

Law School Diversity Steady Despite Affirmative Action Ban



Encouraging Trends Amid Legal Challenges

Racial and ethnic diversity in law school enrollment has remained steady in 2024, defying concerns that the U.S. Supreme Court's 2023 decision to ban affirmative action in college admissions would lead to a significant decline in diverse student representation. Data released by the American Bar Association (ABA) on Monday highlights that the percentage of Black, Hispanic, and Asian students in the first-year juris doctor (J.D.) class has not diminished and, in some cases, has shown modest increases.

Diversity Metrics for 2024

The first-year J.D. class of 39,684 students has maintained nearly identical representation for Black and Hispanic students compared to 2023, the final full admissions cycle before the ban took effect. Specifically:

Black students represent 7.71% of the 2024 first-year class, a slight decline from 7.84% in 2023.

Hispanic students saw a small increase, rising from 14.17% in 2023 to 14.2% in 2024.

Asian students experienced the largest growth, increasing by 2 percentage points to 9.76%.

Meanwhile, the percentage of white first-year students decreased from 57.8% in 2023 to 56.74% in 2024.

Changes in Reporting Methodology

The ABA updated its diversity reporting methodology in 2024, incorporating nonresident students into individual racial categories instead of listing them separately. Nonresident students accounted for 3.71% of the first-year class in 2023 but were not separately identified in 2024. An ABA spokesperson acknowledged that the change complicates direct year-over-year comparisons, as data specific to nonresidents was not collected this year.

Positive Signs, but Further Analysis Needed

Aaron Taylor, executive director of the AccessLex Center for Legal Education, described the early diversity trends as "encouraging" but emphasized the need for deeper analysis. He noted that the full impact of the Supreme Court's ruling may become clearer over time, particularly in terms of enrollment trends at the nation's most prestigious law schools.

"The passage of time will also give us a clearer view of the effects," Taylor said.

Overall Enrollment Growth

In a notable trend, ABA-accredited law schools enrolled nearly 5% more first-year students in 2024 compared to 2023. This increase corresponds to a 6% rise in applicants, resulting in an additional 1,759 first-year law students. However, the total number of J.D. students declined by 1.23% due to the graduation of the unusually large 2021 entering class.

Efforts to Sustain Diversity

The racial composition of the 2024 first-year class suggests that law schools' efforts to adapt to the affirmative action ban have been effective. Applicants of color represented nearly 48% of the total applicant pool, an increase from about 47% in 2023. Many institutions revamped their application essays to better understand candidates' backgrounds, aligning with the Supreme Court's allowance for discussions of race in personal statements.

The Law School Admission Council also expanded its outreach initiatives, encouraging a broader range of aspiring lawyers to apply. This effort appears to have paid off, with the total number of applicants rising by 25%. Notably, Black applicants increased by nearly 38%, and Hispanic applicants rose by almost 29%, according to council data.

Legal and Institutional Challenges

Despite these positive trends, legal challenges loom. Kellye Testy, executive director of the Association of American Law Schools, expressed concerns about potential lawsuits from conservative groups alleging that schools illegally maintained or boosted diversity levels.

“I think people will want to argue that schools did something illegal, even though I don’t think that’s the case,” Testy said.

Conclusion

While the 2024 data offers hope that racial and ethnic diversity in legal education can be sustained without affirmative action, the long-term effects of the Supreme Court’s ruling remain uncertain. Continued efforts by law schools and legal organizations will be essential to maintaining inclusivity in the face of evolving legal and societal challenges.

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