



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS
ADMINISTRATIVE COMPLAINT

April 9, 2025

United States Department of Education
Office for Civil Rights
Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-1100 Via
Email: OCR@ed.gov

To Whom It May Concern:

This is a federal civil rights complaint pursuant to the U.S. Department of Education's (Department) Office for Civil Rights' (OCR) discrimination complaint resolution procedures.

Defending Education (DE) brings this complaint against the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UWM) for discrimination on the basis of race in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance in violation of both Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), 42 U.S.C. § 2000d *et seq.*, and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Defending Education brings this complaint as an interested third-party organization with members who are parents and students throughout the country. DE and its members oppose, among other things, discrimination on the basis of race in America's K-12 schools and institutions of higher education. But UWM is giving its students financial benefits based on their race. The University offers a scholarship between \$1,000-\$3,300 per academic year "to provide financial assistance to statutorily designated minority Wisconsin undergraduate students (African-American, Latino, Native American (American Indian/Eskimo) and Southeast Asians of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, or Hmong descent who entered the United States after December 31, 1975)." The scholarship is designed to "improve their opportunities for retention and graduation and lessen the burden of student debt."¹

The Lawton Grant is administered through UWM's various schools and colleges. And it appears that every single one of UWM's schools and colleges participates in this discriminatory scholarship:

- College of Agricultural & Life Sciences
- College of Engineering
- College of Letters & Science
- School of Education

¹ *Lawton Grant*, UWM Office of Student Financial Aid (archived Apr. 3, 2025), <https://perma.cc/H6AP-D49N>.

- School of Human Ecology
- School of Nursing
- School of Pharmacy
- Student Financial Aid
- Wisconsin School of Business²

UWM lists eligibility criteria for the Lawton Grant as follows:

- Be a Wisconsin resident.
- *Identify as African-American, Latino, Native American (American Indian/Eskimo), Southeast Asian of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, or Hmong decent.*
- Have reached sophomore standing or higher, but not yet received their first bachelor’s degree.
- Submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) each year and it must show a Student Aid Index (SAI) below 10,000 as well as financial need
- Maintain a minimum 2.0 cumulative GPA.
- Maintain full-time enrollment and complete at least 24 credits in the preceding academic year.
- Meet any other criteria as established by your school or college.³

According to the school, the program “was established back in 1986 to provide financial assistance to statutorily designated minority Wisconsin undergraduate students.”⁴ Accordingly, it is a financial benefit granted expressly and unapologetically on the basis of race in violation of Title VI and the Constitution’s 14th Amendment. Attached to this complaint is evidence of the racial discrimination in which UWM is engaging through administration and selection of Lawson Grants (Exhibit A).

As the Department of Education is no doubt aware, discrimination on the basis of race raises concerns UWM has received federal funds in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which declares that “no person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”

In addition, Section 1 of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution asserts: “No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” On these grounds, the Supreme Court held in 1954 that racial segregation of students is unconstitutional. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

As recently as 2024, in *Students for Fair Admission, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*,⁵ the Supreme Court struck down the racially discriminatory admission policies of Harvard College and the University of North Carolina as violative of the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice John Roberts noted that:

Eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it. And the Equal Protection Clause, we have accordingly held, applies without regard to any differences of race, of

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* (emphasis added).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023).

color; or of nationality—it is universal in its application.... For the guarantee of equal protection cannot mean one thing when applied to one individual and something else when applied to a person of another color... If both are not accorded the same protection, then it is not equal.”⁶

And violations of the Equal Protection Clause, the Court confirmed, are *also* violations of Title VI: “discrimination that violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment committed by an institution that accepts federal funds also constitutes a violation of Title VI.”⁷

The Department’s own guidance on Title VI clarifies that covered educational programs and activities may include, but are not limited to: “admissions, recruitment, *financial aid*, academic programs, student treatment and services, counseling and guidance, discipline, classroom assignment, grading, vocational education, recreation, physical education, athletics, and housing.”⁸

Accordingly, we ask that the Department promptly investigate the allegations in this complaint, act swiftly to remedy unlawful policies and practices, and order appropriate relief.

Thank you for your prompt assistance with this request for investigation and resolution. Please contact me for further information.

Sincerely,



Nicole Neily
President
Defending Education

Encl. Exhibit A

⁶ *Id.* at 15 (cleaned up).

⁷ *Id.* at 6 n. 2 (quoting *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U. S. 244, 276, n. 23 (2003)).

⁸ *Education and Title VI*, U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (accessed April 2, 2025). <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/civil-rights-laws/race-color-and-national-origin-discrimination/education-and-title-vi> (emphasis added).

Exhibit A

**Office of Student Financial Aid**
(<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/>)

Search

(<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/>)

Home

(<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/>)

Cost

(<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/cost-of-attendance/>)

Eligibility

(<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/eligibility/>)

Applying

(<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/applying/>)Home (<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/>)Types of Aid (<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/types-of-aid/>)Grants (<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/types-of-aid/grants/>)Lawton Grant (<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/types-of-aid/grants/lawton/>)

Lawton Grant

The Lawton Undergraduate Minority Retention Grant program was established back in 1986 to provide financial assistance to statutorily designated minority Wisconsin undergraduate students (African-American, Latino, Native American (American Indian/Eskimo) and Southeast Asians of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, or Hmong descent who entered the United States after December 31, 1975) to improve their opportunities for retention and graduation and lessen the burden of student debt.

Students interested in receiving the Lawton Grant must reach out to their School/College's Coordinator for nomination – a listing of Lawton Grant Coordinators and their contact information is below.

Eligibility

Students must:

- be a Wisconsin resident.
- identify as African-American, Latino, Native American (American Indian/Eskimo), Southeast Asian of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, or Hmong decent.
- have reached sophomore standing or higher, but not yet received their first bachelor's degree.
- submit the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov) (<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov>) each year and it must show a Student Aid Index (SAI) below 10,000 as well as financial need
- maintain a minimum 2.0 cumulative GPA.
- maintain full-time enrollment and complete at least 24 credits in the preceding academic year.
- meet any other criteria as established by your school or college.

Academic Year Award – minimum \$1,000, maximum \$3,300.

Students can receive the Lawton Grant for a maximum of 8 semesters or up to \$16,000, whichever happens first.



Lawton Coordinators



[Expand all](#) | [Collapse all](#)

College of Agricultural & Life Sciences

Tom Browne

Email: thomas.browne@wisc.edu
(<mailto:thomas.browne@wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.262.3288

College of Engineering

Kelly Meier

Email: kmeier6@wisc.edu (<mailto:kmeier6@wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.264.0392

College of Letters & Science

Jose J. Madera

Email: jose.j.madera@wisc.edu
(<mailto:jose.j.madera@wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.263.5068

School of Education

Jerry Jordan

Email: jjordan@education.wisc.edu
(<mailto:jjordan@education.wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.890.3403

School of Human Ecology

Alex Sowieja

Email: asowieja@wisc.edu (<mailto:asowieja@wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.890.4791

School of Nursing

Katie Bleier

Email: katie.bleier@wisc.edu (<mailto:katie.bleier@wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.263.5172

School of Pharmacy



Kendra Gurnee

Email: kgurnee@wisc.edu (<mailto:kgurnee@wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.262.4487

Student Financial Aid

Jer Her

Email: gorejer.her@wisc.edu (<mailto:gorejer.her@wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.262.3060

Wisconsin School of Business

Megan Olson

Email: megan.olson@wisc.edu (<mailto:megan.olson@wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.263.1702



(<https://www.wisc.edu>)

Part of the Universities of Wisconsin (<https://www.wisconsin.edu/>)

QUICK LINKS

Net Price Calculator (<https://app.meadowfi.com/wisconsin>)

Consumer Information (<https://financialaid.wisc.edu/consumer-info>)

Wisconsin Scholarship Hub (<https://wisc.academicworks.com/>)

Student Jobs (<http://www.studentjobs.wisc.edu>)

UW-Madison FAFSA School Code: 003895 (<http://fafsa.gov>)

CONTACT US

333 E Campus Mall, #9701
Madison, WI 53715-1382

Map

(<https://www.google.com/maps/place/333+E+Campus+Mall,+Madison,+WI+53715/@43.0726464,-89.4005963,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x8807acbb33944359:0x3188cbf9bc397e10!8m2!3d43.0726425!4d-89.3984023>)

Email: finaid@finaid.wisc.edu (<mailto:finaid@finaid.wisc.edu>)

Phone: 608.262.3060 (tel:608.262.3060)

(https://www.instagram.com/uwmad_finaid/)

(https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_en_DIIGWbvwx0_bBqOMCg)

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