Amid Plummeting Diversity at Medical Schools, a Warning of DEI Crackdown's 'Chilling Effect'

Trump has issued executive orders aimed at terminating all diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in federally funded programs.

March 24, 2025 By Annie Sciacca and KFF Health News

The Trump administration's crackdown on DEI programs could exacerbate an unexpectedly steep drop in diversity among medical school students, even in states like California, where public universities have been navigating bans on affirmative action for decades. Education and health experts warn that, ultimately, this could harm patient care.

Since taking office, President Donald Trump has issued a handful of executive orders aimed at terminating all diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, initiatives in federally funded programs. And in his March 4 address to Congress, he described the Supreme Court's 2023 decision banning the consideration of race in college and university admissions as "brave and very powerful."

Last month, the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights — which lost about 50% of its staff in mid-March — directed schools, including postsecondary institutions, to end race-based programs or risk losing federal funding. The "Dear Colleague" letter cited the Supreme Court's decision.

Paulette Granberry Russell, president and CEO of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, said that "every utterance of 'diversity' is now being viewed as a violation or considered unlawful or illegal." Her organization filed a lawsuit challenging Trump's anti-DEI executive orders.

While California and eight other states — Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Washington — had already implemented bans of varying degrees on race-based admissions policies well before the Supreme Court decision, schools bolstered diversity in their ranks with equity initiatives such as targeted scholarships, trainings, and recruitment programs.

But the court's decision and the subsequent state-level backlash — 29 states have since introduced bills to curb diversity initiatives, according to data published by the Chronicle of Higher

Education — have tamped down these efforts and led to the recent declines in diversity numbers, education experts said.

After the Supreme Court's ruling, the numbers of Black and Hispanic medical school enrollees fell by double-digit percentages in the 2024-25 school year compared with the previous year, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. Black enrollees declined 11.6%, while the number of new students of Hispanic origin fell 10.8%. The decline in enrollment of American Indian or Alaska Native students was even more dramatic, at 22.1%. New Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander enrollment declined 4.3%.

"We knew this would happen," said Norma Poll-Hunter, AAMC's senior director of workforce diversity. "But it was double digits — much larger than what we anticipated."

The fear among educators is the numbers will decline even more under the new administration.

At the end of February, the Education Department launched an online portal encouraging people to "report illegal discriminatory practices at institutions of learning," stating that students should have "learning free of divisive ideologies and indoctrination." The agency later issued a "Frequently Asked Questions" document about its new policies, clarifying that it was acceptable to observe events like Black History Month but warning schools that they "must consider whether any school programming discourages members of all races from attending."

"It definitely has a chilling effect," Poll-Hunter said. "There is a lot of fear that could cause institutions to limit their efforts."

Numerous requests for comment from medical schools about the impact of the anti-DEI actions went unreturned. University presidents are staying mum on the issue to protect their institutions, according to reporting from The New York Times.

Utibe Essien, a physician and UCLA assistant professor, said he has heard from some students who fear they won't be considered for admission under the new policies. Essien, who co-authored a study on the effect of affirmative action bans on medical schools, also said students are worried medical schools will not be as supportive toward students of color as in the past.

"Both of these fears have the risk of limiting the options of schools folks apply to and potentially those who consider medicine as an option at all," Essien said, adding that the "lawsuits around equity policies and just the climate of anti-diversity have brought institutions to this place where they feel uncomfortable."

In early February, the Pacific Legal Foundation filed a lawsuit against the University of California-San Francisco's Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland over an internship program designed to introduce "underrepresented minority high school students to health professions."

Attorney Andrew Quinio filed the suit, which argues that its plaintiff, a white teenager, was not accepted to the program after disclosing in an interview that she identified as white.

“From a legal standpoint, the issue that comes about from all this is: How do you choose diversity without running afoul of the Constitution?” Quinio said. “For those who want diversity as a goal, it cannot be a goal that is achieved with discrimination.”

UC Health spokesperson Heather Harper declined to comment on the suit on behalf of the hospital system.

Another lawsuit filed in February accuses the University of California of favoring Black and Latino students over Asian American and white applicants in its undergraduate admissions. Specifically, the complaint states that UC officials pushed campuses to use a “holistic” approach to admissions and “move away from objective criteria towards more subjective assessments of the overall appeal of individual candidates.”

The scrutiny of that approach to admissions could threaten diversity at the UC-Davis School of Medicine, which for years has employed a “race-neutral, holistic admissions model” that reportedly tripled enrollment of Black, Latino, and Native American students.

“How do you define diversity? Does it now include the way we consider how someone’s lived experience may be influenced by how they grew up? The type of school, the income of their family? All of those are diversity,” said Granberry Russell, of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. “What might they view as an unlawful proxy for diversity equity and inclusion? That’s what we’re confronted with.”

California Attorney General Rob Bonta, a Democrat, recently joined other state attorneys general to issue guidance urging that schools continue their DEI programs despite the federal messaging, saying that legal precedent allows for the activities. California is also among several states suing the administration over its deep cuts to the Education Department.

If the recent decline in diversity among newly enrolled students holds or gets worse, it could have long-term consequences for patient care, academic experts said, pointing toward the vast racial disparities in health outcomes in the U.S., particularly for Black people.

A higher proportion of Black primary care doctors is associated with longer life expectancy and lower mortality rates among Black people, according to a 2023 study published by the JAMA Network.

Physicians of color are also more likely to build their careers in medically underserved communities, studies have shown, which is increasingly important as the AAMC projects a shortage of up to 40,400 primary care doctors by 2036.

“The physician shortage persists, and it’s dire in rural communities,” Poll-Hunter said. “We know that diversity efforts are really about improving access for everyone. More diversity leads to greater access to care — everyone is benefiting from it.”

This article was produced by KFF Health News, which publishes California Healthline, an editorially

independent service of the California Health Care Foundation.

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