



June 20, 2018

**VIA ONLINE PORTAL AND ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Douglass Hibbard  
Chief, Initial Request Staff  
Office of Information Policy  
U.S. Department of Justice  
1425 New York Avenue NW, Suite 11050  
Washington, DC 20530-0001  
Via FOIAOnline

Nelson D. Hermilla, Chief  
FOIA/PA Branch  
Civil Rights Division  
Department of Justice  
BICN Bldg., Room 3234  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
CRT.FOIArequests@usdoj.gov

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear FOIA Officers:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552 and the implementing regulations of the Department of Justice (DOJ), 28 C.F.R. Part 16, American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law make the following request for records.

On August 1, 2017, the *New York Times* reported that DOJ was “preparing to redirect resources of the Justice Department’s civil rights division toward investigating and suing universities over affirmative action admissions policies deemed to discriminate against white applicants.”<sup>1</sup> DOJ has reportedly begun to recruit lawyers to participate in this project, including by circulating an announcement to attorneys in DOJ’s Civil Rights Division describing an opportunity to work on “investigations and possible litigation related to intentional race-based discrimination in college and university admissions.”<sup>2</sup> This initiative reflects a major policy shift, with signs of inappropriate partisan political meddling. Media reports indicate that political appointees at DOJ will lead this effort, because “career staffers who specialize in education issues refused to work on the project out of concerns it was contrary to the office’s long-running approach to civil rights in education opportunities.”<sup>3</sup> The extent and nature of collaboration between DOJ and Education on this

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Savage, *Justice Dept. to Take on Affirmative Action in College Admissions*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/us/politics/trump-affirmative-action-universities.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Sari Horwitz & Emma Brown, *Justice Department Plans New Project to Sue Universities over Affirmative Action Policies*, WASH. POST, Aug. 1, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/justice-department-plans-new-project-to-sue-universities-over-affirmative-action-policies/2017/08/01/6295eba4-772b-11e7-8f39-eeb7d3a2d304\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.4bb20f9e9d70](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/justice-department-plans-new-project-to-sue-universities-over-affirmative-action-policies/2017/08/01/6295eba4-772b-11e7-8f39-eeb7d3a2d304_story.html?utm_term=.4bb20f9e9d70).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*



initiative is not yet clear,<sup>4</sup> though DOJ reportedly may use data from the Department of Education to support its work.<sup>5</sup>

Non-partisan policy expertise—not a partisan political agenda—should drive the federal government’s approach to civil rights and access to education. All Americans deserve fair educational opportunities, but shifts in government policy and lawsuits against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina make clear that policies promoting access to opportunity are under siege. The Lawyers’ Committee represents student intervenor-defendants in the University of North Carolina case and represents students who have “amicus-plus” status in the Harvard University case. American Oversight and the Lawyers’ Committee seek information to shed light on the federal government’s approach to civil rights enforcement in college and university admissions, including changes to that approach under the current administration, partisan goals motivating those changes, and the influence of outside interests on government enforcement policy and practice.

### **Requested Records**

American Oversight and the Lawyers’ Committee request<sup>6</sup> that DOJ produce the following within twenty business days:

1. All records reflecting communications (including emails, email attachments, text messages, messages on messaging platforms (such as Slack, GChat or Google Hangouts, Lync, Skype, or WhatsApp), telephone call logs, calendar invitations/entries, meeting notices, meeting agendas, informational material, talking points, any handwritten or electronic notes taken during any oral communications, summaries of any oral communications, or other materials) between any of the individuals in Category A and any of the individuals or entities in Category B.
2. All calendar entries (including invitations) involving at least one person listed in Category A and one person or entity listed in Category B and all attachments to such calendar entries. For calendar entries created in Outlook or similar programs, the documents should be produced in “memo” form to include all invitees, any notes, and all attachments. Please do not limit your search to Outlook calendars—we request the production of any calendar—paper or electronic, whether on government-issued or personal devices—used to track or coordinate how these individuals allocate their time on agency business.

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.* (“A spokeswoman for the Education Department did not immediately respond late Tuesday night to inquiries about whether the agency would play a role in the effort to challenge affirmative action on college campuses.”).

<sup>5</sup> Savage, *supra* note 1.

<sup>6</sup> American Oversight and the Lawyers’ Committee filed a nearly identical request on August 30, 2017. This request seeks responsive records which post-date searches conducted for that earlier request.

Category A - Agency Officials	Category B - Outside Individuals/Entities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the Attorney General</li> <li>• the Deputy Attorney General</li> <li>• the Associate Attorney General</li> <li>• the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights</li> <li>• the Chief of the Educational Opportunities Section of the Office of Civil Rights</li> <li>• any other political appointee or SES employee in the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of the Deputy Attorney General, the Office of the Associate Attorney General, or the Office of Civil Rights (including the Educational Opportunities Section).</li> <li>• anyone acting on behalf of any of the individuals listed above (such as administrative assistants or chiefs of staff)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Edward Blum</li> <li>• Project on Fair Representation (@projectonfairrepresentation.org)</li> <li>• American Enterprise Institute (@aei.org)</li> <li>• William Consovoy</li> <li>• Thomas McCarthy</li> <li>• Michael Park</li> <li>• Patrick Strawbridge</li> <li>• J. Michael Connolly</li> <li>• Bryan Weir</li> <li>• Jennifer Mascott</li> <li>• Suzzette DeMers</li> <li>• Consovoy McCarthy Park PLLC (@consovoymccarthy.com)</li> </ul>

For both requests, the search should include individuals and entities in Category B both as search terms and as entries in the to/from/cc/bcc fields of emails or calendar entries/invitations. The search should include any individuals serving in the roles listed above in either an acting or a permanent capacity.

Please provide all responsive records from September 1, 2017, to the date the search is conducted.

In addition to the records requested above, American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee also request records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If DOJ uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee seek all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms "record," "document," and "information" in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles,

telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>7</sup> **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee have a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.**<sup>8</sup>

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered DOJ’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Agency (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians’ files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but DOJ’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight and the Lawyers’ Committee insist that DOJ use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. American Oversight and the Lawyers’ Committee are available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not**

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<sup>7</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

<sup>8</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

<sup>9</sup> Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

**have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”<sup>10</sup> If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight and the Lawyers’ Committee request that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”<sup>12</sup> Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”<sup>13</sup>

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.<sup>14</sup> Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

**You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request.** American Oversight and the Lawyers’ Committee intend to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, DOJ is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, American Oversight and the Lawyers’ Committee welcome an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, we can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

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<sup>10</sup> FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

<sup>11</sup> *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

<sup>12</sup> *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

<sup>14</sup> *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF or TIF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

### **Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 28 C.F.R. § 16.10(k), American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee request a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>16</sup>

American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee request a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is "in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding" of government operations and activities.<sup>17</sup> Major shifts in DOJ's approach to affirmative action policies have occurred in secret and come to light only through reporting by the *New York Times*.<sup>18</sup> At DOJ, these changes appear to have occurred at the behest of political leadership and over the strong objections of career civil servants.<sup>19</sup> Little information is available to inform the public about these shifts, including the extent to which DOJ is collaborating with the Department of Education and the extent to which outside individuals or groups are exerting influence over DOJ's policies, procedures, and practices. The American people deserve to know whether partisan political agendas are overriding long-standing agency commitments to protecting civil rights and educational opportunity. Because DOJ has not been transparent on these issues, the requested disclosure will be "meaningfully informative" about key government operations and activities surrounding higher education admissions.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, reported "outrage" after the *New York Times* report underscores the public's interest and investment in this subject,<sup>21</sup> and (as described further below) American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee will convey information obtained through this request to the general public via its website and social media accounts.<sup>22</sup> This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>23</sup> As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight's financial interest. American Oversight's

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<sup>15</sup> 28 C.F.R. § 16.10(k)(1).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> 28 C.F.R. § 16.10(k)(1), (2)(i)-(ii).

<sup>18</sup> *See Savage, supra* note 1.

<sup>19</sup> *See Horwitz & Brown, supra* note 2.

<sup>20</sup> 28 C.F.R. § 16.10(k)(2)(ii)(A).

<sup>21</sup> Lydia Wheeler, *Outrage Erupts over Report DOJ Will Target Affirmative Action*, THE HILL (Aug. 2, 2017, 12:05 PM), <http://thehill.com/regulation/administration/344948-outrage-erupts-over-report-doj-will-target-affirmative-action>.

<sup>22</sup> 28 C.F.R. § 16.10(k)(2)(ii)(B).

<sup>23</sup> 28 C.F.R. § 16.10(k)(1), (2)(iii).

mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on our public website and promote their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>24</sup> American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney, American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website<sup>25</sup> and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, American Oversight has a project called "Audit the Wall," where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, the Lawyers' Committee is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in the Lawyers' Committee's financial interest. The Lawyers' Committee was founded in 1963 and is committed to full and fair enforcement of federal civil rights laws and ensuring equal justice under law for all. Educational Opportunities is one of the Lawyers' Committee's core areas and the organization has had a longstanding commitment to fighting for diversity in college admissions. The Lawyers' Committee will use the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. The Lawyers' Committee will also make materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Accordingly, American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee, individually and collectively, qualify for a fee waiver.

## **Conclusion**

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight and the Lawyers' Committee look forward to working with DOJ on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing

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<sup>24</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 11,900 page likes on Facebook, and 43,900 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited June 20, 2018); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited June 20, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> *Vetting the Nominees: Solicitor General Nominee Noel Francisco*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/our-actions/vetting-nominees-solicitor-general-nominee-noel-francisco>.

<sup>26</sup> *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/news/francisco-travel-ban-learned-doj-documents>.

<sup>27</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.

the requested records, please contact Dan McGrath at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or 202.897.4213. Also, if the request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,



Austin R. Evers  
Executive Director  
American Oversight

Kristen Clarke  
President and Executive Director  
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law