



ICE Detention at Columbia Highlights Need for Clear Protocols in College Law Enforcement Interactions

Blog Post

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On February 26, 2026, Columbia University announced, and various media outlets reported, that a Columbia student had been detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents that morning. While there have been many reports of ICE detaining international students over the past year, this incident is notable for how ICE personnel are alleged to have carried out the detention: By holding themselves out not as ICE agents but as New York Police Department officers looking for a missing child, in order to gain entrance into the Columbia dormitory where the student lived.

This appears to be the first instance within recent memory in which ICE agents are alleged to have conducted an enforcement operation while affirmatively misrepresenting who they were in order to gain access to a non-public facility. While the student is reported to have been released that same evening, this incident nevertheless demonstrates how educational institutions – and particularly colleges and universities – may wish to consider how they prepare for and structure interactions with ICE and other law enforcement agencies.

First, it bears emphasizing that ICE, like other law enforcement agencies, is limited by the U.S. Constitution's Fourth Amendment prohibition on unreasonable searches and seizures. Accordingly, ICE's authority to enter a non-public area, such as (but not limited to) a dormitory that is ordinarily accessible only by residents or other authorized persons, is generally subject to a requirement that a judicial warrant be obtained.

Second, recognizing where and when ICE and other law enforcement may or may not be acting within the bounds of their authority requires both training and well-considered protocols. Among other things, establishing a chain of command for ground-level personnel who are most likely to be the first points of contact with ICE can be critical in addressing requests for access to non-public facilities in an orderly fashion. Relatedly, fostering relationships and clear lines of communication with local law enforcement can help ground-level personnel be more prepared to interact both with ICE and other law enforcement with more confidence.

Third, laws specifically applicable to educational institutions, such as FERPA, are still generally applicable in the context of interactions with ICE. In that regard, ensuring that student privacy is secured by the institution to the extent required by law, is not only important in of itself but may also have collateral importance in immigration and other contexts.

Notwithstanding that ICE agents appear to have used disingenuous means to gain access to the student's building, and ultimately, their apartment, Columbia University faces backlash for its alleged failure to prepare and protect its student population. This underscores a college's obligation to proactively educate its community with regard to the scope of the authority of law enforcement. Contact our attorneys in the [Higher Education Practice](#) to ensure your community is educated on its rights when it comes to law enforcement activity on campus.

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