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US Law Week

Law Schools Must Do More to Retain First-Generation Students

By A. Benjamin Spencer and Charleigh Kondas

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Law schools must do more to encourage, mentor, and engage first-generation law students to not only improve graduation rates, but also to improve law firm diversity, say William & Mary Law School Dean A. Benjamin Spencer and second-year law student Charleigh Kondas. They explain the work of the school's First Generation Student Alliance, created as a place where students can freely discuss any struggles and questions.

For undergraduate institutions committed to equity, close attention to recruiting, supporting, and retaining first-generation college students is essential. But it's just as important for graduate schools to understand and empower these scholars as they move toward advanced degrees.

This is particularly true for leaders in law schools, which introduce students to an ancient and traditionally exclusive profession characterized by hierarchy and innumerable written and unwritten rules.

Picture a student entering this hallowed space who is the first in their family to have earned a four-year degree—unacquainted with the concepts of outlines, cold calling, or case briefs. Knowing whom to trust—and whom to ask for help without judgment—becomes a toss up.

Without a ready-made network of support and guidance, law school's nuances are all the more intimidating for her.

Contrast that with the know-how carried by an earlier student with deep family history in education and the law: grandparents and parents who received advanced degrees, one of them a federal judge. Steeped in the profession, this student arrives at his father's alma mater with a running start—a knowledge of networking, study groups, and the Law Review—that helps propel him to another law school's deanship within 19 years.

These divergent experiences are our own, illustrating that a virtual inevitability in one instance—successful completion of law school—was far from certain in the other. Unless they bridge this gap, law schools risk leaving first-generation students without the tools and opportunities to make the most of themselves—and the justice system—through their education and beyond.

Finding Ways to Support Continued Success

It's not enough merely to admit students who are the first in their families to attend law school or who were the first in their families to attend college; we must also find mechanisms to support their continued success once they're here and in their careers to come.

Why is this important? Certainly, if we profess to want an educational system that is inclusive and equitable, then efforts must be made to equip first-generation students with the knowledge that their peers glean from their college-educated parents so that all are equally able to perform to the best of their abilities as law students.

More important, though, is the need to ensure that law schools produce graduates from first-generation backgrounds who can join the legal profession. Lawyers with such backgrounds bring a much-needed set of competencies and perspectives to the practice of law, whether that's the ability to connect with clients who did not attend college, or a different viewpoint on certain litigation or transactions.

Among lawyers who go on to become judges, the perspective of first-generation students is vital, given the broad spectrum of people who appear in court for a fair dispensation of justice.

This is why we must work to create pathways into legal education for first-generation students. That means outreach efforts that inform them about the opportunity to attend law school and why it might be a good fit. And it means providing support and education to first-generation students throughout the application process.

Such support could be, for example, a partnership among undergraduate pre-law advisers, law schools, and organizations like the Law School Admissions Council and AccessLex, both of which have programs to help expand access to law school for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Navigating Law School Life

Once these students enroll, we have to help them navigate the gauntlet of law school life. That can be through informal or formal mentoring programs, supplemental courses, or affinity groups—like William & Mary Law School's First Generation Student Alliance—that bring these students together so they know they are not alone.

School leadership felt that launching such a support system—which is in place at several other law schools—should be a priority in the wake of the push for social justice that characterized the summer of 2020. Thankfully, there were students who felt the same way, and their efforts led to the founding of the Alliance.

Started in the fall of 2020 as students returned to a mixture of in-person and remote classes, the Alliance provides first-generation students an online chat platform to talk freely with one another about their struggles and questions. Nearly 100 students this semester are engaged with the platform, discussing everything from student loans to journal competitions.

The online conversations have helped the alliance further three objectives: to assist incoming first-generation students with their transition, to give current students a metaphorical compass for the law school experience, and to create a network of first-generation professionals with whom students can connect.

Fulfilling these goals in a pandemic demands flexibility and innovation, including video-conferencing events among students and first-generation lawyers that foster mentorships. Another mentorship effort under the Alliance connects first-year students with second- and third-year peers, easing the acclimation process, while additional events center on networking.

Collaboration with the school's Office of Career Services drives forthcoming guidance specifically for first-generation students, such as insight into workplace communication norms, attire, and socializing. The Alliance also helps provide exam-survival kits.

Still on the group's to-do list: individual financial support to lessen the burdens of bar preparation and emergency expenses—a cause for which the Alliance hopes to secure contributions from the legal community.

If law schools can better foster and strengthen the pipelines for first-generation law students and lawyers, they ensure the development of a diverse cadre of legal professionals who can serve people and communities of varied legal needs. Empathy and understanding are two of the keys to being a good lawyer. And a legal profession composed of people of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and talents is crucial to a justice system that functions effectively for the benefit of all.

Let's hope that each of us can find a way to be a part of the important work of helping first-generation students become attorneys and counselors at law.

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