# Universities grapple with cultural graduations amid federal pressure on DEI policies



As the landscape of higher education shifts under the weight of federal policies aimed at redefining diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices, cultural graduations have emerged as vital affirmations of student identity and community. Amidst political pressures, many universities are grappling with the decisions to either uphold these significant traditions or obey new guidelines that discourage them.

The recent cancellation of affinity graduation ceremonies at esteemed institutions such as the University of Kentucky and Harvard University reflects a broader crackdown on DEI initiatives spurred by the Trump administration’s directives. Historically, these ceremonies celebrated the achievements of underrepresented groups, including Black, LGBTQ+, and first-generation students, and allowed them to honour their unique journeys. However, following a Supreme Court ruling that challenged racial preferences in admissions, universities have cited legal compliance as a primary reason for discontinuing these personalised events. Students have voiced their disappointment, feeling that these actions signal a denial of their identities and contributions.

Austin Kissinger, a first-generation college student at the University of Kentucky, expressed the profound sense of loss felt by many when the university announced the cancellation of its ceremonies. "It’s kind of like you’re taking away our celebration, like you’re not letting us embrace who we want to be," Kissinger said. The decision, he noted, left students feeling unsupported at a crucial moment of triumph, an essential milestone of their academic journeys.

Despite these challenges, communities are rising to reclaim these celebrations. Off-campus events, such as the “Senior Salute” orchestrated by the historically Black fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha in Lexington, emphasise community and resilience, gathering students to celebrate their accomplishments regardless of university-sanctioned events. This initiative was not just about graduation; it highlighted a defiance against policies perceived as erasing the significance of cultural heritage in education. Such gatherings reveal a pronounced commitment to fostering a sense of belonging for students from diverse backgrounds who feel alienated by institutional actions.

Furthermore, other universities like California State University, Long Beach, have navigated these changes by ensuring that affinity events remain accessible to all students, thereby adhering to federal guidelines while still upholding celebrations of diversity. This balance between compliance and community remains delicate; many institutions across the U.S. are now engaged in a form of "pre-compliance," adjusting their practices to preclude potential pushback or legal ramifications, as noted by experts in the field. These adjustments could, they warn, undermine the very purpose of DEI initiatives that were designed to combat historic inequalities.

Critics of the sweeping changes argue that they risk stifling cultural representation and community-building efforts pivotal to many students' college experiences. Some observers have warned that the motivations behind the disbandment of affinity groups—especially those within the military and various educational institutions—may not align with a commitment to genuine inclusivity, framing them instead as politically charged interventions that neglect the needs of minority communities.

In this contentious environment, advocacy for the continuation of DEI programming is increasingly urgent. Many contend that the values inherent in these initiatives are essential for fostering a truly inclusive and supportive academic atmosphere. Legislative measures aimed at dismantling these frameworks, coupled with institutional policy shifts in response to political pressure, serve to heighten the stakes for students already experiencing marginalisation.

As cultural graduations stand at the forefront of this debate, they underscore the vital connection between identity, community, and education. The transformative power of celebrating one's background and achievements in academic settings cannot be understated. Acknowledging these experiences not only affirms the journeys of individuals but also enriches the fabric of higher education itself. As universities navigate these choppy waters, the resilience and creativity exhibited by students in organising their ceremonies may be the very force needed to champion an inclusive future for all.

### Reference Map

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ocregister.com/2025/05/17/amid-federal-anti-dei-push-cultural-graduations-are-powerful-affirmations-of-student-diversity/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/18b292a2a62ae2212461c881f76d032e> - A growing crackdown on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs under the Trump administration is leading U.S. colleges, including the University of Kentucky and Harvard, to cancel affinity graduation ceremonies. These events, such as convocations for Black, LGBTQ+, and first-generation students, have long celebrated underrepresented student groups. Officials cite the need to comply with new federal guidance following a Supreme Court ruling against racial preferences in admissions, which the Department of Education now says extends to hiring, scholarships, and ceremonies. Affected students, like Austin Kissinger of Kentucky, express disappointment at losing these personalized celebrations. In response, some communities and alumni have organized alternative gatherings independently. For instance, Arizona’s Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community will host a ceremony for American Indian graduates, and Ohio alumni arranged a Black alumni weekend despite university cancellations. Meanwhile, institutions like California State University, Long Beach, maintain their affinity events by ensuring they are open to all students, aligning with federal directives. The changes signify tension between federal policy and long-standing efforts to support marginalized student populations in higher education.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/dfe2d00e98ff152922065a4274bb4485> - Despite President Donald Trump’s push to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs on college campuses, Black students at the University of Kentucky staged their own off-campus graduation celebration. The university recently canceled identity-based ceremonies for minority and marginalized students, citing changing federal and state policies and legal concerns tied to the Supreme Court's 2023 decision ending racial preferences in college admissions. In response, members of the historically Black fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha organized a “Senior Salute” at Lexington's Lyric Theatre. The event honored students with specialty regalia and encouraging speeches, emphasizing personal initiative and community spirit. Attendees hailed from diverse backgrounds, including LGBTQ+ and first-generation students. Critics condemned the university’s decision, calling it a disappointing capitulation to political pressure. Amid Republican-led legislative efforts in Kentucky to eliminate DEI programs, UK President Eli Capilouto acknowledged the pain caused by the cancellations but defended the move as necessary for legal compliance. Nonetheless, student and community leaders praised the graduates' efforts to reclaim a meaningful tradition that acknowledges the distinct challenges and triumphs of marginalized students.
4. <https://time.com/7212911/west-point-disbands-cadet-clubs-affinity-groups-trump-dei-order/> - The United States Military Academy at West Point has disbanded twelve cadet clubs following an executive order from President Donald Trump that targets diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs across the federal government. This decision affects groups such as the Society of Black Engineers, the Asian-Pacific Forum Club, and the LGBTQ support group Spectrum, among others. These closures follow similar actions by the U.S. Army and Air Force. The affected clubs, listed as 'affinity groups,' were valued for promoting cultural awareness and supporting underrepresented identities within the academy. Critics argue that this move is discriminatory and may negatively impact morale and future enrollment, while some say it aligns with the objective of inclusivity and military tradition. Knights Out, an LGBTQ alumni group, condemned the decision and asserted their support for the current and future cadets affected.
5. <https://www.axios.com/2024/12/07/colleges-end-dei-programs-florida-michigan-utah> - Colleges across the U.S. are shutting down their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. These programs, established mainly in response to the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, included cultural centers, diverse hiring practices, and inclusiveness training. The closures are prompted partly by new laws in certain states. Some universities are going beyond legal requirements, which might affect student life and free speech. Jeremy Young from PEN America notes widespread 'pre-compliance' and 'over-compliance,' harming students. Paul Brest from Stanford Law School cautions against dismissing the entire DEI effort despite its flaws.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/doj-v-dei-trumps-justice-department-likely-target-diversity-programs-2024-12-10/> - President-elect Donald Trump is expected to target diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies at companies and universities, arguing such practices violate anti-discrimination laws. Trump's administration is likely to initiate investigations and lawsuits through the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. Trump's nominee to head the division, Harmeet Dhillon, is known for challenging 'woke' corporate policies. Opponents of DEI argue that these policies are exclusionary, while proponents view them as necessary to address historic racial inequities. Trump's plans may include challenging university admissions practices and other diversity programs using Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Critics fear this approach could roll back efforts to improve racial and gender representation in various sectors, particularly as some companies like Walmart and Starbucks have already scaled back their DEI initiatives in response to legal pressures. Legal experts believe outcomes will vary, depending on how explicitly race is considered in these policies.
7. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/05/01/college-graduation-commencement-diversity-dei/32c4721e-2642-11f0-ae6d-e4db528eba27_story.html> - As a first-generation college student, Austin Kissinger was looking forward to celebrating graduation with others of similar backgrounds at the University of Kentucky. Typically, Kentucky students who are the first in their family to graduate from college pick a faculty member to join them in a special ceremony. Earlier this month, the university canceled the ceremony, along with other convocations that recognize Black and LGBTQ+ students, citing the Trump administration’s campaign to rein in diversity, equity and inclusion programs. Those student groups pooled resources for a celebration together off campus — without the school’s involvement — but Kissinger said the about-face left him and others feeling unsupported. “It’s kind of like you’re taking away our celebration, like you’re not letting us embrace who we want to be,” said Kissinger, a graduating senior who leads the university’s First Generation Student Organization. “You’re not letting us represent what we do at the university.” President Donald Trump’s calls to eliminate any program that treats students differently because of their race have brought new scrutiny of affinity graduation ceremonies. The events have long been a way to build community and recognize the achievements and unique experiences of underrepresented students. Many affinity ceremonies are on track to proceed as usual around the country, with colleges saying the events comply with new guidance. But some colleges are pulling back support. Those include Harvard University, which is battling the Trump administration over demands related to campus activism and diversity efforts on campus. Despite suing the administration over some of its attempts to force changes on campus, Harvard told students it would no longer provide funding, staffing or spaces for affinity celebrations, the Harvard Crimson student newspaper reported. It said a 2023 Supreme Court decision outlawing the use of racial preferences in college admissions also applied to things like hiring, scholarships and graduation ceremonies. The administration contended American educational institutions have been discriminating against students, including white and Asian American students. “In a shameful echo of a darker period in this country’s history, many American schools and universities even encourage segregation by race at graduation ceremonies and in dormitories and other facilities,” read the letter, which was signed by Craig Trainor, the Education Department’s acting assistant secretary for civil rights. The practice has roots in the era of segregation at some schools, but organizers of Black convocations today say they are a way to celebrate the accomplishments of diverse student populations that were once overlooked. Many colleges also have “Lavender graduations,” which celebrate LGBTQ+ students and grew out of a time decades ago when many lacked support from their families. For students who are the first in their families to attend college, it can be easy to feel out of place or unsure of where to turn for help, Kissinger said. At Kentucky, he said he often felt like he had to figure out everything on his own. The affinity ceremony, he said, was intended as a celebration of resilience and pride that they reached graduation.