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Ochoa, Big Ten law deans pledge support for diversity ahead of SCOTUS affirmative action ruling

As the U.S. Supreme Court prepares to hand down a decision that could fundamentally alter affirmative action, a group of law school deans — including Dean Christiana Ochoa of the Indiana University Maurer School of Law — has issued a statement affirming the deans’ commitment to diversity.

The group of 15 deans represent Big Ten law schools, including IU Maurer. In their statement — which IU Maurer posted to its official Facebook page — the deans say they are “joining together to affirm our commitment to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion through legally permissible means, regardless of the outcome of the cases pending before the U.S. Supreme Court.”

“These are core values of our law schools and the universities of which we are part,” the statement says. “If we are to prepare people to be effective lawyers and future leaders, it is essential to create a learning environment that welcomes people who embody a wide range of identities, backgrounds, and experiences.”

The statement comes as the nation’s highest court considers two cases regarding affirmative action policies at two major universities: the University of North Carolina and Harvard College, the undergraduate arm of Harvard University.

The Associated Press reported then that the “survival of affirmative action in higher education appeared to be in serious trouble” at the court, which has a 6-3 conservative majority.

According to the AP, the cases were brought by conservative activist Edward Blum, who formed the plaintiff group Students for Fair Admission. The group has argued that the Constitution forbids the use of race in college admissions and has called for overturning earlier Supreme Court decisions that have upheld affirmative action.

Blum was behind an earlier affirmative action challenge against the University of Texas, as well as the case that led the Supreme Court in 2013 to end the use of a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, according to the AP.

The high court has not yet issued its opinion in the most recent affirmative action cases but is expected to do so before the justices break for the summer at the end of the month. The law school deans say in their statement that they have been following the cases “with great interest.”

“Whatever the outcome of those cases, our law schools will both respect that decision and remain open and accessible to people of diverse backgrounds who we believe will succeed as lawyers and leaders serving the diverse communities that constitute our nation.”

The statement points to diversity, equity and inclusion — commonly known as DEI — standards and practices at the Association of American Law Schools and the American Bar Association.

Specifically, AALS Bylaw Section 6-2 requires member schools to “seek to have a faculty, staff, and student body which are diverse with respect to race, color, and sex.” Likewise, the ABA has “identified the elimination of bias and the enhancement of diversity as one of its four primary goals,” according to the deans.

“Why are diversity, equity, and inclusion so integral to legal education and the legal profession? Among the many reasons is that preparing students for successful careers as lawyers and for leadership roles that they will one day occupy is core to the mission of all our law schools,” the statement says.

“Many legal employers actively seek to hire and retain lawyers with the capacity to work cooperatively with a wide range of people and groups,” the statement continues. “From big law firms, public entities, and multinational corporations, to small nonprofits, firms, and other businesses, employers place considerable value on a diverse workforce. It is therefore critical that law schools include a diverse group of students and prepare them to work with clients and communities who embody the differences that make this country great.”

In addition to Ochoa, signing deans include:
We commit to advancing our core values of diversity, equity, and inclusion through whatever practices and policies remain legally available to our law schools,” the deans conclude in their statement.

Ochoa made history at IU Maurer last fall when she became the first person of color and second woman to be named dean in the Bloomington law school’s history. She was also the eighth Latina to ever serve as dean of a U.S. law school.