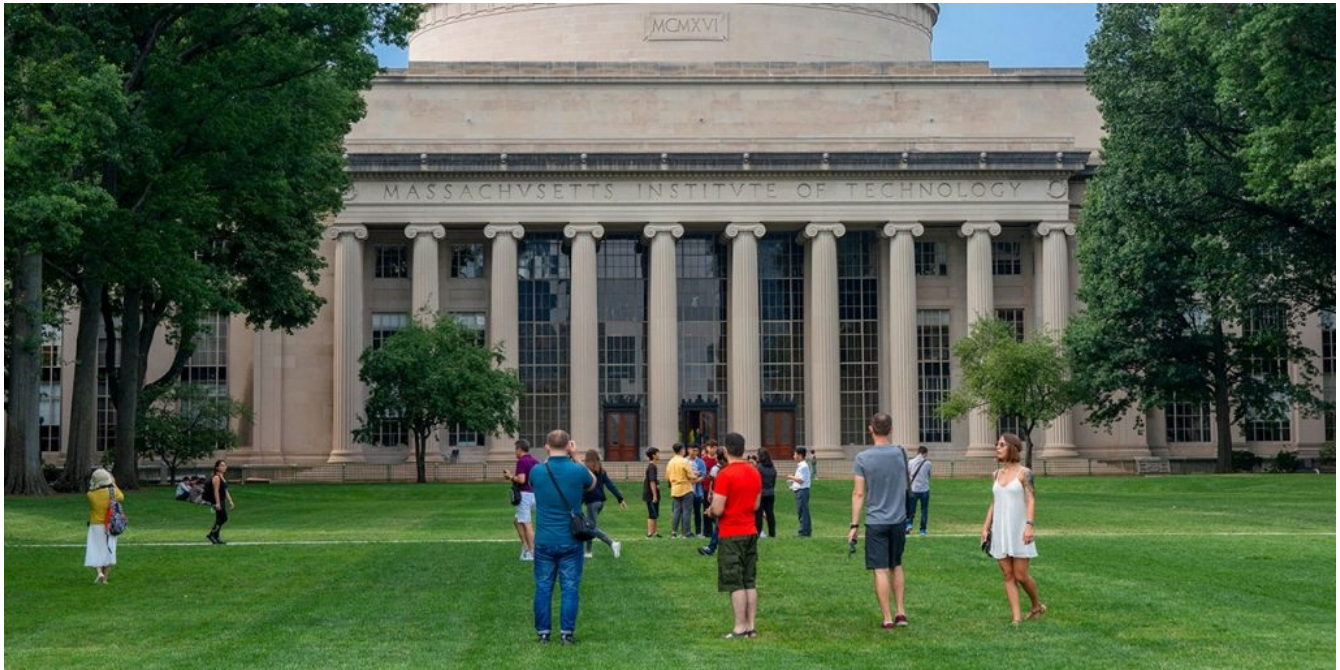


Diversity in Law Schools: Black and Hispanic Enrollment Declines at Elite Institutions



National Trends in Law School Diversity Remain Steady

The diversity of first-year law students nationwide held steady in 2024, with Black students comprising nearly 8% and Hispanic students just over 14% of the national first-year class, according to newly released data from the American Bar Association (ABA). Asian enrollment also saw a notable increase, rising nearly 2 percentage points to 9.76%. However, this seemingly stable national picture masks a concerning decline in diversity at the nation's most prestigious law schools, often referred to as the T-14 schools.

Decline at T-14 Law Schools Raises Concerns

Despite an overall 2.6% increase in first-year enrollment at T-14 schools, the number of Black and Hispanic students at these institutions dropped significantly. Black student enrollment fell from 387 to 356, an 8% decline, while Hispanic student enrollment dropped from 547 to 498, a 9% decrease. These declines are alarming, given the critical role these elite schools play in shaping the legal profession's future leaders, including top law firm hires and judicial clerks.

Experts attribute this trend to the U.S. Supreme Court's 2023 decision to ban race-based considerations in college and university admissions. Nikia Gray, Executive Director of the National Association for Law Placement (NALP), described the decline as the beginning of a "cascade effect," where students of color are increasingly redirected to less-selective institutions.

"The data is concerning," Gray said. "This is likely just the start of a downward trend in diversity within the legal profession."

The Cascade Effect and Affirmative Action Bans

The "cascade effect"—a phenomenon observed in undergraduate admissions after state-level affirmative action bans—is now impacting law schools. Aaron Taylor, Executive Director of the AccessLex Center for Legal Education, noted that this trend warrants further analysis to determine where Black and Hispanic students are ultimately enrolling.

For example, Harvard Law School's Black first-year enrollment dropped dramatically, from 43 students in 2023 to just 19 in 2024. Harvard University was at the center of the 2023 Supreme Court case that led to the ban on affirmative action, with allegations of discriminatory practices against Asian-American applicants while favoring Black and Hispanic students. Meanwhile, Stanford Law School—ranked No. 1 this year—managed to increase its Black and Hispanic first-year enrollment, demonstrating that some elite schools can still maintain diversity even in a post-affirmative action environment.

Broader Implications for the Legal Profession

The decline in diversity at top law schools has significant implications for the legal profession. T-14 schools serve as primary pipelines to high-paying Big Law jobs, federal clerkships, and judicial positions. A less diverse student body at these institutions may reduce the representation of people of color in these influential roles.

"This will be reflected in who is hired in Big Law and for clerkships, and eventually in who becomes a judge," said Verna Williams, CEO of Equal Justice Works. "There will be fewer people of color to choose from, which will have a ripple effect across the profession."

Asian Enrollment Trends and Methodological Shifts

While Black and Hispanic enrollment declined at elite law schools, Asian enrollment either increased or remained flat at all but one T-14 school. However, part of this growth may be attributed to changes in ABA data collection. For the first time, the ABA included nonresident students in individual racial categories rather than reporting them separately. Nonresident students comprised 3.71% of 2024's first-year law school class, with the majority hailing from countries like India, China, and South Korea, according to U.S. government data.

Moving Forward: Balancing Diversity in a New Landscape

The ability of some elite schools to sustain or even grow their Black and Hispanic student populations shows that diversity in legal education is still possible without race-based affirmative action. However, experts stress that this will require proactive measures and innovative strategies.

"The declines we're seeing underscore the urgency of finding alternative ways to promote diversity," Gray said. "Our profession's future depends on it."

As law schools navigate this challenging new landscape, their efforts to foster inclusion and equity will shape not only their classrooms but also the broader legal community for years to come.