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TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL

# RICE UNIVERSITY Finds a Natural Partner in Brazil



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The selection committee for *Internationalizing the Campus 2015*, which chose the winners of the 2015 Senator Paul Simon Award for Campus Internationalization, recognized three institutions for their outstanding accomplishments in specific areas of internationalization. Rice University was recognized for its Brasil@Rice initiative. The full set of profiles can be seen in *Internationalizing the Campus 2015: Profiles of Success at Colleges and Universities*.



**W**HEN BRAZIL LAUNCHED its *Ciência sem Fronteiras* (Science Without Borders) initiative to send 100,000 students and researchers around the world, many prestigious institutions stepped forward to snap them up. Rice University went a step further, repurposing the resulting \$100,000 from tuition paid by the Brazilian government to send Rice faculty to Brazil to jump start collaborations. It also arranged extra support for the small influx of Brazilians on the Houston campus as part of a broader initiative to build lasting links between Rice and Brazilian universities.

The *Brasil@Rice* initiative, directed by Adria Baker, associate vice provost for international education, reflects the determination to deepen Rice's ties to Latin America, as the university has already done on a much wider scale with China. The initiative started in 2012 just as the university began offering a Latin American studies major that requires study abroad and competency in Spanish or Portuguese.

Brazil had launched its science mobility program a year earlier. Then-Provost George McLendon made the decision to redirect the tuition revenues and championed *Brasil@Rice*. Houston, often called the energy capital of the world, is by itself Brazil's sixth largest trading partner, and cultural, intellectual, and economic ties between Houston and Brazil "made this a natural for us," said McLendon. "It's also true that Texas is probably the Brazil of the U.S., a very friendly bunch of people with a can-do spirit."



The *Brasil@Rice* initiative generated a new way of thinking, says Associate Vice Provost Adria Baker



### Spelling Brasil the Brazilian Way

The Brasil@Rice initiative—spelled with an ‘s’ as the Brazilians do—has created “a new way of looking at international on our campus,” said Baker. It also provides an extra level of attention for Brazilian students and scholars during their stay in Houston. The initiative is managed by Mayra Onuchic, who is, in McClendon’s words, “the mother figure for all the Brazilian students.” She and husband José Onuchic—both Brazilian by birth—are masters of one of Rice’s 11 residential colleges. He is a prominent physicist, member of the National Academy of Sciences, and codirector of Rice’s Center for Theoretical Biological Physics, which seeks to advance cancer research with breakthroughs in physics. Doctoral students and postdocs from Brazil regularly work in his National Science Foundation–funded lab. He is also a linchpin in a partnership with the University of São Paulo in which the two universities jointly administer and share use of an IBM Blue Gene supercomputer. “We both use the supercomputer remotely,” said Onuchic. “For me it’s 10 miles, for them 4,000, but for the guys doing the job, that doesn’t make any difference. The research is synergized by our working together. I’d like to see this become the bedrock that connects our two universities.”

There are other components to the bedrock. Robert Vajtai, a nanotechnology researcher, is working with graduate students and faculty from Universidade Estadual de Campinas (University of Campinas or UNICAMP) in the state of São Paulo on novel ways to nanoengineer graphene, a two-dimensional form of carbon, to store energy. One advantage of working with the Brazilian researchers, he said, “is that they have much more freedom to select interesting proj-



Physics Professor Jose Onuchic brings Brazilian researchers to his National Science Foundation-funded lab



UNICAMP history professor Silvia Lara says it took 18 months to clear administrative hurdles for the new dual degree program

ects. Here you need to submit proposals and follow whatever your grant contract says.” Vajtai had just received word from a sister journal of Nature that it was publishing the teams’ latest findings. “These guys are motivated, knowledgeable, and very diligent,” said Vajtai, who added that his department is open to the possibility of dual doctoral degrees.

### History Leads the Way

Most notably, the history departments at Rice and UNICAMP created a dual doctoral degree program in 2012. Brazilian graduate student Ludmila de Souza Maia was the first to avail herself of that opportunity, spending 2012–2013 at Rice and now, back in Brazil, finishing a dissertation that will earn her two doctorates in spring 2016. “I felt very special at Rice. I was very spoiled. I got a lot

of attention and had the whole department helping me,” said Maia. Rice provided a travel grant for her research in Paris archives on nineteenth-century Brazilian and French women writers, and sent her to Latin America studies conferences in Illinois and New Mexico. The first Rice doctoral student is now studying at UNICAMP, and each institution has approved second candidates.

The chair of Rice’s history department, Alida Metcalf, collaborated with UNICAMP history professor Silvia Hunold Lara to create that dual degree, which Rice’s Faculty Senate approved in November 2012. They had strong support from the top. The presidents of the two universities had each visited

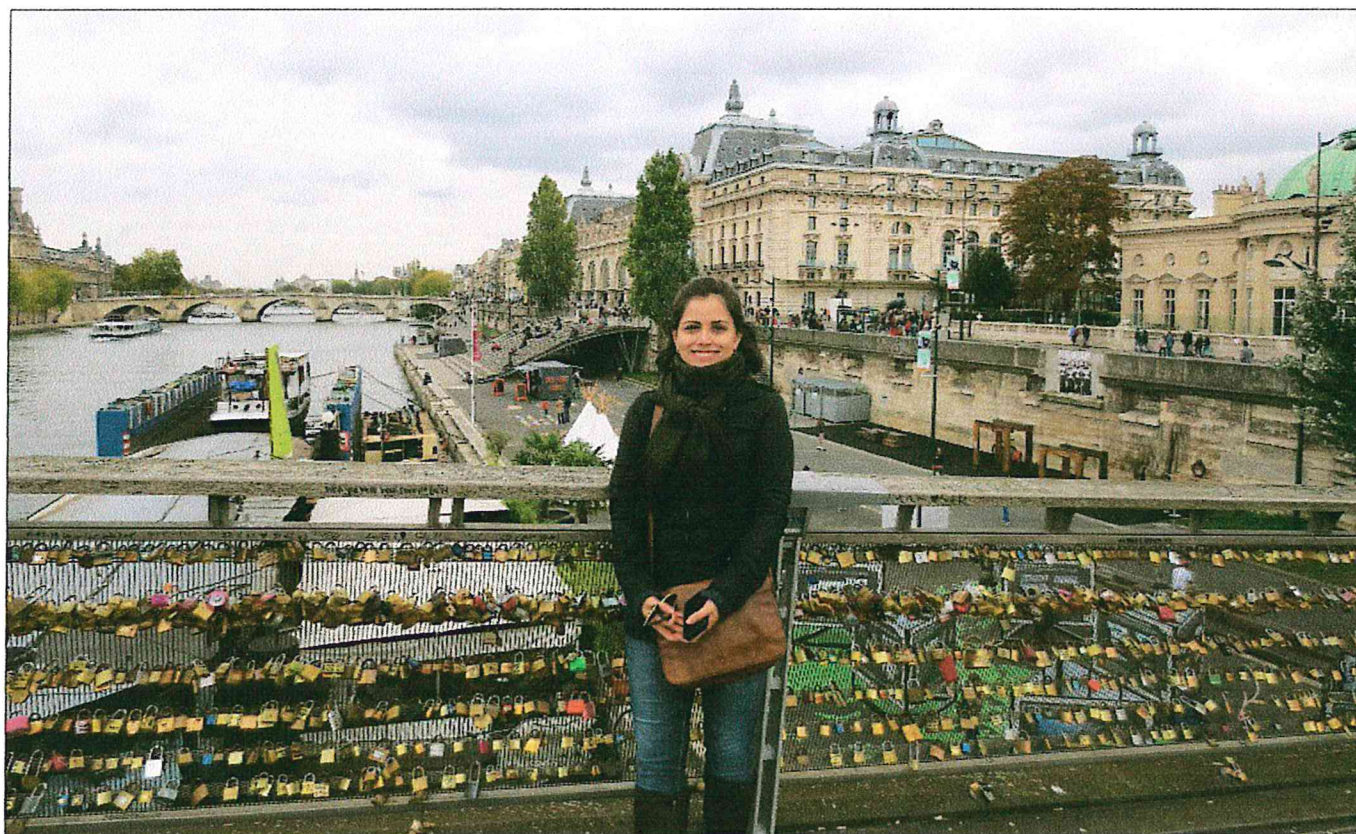
the other’s campus and signed partnership agreements. Metcalf and Lara shared a common interest in the history of the Atlantic slave trade, a strength of both departments. Nonetheless, “it took a year and a half working with our lawyers and bureaucratic staff to put our ideas on paper. It’s not easy,” said Lara.

Doctoral candidates complete coursework at their home campus—including advanced study of Portuguese for the U.S. students—then spend a year at the other school before returning home to write a dissertation in their native language and a lengthy abstract in the other tongue, with Metcalf and Lara as coadvisers. “It’s complicated having two advisers on a dissertation,” said Metcalf, who spent part of her childhood in Latin America, but going down this path “exposes them at a much more sophisticated level to the way in which history is written in two different countries.” And the preparation will give newly minted historians distinct advantages in applying for professorships “in the global academic environment that we are living nowadays,” said Lara, who has been a visiting scholar at U.S. and French universities.



Lovett Hall, the main administration building





Ludmila de Souza Maia conducted archival research in Paris for the dual history PhDs she will earn from UNICAMP and Rice

Rice's enrollment is 6,500 while UNICAMP's is 34,000. Nearly a quarter of Rice students are international. Brazilians comprise only a small percentage (22 graduate students and 15 visiting students in fall 2014), but their presence is readily felt, especially in events arranged by the Brasil@ Rice initiative.

"To really get a lot out of one year in another country, you have to be ready to hit the ground running," said Metcalf, the history chair. Brasil@ Rice "has been able to provide that for the Brazilian students to maximize their time here." McClendon, who has returned to the faculty, said the Brazilians have contributed greatly to the cultural mix on campus. "It's actually not that hard to get Brazilians to feel acculturated because they gravitate naturally to social events," he added.



History chair Alida Metcalf forged a dual PhD degree program with UNICAMP in São Paulo

### Connections Beyond the Campus

Brasil@Rice has ventured beyond the campus into the wider Brazilian business, consular, and cultural communities in Houston. A university representative serves on the board of the Brazilian-Texas Chamber of Commerce, and Rice hosted a delegation of government officials on a visit to Houston last fall. Onuchic was among the first winners of a Diaspora Prize that Brazil created in 2013 to honor

the achievements of Brazilians abroad in science, technology, and innovation.

Baker said Brasil@Rice has "generated tremendous enthusiasm. We've got people from different fields across campus, from high-level professors to beginning faculty, talking with each other. We even have staff thinking Brazil." While more Brazilian students are coming to Rice, the language barrier and costs have made it difficult to convince more Rice students to study in Brazil, Baker said. The university this past summer sent its first students to a language immersion program in São Paulo and subsidized two internships in Brazil. Baker believes the success of Brasil@Rice provides "a template for internationalization" that Rice now can follow with other countries.

It isn't certain how long Brazil will continue its Scientific Mobility Program, but the Brasil@Rice office hopes to award \$90,000 for further faculty travel and collaborations, including two-way visits. A decision is pending approval by a new provost.

Nonetheless, even with no guarantee of future revenues from the mobility program, "my guess is the strength of the ties we build will endure one way or another after that program no longer exists," said McClendon.

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