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# EDITORIAL

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## Letter from Brazil: Teaching and Mentoring in a Sadder Nation

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When I finally got a faculty job, I was thrilled to teach and mentor back in my home country, Brazil. After some time living overseas, I was looking forward to experiencing the vibrant atmosphere of Brazilian universities again. I am not sure how to describe it, but it feels like home. 20th January 2020 was my first day as an Assistant Professor at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp); it was a day full of hand shaking and small talk. At that time, this was still socially acceptable. Less than 50 days later, COVID-19 started to spread fast in Brazil, and Unicamp decided to close the campus and move all classes online.

Since then, a lot has happened. Brazil's death toll from COVID-19 surpassed half a million people, and the social, political, and economic situation has deteriorated quickly. Reading the news every morning is a challenge to our sanity, which includes digesting constant threats to our democracy, the massive destruction of our megadiverse ecosystems (such as the Amazon and the Pantanal), and a sharp increase in inequality and the unemployment rate. Science and universities have been under attack, and the public educational system has suffered severe budget cuts, including to research funding and scholarships for grad students. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic during Bolsonaro's kakistocracy (i.e., a government run by the worst and most unscrupulous citizens) has taken a heavy toll on all of us.

So far, my experience as an assistant professor has been an indoor, online quest amid this dystopian reality. Over the last year and a half, I have interacted with students and my colleagues only virtually. It is hard to connect with people and understand them in online interactions, but my overall feeling is

that we are getting sadder. Not just sadder, but also angrier and more hopeless. My cherished memories of Brazilian universities as joyful, vibrant, and casual public spaces are still vivid, but seem completely disconnected with the present. The collective disillusionment is evident among my friends, family, and my students. I am aware of how privileged I am to have a job that allows me to do what I love, to teach and to do science, but keeping my motivation in these dark times has not been easy.

Every week, I receive heartbreaking e-mails from my undergrad students. Often, I need to take a deep breath after reading their words. Some of them lost family members and close friends to COVID-19; others got sick. A student apologized in advance if he coughed during the presentation because he was still recovering. Many have had to find temporary jobs and need to watch online classes while working or caring for their loved ones. Some of them cannot cope with stress or grief. Grad students are struggling to pay their bills with their scholarships, which are harder and harder to get, and even then, insufficient to cover basic needs. The progressive collapse of our educational system announces a future in which careers in STEM are scarce and uncertain in Brazil, which naturally dampens grad student's hopes. Public universities have always been cores of resistance and unity in dangerous political times, but the pandemic has also taken this democratic space from us.

And yet, witnessing how brave and strong these young students are has renewed my motivation and hopes. It is inspiring to experience how classes can transform at least a little bit of their routines. During online interactions, I encourage students to express themselves and connect ecological concepts with their daily lives. When I am recording video classes, I try to provide a few hours of ecology that could grab their attention amidst all the rest. Realistically, I know this is not enough, but we all need to be supportive and to resist despair.

Brazilians are often viewed as warm, happy people. More than ever, this has become just a stereotype, a cliché. I feel that our natural willingness to laugh at ourselves seems to have faded away and is no longer compatible with our moment in time. Perhaps our history has shown that more than being cheerful people, we are resilient. This is why I am hopeful that, with vaccines and votes, Brazilians will see better days. I am looking forward to the opportunity to teach and mentor in a happier, more egalitarian, and, why not, sunnier nation.