

Race, Development and Social Inequality:

# Exploring the Howard-Brazil Connection

By Grace I. Virtue, Ph.D.  
Photos by Cesar



First-year doctoral student Koren Bedeau studies at the Universidade de São Paulo through the U.S.-Brazil consortium program.

**K**oren Bedeau knows that by the time she gets to Brazil in late spring, the sights and sounds of the world's most famous Carnival will be long gone. Nevertheless, she hears the drums in her dreams, sees the colorful images of Rio's world famous Samba Parade and feels the energy of the rich tropical land throughout her body.

For the casual onlooker, the centuries-old annual Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, a spectacular area of southeastern Brazil, marked by tourist-lined beaches, is what defines this most populous South American nation. For Bedeau, and other serious scholars of the humanities, it is the lure of the melting pot, the intoxicating blend of races, cultures, ethnicities, social and economic classes, and the accompanying disparities confined on the same land mass where fun is just as serious as the fight against poverty and inequities.

A first-year doctoral student majoring in mass communication, Bedeau sees Brazil as an ideal locale for her multidisciplinary research of the images used to promote tourism in developing countries. Bedeau is particularly interested in Brazil's complicated issues of race and diversity, with which the country is only now beginning to wrestle, as well as its unique socio-economic status — somewhere between developed and developing nation.

"Anyone interested in race would be interested in Brazil," says Bedeau of the country with the largest population of Blacks in the Americas outside of the United States. "There are definite discrepancies in the way people of different races are treated."

Orlando Taylor, Ph.D., dean of the Graduate School, says these issues and Brazil's similarities with the United States, including a long history of slavery and the resulting social, political, economic and regional inequalities, are the genesis of the program that will take Bedeau and 10 other Howard University students to South America this summer.

The U.S.-Brazil project is a consortium exchange with Howard University, Vanderbilt University, the Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and the Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA) in Brazil. Together, the institutions have collaborated on a common curriculum for the program and have recently completed details of a course "Contemporary Issues in Race, Social Inequality and Development in Brazil and the United States." to be taught

electronically. The course covers topics in political and social history, religion, culture and art, and social and economic inequality and provides theoretical underpinning for the physical exchange of students. It is taught by faculty drawn from all four institutions.

"The U.S. and Brazilian governments, during the Clinton administration, decided that it was in the best interest of both countries to have intellectual exchanges around different issues," says Taylor. "The

funds were made possible by the U.S. Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, with matching amounts from the government of Brazil."

## Cross Cultural Exchange Creates Rich Experiences

Begun in 2004, the program will ultimately result in 25 Howard University students going to Brazil and the same number of Brazilians coming here to study.

"It was a shower of self esteem," says Evan P. de Brito, a Brazilian student from USP, who spent a semester at Howard as part of the program. Calling the experience "beyond anything he had expected," de Brito says, "Far more than an opportunity to improve my language skills or to find resources for my research, it was an opportunity to see the world from another perspective. There is just no way to describe the feeling of being able to do this in an environment where I was not 'different.'"

Camilla V. Pereira, an education major from USP, who also studied at Howard, describes her semester in similar terms. "Howard University's legacy, its scholars and students contributed not just to my research, but to my education and life experiences also. Their perspectives broadened my horizons and provided me with a great opportunity to grow exponentially and establish new standards."

Howard's rich legacy, its location in Washington, D.C., as well as its immense diversity added to the satisfaction of her overall experience, Pereira says.

"Howard is a mix of everything. I had the opportunity to meet students from many different cultural backgrounds and places that I had never thought about before. I heard so many accents that I was not uncomfortable with mine at all."

Lisa Rawlings, a doctoral student in Howard's School of Social Work, and one of the project's coordinators, hopes that her experience in Brazil this summer will be no less rewarding. Like Bedeau, she feels that Brazil is the perfect place to further her interest in advocating on behalf of the disadvantaged and that the country, with its vast numbers of poor and homeless people, provides just such an opportunity.

"I am truly excited, and I am looking forward especially to meetings with Brazilian corporations and grassroots organizations, as well as field visits to resistance settlements and, even, the slums," says Rawlings, who fervently hopes the program will continue for a long time given its potential to foster cross-cultural understanding.

According to Taylor, Howard's exchange program helps to contextualize the complex issues of race and economic disparity in the United States. Taylor believes both countries can learn from each other and work together to develop new approaches and solutions for these problems. In addition, participating students are exposed to different ways of thinking as their world views are expanded. As a result, the partnership between the institutions will be cemented, creating strong relationships that will benefit future generations of students as well as the faculty.

"This program is a wonderful opportunity for Howard's Graduate School faculty to have an intellectual exchange with their counterparts in an important part of the world," says Taylor. "Our involvement in programs like these brings substance to our claim of providing leadership for America and the global community." [H](#)



Social Work doctoral student Lisa Rawlings is one of the program's coordinators.