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Pedagogical support services for students in Brazilian higher education

Os serviços de apoio pedagógico aos discentes no ensino superior brasileiro

Servicios de apoyo pedagógico para estudiantes de educación superior brasileña

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There are still few academic papers in Brazil aimed at documenting and analyzing the academic support services offered in Brazilian public universities. For this reason, we welcome with satisfaction the publication of the e-book ‘Pedagogical support services for students in Brazilian higher education’ edited by Carlos Dias, Michelle Toti, Helena Sampaio and Soely Polydoro, which presents experiences regarding actions developed by higher education institutions in order to support students in their university career.

This is a compilation of texts aimed at recording experiences and theoretical reflection on pedagogical support in higher education, especially in the Brazilian context: its antecedents, its main characteristics, the professionals involved, the main strategies developed to meet the demand of students and the challenges encountered by professionals dedicated to this work.

The publication is divided into three parts: 1) Higher Education, student retention and student support services; 2) Experience Narratives: pedagogical support services in higher education institutions; 3) pedagogical support services: specific contexts and perspective for the area, in addition to the presentation and final chapter, totaling 17 chapters.

A background that guides the reflection on pedagogical support in higher education refers to the increased demand for this type of support from the expansion and initial democratization of higher education in Brazil in the last two decades. Illustrating these transformations from data such as those of the survey conducted by FONAPRACE (National Forum of Pro-Rectors of Community and Student Affairs), the editors define a timeline that begins with the first measures of expansion of public higher education in the early 2000s, which is consolidated over the following decade.

In Chapter 1, Dias and Sampaio present an overview of the expansion of higher education in the world and in Brazil over the past decades, bringing, in the Brazilian case, information and analysis that point to the convergence of different policies that induce this expansion, combined with the change of the public that begins to access higher education and the needs identified by institutions to promote policies of student retention. However, the

authors also point out that, unlike what is observed in foreign literature, “in Brazil, research and evaluations on programs and actions to assist students designed by higher education institutions themselves are still rare” (P.33), justifying, therefore, the relevance of the publication of this volume presented here. Such changes in the profile of students contribute to the growth in demand for retention policies, including the so-called “pedagogical retention”, as addressed by the book editors.

Heringer details in the following chapter some policies of democratization of higher education that have occurred in Brazil since 2002 and strategies to stimulate the retention of students in universities. She describes how successful affirmative action policies that have been implemented in the country despite several setbacks faced along the way. Still, the main focus of the text is on the attacks on these policies that occurred after the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. In this context, the federal government presents itself as a threat to the continuity of these actions.

Chapter 3, written by Toti and Polydoro, describes the historical trajectory of student support measures in higher education in a comparative analysis between projects developed in the United States and in Brazil. The authors inform us that in the United States, student support actions were developed together with the expansion of higher education itself, in a tradition of university institutions that receive students from different parts of the country and, therefore, who need to stay and immerse themselves in the daily life of the university campus. Currently, interventions are planned in a way that contemplates the emotional, psychological, social and learning characteristics of each student.

After the introductory part, of a theoretical nature, the book provides us with a second section dedicated to the reporting of experiences from the practice of student support and pedagogical support in public institutions of higher education in Brazil, notably federal universities. This second part includes ten chapters reporting experiences from different institutions in Brazil and Portugal, which we have grouped here, for analysis purposes, into three categories: large Brazilian federal universities (with more than 20 thousand undergraduate students); small Brazilian federal universities (with less than 20 thousand undergraduate students) and other institutions.

In the first group of institutions, one of the main issues discussed throughout the example is the difficulty of assist a large portion of students considering institutions with diverse campi and a pedagogical team/sector that does not match the volume of students enrolled. Understanding the impossibility of reaching all students due to the lack of human and material resources, the narratives lead us to a pertinent question that appears in several experiences: who should be preferred to receive pedagogical support? Should this service have as its target audience only scholarship holders and quota students? Or should students with low performance and trajectories marked by interruptions be prioritized?

Delatorre *et al* (2020) highlight that in the institutional design of UFSC, the Coordination of Evaluation and Pedagogical Support (CAAP), responsible sector which

belongs to the Dean of Graduation (PROGRAD) for the institutional program of pedagogical support to students (PIAPE), carried out a diagnosis based on the analysis of the historical performance of students in undergraduate subjects and highlighted the areas with the highest rates of failure or drop-outs. The chapter brings pertinent contributions to the field of discussion of pedagogical support, especially in the aspect of integration between undergraduate and graduate and describes in a very detailed way the contents worked in the learning groups, in addition to explaining some institutional setbacks faced in the implementation of the program. The text brings an important reflection when presenting the path of the programs that met initially specific groups, until the goal of expansion to all students who have some type of demand focused on pedagogical support. The authors note, for example, that “it was evident that students who are entering university now through broad competition, originating of private schools, Brazilians and white, also needed academic and pedagogical follow-up” (P.156). The authors also problematize the dilemma of the great demand for individualized care, in contrast to the need and limits of numerical expansion of the students assisted.

In relation to UFSM, we know that, in 2018, approximately 700 students were covered by pedagogical support actions, but we also perceived the dilemma regarding the capacity of student service by the sectors responsible for these services. Coverage is relative to less than 5% of total undergraduate students. Direct contact actions with students are carried out in a collective or individualized manner.

In the case of UFPE, Santos et al. highlight that the actions are aimed at improving the academic performance of PROAES scholarship students, in order to “guarantee their retention, reduce dropout and retention rates, thus enabling conditions for the completion of the undergraduate course” (P.202). An interesting highlight of the sector's activities was the investment in research on the profile of students as a way to improve the planning of care. Despite this mapping and systematization of student information, the authors draw attention to the number of attendances in proportion to the number of professionals.

The experience of DIPED - Pedagogical Support Division of PR7 - Dean of Student Policies of UFRJ also presents similar difficulties regarding the extension of care. Diped emerged from the initiative of educators and technicians in Educational Affairs who worked in student support even before the creation of PR7 in 2018. Coordinates pedagogical support activities, contributing to the retention and completion of students' graduation and promoting their integration into the academic context. All the actions carried out by Diped are displayed and explained the methodologies adopted in each of them. We observe, from this reporting, that there is still limited knowledge about the actions developed by DIPED within the scope of UFRJ, at the same time that the team identifies the need for expansion and consolidation of these actions, seen as an important component of policies for retention in higher education.

As it follows, the experiences of smaller universities are presented, which show in their construction process a special focus on the development of a sector of pedagogical support in the institution. UFOB opened in 2013, from the independence of a UFBA campus.

The university is characterized as a young university born in the context of federal university expansion from REUNI and in the framework of the expansion of democratization of access through affirmative action policies, notably with the implementation of Law 12,711. The institution demonstrates from the beginning of its activities a concern to collaborate with students in the development of skills that are not restricted to cognitive ones. UFOB has the pedagogical support service (SAP) composing its Socio-psycho-pedagogical Monitoring Program (PAS). The purpose of the project is to promote actions that influence the retention and the academic success of students. The responsibility lies with multidisciplinary teams. Its actions are developed from three modalities: collective activities, multidisciplinary socio-educational activities and support and individual activities.

Unipampa, founded in 2008 with the aim of expanding the offer of free higher education in the region, presents the concern with the composition of a multidisciplinary team, formed by Technician in Educational Affairs, Pedagogues and Social Workers, present in each of the campi of the university.

UNIFAL is the oldest institution among the small institutions depicted here. However, the report presented is about a new university course, the interdisciplinary bachelor's degree in science and technology. The structuring of this course has no professionalizing purpose. Students that enter receive training to cope with university demands in terms of time organization, understanding of the basic contents taught, in addition to developing other important characteristics of university life. From the reporting, it is understood that pedagogical support should not be an appendix in the university, but be part of the structuring of institutions and courses.

Finally, we approach the group of other universities portrayed in the book, which have as one of the characteristics in common between them the skills developed in the context of pedagogical support. PUC-Rio and Unicamp, for example, offer career guidance services for their students. This is an action that helps students to envision their future through career planning. It is noticed that the actions developed in these universities seek not to be restricted to the search only for the improvement of academic performance. For example, Unicamp offers several programs for student retention such as the Interdisciplinary Higher Education Program (PROFIS), Student Housing Program (PME), the Student Support Service (SAE), and the psychiatric and psychological support service (SAPPE). In the PUC-Rio report, the biggest obstacle to reaching a greater number of students is the dissemination of the activity. UPorto, on the other hand, adopts a system that uses seniors themselves to mentor freshmen.

The evaluation adopted by UPorto seems to be essential for the recognition of the effectiveness of the action and for its evolution. Analyzing the entire e-book, it is clear that the process of evaluating activities is still a challenge in Brazil. Unicamp also adopts the strategy of student evaluation of the activities, an indispensable factor for the success of the actions, because it is through this that the planning of the actions, schedules and training proposal takes place. At PUC-Rio, the evaluation of services is carried out only by mapping the number of students who attended the counseling and Psycho-pedagogical Service

(NOAP).

Analyzing these universities, two essential characteristics are perceived in relation to pedagogical support. First, it is observed that pedagogical support cannot be restricted to freshmen. Another relevant point demonstrated in the correlation between these chapters is the perception of how much the evaluation process is fundamental in the construction of pedagogical support activities relevant to the student body.

The third and final part of the book reports experiences of pedagogical support in specific areas. The first text refers to the educational guidance service at the Technological Institute of Aeronautics - ITA. The chapter offers the reader a historical account of the institution. The practice of Pedagogical Support through educational guidance has begun in the institution in 1955, prior to the recognition of the professions of psychologist and educational counselor in Brazil.

In the following chapter, Prado brings a contribution aimed at reflecting about the policies of retention in the STEM areas (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), from the experience of the Polytechnic School of Engineering of UFRJ (Poli/UFRJ). It brings a bibliographic review aimed of different theoretical models of retention, with a brief characterization of the different concepts associated with the debate on retention and dropout, presenting the differences between the terms used in Portuguese and in the English language, such as retention, retenção, dropout, evasão.

In the last chapter of this section, Dias summarizes the guide Student Affairs and Services in Higher Education: Global Foundations, Issues and Best Practices published in 2009 by UNESCO, with the aim of subsidizing, in Portuguese, the Brazilian student affairs services.

Two of the book editors, Toti and Dias, end with a balance chapter of the experiences presented, which goes through some characteristics of the pedagogical support services described in the book. They highlight that the main modality of support is individual support, focusing mainly on so-called first generation students who “have more academic challenges and integration into the university environment, especially due to the general novelty, whether in terms of content, life and studies routine, new friendships, distance from family” (P.479). The authors conclude that, despite advances in knowledge in the field and the expansion of services in recent years, the area of pedagogical support for higher education students still demands more research and bibliographic production.

Thus, the work brings extremely relevant contributions in a recognized effort to compile historical scenes, discussions and reports of national and international experiences. We recommend this reading for researchers, specialists and those interested in the field of higher education, especially for those interested in understanding the institutional transformations in this field in the recent period.