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1 **COURAGE AND RESILIENCE OF BEING FIRST: ADVICE AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO MY YOUNGER SELF AS A FIRST-GENERATION LAW STUDENT**

Tanisha C. Green, Esq., Assistant Dean of Student Development at Thurgood Marshall School of Law

4 To My Younger Self,
As I sit here reflecting on my journey as a first-generation law student, I can't help but think of you and the extraordinary path that rests before you. There will be moments of doubt, challenges that seem impossible, and times when you question if you are in the right place. There will be times when you have absolutely no idea how you will make it another day. I lend you this assurance – YOU WILL. Your journey, from the day you step foot into your law school home will be a remarkable experience —one that will mold your being into a strong advocate and leader. I give you this advice to help you along your path.'

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Firstly, acknowledge how far you have come and the challenges you have overcome. Reflect on the lessons you've learned and the strength you have cultivated along the way. Despite the hardship you may have endured leaving your family for months at a time and embarking on an unexplored journey you may feel this unexplored path to be the most daunting challenge you have ever faced. As the first in our family to pursue a law degree or even graduate college, remember at all times that your distinct experiences bring profound value to the legal profession. Embrace your role as a pioneer, for you have lit the torch that will lead the way for others who will follow in your footsteps.

From the start, immerse yourself in every opportunity for personal development. Don't be afraid to ask questions, seek guidance, and build a support system. Do not let a week pass without initiating even the briefest conversations with mentors, professors, or fellow

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students whose paths may not greatly differ from your own. Absorb the wisdom they have to offer you like a sponge. Remember, it's okay to ask for help—it does not weaken your capabilities; instead it expands your possibilities and makes your hunger for growth evident. It is no secret that understanding every aspect of law school is almost impossible, and the workload may seem completely unbearable. When this inevitable demon creeps upon your shoulder, you must stop, take a deep breath or possibly even a short break and remind yourself of your inherent value. You have earned your place among your peers, and your exceptional outlook will provide depth to classroom discussions and legal discourse. Embrace your fears and take calculated risks. Seize the opportunity to expand your knowledge in legislation by participating in legislative internships and research opportunities offered. Remind yourself that growth often happens outside of your comfort zone and that taking chances can lead to remarkable opportunities.

Never forget the sacrifices made by your little girl to reach this point. The mere thought of the patience and belief in you by her and your family will carry you through all obstacles. While on this flight, let their sacrifices be a constant reminder of the importance of your aspirations. Honor their resilience by giving your all and striving for excellence in everything you do. With bright eyes, look forward to the future you will provide to your daughter. Think about the admiration that she will hold knowing that her single mother held fast and endured an insurmountable three years to make sure her future would be secure. Find value in nurturing your relationships. Invest time and effort into building and maintaining connections with family, friends, and loved ones. Seek their support in ways they may adequately provide it, while upholding the understanding that you must remain focused on the goal of successfully completing law school.

As you progress, remember to take care of yourself. Law school can be demanding, but prioritizing self-care is critical. Take care of your health, set boundaries, and participate in activities that nourish your well-being. Seek moments of peace amidst the chaos—whether it's through meditation, exercise, spending time with loved ones, or partaking in hobbies that rejuvenate your mind, body, and spirit.

Remember that your well-being is not a luxury but a necessary component for achieving success. Embrace self-acceptance and be kind and forgiving to yourself. Your imperfections and mistakes are a natural part of growth in law school.

It may seem difficult, but never lose sight of why you embarked on this flight. Hold onto your enthusiasm for justice, equality, and making a positive impact. Pursue your passions and interests wholeheartedly. Let that passion and purpose guide you through the excruciatingly long nights of studying and over the hurdles you will face along the way. You have the power to impact change, both within the legal profession and the lives of anyone you encounter.

My dear younger self, always remember to pay it forward just as those who paved the way for you to secure a seat in a law school did. Give back your knowledge, skills, experiences, and mentorship. Sharing these elements with others will provide a continuous light to the torch you have carried.

Lastly, TRUST THE JOURNEY! Believe in yourself, for your capabilities surpass even your own imagination. Embrace challenges, celebrate victories, and remember that this flight as a first-generation law student is incredible motivation. Keep pushing onward, remain steadfast in your values, and always remember that you are rewriting history for the generations to come.

With absolute support and complete esteem,
Your Future Self

The American Dream in the World's Borough

Kristie Stack, Associate Director of Student Services at St. John's University, School of Law

To my younger self,

I'm writing to you nearly 15 years after your journey in academia began. What you didn't know then is that your commute to the top of Grymes Hill will be your first of many college journeys. You'll go on to travel to Downtown Brooklyn, Lincoln Center, and Morningside Heights to advise, assess, and research. Time and again, you'll recommit your career to creating formative experiences for others in the ways you have been afforded them.

In the most kismet of ways, I write to you exactly from where those experiences were made possible, from an institution that continues to elevate. As I sit here today in the School of Law, you should know that we never stopped believing in the importance of this work. We still maintain that access to higher education is what ignites change and reform. We've built a mission-driven career rooted in serving students.

The road here has been one full of twists and turns. I wish you had known along the way that your dreams were never really out of reach; all you needed was a place as special as this to believe you could. You always could, and so you finally did.

Here are some of the indelible lessons we've gathered on our way back home:

Honor your roots and let them anchor you. Strong roots make for solid foundations. Your lived experiences will always impact the person you become, even when you don't want them to. Embrace and celebrate your authenticity. Allow your roots to inform the ways in which you wield talent, power, and privilege. Your roots are so critical to who you are; do not ever be ashamed of them.

Pedigree doesn't define you. It never did. You were born to break cycles, and being the trailblazer is never easy. You'll cry when your advisor tells you you're an unlikely law school candidate. You'll grow tired of checking off the high school equivalent box for your parents. You'll hope the electricity hasn't been shut off again by the time you get home. You'll wonder if these circumstances will skew the way others perceive and treat you. They might, but it doesn't matter. Wealth does not create strong, successful leaders; grit, compassion, and resilience do.

You are worthy of the highs and strong enough for the lows. The path will be winding. There will be moments where the lows feel overpowering, and this will cause you to question not only your worth but your purpose. Remember that every low point in a mountain range is nestled in between two peaks. When you reach the highs, because you certainly will, do not question whether you belong there. You were never an imposter; you're exactly what these spaces needed all along.

Fear is normal, but let it be fleeting. You will be met with many emotions along the way, with fear being one of the most prominent – fear of the unknown, fear of failure, and so on. Emotions, including fear, are temporary but inevitable. They are circumstantial and sometimes unmerited. Never let your temporary, undeserving fear compromise your incredible, infinite potential.

Self-advocacy yields opportunity. Self-advocacy is one of the most generous acts you can undertake for yourself and for others. It will empower you to create your own table when the seat you demand is not granted.

You have both the right and responsibility to advocate for yourself; doing so strengthens your village. Become your own best advocate today so there can be more of you tomorrow.

You are successful because you are first-generation, not in spite of it. Being first-generation is adorned with challenges, but it is not the antithesis of success. Your unique plight will leave with you a greater sense of humility than when this journey began. You'll commit yourself to leading for and with others. You'll believe in the common good and stand up for it. You'll recognize that everyone deserves a champion. You'll bring your full self into all that you do, and you'll achieve great things because of it. Believe you will be the first and remain resolute you will not be the last.

And so, this is what the American Dream can look like in the World's Borough.

Kristie Stack is a first-generation student and an Associate Director of Student Services at St. John's University, School of Law. Kristie returned to St. John's in 2022 as an administrator after earning her B.A. in English ('12SJC) and M.S. Ed. in Education ('14SOE) from St. John's University and M.A. in Sociology and Education ('20TC) from Columbia University. Kristie is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Administration and Supervision at Fordham University with a research focus on women in educational leadership.

ADVICE TO FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS: FIND YOUR PEOPLE

Halle Hara, Senior Lecturer and Externship Director at Moritz College of Law at The Ohio State University

My advice to first-generation college and law students: find your people. And they might not be the people that you think. Find the people who will listen to you, genuinely get to know you, and root for you every step of the way. Your people are kind people—ones who want to see you succeed.

To use Michelle Obama’s words: build your own “Kitchen Table.”¹ In her recent book “The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times,” Obama writes about her “Kitchen Table,” a term she uses to refer to the collection of people she trusts most outside of her family. People she’s “asked to pull up a chair and sit with [her] in life.”²

Long before I knew about Obama’s Kitchen Table, I began building my own. Just a few years after entering the legal profession in 1998, I more likely considered it my “Circle of Trust,” a term used in the year 2000 hit comedy, “Meet the Parents,” featuring Ben Stiller.³

As a new attorney, my “social convoy,” as social psychologists call it,⁴ consisted of the two federal judges I worked for as a law clerk. Judicial chambers are small, and both judges took the time to mentor me in a way that just couldn’t happen in a typical law school classroom. When I transitioned to big law, I found a partner who pushed me in a healthy way. When I felt paralyzed with fear as I took my first deposition, that partner sat beside me and repeatedly said, “You can do this,” and “I’ve got you.” I was leaping but with a safety net: the trusted advisor by my side. Many years later, I met a friend who convinced me that I’d be a great law teacher. That person saw things in me I didn’t see in myself, which led to where I am now: teaching and advising students, including those who, like me, did not have a parent who attended college or law school.

“Find your people,” I tell them. Invariably, they ask where to begin. I love this question because it allows me to reflect on one of my favorite people walking the planet: a friend that I met just after the start of law school. On paper, this friend and I looked extremely different. I graduated college after three years and headed straight to law school as a young, single person. She went to law school to start a second career with a partner and a child along for the ride. My friend was fifteen years older than me, an adventurer who had the confidence to live life to the fullest. I was a classic Type-A personality who overprepared for everything, neatly coloring in the lines of life for fear of failure. Despite our many differences, we studied together, picked each other up when we needed it, and laughed about anything and everything to make our way through the three challenging years of law school.

These people I have described are my people.⁵ They answer with a resounding yes when you question whether you are good enough. Be open to finding your people as you navigate your unfamiliar surroundings and do the same for others. Whether you engage a fellow law student, interact with an externship supervisor, visit a

¹ Michelle Obama, *THE LIGHT WE CARRY: OVERCOMING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES* 142 (2022).

² *Id.*

³ *MEET THE PARENTS* (Universal Pictures 2000).

⁴ Lydia Denworth, *Why You Need a Social Convoy*, *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY* (June 30, 2018), available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-waves/201806/why-you-need-social-convoy> (last visited May 30, 2023).

⁵ Michelle Obama, *THE LIGHT WE CARRY: OVERCOMING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES* 145 (2022).

professor during office hours, or participate in a formal mentoring program, doing so will help you to find your people.

Having a support system will allow you to feel at home in a new world and give you the confidence to build your own professional identity. There is a place for you in the law, and your people will remind you that you belong. Because you do.

SUPPORTING FIRST GENERATION STUDENT: FIVE LESSONS FROM MIAMI LAW

Jack Townsend, JD/LLM '17 and Odetta Clarke, JD '12, Associate Directors of Student Life, University of Miami School of Law



First generation (“first-gen”) students represent an increasingly large proportion of law school students. Nationwide, about a third of law students are the first in their family to obtain a bachelor's degree.⁶ This represents a significant increase compared to data collected in 2020 and 2018.⁷ At University of Miami, we are fortunate that 78% of the JD class of 2025 identifies as first-gen. We recently had an opportunity to sit down with three leaders from our First Generation Law Association (“FGLA”) and talk to them about what their experience at Miami Law has been like.

Generation Law Association (“FGLA”) and talk to them about what their experience at Miami Law has been like.

1. Student organizations are impactful.

In 2020, we supported the students in forming FGLA to help provide community to these students. Over the past few years, it has grown into one of the largest and most active organizations on campus. All three of the leaders we spoke to emphasized a strong desire to find community and connection during their 1L year. They wanted opportunities to meet upper-level students, ask them questions, make friends, and dispel some of the uncertainty associated with the first year of law school. FGLA is where they found this community. All three students underscored what a positive impact the organization made on their first year. Now that they are

⁶ <https://lsse.indiana.edu/tag/first-generation/#:~:text=Who%20are%20first%2Dgen%20students,diversity%2C%20equity%2C%20and%20inclusion.>

⁷ <https://www.nalp.org/1121research>; <https://www.aals.org/about/publications/newsletters/fall-2018/aalsgallup/>

upper-level students and organization leaders they will have the opportunity to offer the class of 2026 that same sense of community and belonging.

2. Law school can be a significant financial risk.

Law school is expensive. All the FGLA Leaders we spoke to discussed having concerns about the high cost of law school when making the decision to attend. None of the students we spoke with came straight from their undergraduate studies to law school. They all felt it necessary to spend some time working either to accumulate some savings or formulate a plan to maximize their chances of success once they arrived for their JD studies. At Miami Law, we encourage our students to engage with the AccessLex platform. Its financial planning and education resources are useful for current law students, as well as incoming students. We discovered that there is a great value to informing students about AccessLex in the summer before the first semester. One first generation Miami Law alumnus Miguel Perez, J.D. '22, also [established a scholarship fund for 2L first-gen students](#) while he was still a student at Miami Law. Miguel was inspired by the support and positive experience he received at Miami Law. We award this each year at Homecoming as another powerful signal of our support to first generation students.

3. The FGLA Law School Orientation is really important.

Each year, FGLA typically hosts a number of events early in the Fall semester to help orient the new 1L class. These include a welcome reception to meet first-gen students and faculty. Last year's welcome reception was especially powerful because it featured three members of the 1L faculty who spoke candidly about their experience as first-gen law students. FGLA also hosts well attended practical workshops on things like briefing, outlining, and best practices for 1L year. Over the past couple of years, the organization has developed a comprehensive glossary of law school related terms. The FGLA glossary is especially useful because it does not simply define legal terms like certiorari and de novo, which could be found in Black's Law Dictionary, but also **law school** terms like OCI and SBA.

One of our student leaders spoke about feeling impostor syndrome and a knowledge gap when she started law school. Having these resources and opportunities to aid in navigating the torrent of new and arcane experiences that school presents has helped not only first-gen students but many of our international students and second and third-gen students also.

4. Commencement recognition signals both community and achievement.

This past year, our FGLA leadership felt strongly that graduating first-gen students should have some form of recognition during the commencement ceremony. The students decided to design and order first-gen stoles. Our student affairs team worked with the FGLA students to come up with a design. While we do not have the resources to provide stoles for all of our affinity groups, first-gen students have the standing option to come to our office and purchase a stole at cost. These first-gen stoles were a big hit, and it was moving to see so many graduates walk across the stage with their "first in law" stoles.

5. Mentorship opportunities are critical.

All three of the first-gen students we spoke with talked about the value of mentoring relationships. A couple of them noted though that finding a mentor was actually harder than they expected and that FGLA was once again a major boon to their experience in meeting a mentor. Each year, since the organization formed, FGLA has hosted two receptions, one in the Fall and one in the Spring. These events are meticulously planned by the students and always have substantial turnout. There is normally a panel portion of the events where first-gen

faculty, judges, and lawyers discuss their experiences. This is followed by a more open-ended evening of networking featuring a multitude of faculty and alumni guests. In order to help the students build this first-gen network, we have surveyed our alumni to identify those that are first-gen and willing to mentor students. Last year's events included Erika Whyte (J.D. '11), Partner at Jones Day and Judge Ivan Fernandez (J.D. '92), Chief Judge, Florida 3rd District Court of Appeal. These are among the largest student organization events each year and greatly benefit the students that attend.

FIRST GEN FRIDAY: HOW AUWCL DEVELOPED A PRE-ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

Sarah Peck, Legal Education Advisor, American University Washington College of Law
Rachel Gordon, Associate Director of Academic Advising & Policy Development, American University Washington College of Law

As the number of first generation (first gen) law students who attend American University Washington College of Law (AUWCL) rises, we must create new opportunities to support these members of our community. First gen law students often do not have the same resources or community as students who come from more traditional backgrounds.⁸ AUWCL First Gen Coalition (FGC) is a group of staff members, many of whom identify as first gen, who coordinate programming and initiatives for first gen students at our school. To welcome these students to law school and to foster their sense of belonging, the FGC organized a day-long “First Gen Friday” (FGF) pre-orientation event the week before formal Orientation began in 2022 to facilitate an opportunity for first gen students to begin to establish relationships with each other and AUWCL staff.

With the support of AUWCL Dean Roger A. Fairfax, we set out to create a program that helped first gen students visualize their futures as lawyers and embody the principle of #proudtobefirst. We aimed to highlight inclusion, diversity, mental health resources, academic advising, and career development. Instead of repeating information these students would receive at Orientation the following week, we intended to highlight an overview of the resources available to them at AUWCL, give them an opportunity to find allies, and start to visualize how they fit in as important members of a law school community, which we hoped would empower them and alleviate anxiety. Most importantly, we wanted this to be a fun and informal way to make connections and get to know their new stomping grounds on a smaller scale. Our goal was to build a day of programming that was fun, stress free, and focused on building community.

On the day of FGF, we reminded ourselves that a first-time program would likely come with speed bumps, and we were excited to host the inaugural event. As students checked in, we placed a colored sticker on their name tag, indicating where they should sit. Each color corresponded to a table named after a notable first generation lawyer, such as Bryan Stevenson and Sonia Sotomayor. Although we had about 70 students who had pre-registered, we were pleasantly surprised and ready to accommodate about 30 additional students who joined that day. Dean Roger A. Fairfax began the morning welcoming the students with a simple message: “you belong here.” We then transitioned to an ice breaker activity, *Getting to Know You*, which involved a series of word cloud polls and table discussions. For the polls, we used Poll Everywhere integrated into Google Slides, allowing students to answer anonymously, which helped them to see that others shared similar answers, feelings, and backgrounds. Students connected through these questions and realized that they were not alone. The final session before lunch was *Who You Gonna Call?*, where staff from student-facing offices introduced themselves and explained how they would assist a 1L student in the upcoming year.

The long lunch break didn’t have any specific programming, which gave the students time to talk and connect. To keep the energy high, the first afternoon activity was a team trivia game using the Kahoot! platform. The questions focused on law school, Washington DC, and the legal profession in pop culture. The

⁸ Schaffzin, Katharine Traylor, First-Generation Students in Law School: A Proven Success Model (November 3, 2021). *Arkansas Law Review*, Vol. 70, No. 4, 2018, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3956247>

questions were not overly difficult, but rather meant to invoke discussion and serve as a fun way to start the afternoon. Things got more serious with *Real Talk*, led by a popular staff member who is a first gen alumna of AUWCL. This informal, off-the-record conversation touched upon the realities of law school and gave students a chance to ask questions in a more relaxed environment. We started with a few pre-written questions, provided an opportunity for students to add their own anonymously by writing them on index cards, and then opened the floor for students who were comfortable asking their questions directly. Following this, the final event was an *Alumni Panel* featuring four first gen recent AUWCL graduates who returned to campus and shared information on their law school experience. Through these two discussions, our hope was that students would feel more at ease inquiring about things they would not ask during the following week's larger orientation setting. FGF concluded with closing remarks and a reception with light refreshments.

Throughout each session, engagement was high, and the immediate feedback we received after the program was overwhelmingly positive. During Orientation the next week, many of the students who participated in FGF expressed their appreciation to members of the FGC. Based on this anecdotal evidence, we reached our goal of creating a sense of belonging and community among the incoming first gen students. We followed up with a survey of attendees which confirmed this and provided valuable feedback for future events.

The FGC intends to make AUWCL's FGF an annual pre-orientation event and we are currently planning for 2023. Based on feedback, we intend to involve more students from ADVANCE, AUWCL's student-run mentorship program geared toward the retention of first gen law students. While the first event did not have many upper-level law student participants, we now have a pool of students who benefited from FGF and are eager to participate going forward. Despite the challenges of adding a new event during a busy time, we are proud of what we were able to accomplish the first time we executed an event at this scale. With the support of the Dean and AUWCL Administration, modest resources compared to our general Orientation, and dedicated staff, AUWCL is excited to be able to welcome first generation law students to our community through a first generation pre-orientation and we urge you to consider this type of programming at your school if you do not already do something similar. Make your first gen students #proudtobefirst.

YOU CAN'T SPELL STUDENT WRITING WITHOUT DEIB: DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION AND BELONGING AS A WELLNESS MANDATE

Nickey Woods, *Dean of Students and Associate Dean for Student Affairs, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging at University of Southern California Gould School of Law*

In higher education, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) efforts and student wellbeing initiatives are typically maintained by distinct departments on campus, with one focused on strategic diversity initiatives, and the other dedicated to holistic student wellbeing.

Even before the pandemic, student wellbeing, and in particular, student mental health, was of great concern to student affairs professionals. In the wake of 2020's social justice movement, we also witnessed an increase in campus diversity and inclusion efforts. As we contend with the increase in student mental health challenges and the persistent isolation felt by underrepresented law school students, we should consider how our law school's DEIB efforts intersect with and inform our wellbeing initiatives. In this article, I explore the relationship between DEIB and wellbeing and suggest strategies for integrating these initiatives to promote student inclusion, engagement, and belonging.

Health, Wellness and Wellbeing

In November of 1986, the World Health Organization (WHO) convened its first international conference on health promotion in Ottawa. WHO considers health as a fundamental human right and places emphasis on both social and personal resources. Health is viewed as a responsibility that extends beyond the health sector, encompassing not only healthy lifestyles but also overall *wellbeing*.⁹

Health is considered a complete state of physical, mental, & social wellbeing rather than merely the absence of disease or infirmity.¹⁰ Wellness is defined as the optimal state of health of individuals and groups; the realization of the fullest potential of an individual physically, socially, spiritually, and economically. It is considered a positive state experienced by individuals, societies and a resource for daily life. It is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. The World Health Organization describes *wellbeing as a political choice*.¹¹ It is the outcome of the policies, institutions, economies and ecosystems in which people live.

The conference also outlined fundamental conditions and resources for health, including peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity. To maximize health, individuals require a secure foundation in these basic prerequisites. Thus, the idea that social justice and equity are foundational to wellness is not novel.

Law School Student Affairs and Health Promotion

The conference also identified several actions critical to health promotion:

- Build Healthy Public Policy
- Create Supportive Environments

⁹ World Health Organization. *Ottawa charter for health promotion* (1986), available at <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/349652/WHO-EURO-1986-4044-43803-61677-eng.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

- Strengthen Community Actions
- Develop Personal Skills

While the priorities of law school student affairs professionals may not fit within the strict definition of *health promotion*, the actions outlined by the World Health Organization nearly 40 years ago closely align with practices that underpin our work with students. Student affairs professionals *build healthy public policy* designed to promote student wellbeing in our law schools. We are intentional about *creating supportive environments* so our students can thrive in stressful, high stakes academic environments. We collaborate across our law schools to *strengthen community actions* that support student wellbeing, and the core of student affairs work is empowering our students to *develop* and refine the *personal skills* necessary to thrive in both law school and their legal careers.

Higher Education Wellbeing Resources

Within the realm of higher education, the choices we make reveal our commitment to student wellbeing. An institution that steers budgetary and human resources, for example, to a newly created Office of Student Resiliency sends a clear signal to its campus community that it is committed to ensuring that its students develop the capacity to be resilient in the face of adversity. Institutions that earmark funds for mindfulness or embedded counseling resources signal to their campuses that they acknowledge the increase in student mental health issues and are actively working to address these challenges in meaningful ways. In addition to offices devoted to student resiliency, mindfulness, and counseling services, many colleges and universities have implemented innovative resources to support wellbeing, including virtual therapy to expand access to mental health resources and positions specifically dedicated to health promotion and student wellbeing.

Law Schools as Unique Academic Ecosystems

Because of the unique nature of legal education, it is helpful to view the law school as its own *academic ecosystem*. In this ecosystem, students learn and are assessed in ways that are likely very different from what they not only experienced, but mastered at the undergraduate level. The Socratic method, normalized grading process, class rankings, heavy reading load, outlining, emphasis on critical and analytical thinking, and typically, just one assessment at the end of the academic term, collectively create an intensely stressful environment for students accustomed to high achievement.

Despite the increase in student wellbeing resources on university campuses across the country, the current state of our law school ecosystem remains troubling. Law school students experience higher rates of anxiety, disrupted sleep, depression, physical health and other issues when compared to their peers at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.¹² 96% of law students experience significant stress, compared to 70% of medical school students and 43% of graduate students.¹³

¹² See Bree Buchanan & James C. Coyle, *National Task Force on Lawyer Well-being: Creating a Movement to Improve Well-being in the Legal Profession* (2017), available at <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

Minoritized Law Students: Exacerbated Impacts

For racially minoritized students – many of whom are first generation law students, the stress of law school is exacerbated by implicit and explicit racial bias, microaggressions, and feelings of exclusion.¹⁴ Certain racial, socioeconomic, and other groups have been historically excluded from elite spaces – including law schools – and efforts to diversify legal education among both faculty and the student body highlight the ongoing lack of diverse representation. Law professor Meera Deo attributes ongoing biases in legal academia to the low numbers of Black professors.¹⁵ Thus, it is not uncommon for Black students to experience imposter syndrome and stereotype threat as they contend with the notion that their presence in law school is the result of their race rather than academic merit. The recent Supreme Court decision overturning Affirmative Action and the use of race as an admissions factor likely contribute to feelings of exclusion for underrepresented students as well.

Scholars have long described the law school classroom as a “hostile education environment” for Black students.¹⁶ These students often describe feelings of isolation, stigmatization, exhaustion, demoralization, tokenization, stereotypes, and a sense of inferiority when compared to their white peers. This leads to reduced participation in class, resulting in gaps in knowledge and a lack of diverse perspectives that could enrich the learning experiences of all students. Research indicates that cultural stereotypes influence both student and instructor perceptions in the classroom. Additionally, some professors may lack the desire and/or competency to address how the law intersects with race, further contributing to feelings of discomfort and exclusion for Black students.¹⁷ Law professor Shaun Ossei-Owusu describes the learning of law—especially for racial minorities as *intellectually violent*.¹⁸

The Diversity and Inclusiveness module of the 2020 Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) collected responses on the law school experiences of approximately 13,000 law students at 68 law schools. This module examined the environments, processes, and activities that reflect the engagement with and validation of cultural diversity and societal differences within these schools. The LSSSE findings revealed that white law students felt a greater sense of belonging than their Black counterparts.¹⁹ It is essential to prioritize creating a sense of belonging for all law students to enhance academic vitality and overall classroom experiences of *all* students.

¹⁴ See Leslie P. Culver, *White Doors, Black Footsteps: Leveraging White Privilege to Benefit Law Students of Color*, 21 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 37 (2017).

¹⁵ See Sarah Schendel, *Listen!: Amplifying the Experiences of Black Law School Graduates*, 100 NEB. L. REV. 73 (2020), available at <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3308&context=nlr>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See Leslie P. Culver, *White Doors, Black Footsteps: Leveraging White Privilege to Benefit Law Students of Color*, 21 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 37 (2017).

¹⁸ See Sarah Schendel, *Listen!: Amplifying the Experiences of Black Law School Graduates*, 100 NEB. L. REV. 73 (2020), available at <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3308&context=nlr>

¹⁹ Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. *Law School Survey of Student Engagement* (2020), available at <https://lssse.indiana.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Diversity-and-Exclusion-Final-9.29.20.pdf>

Inclusion vs. Belonging, and Why Both Matter

Inclusion refers to behaviors and cultural norms intentionally designed to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, while *belonging* refers to an individual's sense of acceptance resulting from these inclusive efforts. Although interconnected, they require us to focus our efforts in two distinct ways. Inclusion is concerned with the actions, programs, initiatives and strategies crafted to foster an inclusive environment while belonging is concerned with how the target of these inclusive efforts perceive and feel based on our actions. Inclusion, in a sense, gets us only halfway there.

Why does belonging matter? Lacking a sense of belonging is a more significant predictor of major depression compared to other factors often linked to depression, such as social support, conflict and loneliness, and depression, anxiety and suicide are prevalent mental health conditions associated with a lack of belonging.²⁰

Integrating DEIB and Student Wellbeing: Sense of Belonging and Psychological Safety

The integration of DEIB and student wellbeing lie at the intersection of a student's *sense of belonging* and their *psychological safety*. To maximize student engagement and enhance academic performance, educational environments should promote both belonging and safety.²¹ Rooted in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a sense of belonging supports feelings of security, identity, and community. Psychological safety encourages students to take educational risks and reaffirms the idea that their identity, perspectives, and contributions to classroom discussions are valuable. In a psychologically safe environment, students feel comfortable being their authentic selves; they bring their complete identities to school and the classroom free from the need to suppress any aspects of their identity.

So, what is the link between belonging and psychological safety? Because belonging has long been recognized as one of the most essential human needs, it serves as a bedrock for outcomes that impact all areas of our lives. From a psychological standpoint, a sense of belonging is linked to higher levels of motivation, achievement and improved outcomes for our health and wellbeing.²²

Law students who feel a sense of belonging and psychological safety have higher levels of academic motivation, develop meaningful friendships and mentorship relationships, are more likely to attend office hours, study groups, and are more likely to persist through challenges.²³ Thus, while a sense of belonging and psychological safety are feelings, these feelings can drive specific actions that can directly impact our student's experiences in law school and their academic performance.

Conversely, when law students are denied psychological safety and a sense of belonging in their educational journey, they invoke defense mechanisms that monopolize their cognitive energy, thus contributing to

²⁰ Reyes, Amy. "Low sense of belonging is a predictor of depression." *University of Michigan* (1999).

²¹ Erin Cristina Dallinger-Lain, *Racialized Interactions in the Law School Classroom: Pedagogical Approaches to Creating a Safe Learning Environment*, 67 J. OF LEGAL EDUC. 780 (2017).

²² Elliot, Andrew J., Carol S. Dweck, and David S. Yeager, eds. *Handbook of competence and motivation: Theory and application*. Guilford Publications, (2017).

²³ Ibid.

diminished academic performance and increased risk of dismissal from law school.²⁴ The broader implication of this issue is a perpetuation of systemic issues of race and a racial imbalance in the legal profession. Thus, ensuring that law students feel both a sense of belonging and psychological safety promotes full academic engagement and contributes to a diverse, equitable, and inclusive legal environment. For underrepresented and first generation law students, a sense of belonging and psychological safety protects against feelings of exclusion and isolation. Ultimately, the broader advantage for the law school community is the creation of an environment where all students feel comfortable contributing to classroom discussions, thus enhancing learning for all.

Questions people ask themselves about belonging

Elliot, Dweck, and Yeager's *Handbook of Competence and Motivation* addresses several questions and remedies concerning belonging, particularly as it relates to educational environments. According to Walton and Brady, when students first enter a new setting, they ask themselves questions related to how they fit into this new environment.²⁵ I propose mapping these questions onto the high stress, academically rigorous law school environment as a way to integrate DEIB and student wellbeing.

Question 1: Does anyone here even notice me?

To form social relationships in the law school, students must first be recognized by their peers and professors. In this way, recognition serves as a prerequisite for belonging. Thus, a remedy for law students seeking recognition is the simple act of *recognizing and acknowledging students*, especially underrepresented and first generation law students. We demonstrate recognition of our law students by the simple yet meaningful act of learning their names and ensuring we pronounce them correctly. Additionally, we recognize students by inviting them to participate on faculty or dean advisory committees. Moreover, we can invite our law school alumni to write letters to incoming 1Ls, welcoming them into our law school communities.

Question 2: Are there people here whom I connect to?

First generation law students may enter the legal academic setting and worry about being able to connect with their classmates, many of whom have parents and other family members who are practicing attorneys. To equip these students with the social capital necessary to build connections with others, two remedies that work well are 1) facilitating a sense of personal connection to other people in the law school, and 2) facilitating a sense of working toward common goals with other people in the law school.

To facilitate a sense of personal connection to others, law schools should proactively create as many opportunities as possible for law students to engage socially with their classmates. Welcome week activities, mixers, and dinners with peers and faculty significantly contribute to promoting a sense of connection. At the USC Gould School of Law, one event that builds connection as soon as our 1Ls arrive on campus is our First Generation Professionals (FGP) reception. This reception, facilitated by our Student Affairs office and sponsored by an area law firm with connections to Gould brings together students who identify as first generation college or first generation law school students. It serves as a platform for mingling and networking

²⁴ Erin Cristina Dallinger-Lain, *Racialized Interactions in the Law School Classroom: Pedagogical Approaches to Creating a Safe Learning Environment*, 67 J. OF LEGAL EDUC. 780 (2017).

²⁵ Walton, Gregory M., and Shannon T. Brady. "The many questions of belonging." *Handbook of competence and motivation: Theory and application 2* (2017).

with law school faculty, staff and fellow students. Notably, this event is open to the entire Gould community, often drawing the attendance of students who do not identify as first generation. During orientation, we also host a “Diversity Kickback” in our Affinity Lounge, a dedicated space created and designed for affinity groups. This invitation specifically welcomes students of color and students who identify as LGBTQ+, ensuring that students who have been typically excluded from elite law school spaces can connect with other students with similar backgrounds.

To facilitate a sense of working toward common goals with others in the law school, law schools should actively promote an environment where students feel like they are collectively working toward shared objects.

Encouraging collaboration on projects, study sessions, and participation in extracurricular activities related to the law school’s mission can enhance this sense of belonging.

Question 3: Do people here value people like me?

While the transition from one college setting to the next can be challenging for all students, first generation law students are especially vulnerable to questioning the value they bring to elite academic environments. They are fully aware of the stereotypes that question their intellectual abilities and often carry a constant fear of not being valued in these spaces, even despite increased DEIB efforts, they still experience discrimination. To remedy the notion that students are not valued in our law schools, we can 1) provide a narrative with which to understand common challenges so they do not impugn one’s belonging, and 2) broaden representations of who belongs in a setting.

Provide a narrative with which to understand common challenges so they do not impugn one’s belonging

To help law students navigate the transition to this new and more rigorous academic environment, it is helpful to equip them with tools for making a sense of the challenges they encounter. First generation law students may interpret a challenging first semester as “proof” that they don’t belong in law school and as a result, may fear being outed as an imposter. To combat these feelings, law school students can be explicitly told — via workshops, panels, peer mentoring, etc. — that early academic difficulties are normal and improve with time. Knowing that these struggles are common for *all* law students buffers first generation and other unrepresented law students against impugning their own sense of belonging. Embracing the idea that early adversities are normal challenges that can be overcome may help a student remain academically engaged throughout their time in our law schools. The message we can send our first-generation students is this: *The challenges I’m facing now have nothing to do with my first generation status and everything to do with the transition to this new, more rigorous academic environment. I’ll be fine.*

Broaden representations of who belongs in a setting

When law students worry about if they belong in a setting, they tend to pick up on cues in that setting that signal — overtly or covertly — who belongs. These cues are most salient when students first enter a setting. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that representations of who belongs in our law schools are apparent during prospective student visits, admitted student days, and so on.

One basic remedy is group representation. Including people from different identity groups throughout the law schools signals to all students that *everyone belongs here*. When I was hired by Gould School of Law in June 2021 as the inaugural Assistant Dean of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), I was the only Black dean in the law school. Less than six months later, our Dean of Career Services retired and was replaced by a Black female. A little over one year later, I was promoted to Dean of Students, and a Black female was hired to fill the

Assistant Dean of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion role. In July 2023, Gould's dean Andrew T. Guzman was promoted to USC's next provost. He was replaced by Franita Tolson, the first Black female dean of the law school. While this may not have been the intended impact, increasing the number of Black deans from one to four within a two-year span broadened representation of who belongs in our law school.

Gould is also in its second year of partnering with USC Athletics as part of their *Summer Professional Development Institute for Athletes*. In the summer of 2022, the law school welcomed over forty Trojan athletes who had never set foot inside the law school prior to the sessions. Athletes spanned multiple sports, including football, men's basketball, women's basketball, track and field, and women's volleyball. During their time at the law school, they engaged with law professors and attorneys who shared insights about their day-to-day lives, including Gould alumni and former college athletes. What emerged from this collaboration was an unexpected but highly valuable mentorship dynamic as several athletes and session facilitators developed ongoing mentor/mentee relationships. This year, Gould is again participating in the institute, this time with double the number of athletes. Inviting athletes – who often contend with the “dumb jock” stereotype – into our law school is another way we have broadened representation of who belongs in law school.

Question 4: Is this a setting in which I want to belong?

When new students enter our law schools, it is not uncommon for them to question their sense of belonging. This is especially true for underrepresented and first-generation law students, whose experiences in traditionally homogenous law school settings lead them to not only question whether but also whether they *want* to belong. The law school environment itself can carry a stigma for these students. Pre-orientation or academic success programs designed to strengthen a student's academic skills within the law school may be perceived as “remedia.” Consequently, students who could benefit from this additional support may avoid or fear they will be seen as less intelligent or less prepared than their peers who enter law schools with more preparation.

To destigmatize support initiatives, we can provide students with a broader perspective that connects them to the larger goals they share with their classmates. We should represent the law school setting as one that offers opportunities to pursue valuable goals. For example, if students are passionate about public service and desire to pursue a career in public interest law, ensuring there are ample opportunities to pursue public interest externships or connect with law school alumni who work in similar fields can go a long way toward ensuring students feel they want to belong.

At Gould, several students have expressed an interest in pursuing sports law and in particular, representing athletes via name, image and likeness (NIL) opportunities. To support our students interested in athlete representation, Gould is developing a partnership with USC Athletics to offer a series of educational workshops for the law school's Sports Law Society students. Gould also invites guest speakers with expertise in the NIL space so our students feel that the law school is actively creating opportunities where their goals and interests can be pursued within the context of their legal education.

Question 5: Can I be more than a stereotype here?

For underrepresented and first generation law students, concerns often revolve around negative stereotypes related to their fitness for law school and the fear of being tokenized within the law school setting. It is not uncommon for these students to wonder if they can attain an identity and status within the law school beyond a

stereotype. Despite her high academic achievement, Michelle Obama stated in her thesis that she worried about being seen as “Black first and a student second.”²⁶

One remedy to promote law school belonging and help underrepresented and first generation law students feel like they are more than a stereotype is through a *self-affirmation* intervention.²⁷ Closely related to *values affirmation*, which provides students with an opportunity to reflect on personal values that matter to them, the *self-affirmation* intervention allows students to reflect on personally important values within a setting. Affirmations are closely linked to belonging because they encourage people to maintain a positive sense of themselves as capable. Threats to one’s identity jeopardize one’s sense of capability leading to a diminished self-image and a reduced belief in one’s ability to succeed. When identity threats persist, they can result in a host of negative consequences for underrepresented and first generation law students — anxiety, distractedness, and poor performance — which exacerbates a lack of psychological safety and a sense of belonging.

To promote belonging in the law school setting via this intervention, law students can be invited to create a list of values that are important to them and why those values are important. They can then be invited to explore how those values relate to the legal profession. Numerous studies highlight the benefits of such interventions, particularly among students who experience threats to their identity.²⁸ Asking students to identify the values most important to them is also a powerful way to build connections among students who may not otherwise have an opportunity to build these bonds with diverse classmates. To promote belonging and connectedness to their classmates, students can be asked to write about ways that their values connect them to others within the law school community. This type of activity not only discourages students from defining themselves through stereotypes, but it also promotes belonging and psychological safety. At Gould, we plan to implement this activity during Gould Preview, our annual pre-orientation program for approximately forty of our incoming law students.

Question 6: Are people like me incompatible with this setting?

Underrepresented and first-generation law students also worry about whether the law school setting is incompatible with the very essence of who they are. Black students have long contended with covering or downplaying certain aspects of their identity in order to fit into various academic spaces. In law school, where there is a generally accepted way to be, these students may wonder if they are incompatible with the law school setting itself.

To remedy questions related to incompatibility between law students and the law school, we can change representations of the ingroup to facilitate a perceived fit with setting or behavior. At Gould, a number of students expressed concerns related to activities centered around drinking. For those students, feelings of exclusion were common, yet they still desired to socialize with classmates. To address this issue, we are implementing activities hosted by Student Affairs, activities that promote community engagement without

²⁶ Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "At Last...?: Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History." *Daedalus* 140.1 (2011).

²⁷ Cohen, Geoffrey L., and David K. Sherman. "The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention." *Annual review of psychology* 65 (2014).

²⁸ See Critcher, Clayton R., and David Dunning. "Self-affirmations provide a broader perspective on self-threat." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41.1 (2015).

alcohol. For our students who are not comfortable or do not desire drinking, they do not have to be relegated to the margins of our social activities — we are intentionally creating spaces where they do not have to drink to fit in. Reducing students’ fear of violating a perceived norm may also reduce drinking among other students who do not feel comfortable doing so yet engage in the activity to feel a sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging and psychological safety are foundational to wellbeing

The basic human need to feel like we belong and to feel safe in the spaces we occupy is foundational to our mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing. When students do not experience a sense of belonging or psychological safety in our law schools, it poses a significant risk to their academic and social wellbeing. As we think about ways to maximize wellbeing for students in a high-stress academic environment, considering how diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging initiatives intersect with student wellbeing has the potential to improve outcomes for *all* students. When historically marginalized students feel a sense of belonging and psychological safety in our law schools, they have the potential to thrive both academically and socially, develop meaningful relationships and peers and professors, and to enhance and expand the learning experiences for their peers who do not share similar backgrounds. Belonging is a human necessity, and as such, it is incumbent on us to ensure that DEIB and wellbeing are woven throughout our programming, strategic plans, and activities so we can maximize student wellbeing, inclusion, belonging, and engagement across our law schools.

“NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS”: RUBRICS, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS, AND THE CONCRETIZING OF ABSTRACT STANDARDS

Justin Kishbaugh, Associate Director of Academic Success and Professor of Writing at Roger Williams University School of Law

Defining “Well-Written”

As a first-generation student, I remember the difficulties I faced in having my professors define what they meant by “well written.” The issue only worsened when I attempted to learn what “well written” meant in a scholarly or professional context. For those genres, my professors’ feedback would primarily consist of abstractions such as “unclear,” “awkward (often abbreviated to the somehow more frustrating, “awk”),” or my personal favorite, the question, “What do you mean?” I cannot count how many times that latter question left me screaming at the wall that I would not have written those words if I did not think they communicated what I meant! Even the positive feedback tended to consist of the abstract statements “good” or the occasional “YES!” which, though nice, still did not identify how or why my writing was “good” rather than “awk.” Based on those experiences and frustrations as a student, I have, in my roles as the Associate Director of Academic Success and a Professor of Writing, focused extensively on the structure and grammar of Standard Edited American English (SEAE) in legal and professional writing and have developed a “concrete” rubric that identifies and explains the specific standards by which I assess student writing.

Implicit Clarity and First-Generation Students

For first-generation students in particular, the need for a rubric that communicates expectations without relying on assumptions and prior knowledge is imperative. For example, Bethany Davila argues that abstract feedback on writing, particularly that related to “clarity,” allows professors to evaluate only that student’s ability to conform to the unstated expectations of the dominant cultural norm.²⁹ For Davila, that norm is that of the white middle-class³⁰—but I would argue that norm includes or could be substituted for those who are not first-generation students. Due to their not providing specific and instructional feedback, professors end up rewarding the students who—based on their similar life experiences and implicit ability to conform to those dominant cultural norms—understand abstractions such as “clarity” in the same way as their professor. Thus, for those like Davila who are concerned with creating equity for their first-generation and diverse student populations, avoiding abstract feedback in favor of rubrics with definable and concretely articulated standards provides all students with the ability to succeed regardless of the prior knowledge or privilege they bring to the classroom.

The “Concrete” Writing Rubric

As Davila notes, “clarity” is an abstraction that means different things to different people. Yet I find that term generally functions as a catch-all for having the full scope of a text’s structural components work together to present its content in a linear and efficient manner. Thus, by simply referring to “clarity” as the standard that they want their students’ writing to achieve, professors not only conflate but also simplify and mask the

²⁹ Bethany Davila, *Standard English and Colorblindness in Composition Studies: Rhetorical Constructions of Racial and Linguistic Neutrality*, 40 WRITING PROGRAM ADMIN. 154, 164-5 (2017).

³⁰ *Id.* at 164.

many structural components of a text that one must intentionally shape and arrange for those components to maintain their focus and work together to generate a unified meaning. For first-generation students in particular, the presumption that they are aware of and can intentionally manipulate those many layers of a text often leaves those students struggling to pair a new discipline’s complicated subject matter to a complicated textual structure while often being left to discern for themselves the patterns and functions of the latter.

To identify for my students the structural tiers of a text and provide those students with concrete feedback, I have created a broadly encompassing writing rubric that not only identifies the standards by which I assess student writing but also offers technical instruction on how to meet those standards. More specifically, this rubric provides a structurally tiered and scaffolded set of concrete techniques for achieving proficiency in both the macro and micro structures of a written text. To achieve those goals, the rubric contains a first or introductory level that hierarchizes the structural elements of an organized text and provides clear guidelines for producing them. Those tiers are grouped and organized according to Genre, Section, Paragraph, Sentence, Word, and Punctuation, and the introductory level for each focuses on including the necessary elements for that particular tier and then structuring and organizing those elements according to a logical pattern. The “Genre” tier, for example, consists of the following standard:

- Genre
 - Contains All and Only the Necessary Sections Appropriate for the Genre

Each structural tier is color-coded to reinforce its discrete structural importance, and each is hyperlinked to further scaffolded and increasingly concrete and focused instructional tiers within that category. For example, the “Genre” tier above further divides in its secondary level into the standard sectional components for genres such as a Memo, Brief, Client Letter, Demand Letter, Cover Letter, and Law Review Note or Standard Scholarly Argument. The Law Review Note or Standard Scholarly Argument, for instance, subdivides in the following manner:

- Standard Research Paper or Scholarly Argument
 - Introduction
 - Necessary Background
 - Main Argument
 - Possible Counterargument or Concession
 - Conclusion

Each of those sections are then even further and subsequently hyperlinked to the similarly scaffolded “Section” category that provides specific structural advice for each of those different sections. On that “Section” level, an “Introduction” breaks down into the following components:

- Introduction
 - General Introduction
 - Provide Hook (Large Audience)
 - Transition to Generalized Topic
 - Introduce Specific Topic (Focused Audience)
 - Offer Thesis Statement
 - Focused Introduction
 - In 1–2 sentences per section, summarize the focus of or the arguments contained of each section of your paper—i.e., “In Part I, I argue.... In Part II, I further contend...”

Conclusion: Making “Meaning”

My experience has shown that by simply addressing the criteria contained in the introductory or surface structural tiers outlined above, students produce organized essays that at least convey their intended meaning in a manner that their audience can follow and understand. While that standard tends to meet the needs of professors whose courses do not focus specifically on writing itself, the scaffolded nature of the rubric also allows professors and students alike to continue to identify, define, and reproduce the concrete techniques that lead to a “well-written” text. That ability to create texts that are organized and coherent in both their macro and micro structures is even more important in an educational atmosphere like law school where the overwhelming majority of graded assessments consist of written answers that express the student’s understanding of the course content.

By including a concrete rubric in one’s course and making clear the exact organizational and structural standards that lead to a “well-written” exam or paper, professors can avoid the familiar situation where the content of the students’ written work demonstrates that they studied and can recall the relevant information but the writing is so disorganized that their professors cannot make sense of it. Moreover, a concrete rubric also allows students to approach their professor’s feedback on their writing in an organized and efficient manner wherein they do not address the superficial issues of the micro structures prior to those contained in the macro structures that, when addressed, may change, undo, or remove those previous revisions. Ultimately, the means to success in a given field should not rely on unstated standards, and with so much of post-secondary and legal education relying on SEAE, a concrete and scaffolded rubric that identifies the standards for a “well-written” text creates equity for first-generation and diverse students by not forcing them to intuit the standards by which they will be assessed and by allowing them to produce texts that accurately convey their intended meaning.

DEAR YOU 1999,

*Leilani Marshall, Esq., Associate Dean, Law Student Services
Adjunct Professor of Law at Case Western Reserve University, School of Law*

Dear You 1999,

Oh, how I wish I could give you a huge hug right now! I know you need it! Instead, I am writing you this letter that I truly wish I could have given to you in 1999.

You are a child of immigrants and an immigrant yourself, and that gives you perspective regarding the law that many of your peers will not have. As a First-Gen Law Student, you currently feel like everyone around you knows something you don't. I remember vividly the wide range of emotions that enveloped you that first day of Law School Orientation: anticipation, competition, imposter-syndrome, excitement, and surges of confidence and insecurity. You are embarrassed to admit that you don't know what Law Review and OCI's are, and you wonder how so many of your classmates seem so sure of themselves and so confident when answering questions in class. These feelings are perfectly understandable, but please do not give them too much weight. You belong here. Everyone has come to law school with a unique background: culture, gender, religion, implicit bias, past, experiences, values, standards, judgments, injury, disability, trauma, education, careers, relationships. Give others grace and give yourself grace as well.

Starting strong will be important. Read your emails, manage your time, and identify your learning style early. Stay on top of your reading- you will be teaching yourself the law, and learning is cumulative in law school. It will feel like you are learning another language at first, but it will click eventually. You will not be very social, and that's OK. You will find a handful of wonderful, meaningful friendships. You will feel shy and othered throughout law school for a variety of personal reasons but consider pushing yourself out of your comfort zone on that front. Begin by going in to speak with your Dean of Students sooner rather than later, and definitely go see your professors 1:1 during office hours. You will find that often the faculty persona 1:1 is very different than in the classrooms, and for the most part, they will genuinely care about your success. You will find lifelong friends and mentors in your ADR professor, your Con Law professor, your Crim Law professor, and your Legal Writing professor.

Throughout law school and your law career, actively strive for balance and hold fast to your integrity. Take breaks and be healthy physically and emotionally. Sleep and nurture only healthy relationships. You will need to schedule downtime to rest your mind. Do whatever that is. If it's exercise, great. If it's spending time with family, great. If it's binge watching the latest horror movie, great! Do whatever it takes to refill your reserves.

Importantly, you will get through law school, and you will pass the bar the very first time you take it (even though you won't be able to afford a BarBri Prep course!). You will also walk across the stage at Law School Commencement, cradling a brand-new baby boy who will change your life forever. This memory will constantly remind you of your resilience, strength, and the depths of what you are capable of. As a preview of coming attractions, you will practice law for 18 very fulfilling years in the public and private sectors, with opportunities that you never dreamed of! And then, you will make the strategic pivot to pay it forward by teaching and serving as Dean of Students at law schools (including your alma mater) so that you can serve and support students just like yourself. All the life experience, the trials, and the learning curves that

you have gone through will have distilled a set of skills- borne in empathy- that make you a uniquely gifted advocate. Hang in there and protect your magic at all costs.

With love, solidarity, and great admiration, You 2023

CAMERA-AWARE AND CAMERA-SCARED: 2020-2021 1LS

Dr. Andrew D. Realon Associate Director for Student Academic Development at The George Washington University Law School

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most American law students experienced some of their education in the online modality. During 2020-2021 academic year, students attended class sessions physically separated from their peers and spent many hours staring at computer screens. With the end of the COVID-19 global health emergency, many persons are just now processing how the pandemic affected them. I am an academic support professional who provides advising to law students, and witnessed firsthand how in the Fall of 2020, many 1Ls struggled with their courses in ways different than upper-level students who had already experienced some in-person learning. These first-year students displayed a more uncertainty than usual regarding how to prepare for class and how to maximize their in-class experience. In order to learn more about how this cohort experienced their virtual legal instruction, I conducted an IRB-approved qualitative study at a single institution that overhauled its modality for the 2020-2021 academic year in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While I do not name the institution where I conducted my study, I can describe some of its characteristics: large, located in a densely populated urban area, top-ranked. Each of the study's 18 participants sat for an interview which was recorded and transcribed. Names used below are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the study's participants.

One of the study's principal findings was the impact that self-consciousness had on the participants' academic experience—an obsession over cold-call performance. Participants remembered being required by their professors to enable their video feed. When speaking on Zoom, a person's video and audio are promoted to other attendees. Multiple participants described a heightened sense of awareness of how they were perceived given the additional personal details they broadcasted to the virtual classroom—some participants attended virtual class sessions from a desk only a couple of steps away from their bed! The increased perception changed how students experienced the Socratic Method because they felt like performers on a stage. Participants also missed the ability to hide in plain sight. In large in-person classrooms, students seated far away from a student being questioned might miss their peer's responses entirely. In the Zoom platform, the student being questioned is transmitting a high-definition response to the professor's questions.

Being cold-called was a rattling experience for many participants. After hearing their name, participants described feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and shock. In describing what it was like for the professor to call out her name, Kyra said, "I get nervous. I just felt like a rush of like nerves." While students may have been closely following the discussion, receiving a cold-call forces involvement into the discussion. This unanticipated request can be jarring, like how Isabella experienced it: "I freeze. I'm like "Oh, my God they just called me." Bethany said,

I was very nervous. Everyone is staring at you, and your name is highlighted. The professor is just waiting on you to respond. I think it's extremely intimidating and there's a lot of pressure. I was like truly near panic attack because if you don't answer your call, that does not reflect well on you. It's almost paralyzing for the first time, cause you're just shocked that somebody is willing to put you on the spot like that. You're always a little bit worried that you're gonna be next. 1L was

probably my worst year in terms of stress, anxiety, feelings of isolation, and grades.

Participants said that the anxiety they felt was the result of their perceived need to sound intelligent whenever they were inevitably called upon. Dylan viewed his performance in Socratic Method exchange as a high-stakes opportunity: “If you mess this up, this will like ruin your law career.” Josie similarly expressed, “You’ve got one shot.” Gabrielle explained her perception of the high-stakes:

This is your only sort of time that you're able to show everyone else who you are. This is these people's only impression of me. I want them to like me. I want you know people to think that I'm funny, or whatever and smart. So, a lot of pressure riding on that very small moment.

Lamar perceived a similar need to ‘show off’ in the classroom: “How can I say something that is going to and impress (my classmates)?” Because the stakes were so high, Ross feared the inevitable moment he would be cold-called: “When the professor calls your name, you’re like, ‘Oh, shoot!’” Ross actually used a different s-word, but the euphemism adequately reflects his experience. Nina was haunted by a technical issue she had that prevented her from responding to a cold call. In our interview, which took place two years after the incident her 1L year, she still feared that she might have given her peers a poor impression, and it would have permanent negative ramifications.

At the end of class sessions, students who were cold-called sometimes take the opportunity to process their exchange with the professor that just occurred. Some participants described ‘blacking out’ during their cold-call exchanges, and seeking a recap from their peers. Nina remembered a peer encouraging her after a particularly tough cold call: “Hey, you killed it out there. Everyone messes up, and that's okay.” Bethany also remembered receiving positive affirmations and appreciated them:

I was grateful for the students who would say, "That was a tough one. You did what you could do." I tried to reciprocate that and send it to other students like in even in our big group chat of our section. If somebody was just really put on the spot, somebody would typically say, "Great job! That was tough. Like, you handled it well."

Some students, like Cassandra, were hesitant to seek peer feedback: “I didn't want to reach out to other people because I feel like my friends would have been like, ‘Oh, this wasn't so bad.’ And I'd be like, ‘You're lying. It was terrible.’” Through the giving and receiving of affirmations, peers supported each other. Dylan said, “Sometimes we would be in class and we'd be like, ‘good job on that cold call’ and they'd go ‘thanks you know I felt bad because I didn't know this part.’ And we'd say, ‘oh, that's okay.’” Franklin remembered an instance of group camaraderie after floundering a cold call: “I was like, ‘Yeah, I messed that up didn't I?’ And they're like ‘we've all messed up, you did a great job.’” Kyra had an experience like Franklin: “They were like, ‘Oh, it really wasn't that bad. Don't worry about it. You did so well.’”

When law students are not being cold-called, they witness others responding to the professor’s directed questions. Some students flourish during Socratic Method exchanges. Abigail said, “from the outsider’s perspective it seems like everyone knows what they're doing.” Franklin remembered being intimidated when others were doing so well with the professor’s directed questioning: “I think it's intimidating watching other

people. I would like to think I'm the hardest working person in the school. But I do know there are some colleagues of mine who rival me. Sometimes it's intimidating seeing my other peers perform so well." Kyra felt similar to Franklin: "In that moment watching others answer questions so well you kind of feel stupid." Some students, like Bethany, had performance anxiety after being cold-called following another student who had done exceedingly well in responding to their cold call: "I was just so scared of sounding stupid in front of a 100 people." Isabella felt similar to Bethany: "I just hope I'm saying the right thing and that I'm not sounding dumb." Quincy shared how he handled portraying intelligence: "I generally try and embellish my response to make it sound like I know what I'm talking about. I think actually might be a lot easier over Zoom, just because I think it's easier to feign confidence when all of your body language isn't visible." Quincy admitted to dealing with restless-leg syndrome (repeated bouncing of knee) when in in-person classes. This is not something as easily perceived in the online modality.

Some participants described feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, suggesting that they experienced imposter syndrome. Bethany said, "I don't know if I'm supposed to be here." Students overcame feelings of self-doubt through patience, practice, and self-compassion. One policy change that might help students combat feelings associated with imposter syndrome is to enact camera-optional policies for some class sessions. This would provide increased flexibility for students, and lessen the burden of being 'camera ready' for every single moment of class. Additionally, professors who use warm-calling help their students emotionally prepare for the shock of a cold-call. Since a student may only be cold-called a couple times in the semester, ensuring a sound technological setup can have paramount importance for a law student seeking to shine in the eyes of the professor.

In designing this qualitative study on how law students experienced their virtual instruction, I expected to hear some negative sentiments regarding the Socratic Method. I did not anticipate, however, how the increased ability to perceive might have affected these students' academic experience. The 2020-2021 academic year remains a memorable time for those who witnessed or participated in it. Students who overcame the pandemic's challenges exhibited remarkable resiliency. They learned from their mistakes and adapted. They implemented strategies to be successful and were committed to them. The shared perseverance through the pandemic was a unifying experience for the participants. They participants frequently recount to younger students what they had to endure during the period of remote instruction caused by COVID-19. Gabrielle said it best as I wrapped my interview with her: "There's always something to talk about with what the people in this class experienced."