Why Brazil? Why Now?

Brazil is now poised to emerge as a leading 21st century state by virtue of the richness of its human capital and natural resources, the dynamism of its economy, and its enlightened political leadership. Brazil is the largest country in Latin America and the fifth largest country in the world, both by geographical area and by population with over 205 million people (2012 estimate). It hosts the world’s largest rain forest and has the highest biodiversity on Earth including three different biodiversity hotspots (the Amazon, Cerrado, and Atlantic rain forest). It is no longer dreamers alone who ask the question posed in the title of a 2009 Brookings Institute volume: *Brazil as an Economic Superpower?*

Brazil currently has the world’s sixth largest GDP having bypassed the UK in 2011. It is a medium-developed export-oriented economy with a positive balance of trade. It is also one of the largest agricultural exporters in the world, ranking first in sugar, coffee, tobacco, orange juice, beef, and poultry; second in soybeans; third in corn; and fourth in cotton. It is also one of the world’s leading producers of minerals including iron ore, gold, niobium, copper, manganese, bauxite, lead, and tin. Like the US (12-13%), Brazil has a relatively low trade dependency ratio (under 10%) and is home to renowned global companies, including Petrobras (oil), Embraer (aviation), Companhia do Vale do Rio Doce (mining), and internationally distinguished construction giants like Odebrecht and Camargo Correia. Unlike Mexico, the country has a balanced trade portfolio without an excessive dependence on any one country for export, imports, or foreign direct investment.

More than a half century ago, Brazil adopted a strategy that has made the country unique in its contemporary energy matrix—roughly half renewable, half non-renewable—among other OECD countries. Brazil is also the world pioneer in designing the technology that has made the country a global leader in producing (and consuming) biofuel, mostly cane-based ethanol, as well as natural gas-fueled cars. In a dramatic recent development, a huge "sub-salt" petroleum reserve has been discovered on Brazil’s South Atlantic margin and there is a great likelihood that similar reserves exist along the largely-unexplored Amazon continental margin. With Petrobras already a global leader in deep-water production, Brazil can now look forward to massive fossil fuel revenues for decades to come.

Under the leadership of the two most recent democratically-elected presidents, first Lula da Silva and now Dilma Rousseff, Brazil has made significant advances in terms of economic growth with redistribution, a substantial decline in inequality, and a vast increase in opportunity across racial and class divides. Innovative policies combined with economic growth has grown the Brazilian middle class by 24 million people, the rate of poverty has been nearly halved, and the country has now begun to boldly address its racial inequalities with the establishment of a comprehensive system of quotas in its higher education system for the racially disadvantaged, unanimously judged constitutional in 2012 by a Brazilian Supreme Court now headed, for the first time ever, by a black Chief Justice.

In terms of global health, the Brazilian government and its internationally-respected health professionals play a unique leadership role in the global fight against AIDS while its private-public health system is actively grappling with the challenges of health inequalities. And on higher education, the Ministry of Education’s 2011 University Census showed a growth in the percentage of persons between age 18 and 24 enrolled in universities or who had already completed their university degree from 7.2% in 1997 to 17.8% in 2011. Brazilian universities (even when adjusted for national populations) dominate the rankings with 65 of the top 250 in Latin America. Enrollment in higher education in Brazil has tripled in the last decade; three quarters of this growth has taken place in private universities. Research productivity in Brazil has also increased dramatically and is by far the largest among Latin American nations.

These achievements represent the return on a large investment made by federal and state governments in building capacity, increasing enrollment, and funding research—Brazil's investment in education as a proportion of GDP grew faster in the last decade than in any other OECD nation. At the
same time, Brazil is increasingly looking outward for international partners in higher education and putting substantial funding into the enterprise including an ambitious plan to send 100,000 Brazilians overseas for undergraduate and graduate education (an opportunity Duke should pursue). These exciting developments have magnified the international prominence of Brazil’s uniquely dynamic social movements and a cultural, spiritual, and musical life profoundly shaped by the half of its population that is of African-descent. Whether its spirituality, dance or martial arts, or visual culture, Brazil is a must-see must-go phenomenon in today’s world.

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