

## Correcting the Record: College Essays Can and Should Help Schools See the Whole Student

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In its July 29, 2025 [memo](#), rife with misrepresentations, the U.S. Department of Justice aims to chill colleges and universities from pursuing lawful activities that aim to advance racial equity, dismantle barriers to educational opportunity, and strengthen our campuses and our country as a whole. The memo implies that a college admissions essay prompt about an applicant's lived experience, or their experience overcoming obstacles, may be unlawful because it "advantages those who discuss experiences intrinsically tied to protected characteristics" like race or gender. This implication is harmful, offensive, and **inaccurate under Supreme Court precedent**.

In [SFFA v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC](#), a decision specifically focused on college and university admissions, the U.S. Supreme Court emphasized that **nothing in its opinion "should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise."** To illustrate, the Supreme Court provided two examples: (1) A student's showing of courage and determination demonstrated through overcoming racial discrimination and (2) A student's unique ability to contribute to the university demonstrated by a discussion of how their heritage or culture motivated them to assume a leadership role or attain a particular goal. **Students are free to write about experiences that relate to race in explaining their personal qualities like courage, motivation, or resilience. And schools are free to consider and value those qualities in that student – as long as each student is treated based on their experiences as an individual, and not on the basis of race.** The July 29 memo—by implying that certain essay prompts may violate the law if an applicant discusses experiences related to race—is directly at odds with the Supreme Court's clear language. **This DOJ memo cannot and does not change the law.**

**Colleges and universities should care about and consider each student's unique ability to contribute to their campus.** Lived experience overcoming racial discrimination and other obstacles, or a student's inspiration to assume a leadership role, are exactly the types of considerations that permit schools to evaluate applicants as individuals and to foster a dynamic and successful cohort of students. When colleges and universities ignore the full range of students' accomplishments, inspirations, and experiences, they fail in their responsibility to serve, value, and nurture all students. And they squander the opportunity to enroll a cohort of students who can rise to every challenge on campus and every challenge in society—colleges need bassoonists, basketball players, student government presidents, and mathematicians and society needs social workers, senators, and physicists.

**The approach that DOJ implies schools should take ignores certain lawful indicators of true merit, achievement, and the full measure of a student's potential contribution to campus life.** For example, it devalues the courage and perseverance of a student of color who describes overcoming racial discrimination; diminishes the triumph of a student who is the first in their family or rural town to go to college; and discounts the determination of a student who has thrived academically while experiencing homelessness. And it obscures the full picture of a student who draws inspiration from experiences tied to their race, culture or heritage. Each student's unique sources of motivation and experiences surmounting barriers on their journey deserve respect, esteem, and consideration.

*For more information, please see LCCRUL's [Educational Opportunities Project webpage](#) and LDF's [Admissions for Democratic Merit webpage](#).*