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Building Belonging: Proven Methods to Decrease Attrition and Best Serve Law Students

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**BUILDING BELONGING:
PROVEN METHODS TO DECREASE ATTRITION AND
BEST SERVE LAW STUDENTS**

LEILA LAWLOR*

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A crucial task for legal educators is to determine how to retain our students, especially those who may be most vulnerable to attrition—first-generation students and students of color. This article looks at nine similarly situated ABA-accredited law schools and assesses these

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schools' success at retaining their students. The nine schools are all public, operate both part-time and full-time J.D. programs, generally enjoy above average diversity, and have somewhat similar national rankings. The nine schools also report similar median LSAT scores and undergraduate GPAs of recent incoming classes. The overall attrition rates and attrition rates for students of color vary somewhat among these schools; however, taken as a whole, the nine schools showed a downward trend in attrition over the eleven years studied. Law school applications have increased during the several years, a trend seen both nationally and within the schools studied for this article. This upward trend in the number of applications has enabled law school admissions teams to be more selective, yielding a corresponding upward trend in median LSAT scores and undergraduate GPAs. While this trend may partially explain the simultaneous decrease in attrition, the reduction in attrition can also be tied to increased, intentional efforts to retain students.

Interviews were conducted with the nine schools' academic success directors, other law school administrators and faculty, and alumni to determine methods that are most effective in retaining students. These successful methods can be divided into three general categories: (1) providing friendly, readily available, visible assistance to students with pending needs; (2) incorporating specific, important lessons in academic success programming; and (3) intentionally building an immediate, caring community. Within each of these three categories, specific approaches and procedures were identified. A practical, hands-on model of best practices was developed from this study of successful institutions and from the guidance of experienced law school educators, administrators, and alumni.

I. INTRODUCTION

A crucial task for legal educators is determining how to retain our students, especially our most vulnerable ones. Our educational programs may be carefully designed to train students for their future practice of law, but if we are unable to retain students who possess the potential to succeed, the quality of our education is irrelevant. Undoubtedly, we care about each student admitted to our programs of study. Undoubtedly, we anticipated their likelihood of success, or they would not have been admitted to our programs. In fact, if we did not anticipate that each of our admitted students would succeed, we have violated a standard of the American Bar Association (ABA), which mandates that an accredited law school admit only students "who appear capable of satisfactorily completing its program of legal

education and being admitted to the bar.”¹ Even so, are we serving our admitted students to the best of our ability? If not, what modifications can we employ in order to do so?

This article looks at nine similarly situated ABA-accredited law schools and assesses their success at retaining their students. After gathering quantitative and qualitative data from these schools, this article concludes which methods the schools employed were most effective. All nine schools are public law schools located in large urban areas. All nine schools operate full-time and part-time Juris Doctor programs² and have similar *U.S. News & World Report* rankings and acceptance rates.³ In 2021, all nine schools placed in the second quartile of *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of ABA-accredited law schools.⁴

1. AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, ABA STANDARDS AND RULES OF PROCEDURE FOR APPROVAL OF LAW SCHOOLS 2023–2024, Ch. 5, Std. 501 (2023).

2. See *ABA-Approved Law Schools With Approved Part-Time Programs* https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/aba_approved_law_schools/approved-part-time-programs/ (last visited Dec. 28, 2023). Note that Texas A&M’s part-time program has significantly diminished in size each year since the law school was acquired from Texas Wesleyan University in 2013. The “law school has shifted away from its early position in the Texas Wesleyan era as a school mainly for part-time students working their way through the program. Now, the law school has some part-time students but no official part-time program.” Maurice Richter, *Raising the Bar: Texas A&M Law School Makes Its Case*, FORT WORTH BUS. PRESS (Nov. 23, 2019), <https://fortworthbusiness.com/real-estate/raising-the-bar-texas-am-law-school-makes-its-case/>. See *infra* note 46 for a discussion of Texas A&M’s acquisition.

3. See *Law School Rankings for 2023*, LSD, <https://www.lsd.law/law-school-rankings-2022> (last visited Oct. 29, 2023) (compiling law school rankings from *U.S. News & World Report* published in 2022); *Law School Rankings for 2022*, LSD, <https://www.lsd.law/law-school-rankings-2021> (last visited Oct. 29, 2023) (compiling law school rankings from *U.S. News & World Report* published in 2021).

4. See *Law School Rankings for 2022*, *supra* note 3.

Law School & Location	Law School Ranking (2021) ⁵	Law School Ranking (2022) ⁶	2021 Acceptance Rate ⁷	2021 Percentage of 1L Class Made Up of People of Color ⁸	2021 Median LSAT ⁹
University of Connecticut Hartford, Connecticut	58	64	29%	26%	159
Florida International University Miami, Florida	88	98	21%	61%	160
Georgia State University Atlanta, Georgia	78	78	27%	35%	160
University of Hawaii Honolulu, Hawaii	98	91	33%	78%	156
University of Maryland Baltimore, Maryland	50	47	33%	29%	161
Temple University Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	53 (tie)	63	33%	34%	163
Texas A&M University Fort Worth, Texas	53 (tie)	46	18%	34%	163
Wayne State University Detroit, Michigan	72	58	33%	20%	161
University of Nevada - Las Vegas Las Vegas, Nevada	60	67	31%	35%	160

5. *Id.*

6. See *Law School Rankings for 2023*, *supra* note 3.

7. This information was derived from each of the schools' 509 Reports from 2021. The 509 Report is a disclosure of information required by the American Bar Association for all accredited law schools. These reports may be found at the ABA website: <https://www.abarequireddisclosures.org/Disclosure509.aspx>.

8. This information was derived from the schools' 509 Reports. The percentage was calculated by dividing the reported number of people of color by the reported total number of 1L students, after first subtracting the number reported as "Race and Ethnicity Unknown."

9. See *Law School Rankings for 2023*, *supra* note 3.

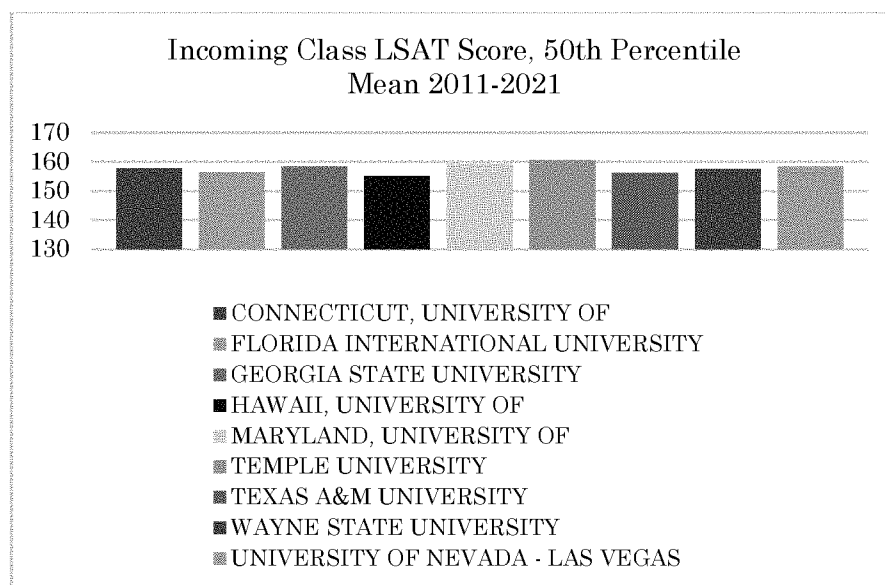
Also significant is the similarity between the median LSAT¹⁰ scores of these nine schools' first-year classes. Of the 196 law schools that reported data to the ABA about their first-year classes in 2021, the range of median LSAT scores was quite wide; the low end was 135 and the high end was 174. However, the range of the nine schools studied for this article was merely 156 to 163.¹¹ This similarity in median LSAT scores is significant in that the median LSAT score has been linked to trends in attrition.¹² Specifically, previous studies have indicated an inverse relationship between median LSAT scores and attrition,¹³ so for these nine schools' attrition rates and their methods of minimizing attrition to be compared meaningfully, the median scores needed to be somewhat similar.

10. See *The LSAT*, LSAC, <https://www.lsac.org/lSAT> (last visited Oct. 29, 2023) (referring to the Law School Admission Test, a multiple-choice, standardized test designed and intended to test reading comprehension, logical reasoning, and analytical reasoning skills that is currently relied on for admissions decisions by most U.S. law schools). Interestingly, on April 25, 2022, an ABA strategic review committee recommended lifting the requirement of any standardized testing requirement for admission to ABA-accredited law schools, paving the way for law schools to devise their own, alternative means of considering applicants. Thus, a law school could rely on undergraduate GPAs, work performance, and other factors. Because the ABA has not prohibited the use of standardized testing, law schools are still free to require the LSAT, the GRE, or other standardized tests for admission. See Memorandum from the Am. Bar Ass'n Strategic Review Comm., Recommended Revisions to Standard 501 and 503 for Council Approval for Notice and Comment, to The Council (Apr. 25, 2022), https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/council_reports_and_resolutions/may22/22-may-memo-revisions-501-503.pdf.

11. The median scores for each law school that reports annual data to the ABA can be found in the ABA's archived, online data reports. To find LSAT scores for all reporting schools, an ABA site user can generate a report by selecting "All Schools Data," the desired year, and "First Year Class." See *Section of Legal Education - ABA Required Disclosures*, AM. BAR ASS'N, <https://www.abarequireddisclosures.org/Disclosure509.aspx> (last visited Jan. 16, 2024).

12. Overall, first year attrition increased between 2010–11 through 2015–16, with the overall increase most attributable to law schools with a median LSAT score lower than 150. Conversely, law schools with higher median scores had generally enjoyed a downward trend in attrition. See Paul Caron, *Organ: Attrition Analysis For 2018, 2019, 2020 With A Focus On Ethnicity*, TAXPROF BLOG (Dec. 22, 2020), https://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2020/12/attrition-analysis-for-2018-2019-2020-with-a-focus-on-ethnicity.html#:~:text=Overall%20First%20Year%20Attrition%20has%20Declined%20for%20Three%20Years&text=That%20downward%20trend%20in%20overall,the%202019%2D20%20academic%20year.

13. *Id.*; see also Stephanie Francis Ward, *Is Sweet Spot for Avoiding Academic Attrition at Law Schools a Median LSAT of at Least 150?*, A.B.A.: A.B.A. J. (Jan. 16, 2018, 3:17 PM), https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/sweet_spot_nontransfer_attrition_law_schools_LSAT_median (providing data showing an inverse relationship between median LSAT scores and attrition).



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Most of these schools also enrolled quite diverse first-year classes in 2021,¹⁵ and a large percentage of students at these nine schools are likely first-generation students. A first-generation student is commonly defined as one without a parent or guardian who holds a bachelor's degree.¹⁶ The ABA does not require law schools to report numbers of first-generation students, so this information is not obtainable by studying data reported by law schools to the ABA in its required disclosure reports.¹⁷ Law school registrars and

14. The information used to create this chart was obtained from the ABA's required 509 disclosures for the nine schools, available at: <https://www.abarequireddisclosures.org/Disclosure509.aspx>. See *supra* text accompanying note 9. The study conducted for this article looked at data from the nine similarly situated schools over an eleven-year span, 2011–2021.

15. Note that, beginning in 2021, the ABA's required 509 disclosures defined people of color as including "Hispanics of any race, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, [or] Two or More Races." See, e.g., *Complete 2023 Q Instructions*, AM. BAR ASS'N, https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/Questionnaires/2023/complete-2023-aq-instructions.pdf.

16. *Are You a First-Generation Student?*, CTR. FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS, <https://firstgen.naspa.org/why-first-gen/students/are-you-a-first-generation-student> (last visited Oct. 18, 2023). Another common definition is a student whose parents have never enrolled in post-secondary education. Jacqueline M. O'Bryant & Katherine Traylor Schaffzin, *First-Generation Students in Law School: A Proven Success Model*, 70 ARK. L. REV. 913, 916 (2018); see also Ryan D. Padgett et al., *First-Generation Undergraduate Students and the Impacts of the First Year of College: Additional Evidence*, 53 J. COLL. STUDENT DEV. 243, 250 (2012).

17. The data required to be disclosed annually in the ABA 509 Reports includes acceptance rates; enrollment rates; enrolled students' LSAT scores and undergraduate

administrators, overtaxed with duties to generate other data, generally do not have the number of first-generation students on hand. Nevertheless, schools with more diversity, like the nine similarly situated schools discussed in this article, are more likely to enroll more first-generation students.¹⁸ The Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE),¹⁹ reports that 27.1% of law students are first-generation,²⁰ and students of color are far more likely to be first-generation.²¹ Data from LSSSE's 2022 annual survey of law students indicate 55.2% of Hispanic or Latino students, 43.3% of Native American students, and 40.5% of Black or African American students are first-generation.²²

GPA; total enrollment and enrollment broken down by gender, race, and ethnicity, if known; faculty resources; J.D. degrees awarded; tuition and fees; grants and scholarships awarded; living expenses; and numbers of attrited and transferred students. The number of first-generation students is not required. See AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, ABA STANDARDS AND RULES OF PROCEDURE FOR APPROVAL OF LAW SCHOOLS 2023–2024, Ch. 5, Std. 509(b)(4) (2023).

18. Again, we can extrapolate from research on undergraduate college students: “[A]mong all first-generation college students, 54% are racial/ethnic minorities” Sophie W. Schuyler et al., *Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color: The Importance of Academic, Transitional Adjustment, and Mental Health Supports*, 6 J. COLL. ACCESS 12, 12 (2021) <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1313619.pdf>; see U.S. DEPT OF EDUC., INST. OF EDUC. SCI., Profile of Undergraduate Students: 2011-12 (Web Tables) (Report No. NCES 2015-167) (2014), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2015167>.

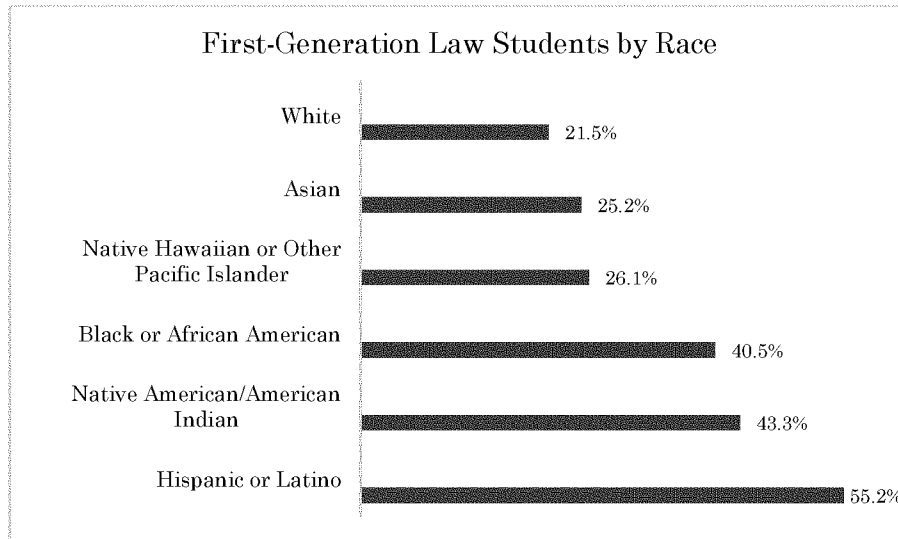
At the school where I taught from 2008–2023, Georgia State University, the 2021–2022 first-year law class was about 36% people of color. See Georgia State University College of Law’s 2022 509 Report at <https://www.abarequireddisclosures.org/disclosure509.aspx>. Georgia State Law does not formally collect data as to the percentage of law students that are first-generation. However, because I worked for years with the school’s 1L students, getting to know the backgrounds of many of them, I became aware that a very large percentage of Georgia State Law’s students were the first generation from their families to attend higher education. In my interviews with my counterparts at the other eight schools, I heard repeatedly that a large percentage of their students were first-generation.

19. As part of the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) conducts an annual survey of thousands of law students from numerous law schools. *Who We Are*, LSSSE, <https://lssse.indiana.edu/who-we-are/> (last visited Oct. 18, 2023). In 2022, LSSSE surveyed “13,000 law students at 70 law schools.” *Annual Results*, LSSSE, <https://lssse.indiana.edu/annual-results/#2014> (last visited Jan. 16, 2024).

20. *LSSSE Public Reporting Tool*, LSSSE, <https://lssse.indiana.edu/advanis/> (last visited Jan. 1, 2024); see also Melissa A. Hale, *Guest Post: The Importance of Supporting First-Generation Law Students*, LSSSE, https://lssse.indiana.edu/tag/first-generation/#_ftn1 (last visited Oct. 18, 2023) (indicating that, at the time of Hale’s 2022 blog post, 29% of law students were first-generation).

21. *LSSSE Public Reporting Tool*, *supra* note 20.

22. *Id.*



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First-generation students generally come to the doors of our law schools with a depth of life experience, work ethic, and determination; however, they often also come with specific, identifiable disadvantages. Surprisingly little research has been conducted on the first-generation experience in law school, but we can extrapolate from research conducted on the first-generation experience of undergraduate students.

We know that first-generation students are more ethnically diverse,²⁴ more likely to be older,²⁵ and more likely to have children.²⁶ They are also more likely to come from low-income households,²⁷ live off campus,²⁸ be part-time students, and work at least part-time while

23. *Id.*

24. O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 917; see Kara Balemian & Jing Feng, COLLEGEBOARD, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS: COLLEGE ASPIRATION, PREPAREDNESS AND CHALLENGES 9–10 (2013), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED563393.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/D694-LYUR>]; Patrick T. Terenzini et al., *First-Generation College Students: Characteristics, Experiences, and Cognitive Development*, 37 RES. HIGHER EDUC. 1, 8 (1996).

25. O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 917; see Balemian & Feng, *supra* note 24, at 10.

26. O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 917; see Terenzini et al., *supra* note 24, at 8.

27. O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 917; see Terenzini et al., *supra* note 24, at 16; Balemian & Feng, *supra* note 24, at 3; Ernest T. Pascarella et al., *First-Generation Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes*, 75 J. HIGHER EDUC. 249, 253, 280 (2004).

28. O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 918; see Balemian & Feng, *supra* note 24, at 10; Pascarella et al., *supra* note 27, at 265.

simultaneously studying.²⁹ Furthermore, they report studying more hours than their continuing-generation peers.³⁰ One new study of first-generation law students indicates that not only are they more likely to work, but they also are more likely to work more hours than their continuing-generation peers.³¹

One of the biggest challenges faced by first-generation students is lack of cultural and social capital needed to accomplish their academic goals.³² First-generation students may not have support networks that can assist them financially during their studies, and they are more likely to graduate with debt accrued for their education.³³ Additionally, their support networks may even be ill-equipped to advise them how to succeed in their studies.³⁴ Their parents and living community may not encourage their studies,³⁵ leading these students

29. O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 918; *see* Balemian & Feng, *supra* note 24, at 10; Pascarella et al., *supra* note 27, at 265.

30. O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 934–35; *see* Law School Survey of Student Engagement, *Looking Ahead: Assessment in Legal Education* 8, 10–11 (2014), https://lssse.indiana.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/LSSSE_2014_Annual_Report.pdf [<https://perma.cc/W3AX-8YVT>]; *see also* CHAD CHRISTENSEN ET AL., LAW SCHOOL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, 2023 ANNUAL REPORT: FOCUS ON FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS 12 (2023), <https://lssse.indiana.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Focus-on-First-Generation-Students-Final.pdf>.

31. CHRISTENSEN ET AL., *supra* note 30, at 12.

32. *See generally* O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 919–23 (revealing reasons why first-generation students “lack the cultural and social network to effectively support their academic pursuits”); Ryan D. Padgett et al., *First-Generation Undergraduate Students and the Impacts of the First Year of College: Additional Evidence*, 53 J. COLL. STUDENT DEV. 243, 261–62 (2012) (discussing data suggesting that first-generation students’ social and cultural capital deficits result in delayed cognitive and psychological development).

33. The Pew Research Center reported that 65% of first-generation college graduates owe \$25,000 or more in student loans. For continuing generation college graduates, the number with this amount of debt drops to 57%. Richard Fry, *First-Generation College Graduates Lag Behind Their Peers on Key Economic Outcomes* (May 18, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/05/18/first-generation-college-graduates-lag-behind-their-peers-on-key-economic-outcomes/>. Likewise, first-generation law students more often anticipate graduating with law-school debt than their continuing-generation peers (88% as opposed to 76%). CHRISTENSEN ET AL., *supra* note 30, at 10.

34. *See* O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 920; Janet Mancini Billson & Margaret Brooks Terry, *In Search of the Silken Purse: Factors in Attrition Among First-Generation Students* 14 (Jan. 1982) (unpublished manuscript), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED214431.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/K7H8-979Q>].

35. *See* O'Bryant & Schaffzin, *supra* note 16, at 920–21; W. Elliot Inman & Larry Mayes, *The Importance of Being First: Unique Characteristics of First Generation Community College Students*, COMMUNITY C. REV., Spring 1999, at 3, 4; Pascarella et al., *supra* note 27, at 252; Gary R. Pike & George D. Kuh, *First- and Second-Generation College Students: A Comparison of Their Engagement and Intellectual Development*,

to experience feelings of guilt. Furthermore, first-generation students are more likely to feel self-conscious about fitting into an academic setting and less academically prepared.³⁶

This article first examines how these nine schools are performing in their efforts to retain their law students. Law school retention efforts are generally focused on 1L students, as most law school attrition occurs at the end of the 1L academic year.³⁷ This article examines only “academic attrition” and “other attrition” and does not consider the number of students who voluntarily transferred away from one of the nine schools.

As defined by the ABA:

Academic Attrition refers to those students who discontinued their education at a time when they were not in good academic standing as defined by the Law School. It includes both students who have been dismissed because they did not satisfy the minimum standards of progress established by the Law School in order to continue their legal studies at that school, and students who discontinued their enrollment at the school at a time when their GPA was below that required for good academic standing as of the end of the first year.³⁸

In other words, when law schools report to the ABA the number of students lost through academic attrition, law schools are instructed to include students who were dismissed for unsatisfactory academic performance and those who left voluntarily at a time when they otherwise would have been dismissed for unsatisfactory performance.³⁹

76 J. HIGHER EDUC. 276, 290 (2005); Michael B. Duggan, *E-Mail as Social Capital and Its Impact on First-Year Persistence of 4-Year College Students*, 6 J.C. STUDENT RETENTION 169, 172 (2004).

36. See generally Padgett et al., *supra* note 32, at 244 (listing different factors before and during college contributing to first-generation students' lower preparedness compared to non-first-generation students).

37. See, e.g., Rob Wiederstein, *2020 Law School Attrition Rates Part 1*, ROB WIEDERSTEIN (May 12, 2021) <https://www.robwiederstein.org/2021/05/12/2020-law-school-attrition-rates/#attrition-rate-by-year> (“First year law students were more than three times likely to leave law school than students further along in their law school career.”).

38. *Complete 2023 Q Instructions*, AM. BAR ASS'N, https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/Questionnaires/2023/complete-2023-aq-instructions.pdf.

39. *Id.*

“Other attrition” refers to students who voluntarily leave a law school for reasons other than unsatisfactory academic performance or transfer.⁴⁰ Law schools do not report to the ABA the cause of “other attrition.” Because the numbers are so small, pinpointing the “other” might result in a FERPA⁴¹ violation. This is, of course, in the best interest of our students, but it means that we must look at the overall “other attrition” data for trends, without specificity as to causes. Some of the common reasons students leave are unmanageable stress or other mental health issues, financial issues, physical health issues, loss of focus or desire, or a family issue or emergency.⁴²

II. A CROSS-SECTION OF ATTRITION RATES AT THESE NINE SIMILARLY SITUATED SCHOOLS

To compare attrition at the nine focus schools meaningfully, data was drawn from annual reports that each school is required to file with the American Bar Association.⁴³ The first comparisons evaluated the reported credentials of the schools’ incoming classes over an eleven-year period, 2011-2021. It was determined that an eleven-year period was broad enough to obtain an understanding of trends for the

40. A.B.A. Standard 509(b)(4), Required Disclosures, requires law schools to report “enrollment data, including academic, transfer, and other attrition.” Thus, other attrition would not include students who are dismissed for academic reasons or who transfer from one law school to another. AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, ABA STANDARDS AND RULES OF PROCEDURE FOR APPROVAL OF LAW SCHOOLS 2023–2024, Ch. 5, Std. 509(b)(4) (2023).

41. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) provides, among other things, certain privacy rights to students to protect their academic records. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1232.

42. Zoom Interview with John Murphy, Dir. of Acad. Support & Bar Passage, Texas A&M Univ. Sch. of L. (May 11, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with Louis N. Schulze, Jr., Assoc. Dean & Prof. of Acad. Support, Fla. Int’l Univ. Coll. of L. (May 17, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with Noeleen Urmson, Assoc. Dir. of Acad. & Pro. Success, James E. Beasley Sch. of L., Temple Univ. (May 18, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with Sydney Lisy, Dir. of Acad. Success, William S. Boyd Sch. of L., U. Nev. (May 20, 2022) (notes on file with author); see also Allie Robbins, *Preventing Attrition: Critical Interventions to Close the Racial Gap in Non-Transfer Attrition*, 26 WIDENER L. REV. 143, 173–77 (2019) (discussing mental health and substance abuse as causes of non-transfer attrition); Helen Mattison, *Why Underprepared Students Drop out College* (2012) (Ph.D. dissertation, Walden University) (<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1038154833>) (“[F]unding, lack of motivation, and the inability to overcome obstacles were the top three reasons students gave for dropping out of college.”); Gabiel Kuris, *Common Reasons Students Leave Law School*, U.S. NEWS (Dec. 14, 2020), <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/law-admissions-lowdown/articles/common-reasons-students-leave-law-school> (discussing unexpected hardship as a cause of law school attrition).

43. The required annual disclosures are known as 509 Reports. See *supra* note 8.

data and of relatively longstanding practices at each of the focus schools.⁴⁴

To obtain a comprehensive view of the credentials of the schools' incoming classes, median LSAT scores and undergraduate GPAs for 1L students at each of the nine law schools were averaged over the eleven-year span. Arrangement of the averaged data in bar graphs⁴⁵ enabled quick visual analysis of the credentials of each school's incoming classes to help grasp corresponding trends.

After looking at the averages, the historical LSAT data was then plotted in line graphs to track how each school's scores had changed across the eleven years. Viewing the data this way, a modest rise in median LSAT scores was observed across most of the nine schools. Texas A&M showed the steepest increase with its scores rising a full ten points—from 153 in 2011 to 163 in 2021.⁴⁶ Florida International University, Temple University, and Wayne State University showed distinct increases in their median LSAT scores, but not to the same extent as Texas A&M. One school, the University of Maryland, dipped a point—from a median score of 162 in 2011 to a median score of 161 in 2021. After experiencing some bumps in both directions during the middle years, the University of Hawaii reported overall stability, with a median score of 156 at both the beginning and end of the eleven-year span.⁴⁷

A similar process was used to analyze the data for each school's median 1L undergraduate GPA. The 50th percentile of each school's 1L class for each of the eleven years was plotted on a line graph to track changes over the eleven-year period.⁴⁸ A steady increase was apparent for all of the focus schools, but the increase was not striking in all nine schools. Texas A&M again showed the steepest increase, with its median undergraduate GPA jumping from 3.22 in 2011 to 3.84 by 2021. The University of Hawaii, Temple University, Wayne State University, and the University of Nevada - Las Vegas showed

44. 2011 is as far back as the 509 disclosures are publicly available in the archives on the A.B.A. website. See *supra* note 8 for an explanation as to the derivation of data used for analyses in this section.

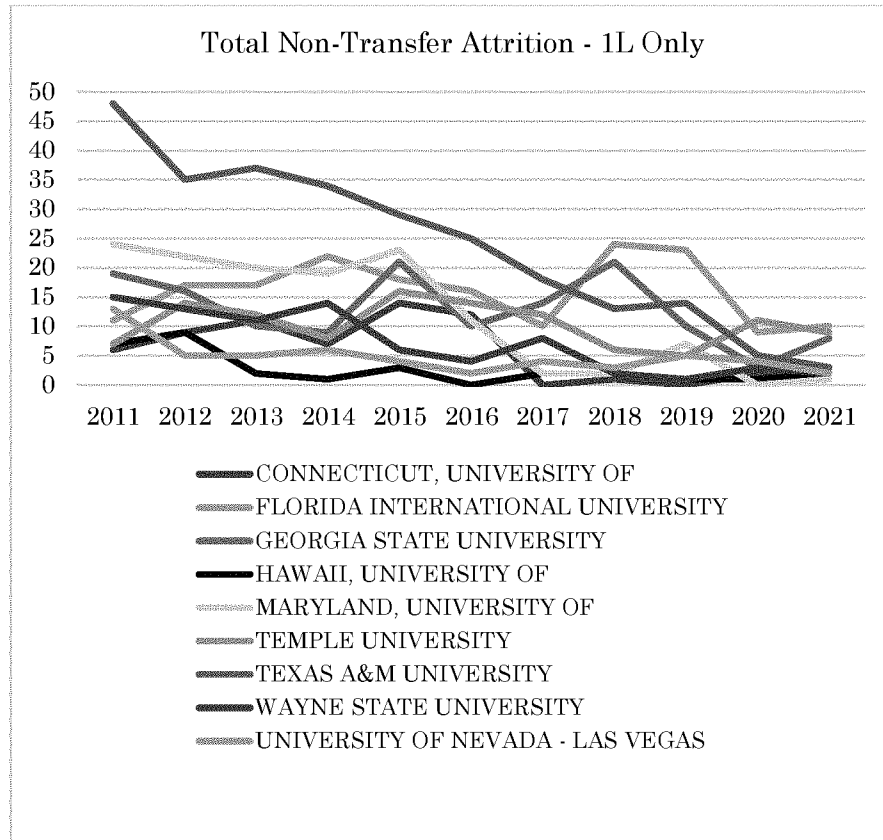
45. See *infra* Graph 1, Appendix.

46. Texas A&M School of Law also stood out as having high academic attrition rates early in the eleven-year span. Interestingly, Texas A&M University acquired Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in 2013, at which time the school was rebranded as Texas A&M University School of Law. *Our Story*, TEXAS A&M UNIV. SCH. OF L., <https://law.tamu.edu/about-us/our-history> (last visited Nov. 11, 2023). In its 509 disclosures, Texas A&M Law has reported significantly rising credentials in its incoming first-year class each year since the acquisition.

47. See *infra* Graph 2, Appendix.

48. See *infra* Graph 3, Appendix.

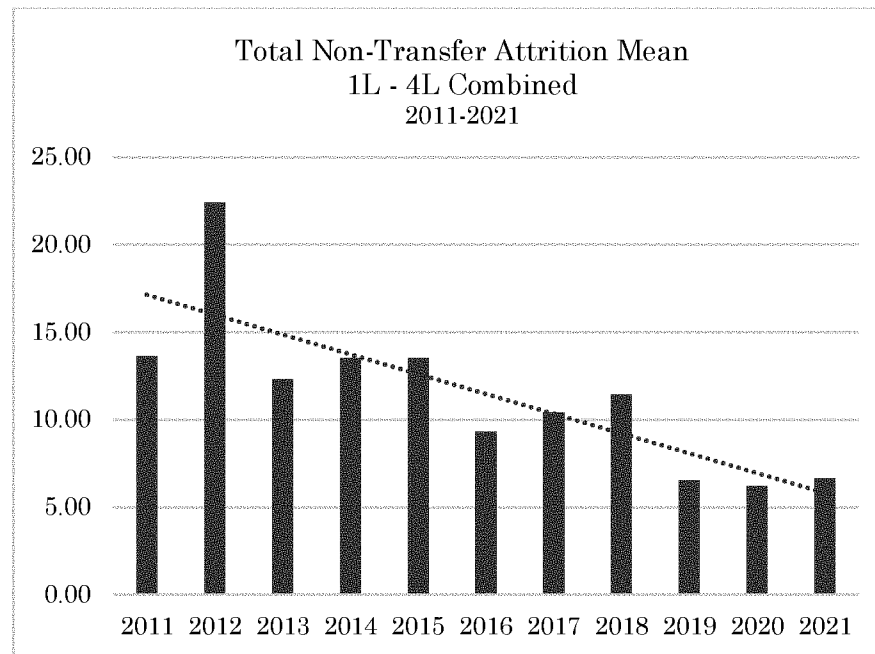
significant increases in the median undergraduate GPAs of their incoming classes. All other schools showed only moderate increases.



When values were plotted to track the changes in 1L non-transfer attrition at each of the nine schools over the course of the eleven-year period, a clear downward trend emerged. The most remarkable decrease occurred at Texas A&M, which lost forty-eight 1L students to non-transfer attrition in 2011 but only three in 2021. Florida International University showed spikes in 2018 and 2019, with twenty-four and twenty-three students attriting, respectively. Georgia State University showed a spike in 2018 with twenty-one students attriting. However, Florida International and Georgia State have since reported much improved attrition rates. Significantly, as of 2021, all nine of the focus schools had ten or fewer attriting students.

Values for total non-transfer attrition were plotted not only for the 1L year, but also for total attrition across all years of law school, 1L -

4L.⁴⁹ There was visual similarity between the 1L graph, above, and the graphing of 1L - 4L data.⁵⁰ This is because, as legal educators would expect, most attrition occurs at the end of the stressful, academically rigorous 1L year.⁵¹



Calculating and plotting the averages of total non-transfer attrition over all years of law school, 1L - 4L, for the nine schools also revealed a clear downward trend.⁵² Though there was a peak in 2012 with an average of 22 students attriting, by 2021 the average was less than a third of that peak at seven students.

When the data was broken down to examine the averages of students who attrited only for academic reasons, again a downward trend was revealed, but the downward trend was less remarkable than that of total attrition.⁵³ Likewise, data for “other” non-transfer attrition occurring over all years of law school was analyzed. This analysis of “other” attrition revealed an even steeper decline than that of total attrition.⁵⁴

49. All years of law school represents three or four years and is dependent upon whether the student attended full-time or part-time.

50. See *infra* Graph 6, Appendix.

51. See Wiederstein, *supra* note 37.

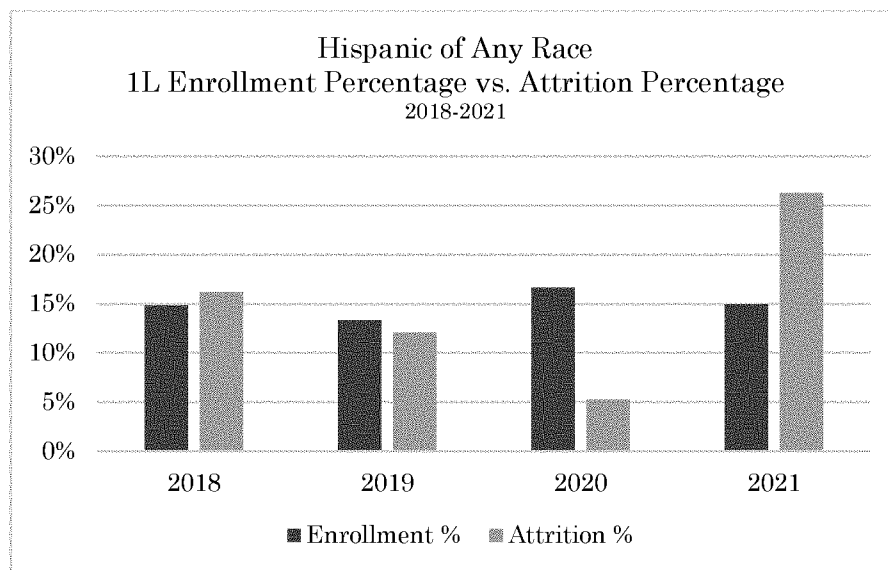
52. See also *infra* Graph 6, Appendix.

53. See *infra* Graph 4, Appendix.

54. See *infra* Graph 5, Appendix.

This downward trend in attrition in the nine focus schools reflects a larger trend among ABA-accredited law schools nationwide, particularly those with similar or higher median LSAT scores, and particularly since 2017.⁵⁵ The steady increase in the credentials of the nine schools' incoming classes over the course of the eleven years studied likely contributed to the corresponding decrease that was observed in attrition rates.

The next analyses compared—for specific racial groups—the percentage of the 1L population to the percentage of attriting students at the nine focus schools over a four-year span.⁵⁶

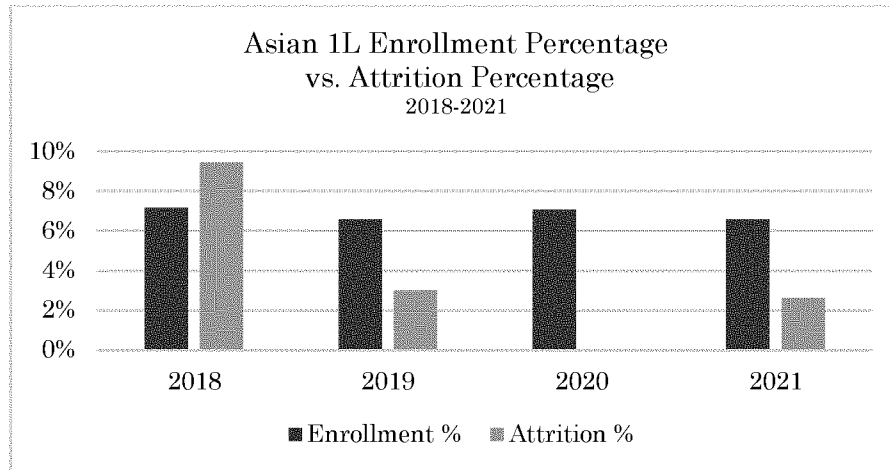


Over the four-year span of 2018-2021, the percentage of Hispanic 1L enrollment matched the percentage of Hispanic attrition. Hispanics of any race comprised about 15% of 1L students

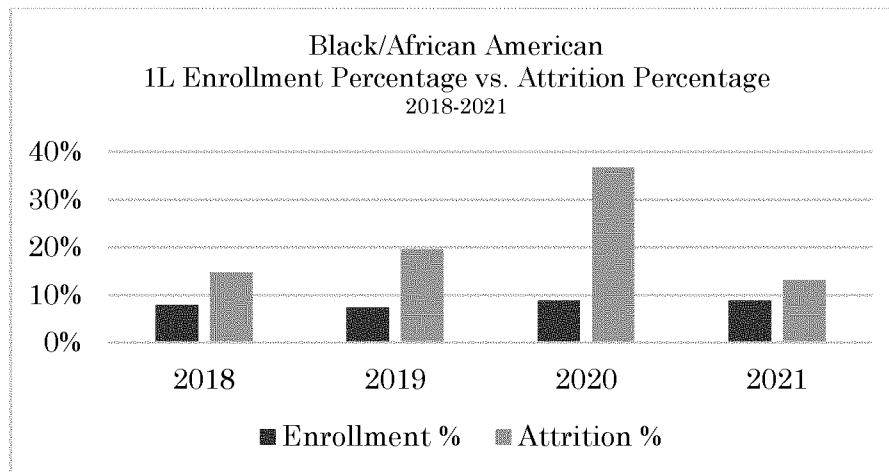
55. See Caron, *supra* note 12.

56. Data used to calculate these percentages was obtained from the nine schools' 509 Reports. These analyses covered only a four-year span because the A.B.A. changed the requirements of 509 disclosures so that law schools had to begin reporting the race and ethnicity of attrited students in 2017. Before that date, the race and ethnicity of attrited students was unreported. In 2018, the 509 requirements changed again to require law schools not only to report the race and ethnicity of students attrited, but also to break down this data according to cause of attrition—academic or “other.” This breakdown of data enabled a more thorough analysis, beginning in 2018. See *supra* note 8 for an explanation of 509 Reports. More detailed information, calculated by school, is on file with the author.

experiencing non-transfer attrition and comprised about 15% of first-year students at the nine schools during those four years.⁵⁷



While Asians comprised 5% of 1L students experiencing non-transfer attrition during 2018-2021, they comprised roughly 7% of first-year students over these four years.⁵⁸

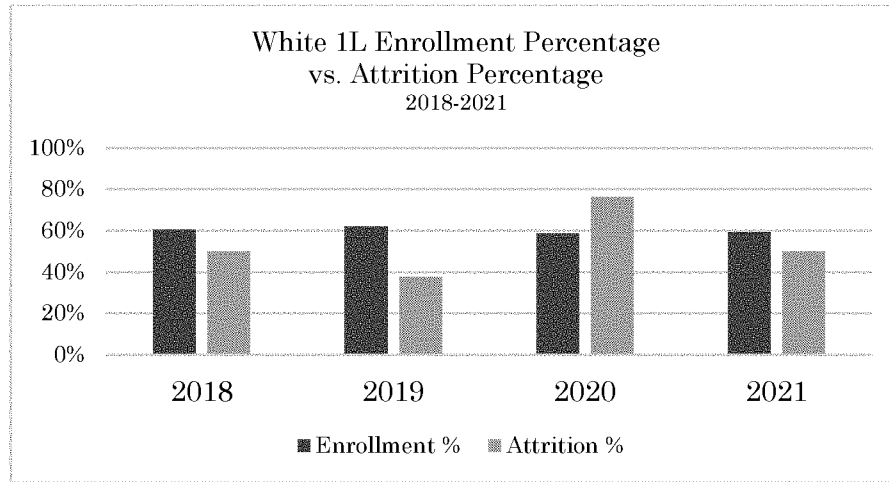


While Black and African American students comprised 20% of 1L students experiencing non-transfer attrition during the 2018-2021, they comprised roughly 8% of first-year students over these four years.⁵⁹

^{57.} *Id.*

^{58.} *Id.*

^{59.} *Id.*



While White students comprised 51% of 1L students experiencing non-transfer attrition during 2018-2021, they comprised roughly 60% of first-year students over these four years.⁶⁰

III. METHODS THAT WORK

Using information gained through interviews with academic support professionals and other administrators from these nine schools,⁶¹ a model of best practices to serve our most vulnerable students—those most at risk of becoming regrettable, preventable

60. *Id.*

61. Telephone Interview with Ryan Maltese, Project Dir., Nat'l Inst. for Student Success, Ga. St. Univ. (Sept. 23, 2021) (notes on file with author); Telephone Interview with Alexis Martinez, Former Assoc. Dean for Students, Ga. St. Univ. Coll. of L., Exec. Dir. of Equity & Compliance at Ga. Inst. of Tech. (Aug. 20, 2021; Dec. 28, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with Allison Calhoun Brown, V.P. for Student Engagement, Ga. St. Univ. (June 1, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with Brandi L. Welch, Assistant Dean for Student Affairs, Wayne St. Univ. L. Sch. (May 17, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with Garrett Halydier, Interim Dir. of Acad. Success, William S. Richardson Sch. of L., Univ. Haw. (Dec. 12, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with James A. Shellenberger, Professor of L. & Dir. of Acad. Core Enrichment, James E. Beasley Sch. of L., Temple Univ. (May 18, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with John Murphy, *supra* note 42; Zoom Interview with Louis N. Schulze, Jr., *supra* note 42; Zoom Interview with Mary Beattie, Assoc. Clinical Professor of L. and Dir. of Acad. Support, Univ. of Conn. Sch. of L. (May 18, 2022) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with Noeleen Urmson, *supra* note 42; Zoom Interview with Russell McClain, Professor, Assoc. Dean for Diversity & Inclusion, and Dir. of Acad. Achievement, Univ. of Md. Francis King Carey Sch. Of L. (Jan. 2, 2024) (notes on file with author); Zoom Interview with Sydney Lisy, *supra* note 42. Please note that these were the titles of the above individuals at the time of their interviews. Some of them have since changed roles, received promotions, or moved to different institutions.

statistics in our “academic attrition” or “other attrition” numbers—was developed. Many of the interviewees were seasoned professionals who were able to share from experience what worked for their students over the years. Several interviews were also with academic support professionals relatively new to their jobs, yet full of new ideas and energy to bring about dynamic changes. Perhaps the most valuable input, however, was when an academic support professional or administrator candidly shared an initiative that had not worked as well as anticipated.

The keys to minimizing attrition which are discussed in the following section of this article are divided into these categories: (A) providing friendly, readily available, visible assistance to students with pending needs; (B) incorporating specific, important lessons in academic success programming; and (C) intentionally building an immediate, caring community. Those who work in student-facing offices likely act, intuitively, in a manner consistent with these goals, but ensuring that these goals are forefront, planned, and deliberate will best serve our most vulnerable students and enable us to minimize attrition. This article aims not only to make the case for the importance of focusing on these efforts, but also to provide a hands-on model of best practices derived from studying successful institutions and the guidance of experienced law school educators and administrators.

A. *Available Assistance*

1. The Triage

At the law schools that best serve their students, students do not have to search long for assistance when a problem, issue, or question arises. These schools have developed what I liken to a triage in an emergency room. Their law students know of a particular office or, in many cases, a particular person, who acts as the first point of contact. This person or office cannot solve the problems of each student who comes for help but has developed the institutional knowledge and familiarity with available student services to lead the student, when necessary, to other accessible resources for help. Just as in an emergency room triage, a triage within an exceptionally supportive law school will respond urgently when a student’s issue is pressing. This means the triage must be available to students after-hours and on weekends as urgent issues arise. Caring administrative staff members at successful law schools monitor emails long past regular school hours.

In some successful schools, the triage is housed within a well-staffed dean of students' office. In others, an academic support office is often the point of first contact. One effective academic success professional referred to her school's academic support office as a "sanctuary of confidentiality."⁶² Another successful school created a specific role—Student Support Coordinator—to serve as the point of first contact.

The most basic needs of Maslow's hierarchy⁶³ are addressed at all nine schools. All of the schools have food pantries or lockers to help address food insecurity with discretion and compassion.⁶⁴ Students suffering from housing insecurity are usually steered to the dean of students' office or a central university office, and these pressing concerns are obvious priorities⁶⁵ at the triage. They are responded to with immediacy and beyond normal school hours, if need be. One of the most successful schools has an administrator specially trained to assist students with Medicaid and food stamp applications.⁶⁶ At this school, information on finding such help is distributed to students as soon as they matriculate.⁶⁷

2. Assisting with Mental Health Issues

a. Providing Counseling and Other Mental Health Resources

It likely comes as no surprise that law students, like lawyers, experience stress, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse issues in much greater proportions than the general population.⁶⁸ A 2016 study published in the *Journal of Addiction Medicine* indicated that 28% of 12,825 practicing lawyers who were surveyed reported depression;

62. Zoom Interview with Noeleen Urmson, *supra* note 42.

63. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a fundamental theory of psychology that was introduced by Abraham Maslow in 1943 to explain factors of human motivation. Maslow proposed that the most basic needs of existence are physiological, for example, food and water, and are thus placed at the base of his pyramid of needs. Next in Maslow's pyramid is safety, and then other, less pressing needs appear in order of urgency – belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. See Douglas T. Renrick et al., *Renovating the Pyramid of Needs: Contemporary Extensions Built Upon Ancient Foundations*, 5 PERSP. ON PSYCH. SCI. 292 (2010).

64. See *supra* note 61.

65. Zoom Interview with John Murphy, *supra* note 42.

66. *Id.*

67. *Id.*

68. Patrick Krill et al., *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, J. ADDICTION MED. 46, 46 (Jan.–Feb. 2016), https://journals.lww.com/journaladdictionmedicine/Fulltext/2016/02000/The_Prevalence_of_Substance_Use_and_Other_Mental.8.aspx.

20.6% reported hazardous, harmful drinking; 19% reported problem anxiety; and 23% reported problem stress.⁶⁹ These percentages represent an immense problem within the legal industry, and it appears that these mental health issues begin or worsen, for many lawyers, while they are still in law school. The David Nee Foundation, named for a much loved Fordham Law student who took his own life preparing for the bar examination,⁷⁰ reported that depression rates increase progressively during law school, beginning at 10% upon matriculation (about the same as the general population⁷¹) and increasing to 40% upon graduation.⁷² The findings of a 2016 poll were also very disturbing—it indicated that 21% of the 3000 law students surveyed had considered suicide in their lifetimes, and 6% had considered suicide within the last year.⁷³

Legal educators certainly can identify the reasons for increased stress, anxiety, and depression among law students. Most law students have never been faced with a similar academic workload. The stress of class rankings can be profound; for some law students, the competition may seem nonstop. The Socratic method, commonly used in law school classrooms, is new to most incoming law students, and mandatory public speaking in lawyering skills classes can trigger additional anxiety.

All nine law schools studied for this article have counseling services available for their students, and all make sure that their students are aware of the available counseling as soon as orientation.⁷⁴ Most of the schools engage counselors to speak to

69. *Id.*

70. Katherine Bender, *Mental Health Resources for Law Students*, *Law Student Division*, A.B.A. (Mar. 29, 2016), <https://abaforlawstudents.com/2016/03/29/mental-health-resources-for-law-students/>.

71. Janet Thompson Jackson, *Legal Education Needs a Wellness Reckoning*, BL (Apr. 7, 2021, 4:01 AM), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/legal-education-needs-a-wellness-reckoning> (according to the David Nee Foundation).

72. Mike Robinson, *6 Law Student Mental Health Statistics*, CLIO, <https://www.clio.com/blog/law-student-mental-health-statistics/> (last updated Aug. 10, 2023) (referring to statistics from the David Nee Foundation).

73. Jerome M. Organ et al., *Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns*, 66 J. LEG. ED. 116, 139 (Autumn 2016), <https://jle.aals.org/home/vol66/iss1/13/>.

74. While all nine law schools studied for this article are affiliated with larger universities so that they are able to offer university-supplied counseling to their law students, the author acknowledges that not every law school is affiliated with a university that can provide professional counseling. Nevertheless, providing professional counseling services and having emergency response available must be a top priority for all law schools, especially in trying times like we have experienced for the last three years. *See supra* note 61.

incoming and returning students at orientation, ensuring students are aware of their available services.⁷⁵ Some students also receive bystander intervention and suicide prevention training.⁷⁶ None of the schools currently employs a full-time mental health counselor housed at the law school, but several, at one time, employed a part-time counselor at the law school., but several, at one time, employed a part-time counselor at the law school.⁷⁷ Almost all of the law schools refer students to a counseling center run by their central university that is staffed full-time and available for urgent meetings and after-hours calls and referrals.⁷⁸ During the pandemic, most counseling appointments were conducted remotely through webcam. Now, at almost all of the counseling centers operated by central universities, students have the option of virtual or in-person appointments with registered counselors who are trained in dealing with young-adult depression and academic stress.⁷⁹

One factor that may be significant and appears worth replicating is that some successful law schools reported a working relationship with the central university's counseling center in which specific counselors are assigned to work with law students.⁸⁰ Knowledgeable law school administrators advised that these counselors should receive special training about law school stressors and law students' specific needs.⁸¹ The counselors should communicate closely with the law school administration throughout each academic year about issues that might affect law students.⁸² For example, the counselors should be made aware of the law school's class ranking system and when the ranking is published to law students. Most administrators reported that law students are heavy users of their central university counseling centers.⁸³

Another method that appears worth replicating is hosting a representative from the state bar's lawyer assistance program at the law school for presentations to students.⁸⁴ Every state bar association

75. *Id.*

76. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61.

77. *See, e.g.*, Zoom Interview with John Murphy, *supra* note 42.

78. *Id.*

79. At the time of writing this article, a few schools were still offering only virtual meetings. *Id.*

80. *See supra* note 61.

81. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61; Zoom Interview with Louis Schulze, *supra* note 42 (discussing the need for counselors to understand the law school ranking process and its influence on students' ability to land prestigious employment).

82. Zoom Interview with Louis Schulze, *supra* note 42.

83. *See supra* note 61.

84. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61.

has a variation of an assistance program for its members. It might represent an under-utilized, cost-free source of vital information and sound advice for law students within its state. Additionally, students who become familiar with the services of the lawyer assistance program while still in law school may be more likely to turn to it for help as practicing attorneys. These programs are confidential and specialize in the mental health issues lawyers contend with most frequently—depression, stress, substance abuse, psychological diagnoses, workplace issues, and family problems.⁸⁵

All nine law schools provide students with a list of available mental health resources. One effective administrator⁸⁶ identified an especially useful resource—literature produced by the state bar association or the ABA, for example, the *Substance Abuse & Mental Health Toolkit for Law Students and Those Who Care About Them*.⁸⁷ This document was prepared through a collaboration of the David Nee Foundation,⁸⁸ the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs, and the ABA Law Student Division, and is replete with links to crisis helplines, useful assessment tools, and wonderful assistance videos for students.⁸⁹ There is a section specifically written for law school administrators attempting to improve or build up their current law school programming in this area, as well as a separate section for faculty which defines the faculty role and provides advice on how to counsel students.⁹⁰

b. Emphasis on Wellness and Mindfulness Practices

On February 14, 2022, the ABA amended accreditation Standard 303 to require law schools to provide substantial opportunities for students to develop professional identities during their studies.⁹¹ The

85. See, e.g., *The Lawyer Assistance Program, A Confidential Service*, ST. BAR GA, <https://www.gabar.org/committeesprogramssections/programs/lap/index.cfm> (last visited Nov. 11, 2023). Note that the state bar provides members complimentary counseling sessions.

86. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61.

87. A.B.A. LAW STUDENT DIVISION ET AL., SUBSTANCE ABUSE & MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT FOR LAW STUDENTS AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM 3 [hereinafter SUBSTANCE ABUSE & MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT], https://s18875.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ls_colap_mental_health_toolkit_new.authcheckdam.pdf (last visited Nov. 11, 2023).

88. See *supra* note 70 and accompanying text for discussion regarding the David Nee Foundation, named for a beloved Fordham Law graduate who took his own life while preparing for the bar examination.

89. SUBSTANCE ABUSE & MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT, *supra* note 87, at 33–35.

90. *Id.* at 28–32.

91. AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, ABA STANDARDS AND RULES OF PROCEDURE FOR APPROVAL OF LAW SCHOOLS 2023–2024, Ch. 5, Std. 303 (2022-2023).

ABA also issued a new interpretation of Standard 303 to define professional identity:

Professional identity focuses on what it means to be a lawyer and the special obligations lawyers have to their clients and society. The development of professional identity should involve an intentional *exploration of the values, guiding principles, and well-being practices* considered foundational to successful legal practice. Because developing a professional identity requires *reflection and growth over time*, students should have frequent opportunities for such development during each year of law school and in a variety of courses and co-curricular and professional development activities.⁹²

Well-being should be our overarching physical and mental health goal, both for our students and ourselves, and mindfulness is a therapy to help us achieve and then maintain well-being. The Mindfulness in Law Society, which has a student division, promotes “the benefits of mindfulness meditation, yoga, and other contemplative practices”⁹³ to enhance overall well-being. Mindfulness involves giving full attention to the present moment, in an intentional manner, using tools like meditation and yoga to focus on one’s breath, a repeated mantra, or an object or sound in one’s environment.⁹⁴

In the last decade, mindfulness training has taken corporate America by storm as a method to improve the well-being and productivity of employees,⁹⁵ and now its popularity is on the rise in the legal profession and law schools. In 2017, the ABA National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being recommended that, “[t]o promote a culture of well-being, law schools should create a lecture series open

92. *Id.* at Ch. 3, Std. 303, Interpretation 303-5 (emphasis added).

93. *The MILS Mission*, MINDFULNESS IN L. SOC’Y, <https://www.mindfulnessinlawsociety.org/mission> (last visited Nov. 11, 2023) (stating that the Mindfulness in Law Society educates lawyers about mindfulness and promotes mindfulness practices).

94. See Dainen Penta, *The Anxious Lawyer - My Mantra is ‘Tacos,’* KING CNTY. BAR BULL. (Nov. 2017), <https://www.kcba.org/For-Lawyers/Bar-Bulletin/PostId/260/the-anxious-lawyer-my-mantra-is-tacos> (reviewing JEENA CHO & KAREN GIFFORD, *THE ANXIOUS LAWYER: AN 8-WEEK GUIDE TO A JOYFUL AND SATISFYING LAW PRACTICE THROUGH MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION* (2016)).

95. Ron Dube, *Why More Companies Are Cultivating a Culture of Mindfulness*, FORBES (Mar. 25, 2019, 8:00 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robdube/2019/03/25/why-more-companies-are-cultivating-a-culture-of-mindfulness/?sh=1f72a40a5619>.

to all students and a course designed to cover well-being topics in depth.”⁹⁶ The ABA task force recognized that mindfulness techniques can enable individuals to improve concentration and focus, reduce stress, and improve emotional strength.⁹⁷ The task force also recognized that mindfulness can encourage creativity.⁹⁸ Because these advantages will particularly benefit people in a high-stress, competitive environment, law schools that embrace mindfulness training, carving out time and space for students who want to learn and practice mindfulness techniques, are training their students to achieve more balanced lives and greater emotional resilience.

There has been so much buzz over the terms mindfulness, well-being, and wellness in the last five years, plus an emphasis on helping students balance whole lives, that it is somewhat surprising that the latest LSSSE survey indicates, when law students were asked whether their “[s]chool emphasized: [h]elping [them] cope with [their] non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.),” almost three-quarters responded only “some” or “very little.”⁹⁹ On the other hand, when asked whether their “[s]chool emphasized: [p]roviding the support [they] need to help [them] succeed academically,” two-thirds responded “quite a bit” or “very much.”¹⁰⁰ It appears that law school academic success programs are making their mark on law students, which is welcome news, but perhaps mindfulness and wellness initiatives are not yet as prevalent. This must change quickly in response to ABA guidance, and this should change quickly out of concern for our students. As recognized by the ABA Task Force, mindfulness techniques can be especially valuable for people in high-stress environments, like students who are navigating the challenges of law school for the first time. Mindfulness training might enable a sense of balance through periods of otherwise increased tension and heavy demands on their schedules.

In response to ABA guidance, the prevalence of wellness initiatives and mindfulness training in the nine law schools studied for this article appears to be increasing. Of the nine schools, only one has regularly offered a course on mindfulness, and this school has

96. TASK FORCE ON LAWYER WELL-BEING, THE PATH TO LAWYER WELL-BEING: PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE 39 (2017), <https://lawyerwellbeing.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Lawyer-Wellbeing-Report.pdf>.

97. *Id.* at 52–53.

98. *Id.* at 15.

99. 74% of responding students selected the lowest two choices out of the four scaled answer choices: “Some” and “Very little.” *LSSSE Public Reporting Tool*, *supra* note 20.

100. 67% of responding students selected the highest two choices out of the four scaled answer choices: “quite a bit” and “very much.” *Id.*

achieved low attrition rates, particularly among its students of color.¹⁰¹ This school's elective course on mindfulness has proved to be very popular among students, and, interestingly, other professors have audited the course to learn techniques to improve their own well-being. At this same school, several professors begin their classes with a minute or two of silence for students to meditate, reflect, or just breathe. Also at this school, a mindfulness expert addresses all 1Ls during a required class session, taking the first-year students through a brief meditation and breathing exercise. Additionally, the academic success director at this school requires each 1L, at the beginning of the academic year, to submit a weekly schedule complete with blocks of time for recreation, exercise, ample sleep, mindfulness activities, and other pastimes to promote wellness.¹⁰²

Some of the schools host optional mindfulness programs conducted by outside experts.¹⁰³ At one successful school, wellness and mindfulness programming is conducted by the legal writing faculty.¹⁰⁴ Many successful schools sponsor mindfulness student organizations, but several administrators expressed that their schools' mindfulness programs were in a state of necessary growth or rebuilding.¹⁰⁵

The nine schools studied for this article shared some other ingenious programming developed under the umbrella of wellness efforts. Many of the schools hold wellness days, wellness weeks, or hold a regular series of wellness panels.¹⁰⁶ In some of the most effective schools, faculty and staff intentionally model wellness

101. At the time of writing this article, only Georgia State University College of Law reported offering a class on mindfulness. This extremely popular class was the brainchild of Professor Charity Scott who passed away in March 2023. Her work in this area—conducting studies and reporting results of quantitative and qualitative analysis—continues to benefit law students and practitioners. She advocated for incorporating mindfulness practices in law school training to improve focus and well-being while reducing stress and anxiety. *See generally* Charity Scott & Paul Verhaeghen, *Calming Down and Waking Up: An Empirical Study of the Effects of Mindfulness Training on Law Students*, 21 NEV. L.J. 277 (2020).

102. This paragraph was written from the author's personal experience of working at Georgia State University College of Law until August 2023.

103. For example, Georgia State University, where I taught 2008–2023, regularly hosts practicing attorney Austin Charles, an alumnus who founded the national Mindfulness in Law Society - Student Division.

104. *See* Zoom Interview with Louis Schulze, *supra* note 42.

105. *Id.* (discussing mindfulness programming, in particular); Zoom Interview with Mary Beattie, *supra* note 61.

106. For example, the University of Nevada - Las Vegas holds four sessions on mindfulness, both in law school and in the profession. Zoom Interview with Sydney Lisy, *supra* note 42.

practices.¹⁰⁷ Some hold shared recreation sessions with students. One successful school holds “Cooking with Professors” sessions,¹⁰⁸ and during the pandemic, the organizers happily discovered that holding the sessions virtually increased attendance. It appears that, prior to the pandemic, students had not been attending the in-person sessions just for a taste of the food prepared; rather, students were simply hungry to see their professors in a casual role and watch their professors doing something enjoyable and completely unrelated to the study of law. Another professor makes a point of taking part in physical exercise with students to model his personal emphasis on fitness while modeling his strong work ethic.¹⁰⁹

3. Assisting with Financial Issues

a. Financial Emergencies

For undergraduate students, the number one reason for dropping out of school is financial.¹¹⁰ The specific reasons, other than academic, that students drop out of law school are unavailable through study of data disclosed to the ABA.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, law school administrators who work closely with students can confirm anecdotally that financial hardship is a top reason for students dropping out of law school.¹¹² This cause of “other” attrition is likely more prevalent at the nine schools studied for this article as they operate part-time programs designed for working students who likely support themselves, and in some instances, also support a family.¹¹³ If these students suffer a loss

107. See, e.g., Zoom Interview with John Murphy, *supra* note 42; Zoom Interview with Louis Schulze, *supra* note 42; Zoom Interview with Noeleen Urmson, *supra* note 42.

108. Zoom Interview with John Murphy, *supra* note 42.

109. *Id.*

110. Erika Giovanetti, Money Is the Top Reason Why Students Are Dropping Out of College, Study Finds, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT (Feb. 9, 2023), <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/dropping-out-of-college-why-students-do-so-and-how-to-avoid-it> (citing a new study by the University and Professional Continuing Education Association).

111. The ABA requires law schools to report only the number of students who drop out for reasons other than academic. See AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, *supra* note 40.

112. See Zoom Interview with John Murphy, *supra* note 42; Zoom Interview with Louis Schulze, *supra* note 42; Zoom Interview with Noeleen Urmson, *supra* note 42; Zoom Interview with Sydney Lisy, *supra* note 42.

113. One can extrapolate from known research regarding the prevalence of part-time students dropping out of undergraduate schools. “Full-time [undergraduate] students are always more likely than part-time students to complete an award.”

of income, even temporarily, they may not have the luxury of continuing their studies. Financial hardship may occur because of unforeseeable reasons other than the loss of earned income—a fire, a natural disaster, a theft, or costs incurred because of a health-related event or the death of a family member.

Additionally, inflation has taken a great toll on our buying power since the start of the global pandemic. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, what we could purchase with \$100 in March 2020, as we sank into the pandemic, will now require \$118.96, as of November 2023.¹¹⁴ Generally, rampant inflation has made it harder for us to pay our fixed monthly bills and have money left for the daily cost of living. When a student struggles financially, a foundational problem exists.¹¹⁵ Regardless of the academic support that the student receives, when a student is struggling to pay the basic living expenses of rent and food—not to mention tuition—that student is not set up for success. Extrapolating from research done in undergraduate institutions, many students are one unexpected expense away from having to drop out of school.¹¹⁶ The Trellis Company, a nonprofit that focuses on research in post-secondary education, surveyed 38,000 students from seventy-eight U.S. colleges.¹¹⁷ Results of the 2019 survey indicated that 57% of the respondents at four-year colleges and 61% at two-year colleges could not come up with \$500 if an emergency arose.¹¹⁸ Additionally, a third of the surveyed students at two-year colleges and a quarter of those at four-year colleges indicated they had run out of money at least five times in the past year.¹¹⁹

Maintaining an emergency fund earmarked only for law students is likely the optimal system for providing discreet and immediate financial help to law students experiencing a financial emergency. An emergency fund's purpose is to provide some financial assistance to law students who cannot meet their essential expenses because of an

Melanie Hanson, *College Dropout Rates*, EDU. DATA INITIATIVE, <https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates> (last updated Oct. 29, 2023).

114. Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm (last visited Jan. 20, 2024).

115. See Andrea Moore et al., *A Qualitative Examination of the Impacts of Financial Stress on College Students' Well-Being: Insights from a Large, Private Institution*, SAGE OPEN MED. (May 22, 2021), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8141976/> (discussing impact on academic success and social functioning).

116. KASEY KLEPFER ET AL., TRELLIS CO., STUDENT FINANCIAL WELLNESS SURVEY REPORT: FALL 2019 IMPLEMENTATION 5 (July 2020), <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Fall-2019-SFWS-Report.pdf>.

117. *Id.*

118. *Id.*

119. *Id.* at 16.

unexpected crisis.¹²⁰ The funding is intended to be temporary. Schools with in-house emergency funds cited one distinct advantage of this system—they can respond to their students’ needs with discretion and immediacy within a few days at most, on a case-by-case basis.¹²¹

Other schools have emergency funds available only through their central university dean of students’ offices, which can render the application process more uncomfortable and less discreet, while making the award process lengthier. Although it is not optimal for students’ assistance requests to be filtered through the central university, administrators indicated such a system can operate effectively if the student needing assistance receives prompt guidance from law school staff.¹²² In other words, when a student experiences a financial emergency, the key to keeping that student enrolled is immediacy, both from law school staff and from the university office processing the request.

b. Financial Aid

Nothing is more frustrating to a busy law student than having to invest precious hours wading through bureaucratic problems with financial aid documentation. Those who have worked in this area know that snags and glitches can be much too commonplace. Findings from LSSSE’s 2022 national survey of law students indicate that more than 30% of responding students were either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with the financial aid advising they had received.¹²³ This is a dismaying percentage, especially considering that not all law students apply for or receive financial aid. When law students were asked whether their school “[p]rovid[ed] the financial counseling . . . need[ed] to afford your education,” more than 61% indicated they had received only “some” or “very little” counseling.¹²⁴ Law school administrators interviewed for this article acknowledged that when

120. See, e.g., *Emergency Aid, Division of Academic & Student Affairs*, FLA. INT’L UNIV., [https://dasa.fiu.edu/all-departments/dean-of-students/emergency-aid/#:~:text=The%20Student%20Emergency%20Fund%20\(SEF,related%20to%20an%20unexpecte d%20situation](https://dasa.fiu.edu/all-departments/dean-of-students/emergency-aid/#:~:text=The%20Student%20Emergency%20Fund%20(SEF,related%20to%20an%20unexpecte d%20situation) (last visited Jan. 20, 2024) (“The Student Emergency Fund (SEF) provides limited emergency financial assistance to currently enrolled FIU students who are unable to meet immediate, essential expenses because of temporary hardship related to an unexpected situation.”).

121. See, e.g., Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61; Zoom interview with Russell McClain, *supra* note 61. Both administrators indicated their law schools had some funds earmarked only for law students as well as university-wide emergency student funds.

122. See *supra* note 61.

123. LSSSE *Public Reporting Tool*, *supra* note 20.

124. *Id.*

financial aid matters are handled improperly or inefficiently, students are frustrated, at the very least.¹²⁵ Administrators shared that, all too often, students can become tremendously inconvenienced, perhaps even unnecessarily dropped from class rolls.¹²⁶ Because of our increased reliance on electronic instruction and electronic communication with students, a reliance that became especially pronounced in legal education during the pandemic and now post-pandemic, a law student being dropped from an electronic roster can devastate that student's ability to keep up with assignments.

In the pressure cooker of first-year studies, an obstacle with financial aid can become the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back.

[B]urdensome business procedures or institutional bureaucracy can cause students to develop a negative relationship with their university. If students have unhelpful or unpleasant experiences with units like the business office [or] financial aid[,] . . . they may become disillusioned toward the institution and less likely to finish their program.¹²⁷

Hanover Research, a for-profit research and consulting group that has worked extensively with higher education institutions in efforts to decrease student attrition, provides as its first pointer to institutions attempting to improve financial aid services: "Simplify the financial aid application process."¹²⁸ As its second piece of advice, Hanover Research suggests "[t]arget[ing] financial aid to students with the largest unmet needs."¹²⁹ Our students with the largest unmet needs are almost certainly also our most vulnerable students—students of lower socio-economic status, first-generation students, and students of color.¹³⁰

125. See *supra* note 61.

126. *Id.*

127. HANOVER RSCH., STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION 9 (Sept. 2014), <https://www.hanoverresearch.com/media/Strategies-for-Improving-Student-Retention.pdf>; see Jalynn Roberts & Ronald Styron, *Student Satisfaction and Persistence: Factors Vital to Student Retention*, RSCH. HIGHER EDUC. J. 1, 4–5 (Mar. 2010), <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/09321.pdf>.

128. *Three Ways that Financial Aid Can Improve Student Retention*, HIGHER EDUC. INSIGHTS BLOG (Aug. 12, 2016), <https://www.hanoverresearch.com/insights-blog/higher-ed-best-practices-in-student-retention/>.

129. *Id.*

130. One can extrapolate from known research on undergraduate students. Maria Carrasco, *Analysis: Most Students Face Unmet Need When Paying for College*, NAT'L

Because of these concerns, administrators at successful schools have one of two mechanisms in place. Optimally, the school's administration will include at least one person housed at the law school—a financial aid director—with the ability and authority to solve student financial aid issues.¹³¹ Among schools with leaner staffing, the best-performing schools have usually developed a special liaison within the central university's financial aid office. The liaison is someone familiar with law students' particular needs and the law school's academic calendar. These successful law schools carefully cultivate a working relationship with their financial aid liaison, keeping the liaison up to date on changing circumstances at the law school and foreseeable law student needs. Likewise, the liaison can inform the law school administrator who is tasked with financial aid issues when there are changes in application procedures or processing requirements. In this way, the law school and the central university financial aid office can provide a streamlined, simplified process, causing as little frustration as possible to students needing assistance.

B. *Methods of the Best Academic Success Programs*

Each of the nine law schools houses an active academic success program. Each of the directors of these programs covers the common themes of such programs when instructing first-year students—time management, reading and briefing cases, outlining, and exam preparation. At some of the most effective schools, however, the academic success directors invest tremendous energy and dedication in their programs, and thus in their students. The academic success lessons at these schools include some less common but tremendously important instruction on growth mindset, the impostor syndrome, and metacognition. Another practice common among programs at top performing schools is to invite former students to address current 1Ls.

ASS'N OF STUDENT FIN. AID ADM'RS., https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/31502/Analysis_Most_Students_Face_Unmet_Need_When_Paying_for_College#:~:text=While%20the%20majority%20of%20students,unmet%20need%20than%20white%20students. See also CHRISTENSEN ET AL., *supra* note 30, at 12.

131. These structures were indicated by law school administrators and faculty during the interviews conducted for this article, and the resultant proposed plan was developed by the author after concluding the interviews. See *supra* note 61.

1. Growth Mindset

More than thirty years ago, educational researcher Carol Dweck became intrigued with the way different schoolchildren reacted to failure.¹³² Some students rebounded quickly from failure, while even the smallest setbacks shattered others.¹³³ Dweck coined the term “growth mindset,” which refers to the understanding that abilities and intelligence can be developed.¹³⁴ The students who were devastated by small failures lacked a growth mindset; Dweck identified their mindset as fixed because they held the belief that their abilities were unchangeable.¹³⁵ Because students with a growth mindset believe they can improve their abilities and intelligence, they will invest in hard work. Learning is their interim goal and high achievement is their ultimate goal.¹³⁶

In law school, developing a growth mindset can enable students to approach their complex studies with inquisitiveness and an eagerness to learn the law. It can also equip students to deal effectively with any setbacks that might come their way. As law students were generally high-performing undergraduate students, they are often unfamiliar with receiving low grades. The key to law students maintaining confidence in their abilities is developing a growth mindset. A growth mindset can enable workplace success as well. Law firms hiring new graduates seek “associates with grit and resilience—lawyers who can withstand the pressures and rigor of practicing law.”¹³⁷

A very effective program director shared that she teaches growth mindset to 1Ls at the end of their first semester, and her timing is intentional.¹³⁸ She explains to students that their law school has a policy of requiring a certain mean (2.9–3.1) in all of their required first-year classes. She then explains that this required mean will cause some of them to receive grades lower than those they received in prior studies. She explains that they will receive their first semester grades at the beginning of January, and when they open their laptops and see their marks, some of them may feel discouraged.

132. *Decades of Scientific Research that Started a Growth Mindset Revolution*, MINDSETWORKS, <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/> (last visited Nov. 11, 2023).

133. *Id.*

134. *Id.*

135. *Id.*

136. *Id.*

137. Eduardo Briceño & Dawn Young, *A Growth Mindset for Law School Success*, *Law Student Division*, A.B.A. (Sept. 12, 2017), <https://abaforlawstudents.com/2017/09/12/growth-mindset-law-school-success/>.

138. Zoom Interview with Anonymous Acad. Success Dir. (May 19, 2022) (notes on file with author).

The academic success director prepares them for this experience with detailed instruction on developing a growth mindset. During our interview, this director shared that, coincidentally, she had recently received a call from a student thanking her for the class. The student told her that the growth mindset class was the most important class he had taken in the fall because he had the identical experience she had described of opening his laptop, viewing his grades, and feeling devastated. Because of her instruction, he challenged himself to improve his study methods and GPA during the spring semester, which he did successfully.

2. Impostor Syndrome

Impostor syndrome is characterized by doubting oneself professionally, despite demonstrating success.¹³⁹ Women are more likely to suffer from impostor syndrome than men,¹⁴⁰ and students of color are especially susceptible.¹⁴¹ First-generation students are more likely to suffer from it than students who are not first-generation.¹⁴²

Impostor syndrome is common among high achievers.¹⁴³ For high achievers, it feels like a nagging voice in the back of their heads telling them that they do not deserve their success. They have difficulty believing their success resulted from hard work, skill, and experience.¹⁴⁴ Many celebrities admit suffering from impostor

139. George P. Chrousos & Alexios-Fotios A. Mentis, *Imposter Syndrome Threatens Diversity*, 367 SCIENCE 749, 749 (2020).

140. See Kathy Caprino, *Impostor Syndrome Prevalence in Professional Women and How to Overcome it*, FORBES (Oct. 22, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2020/10/22/impostor-syndrome-prevalence-in-professional-women-face-and-how-to-overcome-it/?sh=44ad342073cb> (describing one survey that found that many of the surveyed respondents “felt women may experience imposter syndrome more than men”).

141. See generally, Afran Ahmed et al., *Why Is There a Higher Rate of Impostor Syndrome Among BIPOC?* ZENODO (Dec. 8, 2020), <https://zenodo.org/records/4310477>.

142. Eric W. Dolan, *First-Generation University Students Are More Likely to Struggle with Imposter Syndrome*, PSYPOST (Jan. 11, 2020), <https://www.psypost.org/2020/01/first-generation-university-students-are-more-likely-to-struggle-with-imposter-syndrome-55207>; Kristin Wong, *Dealing with Imposter Syndrome When You're Treated as an Imposter*, N.Y. TIMES (June 12, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/smarter-living/dealing-with-impostor-syndrome-when-youre-treated-as-an-impostor.html>.

143. Robert Glazer, *The Imposter Syndrome Paradox: Why Feeling Like a Fraud May Be Your Strongest Asset*, FORBES (June 29, 2018), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertglazer/2018/06/29/the-imposter-syndrome-paradox-why-feeling-like-a-fraud-may-be-your-strongest-asset/>.

144. See Caprino, *supra* note 140 (finding that the respondents “identified self-imposed pressures and self-criticism as key contributing factors” of impostor syndrome).

syndrome, including Tom Hanks, Justice Sonya Sotomayor, and former First Lady Michelle Obama.¹⁴⁵

Effective academic success programs in the nine schools studied include instruction on impostor syndrome. One highly effective professor—whom I once worked with—told me she explains the syndrome to 1Ls, and asks them to write anonymous comments on a chat-board stating whether they believe they have previously suffered or currently suffer from impostor syndrome. She said that when the chat-board is revealed to the room, you can hear a collective sigh as the 1L students realize they are not alone in their self-doubts. In my own work with students, I teach 1Ls about impostor syndrome and share with them that I myself suffered from it in law school. I had returned to law school as a nontraditional student after working for several years after college, so I feared that my academic skills would not be sharp enough to compete successfully with my younger law school classmates. Through this narrative, I attempt to normalize impostor syndrome. I share candidly that I have overcome much of my own self-doubt but occasionally still suffer from the syndrome. A piece of sound advice to students is to save notes and commendations that prove their peers and supervisors value them, so they can return to these words when self-doubt occurs.¹⁴⁶

3. Metacognition

Metacognition is “knowledge and regulation of [one’s] own thinking and learning processes.”¹⁴⁷ Put more simply, metacognition is “*thinking about thinking*.”¹⁴⁸ One extremely effective academic success director who works at one of the nine schools studied for this article identifies the three keys to ensuring law student success as contextualizing academic support lessons within doctrinal training, self-regulated learning, and metacognition. He teaches students what he calls the four-step study plan:¹⁴⁹ “Prepare for Class,” “Attend Class,” “Review Class/Cumulative Review,” and “Test

145. Ruth Gotian, *Feel Like A Fraud? How to Outsmart Imposter Syndrome*, FORBES (Dec. 8, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ruthgotian/2020/12/08/feel-like-a-fraud-how-to-outsmart-imposter-syndrome/>.

146. See Vanessa Van Edwards, *The 5 Types of Imposter Syndrome (And How to Overcome It!)*, SCIENCE OF PEOPLE, <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/imposter-syndrome/> (last visited Jan. 20, 2024).

147. JEANNE E. ORMROD, HUMAN LEARNING 415 (8th ed. 2020).

148. *Id.* at 379.

149. Louis N. Schulze, Jr., *Using Science to Build Better Learners: One School’s Successful Efforts to Raise its Bar Passage Rates in an Era of Decline*, 68 J. LEGAL EDUC. 230, 251 (2019).

Yourself/Objective Self-Assessment.”¹⁵⁰ Under each step, the academic success director provides detailed instructions for students.¹⁵¹ The benefit of applying his four-step plan is that, if done properly, students master the material as they progress through each semester rather than waiting to achieve thorough understanding when preparing for final exams at the end of the semester when limited study time simply will not permit it.¹⁵² When students use his method religiously, he has witnessed them soar “from sub-2.00 first-semester GPAs to 3.50 second-semester GPAs; from the bottom of the class to dean’s list.”¹⁵³

Several effective academic success directors interviewed have, simultaneous to their work with students, continued their graduate or post-graduate work to enrich their teaching and scholarship.¹⁵⁴ An assignment in a graduate psychology class taken by one of the directors required reading about a classic study from the 1960s conducted by two researchers: Thomas Hyde and James Jenkins.¹⁵⁵ Subjects of the researchers’ experiment heard a list of words read to them at a rate of one word every two seconds.¹⁵⁶ Researchers instructed the subjects in one group to count the number of times the letter “e” appeared in each word.¹⁵⁷ A second group was told to rate the pleasantness of each word.¹⁵⁸ The first group merely had to think about the spelling of each word, whereas the task assigned to the second group forced them to think about the meaning of each word.¹⁵⁹

One other significant aspect to Hyde and Jenkins’ experiment was that the word list consisted of twelve pairs of highly associated words,

150. *Id.*

151. *Id.*

152. *Id.*

153. *Id.* at 252.

154. *See, e.g.*, Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61; Zoom Interview with Russell McClain, *supra* note 61. Dean Welch earned a M.Ed. in Higher Education Leadership in 2018. She is now Dean of Students at the University of Chicago Law School. Dean McClain, an accomplished scholar who writes in the areas of academic success and stereotype threat, is currently working on a Ph.D.

155. The academic success director’s knowledge of the 1969 study came from reading an article by Daniel T. Willingham assigned in the Psychology of Learning class. Daniel T. Willingham, *Ask the Cognitive Scientist: Students Remember . . . What They Think About*, 27 AM. EDUCATOR 37 (Summer 2003). *See generally* Thomas S. Hyde and James J. Jenkins, *Differential Effects of Incidental Tasks on the Organization of Recall of a List of Highly Associated Words*, 82 J. EXPERIMENTAL PSYCH. 472 (1969) (the original study).

156. *See* Willingham, *supra* note 155, at 38.

157. *Id.*

158. *Id.*

159. *Id.*

like “doctor” and “nurse.”¹⁶⁰ Researchers did not reveal to the subjects of the experiment that they would be tested for recall of the words at the end of completing their task of counting the incidence of the letter “e” or rating pleasantness.¹⁶¹ After hearing the complete list, the subjects were in fact tested for recall.¹⁶² The group that had been forced to think about the meaning of the words not only remembered more words but also tended to remember the related words in pairs; specifically, if the subjects in this group remembered one of the related words, they usually remembered the other.¹⁶³ The group counting the letter “e” remembered fewer words and failed to remember the related words in pairs.¹⁶⁴ Hyde and Jenkins concluded that deeper processing of the words enabled better recall.¹⁶⁵ In short, the task requiring deeper processing tended to produce recollection of more words and pairs of related words.¹⁶⁶

Teaching 1Ls about the Hyde and Jenkins experiment can motivate their study. An overarching goal of effective academic success programs is for students to become invested in the proven study methods taught in classes and workshops, rather than looking for shortcuts.¹⁶⁷ The lesson from the Hyde and Jenkins experiment for law students is that deeper thinking about the cases they are assigned to read will better enable recall when needed. Producing their own case briefs enables recall when students find themselves under the pressure of the Socratic method. Creating one’s own outline rather than using a commercial outline or adopting an upperclassman’s outline enables recall of the principles of law and policy learned in each 1L class. Gradually producing an outline throughout the semester while incorporating intermittent review and self-testing sessions, as recommended in the four-step study plan discussed above, will enable better recollection so that students can master the material and ultimately maximize their GPAs.¹⁶⁸

4. Former Students as Presenters

An effective method shared by many successful academic success directors is inviting former students to visit a current class to discuss

160. *Id.*

161. *Id.*

162. *Id.*

163. *Id.* at 39.

164. *Id.*

165. *Id.*

166. *Id.*

167. *See Schulze, supra* note 149.

168. *Id.*

their own experiences of turning themselves around academically. One academic success director teaches a class during spring of the 1L year targeted to students whose first-semester grades have landed them in the lowest quintile of 1L GPAs.¹⁶⁹ The purpose of this class is to retain those students whose first semester performance has indicated they may be at risk of academic dismissal after completion of the first year of law school. This academic success director invites a successful graduate who had been placed in the spring class during a previous year because of low academic performance during the first semester of law school.¹⁷⁰ The message from the successful graduate to the students in this 1L spring class is clear: Do not allow yourself to be stigmatized by placement in this class. I ended up graduating with a solid GPA, and I am now quite successful in the practice of law. You can follow in my footsteps, but you must use the study methods being taught to you.

Most of the academic success directors interviewed for this article invite upper-year students to visit the academic success workshops or classes they conduct for current 1L students. The upper-year students often share their own experiences of having received disappointing marks the first semester of law school, but then turning a corner academically and vastly improving during the next semester and into their 2L and 3L years. The upper-year students discuss organized study groups, outline preparation, and weekly self-testing sessions. In my own experience working in academic success, I have enlisted the help of upper-year students who have been able to communicate extremely effective advice to 1L students. One memorable 2L, now a successful graduate, shared with 1Ls that she would talk openly about her academic experience to prospective employers as an illustration of her grit and resilience. She had struggled mightily early in law school but had turned herself around through a remarkable investment of time and energy. This had become her proud story, and she landed her dream job by telling it.

Even the best academic success programs in law schools are ineffective if students are not invested in the worth of the lessons. Legal educators can expound upon the value of well organized, thoughtfully crafted class notes and the importance of creating one's own course outline. However, hearing the value from a recent graduate or from upper-year students who turned their academic performance around is considerably more convincing. Any seasoned law professor can confirm that shortcuts in legal studies will shortchange a student's law school experience. Setting up

169. See Zoom Interview with Louis Schulze, *supra* note 42.

170. *Id.*

opportunities for 1Ls to learn from people who recently walked the same path as them can provide a necessary impact.

5. Hope-Based Retention Efforts

Research indicates that retention efforts by academic success programs should not be structured as remedial—they should be hope-based.¹⁷¹ Traditional, remedial models that address vulnerable students' academic deficiencies have been proven less effective than models that focus on students' assets and encourage hope for a future of academic and professional success, especially among first-generation students.¹⁷² This focus on hope is not the emotional, traditional view that inspires students to reach their goals.¹⁷³ Setbacks may derail students' efforts when the traditional view is applied.¹⁷⁴ Rather, hope-based retention methods focus on the deliberate process of articulating one's goals and developing a practical, viable path to achieve those goals.¹⁷⁵ Several schools' academic success directors indicated that their schools were moving in the direction of espousing a hope-based approach.¹⁷⁶ Interestingly, several directors indicated they have incorporated hope-based retention methods intuitively, without knowing of the research or the name of the initiative.¹⁷⁷

This hope-based perspective, which focuses on articulating one's goals and envisioning a path to reaching them, is well timed. As discussed, the ABA amended its accreditation Standard 303 on February 14, 2022, to require law schools to provide substantial opportunities for students to develop a professional identity during their studies.¹⁷⁸ The ABA also issued a new interpretation of Standard 303, which defines professional identity formation as a “focus on what

171. Cyrus R. Williams & S. Kent Butler, *A New Retention Variable: Hope and First-Generation College Students*, 11 VISTAS ONLINE 1, 9 (2010), https://www.counseling.org/resources/library/vistas/2010-v-online/Article_11.pdf.

172. *Id.*

173. *Id.*

174. *Id.*

175. *Id.*

176. *See supra* note 61.

177. *Id.*

178. AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, ABA STANDARDS AND RULES OF PROCEDURE FOR APPROVAL OF LAW SCHOOLS 2023–2024, Ch. 5, Std. 303, Interpretation 303-5 (2022-2023), https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/standards/2023-2024/23-24-standards-ch3.pdf.

it means to be a lawyer and the special obligations lawyers have to their clients and society.”¹⁷⁹

C. *Intentional Building of a Community*

The final section of this article discusses the most essential steps that legal educators and administrators can take to retain students, especially our most vulnerable students: build a strong sense of community, from the moment these students apply to our institutions and walk through our law school doors. Experts agree that building a sense of community is crucial to retaining students. In a study published in December 2019, researchers determined that students at four-year undergraduate institutions who reported feeling a part of the institutional community at the end of their first year of studies had better long-term outcomes than their peers who did not report the same sense of belonging early in their studies.¹⁸⁰ The students who reported a sense of belonging “seemed to be persisting more in their second and third years, as well as reporting lower levels of mental health issues.”¹⁸¹

LSSSE’s 2018 report, *Relationships Matter*, recognized that “relationships [with faculty, administrators, and classmates] serve as important ties to the law school and impact student satisfaction, sense of belonging, and academic and professional development.”¹⁸² Generally, law students report high overall satisfaction with their academic experience. The 2022 LSSSE survey of 13,000 law students¹⁸³ indicated little difference between first-generation and continuing-generation law students’ satisfaction with their “entire educational experience.”¹⁸⁴ Among first-generation students, 75.2% reported good or excellent satisfaction levels.¹⁸⁵ Among continuing-generation students, 78.5% reported good or excellent satisfaction levels.¹⁸⁶ There was also very little difference between part-time and full-time students who reported satisfaction with their overall

179. *Id.*

180. Elin Johnson, *Students’ Sense of Belonging Varies by Identity, Institution*, INSIDE HIGHER ED. (Jan. 2, 2020), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/01/02/minority-students-sense-place-higher-two-year-four-year-institutions>.

181. *Id.*

182. LSSSE, 2018 ANNUAL SURVEY RESULTS 5 (2018), <https://lssse.indiana.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Relationships-Matter.pdf>.

183. See *Annual Results*, *supra* note 19.

184. LSSSE *Public Reporting Tool*, *supra* note 20.

185. *Id.*

186. *Id.*

educational experience. Among part-time students, 78.3% reported good or excellent satisfaction levels.¹⁸⁷ Among full-time students, 77.5% reported good or excellent satisfaction levels.¹⁸⁸ However, when the satisfaction results are cross-referenced with racial or ethnic identification being the second criterion, the survey data appear less uniform. Whereas 80.6% of White students indicated good or excellent overall satisfaction, that number dipped to 76.2% for Hispanic or Latino students, and 73.6% for Black or African American students.¹⁸⁹

More troubling were the results of a 2020 report from LSSSE on diversity, inclusion, and community.¹⁹⁰ It was the first time LSSSE had administered a supplemental set of survey questions specifically asking students about diversity, inclusion, and their sense of belonging in law school.¹⁹¹ Of White students asked whether they felt “part of the community,” 31% strongly agreed.¹⁹² When the question was asked of Native American, Black, or African American students, the percentage who strongly agreed that they felt “part of the community” decreased to 21%.¹⁹³ Of first-generation students surveyed, only 23% strongly agreed that they felt part of their law school community, as opposed to 31% of continuing-generation students.¹⁹⁴

Intentional efforts to build a sense of community can make a difference in student satisfaction and change our students’ ability to connect with their peers and professors. In turn, these connections may be essential to our students’ ability to articulate their academic and professional goals, and ultimately to develop a practical, viable

187. *Id.*

188. *Id.*

189. *Id.* There appears to be somewhat similar disparity in students’ relationships with faculty, although the unevenness is slightly less pronounced than what was reflected in the survey results of overall satisfaction. In the LSSSE 2022 survey, students were asked to rate their relationships with faculty members. The question was formatted as a seven-point Likert-scale question, with one indicating that faculty were “unavailable, unhelpful, unsympathetic” and seven indicating that faculty were the opposite—“available, helpful, sympathetic.” *Id.* Of White students surveyed, 79.7% selected one of the top three categories of the Likert scale, indicating satisfaction with faculty relationships. *Id.* Of Hispanic or Latino students, 76.1% selected one of the top three categories, and of Black or African American students, 74.3% selected one of the top three categories. *Id.* Of first-generation students surveyed, 76.5% selected one of the top three categories as opposed to 78.2% of students who are not first-generation. *Id.*

190. Jakki Petzold, *Annual Results 2020 Diversity & Exclusion: Sense of Belonging*, LSSSE (Dec. 30, 2020), <https://lssse.indiana.edu/blog/annual-results-2020-diversity-exclusion-sense-of-belonging/>.

191. *Id.*

192. *Id.*

193. *Id.*

194. *Id.*

path to achieve those goals. Feeling part of a law school community might also ensure students will take advantage of available resources when a crisis arises that could otherwise threaten their continued studies.

1. Developing an Effective Mentor System

Almost all law schools studied for this article have some version of a student mentoring program. Not surprisingly, the best performing schools have well organized mentoring programs with deliberate structure and strong administrative guidance.¹⁹⁵ At one very effective law school where students of color are the majority rather than the minority, every incoming first-year student is immediately paired with an upper-year student tagged as “big sibling.”¹⁹⁶ This system works quite effectively as incoming students are assigned mentors to whom they can direct basic questions, hopefully avoiding the unnecessary intimidation of having to ask “stupid questions” to a professor or administrator during the early days of law school.¹⁹⁷ The system also intentionally builds relationships between students at different stages of their law school experience. This mentoring system affords upper-year students an opportunity, during their 2L, 3L, or 4L year, to “pay it forward” by providing an important service to an institution that has become their academic haven. Another important purpose of this mentoring program is to keep upper-year law students engaged with the administration and the institution.¹⁹⁸ This is significant in that LSSSE reports that law students have a general tendency to disengage progressively as they proceed through the years of their law school studies.¹⁹⁹

Several other successful schools have a version of mentoring in which upper-year students are hired as “peer mentors,” “dean’s fellows,” or “student counselors.”²⁰⁰ In these schools, there is a less

195. See *supra* note 61.

196. Zoom Interview with Garrett Halydier, *supra* note 61. The ABA’s definition of people of color includes “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.” See *supra* note 15.

197. *Id.*

198. *Id.*

199. See LSSSE, *supra* note 182, at 4 (noting that many relationships that start strong at the beginning of law school diminish or fade by the third year).

200. For example, Florida International University College of Law enjoys a strong sense of community. Zoom Interview with Louis Schulze, *supra* note 42. FIU Law conducts both a peer mentor program—partnering each 1L with an upper-year

distinct line between student services and academic support, so the “dean’s fellows” and “student counselors” are upper-year students with two responsibilities: giving academic skills guidance to 1Ls and guiding them through the first year with organized small-group meetings and planned social events. The upper-year participants are generally perceived as an elite group, worthy of emulating, so the hiring process can be quite selective.²⁰¹ Interestingly, upper-year students with top grades are not always the ones selected. Effective academic success professionals voiced that interpersonal skills are the most important consideration, with the second priority being an academic record reflecting an upward trajectory.²⁰² In other words, they look for upper-year students who may have struggled a bit at first but figured out how to succeed in law school by the end of their second semester.²⁰³ These academic success professionals also voiced that it is important to interview each applicant for the mentoring position personally to find upper-year students who express a sincere desire to help other students.²⁰⁴ Lastly, the mentors should look like the incoming class, reflecting diversity of gender, age, and race.²⁰⁵

Administrators at schools with these programs lauded the programs’ success. In fact, one very effective administrator explained that such a program could prove to be the school’s “magic bullet.”²⁰⁶ Administrators also voiced a desire to increase the number of upper-year participants so that each participant’s assigned 1L cohort could be as small as possible. In their current programs, upper-year participants are generally tasked with guiding ten to twenty first-year students; organizers thought reducing the number to fewer than ten would be optimal.²⁰⁷ One school administrator who has conducted a very effective program recommended paying a small stipend to each mentor, serving as an “operating budget” for the mentor to buy

mentor—and an alumni mentoring program—partnering each 1L with an alumnus. See *Peer Mentor Program*, FLA. INT’L UNIV. L., <https://law.fiu.edu/student-life/peer-mentor-program/> (last visited Jan. 20, 2024); *Alumni Mentoring Program*, FLA. INT’L UNIV. L. <https://law.fiu.edu/alumni/alumni-mentoring-program/> (last visited Jan. 20, 2024).

201. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61.

202. See, e.g., Zoom Interview with Noeleen Urmson, *supra* note 42 (discussing selection of student mentors).

203. *Id.*

204. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61.

205. Zoom Interview with Noeleen Urmson, *supra* note 42.

206. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61.

207. This wisdom was echoed by Dr. Alexis Martinez, who has formerly served as Dean of Students for three different A.B.A.-approved law schools, including one of the nine schools studied for this article. Telephone Interview with Alexis Martinez, *supra* note 61.

supplies and refreshments to provide 1Ls in mentoring sessions throughout the year.²⁰⁸

Interestingly, at one school where a highly successful administrator once served as director of academic success, when 1L students have an issue arise that might affect their ability to complete their law studies—for example, a family emergency, health-related issue, or financial crisis—their point of first contact is almost always their assigned mentor.²⁰⁹ The mentor, in turn, heads to the school's triage person—a services benefits coordinator. The mentors at this school receive essential training prior to the beginning of fall semester so that they recognize urgent issues and know whom to contact to assist their 1L mentees. They call this part of new mentor training “What Would You Do,” and pose scenarios that have arisen in the past when 1Ls reached out to their mentors with difficult issues.²¹⁰

2. External Community

At two successful law schools, when administrators were asked about intentional efforts to develop a sense of community within their student body, they emphasized that the key to their schools' strong sense of community lay within the development of a community much larger than the current law school population.²¹¹ At one of these two schools, the administrator reported that alumni of the school tend to stay within the geographic community of the law school throughout their careers, so these alumni remain active law school community members and are extremely supportive of current law students.²¹² They “take our students under their [alumni] wings,” and the incoming students' sense of belonging forms naturally.²¹³

When I asked the academic success director at the second law school about the school's intentional efforts to build a sense of community, he immediately interpreted my question to mean a sense of community throughout the state.²¹⁴ His law school is the only one in his state, and there are fewer than 5,000 active members of the state bar.²¹⁵ He shared that the law school is extremely purposeful

208. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61.

209. *Id.*

210. *Id.*

211. *Id.*

212. Zoom Interview with Brandi Welch, *supra* note 61.

213. *Id.*

214. Zoom Interview with Garrett Halydier, *supra* note 61.

215. See HAW. ST. BAR ASS'N, 2023 BAR STATISTICS & SUMMARIES 1 (2023), <https://hsba.org/images/hsba/Misc/2023%20Bar%20Statistics%20and%20Summaries.pdf>.

about building a sense of community because, when they welcome a 1L, they understand that person will be one of their brothers or sisters in their professional community someday—if they successfully cultivate a feeling of community from the outset.²¹⁶

3. Community-Building Advice from Alumni, Experienced Administrators, and One Master Community Builder

From interviews with administrators and academic success directors at the nine law schools studied for this article, as well as interviews with several alumni from one of the nine schools,²¹⁷ the following common threads of advice emerged.

a. Common Threads of Advice on Community Building

Meeting personally with students to build rapport is essential, and faculty involvement is key. At one successful school, a faculty member schedules a twenty-minute getting-to-know-you meeting with each student in his very large first-year classes. Although these meetings consume a tremendous amount of the professor's time, the students appreciate it greatly, and important connections are formed. The professor reported that although it sounds "cliché, [he] gets far more out of the conversations than the students. It is a privilege to learn about and through the diversity of their experiences."²¹⁸ Academic success directors at successful schools voiced the importance of one-on-one meetings with students.²¹⁹ In this way, they said, they are able to understand an individual student's strengths, struggles, and time constraints, enabling them to tailor a study plan to fit each individual.

216. Zoom Interview with Garrett Halydier, *supra* note 61.

217. The interviewed alumni are graduates of Georgia State University College of Law, the institution where the author earned her J.D. and taught until August 2023. The author's questions for the interviewed alumni focused on what her institution did well in its efforts to create a sense of belonging, and what the institution could have done better. *See supra* note 61.

218. Email from John Marshall, Professor, Ga. St. Univ. Coll. of L., to Leila Lawlor (Dec. 29, 2022) (on file with author). Professor Marshall shared that it will take three full months for him to schedule and complete the meetings with all his students in a very large first-year class. He said the twenty-minute meetings often last thirty minutes or longer, and they can be held in person, by phone, or by WebEx. He shared that about 20%-25% of the meetings require some kind of follow-up communication about "classes the students should consider, local attorneys to whom they should reach out, or law school programs the students should consider." For smaller, upper-year classes, Professor Marshall tries to host dinner at his home. *Id.*

219. *See supra* note 61.

Administrators also shared the importance of individual meetings between students and their academic advisors.²²⁰

Another common thread of guidance is that students need physical space to gather, and space should be available to students for informal gatherings without requiring them to preplan. This is especially important for part-time students and commuters who “have many other demands on their time and attention. These students, especially, need a safe space to take a deep breath and gather a bit of mental bandwidth as they transition from their work and family to their academic life.”²²¹

Involving practitioners in law school functions is important. Practitioners invited to guest speak in classes and serve on panels to address students make their mark on students.²²² Alumni suggested limiting the number of audience participants so that participating students can engage with the visiting practitioners.²²³ Some alumni recalled meeting with judges who visited their law school when they were students. They remembered the judges as especially engaging, interested in the students’ career goals, and willing to maintain follow-up email communications to assist and advise them in reaching their career goals.²²⁴

The alumni also stressed that law schools should invite alumni back to the school, not only for the school to develop and maintain a sense of involvement with the alumni, but also to model alumni involvement to current students.²²⁵ Several alumni lamented that they only receive invitations to large events like class reunions, while smaller events would be opportunities for them to connect with current students and perhaps create informal mentoring relationships.²²⁶ One alumna recognized that school-sponsored volunteer days can create wonderful opportunities for students to get to know alumni, other practitioners in the larger legal community, and faculty and staff who participate.²²⁷

There was a consensus among interviewees that law school orientation should be trimmed rather than lengthened, as students

220. *Id.*

221. CIA VERSCHULDEN, BANDWIDTH RECOVERY 98 (2023) (ebook).

222. Telephone Interview with Daniela Britton, alumna of Ga. St. Univ. Coll. of L., (Dec. 10, 2022) (notes on file with author); Telephone Interview with D’Andrea Diop, alumna of Ga. St. Univ. Coll. of L. (Dec. 10, 2022) (notes on file with author); Telephone Interview with Glenith Williams, alumna of Ga. St. U. Coll. of L. (Dec. 12, 2022) (notes on file with author).

223. Telephone Interview with Daniela Britton, *supra* note 222.

224. *Id.*; Telephone Interview with Glenith Williams, *supra* note 222.

225. Telephone Interview with Daniela Britton, *supra* note 222.

226. *Id.*; Telephone Interview with Glenith Williams, *supra* note 222.

227. Telephone Interview with Daniela Britton, *supra* note 222.

become overloaded with information. Some alumni suggested moving all discussions of student organizations to a time outside of orientation when students could get to know the leaders and missions of the organizations more thoroughly, thus allowing community to build naturally.²²⁸ Joining an affinity group can be important in developing a sense of belonging.²²⁹ Alumni also recognized that, as previously discussed in the wellness section of this article, state and local bar associations may be under-utilized resources. Students should be informed that student bar memberships are usually free, and attending bar association events is a wonderful networking opportunity to become acquainted with the greater legal community. A recently graduated alumna suggested increasing her alma mater's collaborative events with the state and local bar associations.²³⁰

b. Advice from a Master Community Builder

In January 2022, Judge Ana Maria Martinez became the first and only Latina to serve as a judge in a court of record in Georgia.²³¹ She builds community wherever life takes her, and where life has taken her is not a matter of happenstance. Judge Martinez did not speak English when she immigrated from Colombia to the United States as a twelve-year-old.²³² On her first day of school in the United States, a teacher assigned her to another preteen Latina, telling the other girl to help Martinez find her way to her next class.²³³ When the bell rang, the girl assigned to assist Martinez scooted out the classroom door, leaving Martinez all alone in an unfamiliar environment, having to fend for herself without a community of support. Martinez soon learned English, built her own network of friends and support, and learned to excel in school in the United States. After college, she worked in insurance for a few years and then applied to law school at

228. *Id.*; Telephone Interview with Glenith Williams, *supra* note 222.

229. Telephone Interview with D'Andrea Diop, *supra* note 222.

230. Telephone Interview with Daniela Britton, *supra* note 222.

231. Ana Maria Martinez, Judge, State Ct. of DeKalb Cnty., Ga., Address at Georgia State University College of Law Graduation Ceremony (Dec. 16, 2022) [hereinafter Judge Ana Maria Martinez Address].

Interestingly, Judge Martinez was appointed to the judgeship when her boss, Judge Dax Lopez, retired. She formerly served as his law clerk. Kathryn Hayes Tucker, *Staff Attorney to Replace Boss on the Bench, Making History as Ga.'s First Latina Trial Judge*, DAILY REP. ONLINE (Jan. 13, 2022), https://www.law.com/dailyreportonline/2022/01/13/staff-attorney-to-replace-boss-on-the-bench-making-history-as-ga-s-first-latina-trial-judge/?cmp_share.

232. *Meet Ana Maria Martinez of Georgia Latino Law Foundation*, VOYAGEATL (Mar. 27, 2019), <http://voyageatl.com/interview/meet-ana-maria-martinez-of-georgia-latino-law-foundation/>.

233. Judge Ana Maria Martinez Address, *supra* note 231.

Georgia State University,²³⁴ one of the nine schools studied for this article.

Law school presented new challenges and opportunities. Martinez made an important connection on her first day of law school orientation when she was put in a small group discussion session led by the professor who would soon teach her tort law.²³⁵ Martinez was excited to be the first student called on in this professor's class the following week, but nerves prevented her from performing as well as she had hoped to perform, under the pressure of the Socratic method. Nevertheless, the professor recognized Martinez's efforts, and an important bond was formed.²³⁶ The professor would soon become Martinez's champion throughout law school, but perhaps more importantly, the professor had just taught Martinez the importance of building a connection with someone who could guide her throughout law school as she formed her own professional identity.²³⁷ It was an important lesson in community building.

Just a few years after her 2009 law school graduation, Martinez was elected president of the Georgia Hispanic Bar Association.²³⁸ While serving as president, she "gained a deeper understanding of the challenges [Hispanic and Latino lawyers] needed to overcome as a community, both to succeed as lawyers in this state and to make substantial gains in terms of diversity in the bar and the judiciary."²³⁹ Martinez was already an important member of the Georgia community of Latino lawyers and judges, but she perceived a need for additional, intentional community building. Specifically, she perceived a need to support Latino law students and to create a pathway to increase the number of Latino lawyers and judges in Georgia.²⁴⁰

Martinez enlisted the help of several enthusiastic members of the Latino legal community, and the Georgia Latino Law Foundation was

234. *Meet Ana Maria Martinez of Georgia Latino Law Foundation*, *supra* note 232.

235. This professor was Wendy F. Hensel, who was teaching Torts when Martinez was a 1L at Georgia State University College of Law. Telephone Interview with Judge Ana Maria Martinez, State Ct. of DeKalb Cnty., Ga. (Dec. 28, 2022) (notes on file with author). Hensel has since gone on to have a meteoric career in academia, serving as dean at Georgia State University College of Law and provost of the university. She is now Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost at the City University of New York. *Wendy F. Hensel, Administrative Profile*, CUNY, <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/administrators/wendy-hensel/> (last visited Oct. 23, 2023).

236. Telephone Interview with Judge Ana Maria Martinez, *supra* note 235.

237. *Id.*

238. *Id.*

239. *Meet Ana Maria Martinez of Georgia Latino Law Foundation*, *supra* note 232.

240. Telephone Interview with Judge Ana Maria Martinez, *supra* note 235.

soon born.²⁴¹ Its mission is “to increase diversity in the legal profession by supporting the Latino legal community pipeline. In addition, [the GLLF] seek[s] to increase the Latino community’s access to the legal system by educating and empowering Latinos to join the legal profession.”²⁴² Martinez’s community expanded to include law students throughout the state who depended on her and her GLLF colleagues for support and advice. Her newly expanded community would also soon include Georgia high school students looking for guidance on college applications and finding a path to becoming a lawyer. In Martinez’s own words, she “started the organization to build connections, to help law students, mostly first-generation, get summer opportunities and build their resumes.”²⁴³ Martinez tells every law student she advises to meet one-on-one with law faculty.²⁴⁴ She tells them not to wait to visit office hours until a question or a problem arises, but rather to visit immediately, just to become acquainted—or put another way, to build their own community.²⁴⁵

Helping law students build connections was the first of several of GLLF’s initiatives. The second was “Law Day,” an annual event for all incoming and current Latino law students in Georgia, held each August just prior to the beginning of classes at law schools around the state.²⁴⁶ The third initiative was born in 2020, again because Martinez perceived a need. Martinez was troubled when she realized law students around the state were losing their hard-earned summer internships because of COVID.²⁴⁷ She organized the 2020 Virtual Judicial Internship Program, enabling students to work virtually for judges around the state.²⁴⁸ In developing the virtual internship program, Martinez expanded her community to include many members of the judiciary, students from all four Georgia law schools, and grateful faculty and administrators from all four Georgia law schools.²⁴⁹ Because of annual requests from judges and law schools, the virtual program has continued and now operates as a hybrid

241. *Id.*

242. *About the GLLF*, GA. LATINO L. FOUND., https://www.galatinolawfoundation.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=420361&module_id=405887 (last visited Oct. 23, 2023).

243. Telephone Interview with Judge Ana Maria Martinez, *supra* note 235.

244. *Id.*

245. *Id.*

246. *Id.*

247. *Id.*

248. *2020 Virtual Judicial Internship Program*, GEORGIA LATINO LAW FOUNDATION, https://www.galatinolawfoundation.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=420361&module_id=406037 (last visited Oct. 23, 2023).

249. Telephone Interview with Judge Ana Maria Martinez, *supra* note 235.

internship program.²⁵⁰ One of the unexpected advantages of the internship program is that summer interns are now available to judges outside metropolitan Atlanta who previously did not have access to summer interns—a win for the judges and a win for the interns.²⁵¹ Additionally, as a fourth initiative, GLLF runs the “Leadership Academy and Mentoring Program, . . . a year-long series of leadership development workshops so law students can both strengthen their leadership skills and find their place as leaders in the legal community and the community at large.”²⁵² Again, the impetus is helping others build community.

Martinez’s theory of building community is straightforward but multi-faceted. First, build one-on-one connections like the one she formed with a law professor on her first day of law school orientation. Champions can help you succeed. In turn, you can champion others, helping them succeed. Second, perceive needs for change and be courageous enough to act upon those perceived needs. Third, expand your network intentionally to aid your efforts. Last, do not merely delegate tasks. Instead, create leaders. Look for people who express passion for your efforts. Allow them to shadow your work for a year. In the second year, share the work with the budding leader. In the third year, allow the budding leader to take control but always remain supportive and available.

The lessons from Judge Ana Maria Martinez for law school administrators, staff, and faculty are simple: (1) connect one-on-one with students; (2) look for needs that demand attention, and creatively—even courageously—discern ways to meet those needs; and (3) train leaders. You will build confidence, a sense of purpose, and a feeling of belonging for your students. You will build a stronger community.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article first compared attrition rates of nine similarly situated public law schools, all of which operate both part-time and full-time programs, generally enjoy above-average diversity in their incoming classes and have somewhat similar *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. The nine schools also have reported similar median LSAT scores and similar median undergraduate GPAs of recent incoming classes. The nine schools studied for this article vary in overall attrition rates and in their attrition rates for students of color;

^{250.} *Id.*

^{251.} *Id.*

^{252.} *Meet Ana Maria Martinez of Georgia Latino Law Foundation, supra* note 232.

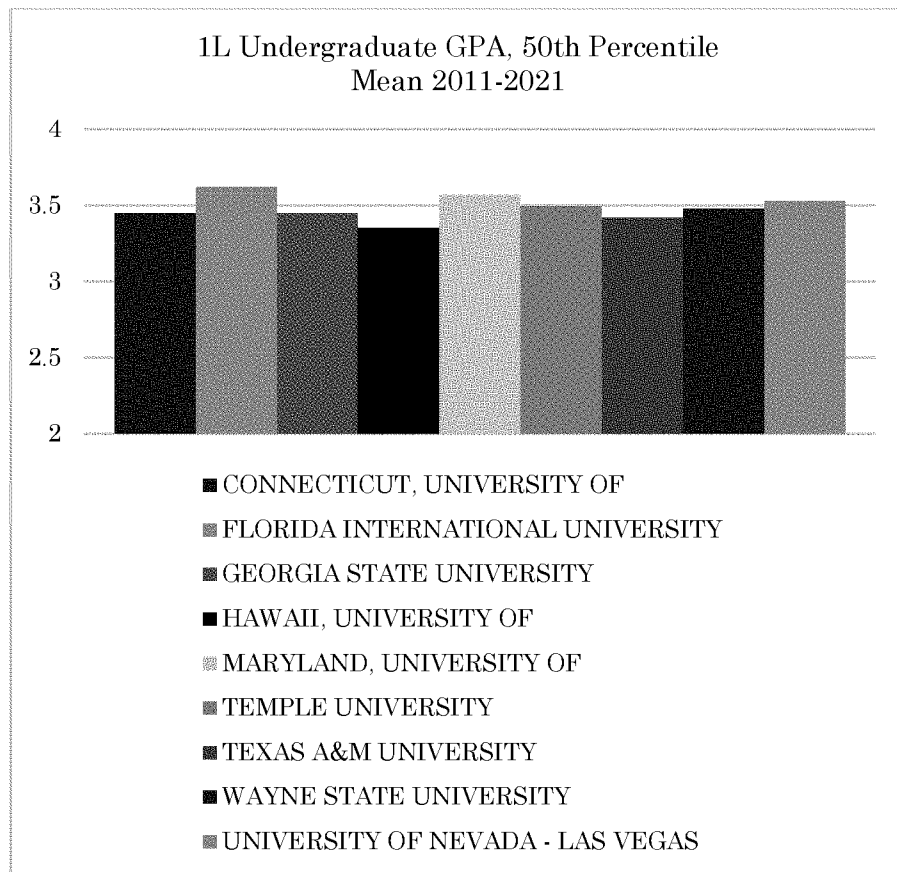
however, taken as a whole, these schools show a downward trend in attrition over the last eleven years. This downward trend reflects a larger trend among ABA-accredited law schools nationwide, particularly among schools with median LSAT scores equal to or higher than the median scores of the nine schools studied, and markedly since 2017.

Law school applications have increased within the last few years, which has enabled law school admissions teams to be more selective. Because of this, incoming classes in these nine schools have generally shown an upward trend in median LSAT scores and undergraduate GPAs, which may partially explain the simultaneous decrease in attrition; however, the reduction in attrition can also be tied to increased, intentional efforts to retain students. These efforts have focused mostly on 1L students, as most law school attrition occurs at the end of the 1L academic year.

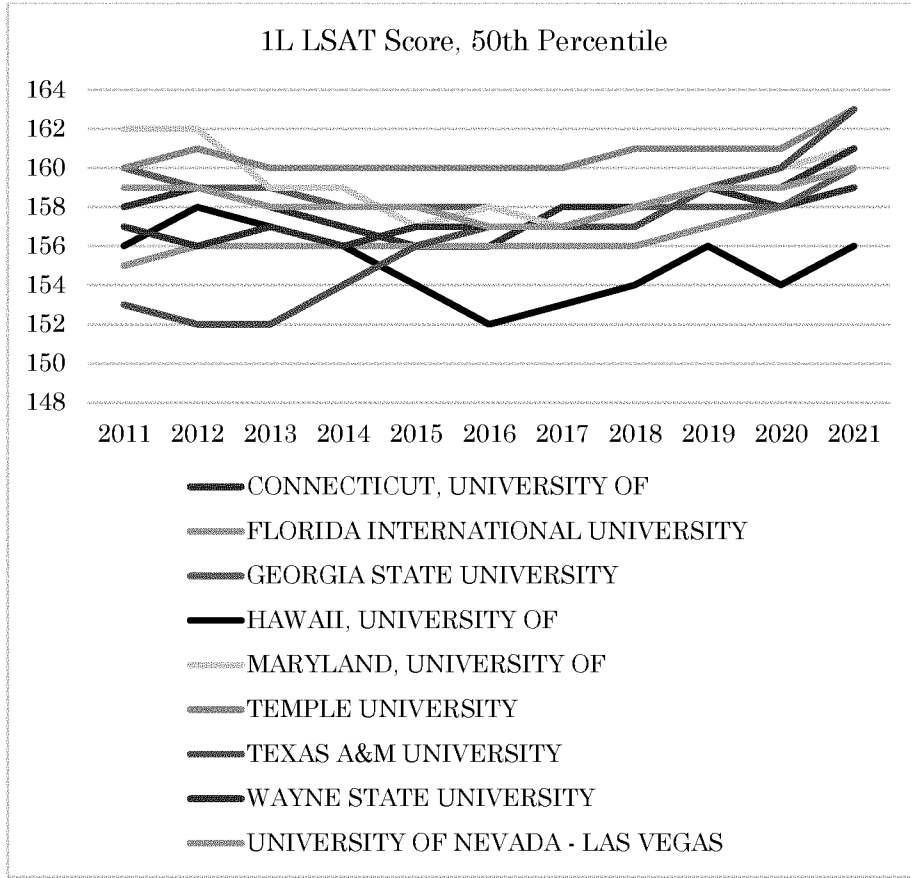
This article discusses the content of interviews conducted with the nine schools' academic success directors, other law school administrators, faculty, and alumni in determining effective retention methods. These effective methods can be divided into three general categories: (1) providing friendly, readily available, visible assistance to students with pending needs; (2) incorporating specific, important lessons in academic success programming; and (3) intentionally building an immediate, caring community. Within each of these categories, specific approaches and procedures were identified. A practical, hands-on model of best practices was developed from this study of successful institutions and from the guidance of experienced law school educators, administrators, and alumni.

APPENDIX

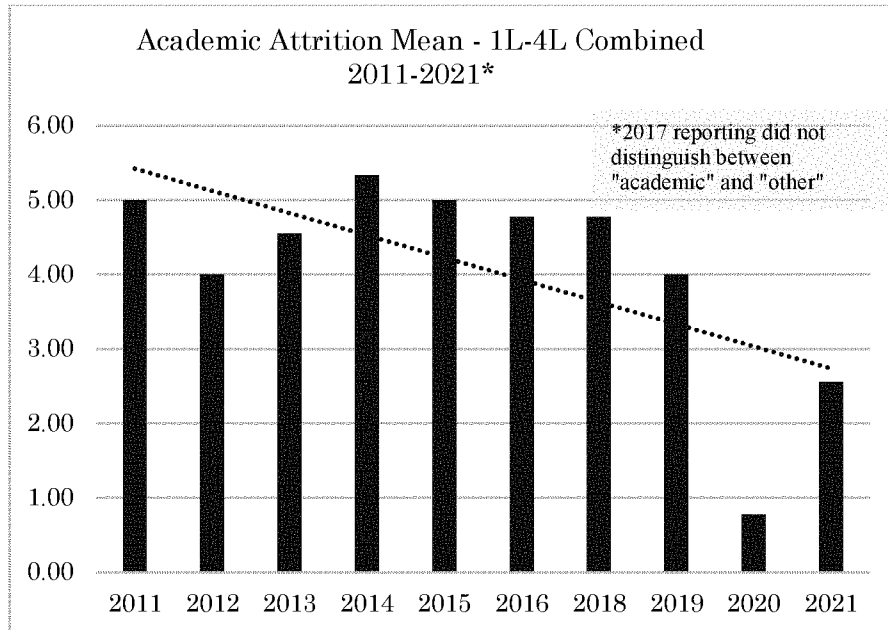
GRAPH 1



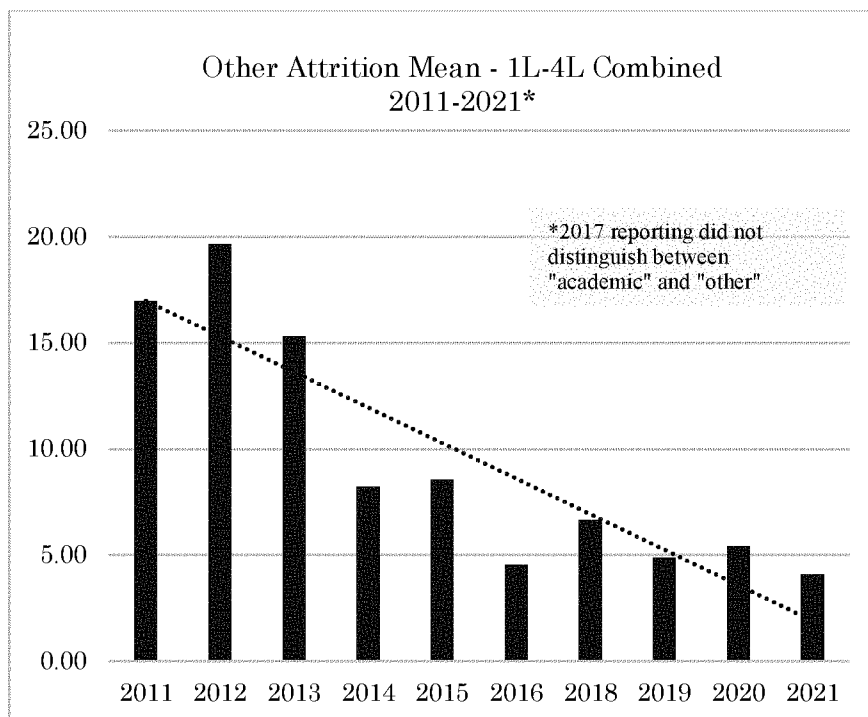
GRAPH 2



GRAPH 4



GRAPH 5



GRAPH 6

