# Federal courts block enforcement of DEI rules and visa cancellations, providing relief for Hawaii universities



In recent developments impacting higher education across the United States and particularly in Hawaii, significant legal decisions have temporarily halted federal actions against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programmes as well as the termination of student visas for international students. These rulings have brought a momentary reprieve to universities navigating the challenges imposed during the administration of former President Donald Trump, which had introduced stringent regulations affecting race-based educational initiatives and the status of international students.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Hawaii has proactively reached out to college and university officials throughout the state, urging them to “continue to feel empowered to push for academic freedom and free speech” following court injunctions that block enforcement of the U.S. Department of Education’s new rules dismantling DEI programmes. These federal rules, communicated through a February 14 “Dear Colleague” letter and accompanying certification requirements, had warned that DEI initiatives involving race-based admissions or hiring practices could breach federal civil rights laws.

Three federal district courts—in Maryland, New Hampshire, and Washington, D.C.—have issued preliminary injunctions preventing the Department of Education from enforcing these controversial measures. Salmah Rizvi, executive director of the ACLU of Hawaii, told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser that universities are no longer legally obligated to comply with the “Dear Colleague” letter which had pressured institutions to remove race-conscious elements from their policies.

“I know a lot of universities have already tried to scrub their websites or did it; I don’t know about which universities are doing what, but I do know that universities had already started taking steps to comply with the ‘Dear Colleague’ letter,” Rizvi said. “But that ‘Dear Colleague’ letter that Trump sent to everybody is right now being enjoined, meaning that it can’t be enforced, meaning that universities have a right to engage in their programming as they don’t necessarily have to be in compliance with that letter anymore.”

This judicial intervention allows colleges, at least temporarily, to continue their DEI-related efforts without the fear of losing federal funding, a protection that civil rights advocates and educational institutions have deemed essential for fostering inclusivity and equity.

Concurrently, federal immigration authorities have reversed a previous decision that had abruptly cancelled the visas of thousands of international students nationwide. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency has restored the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) records for affected students, reinstating their legal status. About 1,700 international students across the country, including fewer than five from the University of Hawaii (UH), had experienced visa revocations. The University of Hawaii confirmed these students are now listed as “active” in the SEVIS system.

ICE is currently developing a new policy framework regarding SEVIS terminations but has committed in court filings to maintain the records of impacted students as active during this period of transition.

On the local front, UH President Wendy Hensel affirmed the institution’s commitment to upholding DEI initiatives, reflecting comments she made during a public forum held on March 13. The university’s spokesperson confirmed that no DEI-related programmes have been discontinued amid the federal government’s prior pressure to dismantle such efforts. Hensel remarked after the forum: “There is no question: the stakes for higher education and for UH are extremely high. I want to assure you that I, along with our leadership team that includes the vice presidents, chancellors, and UH Manoa Provost are fully engaged in responding to these challenges. I continue to benefit from the ability to consult with key stakeholders represented on the Advisory Council.”

These developments bear significant weight in Hawaii, where the university system hosts a notable population of international students and where the state’s rich multicultural identity informs its educational ethos.

Nationally, the legal challenges address contentious issues of affirmative action, race-conscious practices, and immigration policy under the Trump administration. The Department of Education’s guidance had condemned American educational institutions for what it called “pervasive and repugnant race-based preferences,” denying that diversity and racial equity constitute compelling governmental interests under federal law, in light of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2023 decision in Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard.

However, courts have upheld arguments from educators and civil rights groups that the federal government’s actions exceeded legal limits, threatening academic freedom and equity programmes. The case regarding SEVIS terminations and DEI enforcement continues to progress through the legal system and is expected to reach the U.S. Supreme Court in due course.

For now, the ACLU of Hawaii is encouraging university officials to communicate these legal victories to their campus communities and to seek assistance as necessary. The Honolulu Star-Advertiser reports that these court rulings constitute a temporary safeguard for DEI initiatives and the legal status of international students amid ongoing policy debates and litigation.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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