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Supporting First Generation Professionals

by Alison Lintal

Higher education, especially law school, is not a culturally neutral environment. First generation students who have no lawyers in their family or have little experience with the legal system (or negative experiences with the legal system) have little to no knowledge about the unknown “rules” of both law school and the legal profession itself. Law school is a process of assimilation where students from different backgrounds and disciplines become indoctrinated into the legal profession and its accompanying norms. Dressing and acting the part is important. However, this process can be more difficult for first generation professionals. This evolution in professional identity sometimes comes at the cost of degrading personal authenticity. Due to their unfamiliarity and social psychological barriers, students may fear they can’t embrace being their authentic selves, which include their first generation identities.

Defining First Gen

As professional schools, law schools are uniquely situated in that they might have both first generation college students and also first generation graduate school students in their admitted classes — with first generation typically being defined as having parents who do not possess at least a bachelor’s degree (or an advanced degree beyond a bachelor’s). Currently law schools continue to admit more first generation students, even as overall enrollment declines. First generation students have been called “the hidden minority.” The first generation student identity can differ from student to student and can evolve over time, but students share some common characteristics such as:

- feeling the need to work to generate income while attending school;

- coming from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds;
- possibly living at home/off-campus or with family;
- having significant family/work responsibilities to balance with school; and
- being less likely to participate in co-curricular activities or socialize with peers outside of school.

First Generation in the Law School Environment

Most research centered on first generation students focuses on the college experience rather than on professional school. However, the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research parsed some statistics from the *2014 Law School Survey of Student Engagement* (LSSSE). Overall, first generation students in law school reported spending 8% more time studying for class and 25% more time working for pay than their continuing generation law school peers. This difference in how first generation students spend their time has a negative impact on the number of hours students spend with faculty and their peers outside of the classroom, including attending office hours and participating in co-curricular or student-led volunteer service activities.

Additionally, data from the LSSSE indicated that first generation students participate less than their continuing generation peers in prominent co-curricular activities like law review, moot court, and faculty research assistant positions. Although law student use of time and grades likely impact this

participation, another possible explanation is that first generation students miscalculate the importance that these activities play on their future career and employment opportunities.

Barriers

In addition to the obvious academic and financial barriers that first generation students face, there are often significant psycho-social barriers that play a role as well in their law school experience. Helping to cultivate a sense of belonging is important, since many first generation students experience impostor syndrome and receive less support from their families as they negotiate their new law school identity. Additionally, stereotype threat can impact students' self-perception, confidence, and competence.

For example, research has shown that students from a lower socioeconomic background suffer from negative stereotypes regarding their competence that become self-fulfilling. (See Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu, 2002; see also Durante, Tablante, and Fiske, 2007; and Volpato, Andrighetto, and Baldissari, 2017.) Strong self-reliance or pride, lack of a built-in professional network, and absence of entitlement are additional barriers that work against the success of first generation students in law school.

Strategies for Support and Success

Supportive programs may be faculty-driven, staff-driven, student-driven, alumni-driven, or a combination of a few approaches. However, sitting back and doing nothing is no longer an option as the professional school first generation population continues to grow.

An administratively sponsored and centrally organized content-based professional development program is the approach that was taken by the University of Southern California, Gould School of Law. Providing opportunities for peer-support, lunchtime seminars, and alumni networking that

are targeted toward first generation students allows them to grow professionally.

Using affinity group peer mentorship opportunities can be another good step, especially if students at your school are motivated to create a first generation student group with a designated staff advisor such as is the case at Hofstra Law and Berkeley Law.

Partnering with student groups to provide additional skills training is also an opportunity to explore. Engaging external stakeholders like alumni and employers is also key, and it is important to publicize and promote your students' success. Law schools are also beginning to look to our law firm partners to take the lead on incorporating first generation professionals under the diversity and inclusion umbrella and being more proactive about offering training and mentorship programs as well as an open dialogue.

Peer-driven group meetings or facilitated discussions with first generation peers can be very effective. A 2014 study that took place on the campus of a Midwestern undergraduate institution found that a one-hour panel where senior students shared advice with new students on how their social class background mattered for their college experience seemed to reduce the social class achievement gap between first generation and the continuing generation students by 63%! This resulted in improved academic performance and increased utilization of resources by the first generation college students. These discussions gave students the confidence to be comfortable talking about their background in a higher education setting and gave them tools to address the barriers they faced. (See *Closing the Social-Class Achievement Gap: A Difference-Education Intervention Improves First-Generation Students' Academic Performance and All Students' College Transition*, Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin, 2014.)

Replicating this difference-education intervention in a law school setting is simple and cost-effective to implement. Organizing facilitated small group discussions among peers with an upper-level stu-

dent who shares details about their background and lessons learned can get first generation students comfortable with sharing their story, relating to peers, asking questions, and learning how to have a healthy sense of entitlement in law school.

A common thread throughout each program is a desire to consciously build a community that is inclusive of first generation students. Furthermore, being mindful of first generation concerns and practicing more explicit communication with students is key.

Challenges and Opportunities

Depending upon the data that your admissions office collects, relying on student self-identification can leave you with an incomplete picture. Even if you are able to identify the first generation students in your law school, you may still face issues with engagement. Partnerships with employers, alumni, and other law school departments are important for success. Not only does supporting first generation students enhance engagement and promote individual professional development, it can also excite and renew collaborations with your alumni, development, admissions, and communications departments.

Takeaways

Approaches may differ and each school or employer needs to tailor its program to its unique culture and needs; however, most programs should provide a system of support that:

1. offers access to information and resources;
2. identifies and partners with advocates (alumni, employers, staff, faculty, fellow students); and
3. creates a safe space for students and avoids isolation.

You can always start small. First, work to identify first generation students in each class (likely in collaboration with admissions) and allow this to inform your individual counseling sessions.

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