

How Trump administration threats could affect medical school admissions

Advocates say diverse doctors are needed to treat underserved communities and worry Trump moves will hurt those most in need.

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The Trump administration's mounting investigations and attacks on diversity initiatives have left medical schools facing a tough choice as they consider how to select incoming classes: stick with policies they see as core to their mission or risk critical federal funding.

The legal landscape is unresolved, leaving some schools to weigh potential consequences in a high-profile, high-stakes fight.

The Justice and Education departments have already launched an onslaught of investigations into medical schools' admissions practices, accusing several of discriminating against White and Asian applicants in favor of Black and Hispanic candidates. Then, last week, the Treasury Department and Internal Revenue Service proposed [stripping tax-exempt status](#) from private schools if they consider race in admissions and other policies.

For medical schools, the question can be complicated. Many in the field argue that a diverse health care workforce is critical to serving a diverse patient population. And while outright consideration of race is illegal, they have looked for race-neutral ways to build a diverse cohort of future doctors.

Students who come from underserved communities are more likely to want to serve in those communities once they graduate, said Michelle Ko, a professor at the University of California at Davis who studies diversity in medical education.

"What we are looking for is future physicians who are going to bring the services to the communities who need them," she said. "We want to choose the students who are going to provide the services we need as a community, as a state, as a country."

The Supreme Court has not said whether those efforts are legal, but the Trump administration is threatening to pull federal funding from schools that express interest in diversity or whose data show racial disparities in admitted students' scores. The administration and its allies contend that such admissions policies amount to valuing diversity over merit, and that that's particularly harmful when selecting future doctors.

"Every data point that we see speaks to continued and really pervasive discrimination within medical school admissions," said Ian Kingsbury, senior director of the Center for Accountability in Medicine, a project of Do No Harm. The group, which advocates against what it calls identity politics in medicine, has [questioned](#) the science behind the idea that health outcomes are improved when patients are treated by doctors of the same race. In an email, he added that he applauds the effort to bring colleges and universities into compliance with federal civil rights laws. "As Pres. Reagan famously quipped, 'When you can't make them see the light, make them feel the heat.'"

Those investigations are creating difficult decisions for universities.

“This administration, unlike prior administrations, has put federal funding for an entire institution at risk for an issue in one area, and that’s new,” said Frank Trinity, chief legal officer at the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). “It does raise the stakes for schools.”

In 2023, the Supreme Court struck down race-conscious admissions in higher education, but many argued it was perfectly legal to use race-neutral techniques to build a more racially diverse class of students.

“Nothing in the Supreme Court decision ... compels us to deviate from our mission or to deviate from our goals of diversifying the health care workforce,” David J. Skorton, the chief executive of the Association of American Medical Colleges, said in a [webinar](#) following the 2023 ruling. “Lives depend on us successfully diversifying the health care workforce.”

But those strategies are now facing federal investigations and civil lawsuits.

The Trump administration began investigating UCLA’s medical school soon after President Donald Trump returned to office last year. In May, the Justice Department [announced](#) its conclusion that the school used race to decide who would be admitted, contrary to the court’s prohibition.

A cascade of similar accusations at medical schools across the country followed: [Yale University](#) in May, the [University of California at Davis](#) in June, the [University of California at San Diego](#) in July and [George Washington University](#) in August. All were accused of discriminating based on race.

In June, the Justice Department said it had launched 15 new probes, and a month later, the Education Department announced five more.

George Washington University disputed the findings. Yale’s president [has said](#) they are providing information to the Justice Department as required and has emphasized the university’s admissions and hiring decisions must continue to be made independently and in accordance with the law. UC-San Diego said its requirement to meet strict academic thresholds is applied equally to all candidates. UC-Davis said its process did not discriminate but added that the university is “fully committed to meeting the critical health care needs of California, particularly those in underserved and under-resourced areas.”

The government repeatedly charged that even if schools use race-neutral factors in their admissions process — for instance, taking into account students’ socioeconomic status or hardships they have faced — their true motivation is racial diversity. That, the administration contends, is illegal.

The attacks on medical schools are also coming from Capitol Hill. In July, the [House Committee on Education and the Workforce](#) grilled four medical school leaders on these points during a contentious hearing in which Republicans accused the schools of flouting the law.

Rep. Randy Fine (R-Florida) [demanded to know](#) why students of color admitted to UCLA had lower test scores and grade-point averages.

“Because there are a number of other factors that are involved,” replied Steven Dubinett, dean of the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine.

Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Virginia) countered with the flip side of the query: What about the likelihood that a candidate planned to practice in an underserved area or in an area with a shortage of doctors, like primary care. “Should that be a factor in admissions?” he asked.

“We have a holistic review process, and some of those issues actually are discussed,” Dubinett replied. Meantime, schools face pressure from the left to stick with their policies.

After the president of Yale disclosed that the school was in negotiations with the government, it faced a crush of lobbying from faculty, alumni, students and others to stand firm. In August, Sen. Richard Blumenthal and Rep. Rosa DeLauro, both Connecticut Democrats, urged Yale's president to reject any settlement.

"Acquiescing to a bully does not make that bully go away, it encourages them to come back for more and to expand their overreach to weaker targets," they wrote.

The fight is also playing out through civil litigation. In May 2025, a pair of legal advocacy groups and an applicant sued UCLA and its medical school, charging discrimination based on race. In January, the Justice Department moved to join the suit and is now a named plaintiff. The agency asked the court to terminate all federal grants to UCLA and to order the school to return all federal grant money received since 2023.

To prove their case, the groups provided data showing that White and Asian applicants consistently made up about 3 in 4 applicants but the percentage who actually enrolled fell over time, reaching 54 percent in 2023.

"In defiance of state and federal law," the complaint alleges, "UCLA uses race as a factor in admissions."

One of the people behind the suit is Edward Blum, who has brought multiple cases to the Supreme Court including the landmark Students for Fair Admissions case that rejected race-based affirmative action in 2023. He said it is clear through statements made by school leaders that UCLA was seeking to racially balance its class. He said his group, Students for Fair Admissions, is looking at bringing similar suits against other schools.

"This is precisely the kind of proxy-driven racial classification the Supreme Court prohibited," Blum said. But is it?

That core question is very much unsettled, experts said.

After the Supreme Court delivered its knockout blow to race-conscious admissions in 2023, AAMC assured its members that there was no reason to abandon their quest for diversity.

On the 2023 webinar, AAMC promised to roll out "tools and resources" for schools to legally recruit and graduate diverse classes. Leaders pointed to language in the Supreme Court decision lauding the benefits of diversity and affirming that schools could make admissions decisions consistent with their missions, as long as they were not directly considering race.

"We remain committed to diversifying our health care workforce," Geoffrey H. Young, the association's senior director for transforming the health care workforce, said at the time.

The association said schools could consider applicants' "lived experience" and make decisions based on how well their records and intentions line up with the schools' mission. There was nothing illegal, for instance, about giving an edge to someone who has demonstrated interest in practicing with medically underserved populations.

Ko, the professor at the University of California at Davis, said that once applicants reach a certain threshold of grades and test scores, there isn't much difference among students in terms of future success. So, she said, it makes sense to consider other factors.

The idea that schools can adopt race-neutral policies aimed at racial diversity was backed up by the Biden administration, which in 2023 detailed how colleges might use other means to achieve diverse classes such as considering adversity like financial hardship or racial discrimination.

The Trump administration has put forth a very different interpretation of the law, though it is unclear whether its interpretation will fly once it is fully litigated.

In February 2025, the Education Department issued a sweeping, though vague, letter to universities and K-12 school districts that said schools may be in violation of federal law if they consider race in virtually any way and argued that even race-neutral policies are illegal if the goal is to increase diversity.

Responding to a lawsuit, a federal court struck down the guidance, saying the department was trying to “substantially alter the legal obligations” of schools without going through proper procedures. Eventually, the administration withdrew the document.

Nonetheless, administration officials suggested they would continue to interpret and enforce the law as they saw it.

That does not mean the administration is right, said Trinity, of the medical school association.

“The law is in flux,” he said. “The risk here is schools may enter into resolution agreements with terms that are more onerous and problematic than the administration could obtain in a court.”