Access to higher education in Colombia: An assessment of public policy and outcomes

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This research analyzes a set of national policy initiatives, 2002-2010, regularly referred to as Colombia's "Educational Revolution". Together these policies constitute a Colombian effort to increase access to higher education, an effort in partnership with the World Bank. The dissertation presents findings on policy goals, efforts, impacts, and outcomes.

The concept of access policy used here is a broad one that places social and political institutions (including governments) in the role of equalizing opportunity. This concept comprises not only the entry stage but conditions prior to and after entrance into higher education. The research combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, based on an elaborated framework of access policy categories and indicators. It focuses on two issues: first, whether or not public policy goals - often enunciated in policy plans - were effectively translated into policy efforts, and subsequent impacts; and second whether changes to higher education policy significantly reduced social inequalities in student access and persistence, as envisioned by national policy makers and their World Bank partners.

The policy efforts not only are multifaceted and innovative, but major and consistent with the goals conceived by the policymakers. Impacts and outcomes are mixed. Some policy impacts and outcomes represent major improvements that shift historical trends, whereas others leave problems that constitute future challenges for access policy. Policy has brought considerable enrollment increases for low-income groups. Also net enrollment rates have risen over time among all income groups. Substantial improvements in equity have come through a student aid program. However, unexpected inequalities emerged during implementation efforts, unequal proportions in participation by income groups persist, and the pre-existing challenges in access and equity remain (especially with respect to dropouts).

The Colombian case has a three-fold significance. The first lies in the magnitude and variety of policy goals and efforts to increase access. The second lies in this being one of the biggest World Bank projects on access to higher education in Latin America. Third, relative to other countries, the Colombian higher education system comprises several important characteristics that deserve further exploration. Among them is Colombia's historical standing for having a regressive public higher education that has placed low-income students at a severe disadvantage, in a country with deeply rooted social inequalities.