

Fall 2023

Belonging Matters: One School's Strategy for Fostering Community and Confidence Among Students from Historically Excluded Groups

Alexi Freeman
University of Denver Sturm College of Law

Caley Carlson
University of Denver Sturm College of Law

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/njlsp>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alexi Freeman and Caley Carlson, *Belonging Matters: One School's Strategy for Fostering Community and Confidence Among Students from Historically Excluded Groups*, 19 NW. J. L. & Soc. POLY. 76 (2023).
<https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/njlsp/vol19/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern Pritzker School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Northwestern Journal of Law & Social Policy by an authorized editor of Northwestern Pritzker School of Law Scholarly Commons.

Belonging Matters: One School’s Strategy for Fostering Community and Confidence Among Students from Historically Excluded Groups

Alexi Freeman*
Caley Carlson†

ABSTRACT

For generations, law students from historically excluded and underrepresented groups—including but not limited to students of color, students with disabilities, gender diverse and gender non-conforming students, and students who identify as LGBTQIA+—have been expected to navigate their legal educations “successfully” despite the many challenges they encounter. This article describes Denver Law Ascent, a program at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law that is designed to provide critical supports to such students and cultivate a sense of belonging early on as well as throughout students’ educational journeys. Drawing from evidence-based research and best practices, Denver Law Ascent is one school’s intentional approach to fostering belonging and preparing students for academic success.

Keywords: diversity, legal education, belonging

* Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Professor of the Practice, University of Denver Sturm College of Law. JD, Harvard Law School; BA, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Freeman expresses gratitude to Caley for her tireless work and to Dean Jessica Boynton who has been a critical partner and initiator of Ascent. Gratitude also to Professor Diane Kraft and Professor Roberto Corrada for their efforts with Ascent.

† J.D. Candidate, 2024, at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law.

INTRODUCTION

Opening a law school acceptance letter is one of the proudest moments of many students' legal careers. After countless hours studying for the Law School Admission Test, gathering recommendation letters, and drafting and re-drafting a personal statement, the acceptance letter justifies and validates students' efforts. By the time the onset of law school arrives, student excitement is typically coupled with some nerves. Nevertheless, they arrive at their respective law buildings, hoisting backpacks full of heavy casebooks, ready to meet their classmates and professors and take the exciting plunge into law school.

For some students, that excitement quickly dwindles. As they peer into the sea of unknown faces, they may notice how few mirror their own. Others read the names of students in their section and discover that only a handful seem to share a cultural or ethnic identity. Some students review nametags, searching for peers with pronouns akin to their own, while others wonder if any classmates share the same neurodivergent identities. When students encounter these dynamics, feelings of isolation, frustration, and anxiety often arise. Before classes even begin, students may feel as if they are swimming upstream without a paddle in sight, wondering how they will ever survive without a support system.

In recognition of these circumstances, the University of Denver Sturm College of Law launched Denver Law Ascent, an initiative focused on helping students to not only survive, but thrive, in their legal education. While no community is monolithic and students experience different reactions to the starkly homogenous populations of America's law schools, students from historically excluded groups (HEGs)¹ typically face similar realities upon matriculation to almost any law school in the country. What is particularly troubling, is that far too many law schools seem to accept homogeneity as the reality, failing to proactively engage in efforts that might ease this transition and better prepare students. While programming cannot eradicate generations of exclusion in legal education or change statistics overnight, this article contends that proactive efforts are critical to fostering belonging and to offering much needed support to students.

In Part I of this article, we will provide an overview of the realities and challenges that students from HEGs often face in law school. In Part II, we will discuss how Denver Law Ascent is aligned with research-based strategies and tactics that help students navigate through those challenges, promote academic skill development, foster relationships, and acclimate students before school begins. In Parts III and IV, we will share preliminary data around Ascent, including an author testimonial. Finally, in Part V, we will highlight two components that have been critical for program implementation.

¹ We use the term HEGs to acknowledge the long-lasting effects of a lack of access to, and underrepresentation in, legal education as well as effects from structural oppression. Despite using the word historically, we acknowledge that such students continue to face such challenges. As documented by the research cited in this article, students from HEGs typically include students of color, disabled students, students who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and students who are gender-diverse. Sometimes, the studies or data we refer to utilize different terms, including terms like underrepresented minorities or diverse. We include those terms in these situations.

I. CHALLENGES FACING STUDENTS FROM HEGS

It is no secret that law schools, and the legal field generally, significantly lack diversity,² despite some recent progress. In 1971, only 12% of first-year law students were women and 7.4% were people of color.³ By 2022, 36.6% of first-year law students identified as students of color and 55% of incoming students identified as women; before that, “the majority of law school matriculants were men.”⁴ Additionally, law schools are seeing more students with disabilities and students that outwardly identify as LGBT+. For example, in 2021, 5.5% of law school graduates self-reported having a disability, up from 2.7% in 2009.⁵ In 2022, 0.6% of the graduating class identified as transgender, gender nonbinary, or genderqueer/gender fluid and 14.0% identified as LGBT+.⁶ Relatedly, the National Association for Law Placement reported that “the 2021 summer associate class was the most diverse ever measured.”⁷ Compared to the previous year’s summer associates,

² The Oxford Learner’s dictionary defines diversity as “a range of many people or things that are very different from each other” as well as “the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, religions, etc.” *Diversity*, OXFORD LEARNER’S DICTIONARY, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/diversity> [https://perma.cc/2MTY-HKYF] (last visited Feb. 11, 2023).

³ Cruz Reynoso & Cory Amron, *Diversity in Legal Education: A Broader View, a Deeper Commitment*, 52 J. LEGAL EDUC. 491, 493 (2003).

⁴ Susan L. Krinsky, *Incoming Class of 2022: A Major Advance in Diversity, More Work to Do*, LAW SCH. ADMISSIONS COUNCIL (Dec. 20, 2022), <https://www.lsac.org/blog/incoming-class-2022-major-advance-diversity-more-work-to-do#msdyntrid=6c4qItQyNXHlm3N--Zz3Harm9N6xmnu8ZKErEG36joY> [https://perma.cc/Z9EA-HH7J]. The data used relies on the ABA’s “Standard 509” report. *Statistics*, ABA SECTION OF LEGAL EDUC. AND ADMISSIONS TO THE BAR [hereinafter ABA Statistics], https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/statistics/ [https://perma.cc/XUX9-RPDP] (follow “2022 1L Enrollment by Gender & Race/Ethnicity” hyperlink) (last visited Oct. 8, 2023). The ABA does not define what “minority” means. However, based on the calculations, any group other than “white men,” “white women,” and “white other” are counted in the tabulations for the minority section (leaving Hispanic women/men/other, American Indian men/women/other, Asian men/women/other, Black or African American men/women/other, Native Hawaiian Pacific Island men/women/other and two or more races men/women/other).

⁵ NALP Bulletin+, *Employment Outcomes for Graduates with Disabilities*, NAT’L ASS’N FOR L. PLACEMENT (Dec. 2022), <https://www.nalp.org/1222research> [https://perma.cc/DFK3-WM2R]. These numbers reflect NALP’s Employment Report and Salary Survey but are likely underreported. Data on students with disabilities are not tracked in the same way gender/race/ethnicity are tracked at admission. For example, students can self-report race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity at the time of application. See, e.g., *Racially/Ethnically Diverse Applicants*, LAW SCH. ADMISSIONS COUNCIL, <https://www.lsac.org/discover-law/diversity-law-school/raciallyethnically-diverse-applicants> [https://perma.cc/V7H5-LWCF] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023) (discussing the option to self-report race); *LGBTQ+ & Law School*, LAW SCH. ADMISSIONS COUNCIL, <https://www.lsac.org/discover-law/diversity-law-school/lgbtq-law-school> [https://perma.cc/AM3C-G7J6] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023) (discussing how some people will mention their identities and others will not). Instead, internally, schools tend to look at the number of students who request accommodations. See *Why It All Matters*, NAT’L DISABLED L. STUDENTS ASS’N (May 26, 2020), <https://ndlsa.org/2020/05/26/why-it-all-matters/> [https://perma.cc/NN88-TPB9].

⁶ Krinsky, *supra* note 4. This data is from a new study published by LSAC as data on LGBT+ students has not historically been tracked.

⁷ NALP Bulletin+, *Changes in the Racial/Ethnic Representation of Summer Associates Since the Great Recession*, NAT’L ASS’N FOR L. PLACEMENT (May 2022), <https://www.nalp.org/0522research> [https://perma.cc/FT45-MQ8M].

the representation of summer associates of color increased overall by nearly 5% and representation of women of color by 3%.⁸

Although these numbers demonstrate progress, the majority of students in almost all law schools across the country identify as white.⁹ Denver Law is no exception, with only 30% (its highest percentage ever) of students matriculating in Fall 2022 identifying as students of color.¹⁰ Across the country, despite fifty years of progress and increased focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in law schools,¹¹ students from historically excluded communities continue to “face significant barriers to academic achievement in law school, which ultimately impacts their academic and professional success.”¹² For example, in 2016 white students made up 62% of 1L enrollment and 49% of 1L non-transfer attrition.¹³ In contrast, minority students¹⁴ made up 30% of enrollment but 44% of the attrition rate.¹⁵ In addition to the normal stressors of law school causing “law students [to] suffer elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, all of which can depress performance,” students from HEGs face challenges such as (1) lack of belonging and (2) lack of information and support compared to their counterparts.¹⁶

⁸ *Id.* Although representation of summer associates of color has increased, uneven growth by race/ethnicity exists.

Longer-term trends since the height of the Great Recession in 2009 also show uneven growth by race/ethnicity. Overall, Black summer associates experienced the smallest rise in representation, increasing by 3.7 percentage points from 7.41% to 11.14% of all summer associates. That compares to a 4.7-percentage-point gain for Latinx summer associates and a 5.4-percentage-point gain for Asian summer associates during this same time period. For women specifically, Latinx women had the smallest improvement of 2.4 percentage points, compared to increases of 3.0 percentage points for Black women and 4.4 percentage points for Asian women.

Id.

⁹ See Meera E. Deo, Walter R. Allen, A.T. Panter, Charles Daye, & Linda Wightman, *Struggles & Support: Diversity in U.S. Law Schools*, 23 NAT'L BLACK L.J. 71, 78 (2009) (reporting the racial distribution of first-year students consulted in a 2004 survey).

¹⁰ *Perspective Student Information: Fall 2022 Entering Class Profile*, UNIV. OF DENV. STURM COLL. OF L. <https://www.law.du.edu/admissions/jd-admissions/prospective-student-information> [<https://perma.cc/64V4-694G>] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023). Students of color includes students who identify as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, Native American, Native Hawaiian or Alaskan Native, and Asian.

¹¹ See BELINDA DANTLEY & LISA SONIA TAYLOR, *THE BOTTOM LINE: LAW SCHOOLS NEED TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT THE WORK OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION* 5, 8 <https://taxprof.typepad.com/files/the-bottom-line.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/LP5B-HNZ4>] (last visited Oct. 8, 2023) (noting that 73% of the people surveyed had been in their positions for less than 3 years, and 69% believed that their position is the first of its kind in their law school. Additionally, demonstrating that 91.5% of all ABA-accredited law schools have issued solidarity or antiracist statements as reported on the AALS Dean's Antiracist Clearinghouse project).

¹² Amy H. Soled & Barbara Hoffman, *Building Bridges: How Law Schools Can Better Prepare Students from Historically Underserved Communities to Excel in Law School*, 69 J. LEGAL EDUC. 268, 269 (2020).

¹³ Kylie Thomas & Tiffane Cochran, *ABA Data Reveals Minority Students Disproportionately Represented in Attrition Figures*, ACCESSLEX (Sept. 18, 2018), <https://www.accesslex.org/xblog/aba-data-reveals-minority-students-are-disproportionately-represented-in-attrition-figures> [<https://perma.cc/NR57-UDCZ>].

¹⁴ Minority is used in this article to include those identifying as American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian, and two or more races.

¹⁵ Thomas & Cochran, *supra* note 13.

¹⁶ Victor D. Quintanilla & Sam Erman, *Mindsets in Legal Education*, 69 J. LEGAL EDUC. 412, 413, 434 (2020). The article specifically refers to “racial-ethnic minority and first-generation students,” leaving students who do not identify in those groups as “counterparts.” See also *Survey of Law Student Well-Being*, AM. BAR ASS'N (Mar. 30, 2020), https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/research/law_stu

A. *Lack of Belonging*

Belonging or “belongingness” relates to the “feeling that ‘one matters, is valued or appreciated by others.’”¹⁷ Studies show that students with a sense of belonging in school environments tend to have “positive emotions, feelings of self-worth and social acceptance”, while students who lack a sense of belonging “describe feelings of alienation, rejection, social isolation, loneliness, disengagement, and marginalization.”¹⁸ Because of the disappointing reality of law school compositions, law students from HEGs are often the only students, or one of a few, within their identity group at school. On its own, physical isolation from similar groups of people creates a feeling of lack of belonging and alienation. These feelings are often compounded by fears or perceptions of “bias, discrimination, or unfair treatment, experiences of not being taken seriously in class, worrying that the professor underestimates their intelligence, and indicating that others would be surprised to see them succeed.”¹⁹ A recent study shared that 50% of women of color law students surveyed report they “frequently” feel included or welcomed by their law school peers and 36% of women of color that reported they only “sometimes” feel that way.²⁰ A significantly higher percentage of white men (66%) and white women (62%) report they “frequently” feel included and/or welcomed by their law school peers.²¹ Another report shared that 69.7% of LGBTQ graduate students felt a sense of belonging at their school as opposed to 80.1% of non-LGBTQ students.²²

Furthermore, students from underrepresented backgrounds may suffer from a sense of lack of belonging due to the concept of “stereotype (or identity) threat.” Stereotype threat is the fear of confirming negative stereotypes, which can “impede learning and performance among law students, especially those from underrepresented and negatively stereotyped groups.”²³ Stereotype threat appears in many ways in a law school setting. For example, students may not attend office hours or study sessions organized by teaching assistants for fear of confirming stereotypes associated with their race, gender, or disability. Others may not want to raise their hand in class to ask a question to avoid “sounding stupid”

dent_survey/ [https://perma.cc/UN2W-PN92]; Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe, & Katherine M. Bender, *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. LEGAL EDUC. 116, 119 (2016).

¹⁷ Emily Grant, *Belongingness*, 54 CONN. L. REV. ONLINE 1, 4 (2022) (quoting TERRELL L. STRAYHORN, COLLEGE STUDENT’S SENSE OF BELONGING 36 (2d ed. 2019)).

¹⁸ UNIV. COLL. OF LONDON, BAME AWARDDING GAP PROJECT: STAFF TOOLKIT 2020, at 30 (2020) (citing Laura D. Pittman & Adeya Richmond, *Academic and Psychological Functioning in Late Adolescence: The Importance of School Belonging*, 75 J. EXPERIMENTAL EDUC. 270 (2010)), https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/bame_awarding_gap_toolkit_2020.pdf [https://perma.cc/SL75-2VRF]; Grant, *supra* note 17, at 7.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Bodamer, *Do I Belong Here? Examining Perceived Experiences of Bias, Stereotype Concerns, and Sense of Belonging in U.S. Law Schools*, 69 J. LEGAL EDUC. 455, 477 (2020).

²⁰ THE NALP FOUND. FOR L. CAREER RSCH. AND EDUC. & CTR. FOR WOMEN IN L., WOMEN OF COLOR: A STUDY OF LAW SCH. EXPERIENCES 50 (2020) [hereinafter WOMEN OF COLOR IN LAW SCHOOL], <https://utexas.app.box.com/s/kvn7dezec99khii6ely9cve368q4gj9o> [https://perma.cc/D2H6-4VG3].

²¹ *Id.*

²² KATHRYN K. O’NEILL, KERITH J. CONRON, ABBIE E. GOLDBERG, & RUBEEN GUARDADO, EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ PEOPLE IN FOUR-YEAR COLLS. AND GRADUATE PROGRAMS 30 (2022), <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGBTQ-College-Grad-School-May-2022.pdf> [https://perma.cc/7RB4-NA5L].

²³ Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 16, at 434.

or for fear of confirming fellow students' perceptions that they were admitted only because of affirmative action. Stereotype threat can also prevent students from getting the accommodations they may need. According to a 1L at New York Law School, "[t]here is a stigma that a person in a wheelchair is slow or not capable," which creates a "struggle between trying to fit in to an incredibly competitive environment and trying to get the accommodations they need while fighting the constant worry that they will be viewed as less capable."²⁴ Anecdotally, some students with neurodivergent identities deal with this as well—even though their disability status is invisible, they may not want to share their status or seek out accommodations because they do not want faculty, staff, or students to think they are getting a "handout," even though their accommodation is necessary.

Ultimately, a lack of belonging and stereotype threat "can cause distraction and rumination, provoke anxiety, diminish academic performance, impede development of relationships with peers and faculty, and diminish motivation and engagement."²⁵ These feelings "generate a vicious cycle of anxiety, nonbelonging, and stereotype threat. The result can be lower academic performance and avoidance of the very practices that could break this recursive process."²⁶

Students from HEGs often also deal with "imposter syndrome." Imposter syndrome is "an internal feeling of distrust in one's own abilities and accomplishments along with the fear of being exposed as an 'imposter,' even in the face of demonstrated success and competence."²⁷ Studies show that "women suffer from the imposter syndrome more commonly than do men, first-generation college students experience it more often than do multigeneration college students, and students of color are particularly susceptible to feeling like imposters."²⁸ While this can affect any student, we have seen some students—particularly students from HEGs—discuss experiencing imposter syndrome at a far greater frequency. Whether they have trouble believing they "deserve" to be in law school, think that a higher grade in class was the result of pure luck versus a result of their abilities and hard work, or they feel nervous about being unable to make conversation at a networking event, students experience many worries and doubts. The law school environment can magnify existing imposter syndrome due to its competitive nature and the "absence of a collaborative culture with communal affordances and opportunities."²⁹

Feelings of imposter syndrome can be exacerbated by poor or troubling interactions with peers or faculty. A report demonstrated that a significantly higher percentage of women of color (52%) reported experiencing "comments by or interactions with other students and/or faculty in class that negatively impact their academic performance than white men (21%)."³⁰ This same study found that over one-half of "women of color (54%) and men of color (57%) who report they hear comments or experience interactions in class

²⁴ Christine Charnosky, *'I Felt Afraid to Ask': Law Students With Disabilities Are Often Torn Between Trying to Fit In and Seeking Accommodations*, LAW.COM (Apr. 26, 2022), <https://www.law.com/2022/04/26/i-felt-afraid-to-ask-law-students-with-disabilities-are-often-torn-between-trying-fit-in-and-seeking-accommodations/> [https://perma.cc/G2VF-STKU].

²⁵ Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 16, at 424.

²⁶ *Id.* at 423.

²⁷ Janet Thompson Jackson, *Wellness and Law: Reforming Legal Education to Support Student Wellness*, 65 HOW. L.J. 45, 79 (2021).

²⁸ Soled & Hoffman, *supra* note 12, at 286–87.

²⁹ Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 16, at 428.

³⁰ WOMEN OF COLOR IN LAW SCHOOL, *supra* note 20, at 47.

that negatively impact their classroom learning also report it affects social relationships outside of class,” while only 46% of white women and 43% of white men report the same impact.³¹ Almost two-thirds (63%) of women of color report their law school peers “frequently” or “sometimes” underestimate their ability for academic success.³² Relatedly, while “36% of women of color report they ‘frequently’ feel comfortable raising their hand to ask questions in class, 56% of white men and 46% of men of color report feeling the same level of comfort.”³³

More specifically, a recent study included multiple examples of how peers’ actions and perceptions negatively influenced students of color’s performance in law school at times:

Some white law school students aired racist perspectives about minority law school students in- and outside of class or openly declared that “some opportunities were unfair simply because they strongly encouraged minorities to apply” When study participants heard these comments or challenged white peers’ racially-biased perceptions, they reported feeling alienated, offended, singled out, prejudged, or unwelcome, which, in turn, hijacked their attention from course content, Socratic-method lectures, case readings, or other academic activities (e.g., “learning the CREAC method” [Linwood]) that are vital for success in law school. In extreme cases, some law school students of color avoided working with other (mostly white) students, failed to show up to work on “legal teams assigned by the professor” (Hector), or outright argued with the fellow student or professor in the moment, which “always runs the risk of ending very badly...where you fail or get labeled as the mad, angry Black *itch or whatever they come up with next” (Vanessa).³⁴

Feelings of isolation can also be exacerbated by a lack of faculty from similar backgrounds. Studies indicate:

[When] Black and Latino college students learn from Black and Latino faculty [in college], they are more likely to complete college, in no small part because Black and Latino faculty members can serve as strong mentors and role models to students of color, promote persistence toward a degree, and help create a more inclusive campus climate.³⁵

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.* at 51.

³³ *Id.* at 47.

³⁴ Terell Strayhorn, “*Tellin’ the Truth in Their Own Words*”: A Critical Race Qualitative Analysis of Ethnic Minority Law School Students’ Experiences, 7 *AM. J. QUALITATIVE RSCH.* 25, 36 (2023).

³⁵ JINAN BITAR, GABRIEL MONTAGUE, & LAUREN ILANO, FACULTY DIVERSITY AND STUDENT SUCCESS GO HAND IN HAND: SO WHY ARE UNIVERSITY FACULTIES SO WHITE? 3 (2022) (citing Frances Contreras & Gilbert J. Contreras, *Raising the Bar for Hispanic Serving Institutions: An Analysis of College Completion and Success Rates*, 14 *J. HISP. HIGHER EDUC.* 151 (2015); Rebecca Stout, Cephias Archie, David Cross, & Carol A. Carman, *The Relationship Between Faculty Diversity and Graduation Rates in Higher Education*, 29 *INTERCULTURAL EDUC.* 399 (2018)).

Other research similarly found that “minority students who have educators of the same race or ethnicity are more likely to look to those teachers as role models and to report greater effort in school and higher college goals.”³⁶ Unfortunately, the American Bar Association reported in 2019 that there were 9,494 full-time professors at ABA-accredited law schools and 1,987 identified as minorities—only 20%.³⁷ Another study indicates that there are very few tenured Black law professors working in U.S. law schools, which, along with broader underrepresentation, contributes to ongoing biases in legal academia.³⁸

Qualitative studies of law students of color demonstrate the challenges that can flow from a lack of diverse faculty. Less than half (46%) of women of color report they “frequently” feel included or welcomed by law school faculty in comparison to nearly two-thirds of white men (62%).³⁹ Less than half (41%) of women of color report faculty “frequently” or “sometimes” underestimate their ability for academic success as compared to white men (27%).⁴⁰ A study of twenty-nine law students, who identified as underrepresented minorities (URM), discussed how “participants spoke in detail about a desire to take courses from . . . faculty, especially same-race law faculty who could serve as mentors and role models. However, very few faculty of color were employed at the law schools they attended.”⁴¹ Twenty-two of the twenty-nine participants reported rarely, if ever, “meeting/seeing an ethnic minority law school professor” at their institution.⁴² Moreover, according to a survey conducted by the national LGBTQ+ Bar, 95.5% of schools report that they actively recruit LGBTQ+ faculty, but 73.6% of schools do not provide a self-identification process for employees.⁴³ Without providing a voluntary self-identification process for faculty and administrators, the success of the recruiting efforts are not meaningfully measured nor is accurate information available to prospective students.⁴⁴ Unless faculty actively identify, students are also likely to be unaware of who to connect with, contributing to both real and perceived isolation.

In contrast, the students appreciated being able to engage with faculty of similar affinity. They shared comments about law school faculty and staff who “kept it real with them”—admitting that they had experienced a chilly climate—but also offered a network of care and support, which catalyzed initial feelings of a sense of belonging for participants. Others recalled how some ethnic minority faculty and staff members shared personal stories about how they overcame financial, academic, or personal obstacles during law

³⁶ Leslie Davis & Richard Fry, *College Faculty Have Become More Racially and Ethnically Diverse, but Remain Far Less so Than Students*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (July 31, 2019) (citing Anna J. Egalite & Brian Kisida, *The Effects of Teacher Match on Students’ Academic Perceptions and Attitudes*, 40 EDUC. EVALUATION & POL’Y ANALYSIS 59 (2018)), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/31/us-college-faculty-student-diversity/> [perma.cc/Q7VV-HQA7].

³⁷ Stephanie Francis Ward, *How Many Tenured Law Professors are Black? Public Data Does Not Say*, ABA J. (Oct. 28, 2020), <https://www.abajournal.com/web/article/how-many-tenured-law-professors-are-black-public-data-does-not-say> [perma.cc/X4SW-UE6T].

³⁸ *Id.* (citing MEERA DEO, *UNEQUAL PROFESSION: RACE AND GENDER IN LEGAL ACADEMIA* (2019)).

³⁹ WOMEN OF COLOR IN LAW SCHOOL, *supra* note 20, at 53.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Strayhorn, *supra* note 34, at 33.

⁴² *Id.* at 33–34.

⁴³ THE LGBTQ+ BAR ASS’N, *LAW SCHOOL CAMPUS CLIMATE SURVEY: AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 1, 2* (2021), <http://lgbtqbar.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/8/2021/04/Law-School-Campus-Climate-Survey-Executive-Summary-2020-2021.pdf> [perma.cc/SE7G-WFYV].

⁴⁴ *Id.* Comparatively, 76.4% of schools provide a self-identification process for students. *Id.*

school. Stories (or testimonies) of this kind empowered underrepresented minority students to accept admissions offers and persist in law school as well as believe that they mattered, that someone (at their law school) cared about them, and that they were “more than just another applicant or admittee [sic].”⁴⁵ The author concluded that “[e]stablishing meaningful personal connections with ethnic minority law school faculty and staff members, communicating frequently and effectively with such staff, and feeling cared about from pre-entry campus visits to post-matriculation interactions powerfully influenced . . . law school students’ experiences.”⁴⁶

Outside of a lack of interaction with diverse peers and faculty, some students from HEGs may also suffer from a lack of belonging due to the number of external responsibilities and obligations they have, which may limit engagement in law school at times. For example, one study found that 80% of women of color and 82% of white women reported that they spend time on family obligations outside of law school, higher rates than their male counterparts.⁴⁷ Another study concluded that law students often have familial duties:

[students have] families—that is, parents, siblings, partners, and/or dependents—to whom they feel a great deal of responsibility. Concerns about family may be even more salient for URM students who are more likely to shoulder responsibility for extended family, fictive and elderly kin, or caregivers due to documented sociocultural differences.⁴⁸

Again, anecdotally, we see this time and time again at Denver Law. Some students can focus solely on law school responsibilities, while others must miss class, lose opportunities to participate in extracurricular events, or simply deal with extra stress because of such obligations. Relatedly, such students may experience “community overwhelm.” In her book, *The Age of Overwhelm*, author Laura van Dernoot Lipsky describes this concept, noting how anyone deemed “other” is often “exposed to conditions that breed overwhelm and that communities living in the aftermath of violence or dealing with the legacy of collective overwhelm” suffer.⁴⁹ While overwhelm and belonging are different concepts, they are related. When students attend law school with this constant heaviness and do not know whether others similarly struggle, those feelings of isolation likely only increase.⁵⁰

Students at elite law schools, who may at times be seen as more privileged than their peers at other schools, similarly suffer. For example, a study of Black graduates from Harvard Law School offered a different, but important perspective on belonging.⁵¹ While 88% of Black Harvard Law School alumni surveyed reported that they would go to law

⁴⁵ Strayhorn, *supra* note 34, at 33.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 34.

⁴⁷ WOMEN OF COLOR IN LAW SCHOOL, *supra* note 20, at 148. Note that a higher percentage of women of color reported participating in civic/public service opportunities (including pro bono work) outside of class responsibilities than white women.

⁴⁸ Strayhorn, *supra* note 34, at 38.

⁴⁹ LAURA VAN DERNOOT LIPSKY, *THE AGE OF OVERWHELM: STRATEGIES FOR THE LONG HAUL* 24–25 (Julie McCann ed., 1st ed. 2018).

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ See generally DAVID B. WILKINS & BRYON FONG, HARVARD LAW SCHOOL REPORT ON THE STATE OF BLACK ALUMNI II: 2000-2016 (2018), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3110790 [<https://perma.cc/8GMY-L2RH>].

school again, only 66% would recommend going to law school to a young person.⁵² The author calls this a “disaster for the pipeline,” and it signifies negative associations with legal education.⁵³ It is our experience that sharing stories of success and receiving encouragement from lawyers or mentors with similar affinity or life experiences can play a role in the recruitment of the next generation of law students. This is something the authors engage in as part of recruitment efforts at Denver Law. When over one-third of Black alumni at one of the most prestigious law schools in the country do not want to encourage more Black law students to join the profession, this signals a problem. It may indicate that despite the tremendous access and opportunity that often results from attending such an elite institution, the physical, mental, and emotional toll of being a Black law student—and perhaps from the lack of belonging—outweighs those positive effects. A prospective Black law student may subsequently conclude that if they cannot make it at Harvard, they should not join this profession at all, contributing to the continued lack of representation of Black students.

B. *Lack of Information and Support*

A lack of belonging magnifies the little support and the gap in information available to first generation students from HEGs. Without a feeling of belonging or a community to rely on, students unfamiliar with the legal profession often “lack insight about why they are struggling and do not understand how students ‘like them’ can improve.”⁵⁴ Further, law school is engrained in hidden curriculum; “unspoken values, norms, and behaviors that operate within an institution . . . serve to promote, enforce, and influence educational practices and people.”⁵⁵ Law students who do not have lawyers in their family or who are not exposed to lawyers in other ways may not understand certain acronyms or norms. Students may not be familiar with other professional norms and practices. For instance, students may not know what is considered “business casual” attire; they may not know about the significance of law review; and they may not be as familiar with the appellate court system. Often this hidden curriculum or “behind the scenes” information is not taught because it is believed to be either unimportant or common knowledge. Therefore, students who have an “in” and who have “hidden knowledge or access are advantaged.”⁵⁶ Law students of color appear to be disproportionately impacted by this issue. Research shows that “a significantly lower percentage of women of color (67%) and men of color (69%) report they personally knew a lawyer before starting law school compared to white women (78%) and white men (77%).”⁵⁷ Women of color are also the “least likely to report they

⁵² *Id.* at 66.

⁵³ Vivia Chen, *Black Harvard Law Grads Are Doing Fine (Mostly)*, THE AM. LAW. (Oct. 13, 2017, 9:55 PM), <https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/almID/1202800445396/#:~:text=Black%20HLS%20grads%20gave%20high,it%20to%20a%20young%20person> [https://perma.cc/3DLR-JAYJ].

⁵⁴ Nicole M. Stephens, MarYam G. Hamedani, & Mesmin Destin, *Closing the Social-Class Achievement Gap: A Difference-Education Intervention Improves First-Generation Students' Academic Performance and All Students' College Transition*, 25 PSYCH. SCI. 943, 944 (2014).

⁵⁵ Cristal E. Jones, *Still Strangers in the Land: Achievement Barriers, Burdens, and Bridges Facing African American Students Within Predominantly White Law Schools*, 39 LAW & INEQ. 13, 39–40 (2021).

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 40.

⁵⁷ WOMEN OF COLOR IN LAW SCHOOL, *supra* note 20, at 84.

know a non-relative who is a lawyer (58%) and/or have relatives other than a parent or guardian (17%) who are lawyers compared to other student groups.”⁵⁸

Students who experience the “vicious cycle of anxiety, nonbelonging, and stereotype threat” and do not have knowledge of the hidden curriculum “may be less likely to seek help from professors or other offices on campus [and] may be unaware of what resources exist to help.”⁵⁹ They may be embarrassed to seek help or worried about how their professor or peers may respond to their outreach or questions. They may also have no idea that they *should* reach out—that their peers are doing just that—or do not recognize what knowledge they lack. These feelings can be amplified if law schools fail to hire faculty with similar lived experiences for URM students to connect with. Research shows that “[m]ore women of color report they seek advice from a friend or mentor on a regular basis, while more white men report they seek advice from a parent/guardian and practicing/former attorneys in comparison to other student groups.”⁶⁰ Students of color more broadly are also “less likely to report they turn to a parent or guardian on a regular basis for advice compared to their white peers.”⁶¹ The lack of information and support can cause a sense of overwhelm, which not only may affect academic performance, but also makes students “less likely to participate in activities on campus or to seek out and develop relationships with their peers or with faculty members.”⁶² Therefore, the information gap can reinforce a feeling of being left out and exacerbate a lack of belonging.

Perceptions of gender relations improve only slightly in comparison to perceptions of race relations. A recent study of 4000 students across forty-six law schools found that women of color were less satisfied with their law school experiences than their white cohorts and rated race relations at their schools less positively than even their male peers of color.⁶³ While 70% of white men gave race relations a positive rating, only 40% of women of color did the same.⁶⁴ Regarding gender relations, only 48% of women of color and 59% of white women give the state of gender relations at their schools a positive rating indicating some negative effects for women, such as “experienc[ing] discrimination and/or unfair or different treatment due to gender.”⁶⁵ A significantly higher percentage of white men (73%) and men of color (67%) give the state of gender relations a positive rating.⁶⁶ Significantly, 31% of women of color reported having seriously considered leaving law school, more than men of color (26%), white women (24%), and white men (22%).⁶⁷ Black women specifically were most likely to consider leaving, at 38%.⁶⁸ Among women of color who considered leaving, “45% report they considered leaving because they do not enjoy law school, 38% report they considered leaving due to financial debt, and 35% report they considered leaving because law school was not a good fit for them socially.”⁶⁹ Reflections

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 16, at 423; Grant, *supra* note 17, at 8.

⁶⁰ WOMEN OF COLOR IN LAW SCHOOL, *supra* note 20, at 80.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² Grant, *supra* note 17, at 8.

⁶³ WOMEN OF COLOR IN LAW SCHOOL, *supra* note 20, at 28, 36.

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 36.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 42.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 36, 45. Please note, the report was discussed in binary terms and data was not available for nonbinary or trans student experiences.

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 32.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 33.

from such students around leaving included, “It’s frustrating when I am treated like an exotic species in class just because there aren’t other people of my ethnicity;” “[m]y classmates and faculty are all white. I don’t fit in;” and “[f]elt like I didn’t have a community.”⁷⁰

Students from HEGs continue to face unique challenges that the majority of law students do not have to grapple with. The culmination of the fear of stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, lack of faculty from similar backgrounds, and lack of support for students from HEGs makes the difficult journey of law school even harder. Students can feel alone, believe that they do not belong, fear the threat of being stereotyped, experience imposter syndrome, lack support, and lack institutional knowledge. This combination of experiences may even lead students from HEGs to believe that they are unable to succeed in law school. As such, some of these students actually leave law school.⁷¹ However, law schools can work to help mitigate these difficulties by creating intentional support networks, communities, and programs that push back against these realities. With that in mind, in 2021, the University of Denver, Sturm College of Law launched Ascent.

II. ONE MODEL: DENVER LAW ASCENT

Given the uneven demographics of today’s law students and the research documenting the challenges encountered by students from HEGs, in the last two years, Denver Law initiated a comprehensive program designed to offer particularized support to students. Modelled after Georgetown University Law Center’s Rise program,⁷² Denver Law Ascent is open to all accepted students but is specifically designed to welcome and support incoming Denver Law students from communities historically underrepresented in the legal profession including (but not limited to) students who are ethnically or racially historically underrepresented, LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, gender-diverse persons, and first-generation college students. The program aims to help students build community among their classmates and Denver University faculty, staff, alumni, and the legal community at large, and develop academic skills critical to navigating legal education at Denver Law, and in general.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ See Thomas & Cochran, *supra* note 13. In 2016, American Indian students made up 0.7% of the 1L enrollment but accounted for 1.4% of 1L non-transfer attrition; Asian students made up 6.1% of 1L enrollment but 6.2% of 1L non-transfer attrition; Black students made up 9.0% of 1L enrollment but 15.5% of 1L non-transfer attrition; Hispanic students made up 11.6% of 1L enrollment but 15.9% of 1L non-transfer attrition; Native Hawaiian students made up 0.2% of 1L enrollment and 0.3% of 1L non-transfer attrition; and students of two or more races made up 3.3% of 1L enrollment but 4.9% of 1L non-transfer attrition.

⁷² Denver Law staff learned about Rise from a student affairs conference held in summer of 2019. See *Rise*, GEORGETOWN LAW, <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/your-life-career/campus-services/office-of-the-dean-of-students/rise/> [http://perma.cc/FV5N-3TPQ] (last visited Feb. 11, 2023). We are also aware of a few other schools that engage in related programs including but not limited to University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law and Suffolk University Law School. See *Pre-Orientation Program Introduces Diverse Students to Law School*, UNIV. OF MD. FRANCIS KING CAREY SCH. OF L., <https://www.umaryland.edu/news/archived-news/september-2019/pre-orientation-introduces-diverse-students-to-law-school-.php> [http://perma.cc/L33P-7CTM] (last visited Oct. 8, 2023); *Progress to Success: Diversity Peer Mentoring and Community Enrichment Program*, SUFFOLK UNIV. L. SCH., <https://www.suffolk.edu/law/academics-clinics/student-life/advising-counseling/progress-to-success-peer-mentoring> [http://perma.cc/ZV7Q-UENK] (last visited Oct. 8, 2023).

As discussed in depth later in the section, the program launches with an immersive pre-orientation week, which includes academic preparation, community building, and networking, among other components. While the foundation of the preparation and community-building occurs during that week, program administrators intentionally organize various other efforts throughout the year to provide ongoing support and help promote engagement with the students.

At the time of the publication of this article, Denver Law has initiated three cohorts of Denver Law Ascent with the incoming classes of Fall 2021, 2022, and 2023. While some minor changes to the program occur each year, the critical pillars remain the same. In this section, we describe the program in depth, alongside the outcomes each component aims to achieve.

A. *Application Process*

All students admitted to Denver Law as JD students, whether they join as full-time or part-time students, are eligible to apply to Ascent. Information regarding the program is sent multiple times to all admitted students by the Admissions Office. The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion also advertises the program at various junctures, generally between the spring of the semester prior to matriculation until after the deadline for second deposit, typically in June. The deadline is purposefully set for after that second deposit deadline to ensure all students have an opportunity to apply. This year Denver Law began advertising in February so the Ascent program could potentially serve as a recruiting tool.

The application consists of a resume submission and multiple essay questions, designed to help the committee understand students' backgrounds, goals, interests, and concerns. The selection committee⁷³ does not review students' original applications to Denver Law. Although reviewing students' numerical scores (such as Law School Admission Test scores, undergraduate GPA, or scholarship status⁷⁴) could be helpful, as it might provide insight into which students might have stronger academic needs or might offer other important supplemental information to consider or influence the program's assessment, Ascent is not solely designed with academic metrics in mind. Whether students are at, above, or below academic medians, is not the only (or even priority) factor for assessing a student's need for belonging.

Utilizing this application process, for the incoming class of 2021, Ascent included twenty-one first-year students. For the incoming class of 2022, Ascent included twenty-nine first-year students. For the incoming class of 2023, Ascent includes twenty first-year students. While Ascent could potentially expand a cohort to greater than thirty, administrators aim for each cohort to consist of twenty to thirty students annually. There are some concerns that any significant increase might have a negative effect on

⁷³ The selection committee is comprised of the assistant dean of student affairs and the associate dean of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The director of the academic achievement program, the dean of academic affairs, and/or the dean of the law school may also be consulted or involved.

⁷⁴ On occasion, we happen to know about certain scholarships due to committee members' involvement in other Denver Law programs. However, this is not a factor for selection or is not gathered for all applicants.

belonging.⁷⁵ However, as the Denver Law incoming class continues to increase,⁷⁶ and hopefully continues to grow its population of students from HEGs,⁷⁷ Ascent may also need to adapt.

B. Academic Support

A hallmark of the pre-orientation week includes a mock law school class taught by a Denver Law professor as well as accompanying academic support sessions, also led by a professor, that provide context to the class sessions and break the material down. According to a study about what student activities and behaviors led to professional and academic gains, students “rise to [the] challenge when they perceive themselves as having resources at their disposal [exceeding what they need] to meet the demands of a situation.”⁷⁸ By creating specific support to provide resources to these students, Ascent works to help students feel more capable of succeeding in law school academically as well as socially.

For these academic sessions, Ascent administrators engage law professors who regularly work with 1L students to teach these sessions. The sessions were created based on the idea that newly admitted, students may require a different type of engagement as compared to second- and third-year students. For the first two Ascent cycles, the mock class subject was Entertainment Law. The topic was intentionally selected. This is not a subject taught to first-year students. It is not a subject regularly available in Denver Law’s curriculum. While all law subjects involve aspects of discrimination and identity, Entertainment Law is also not a class that inherently or organically raises such topics. We did not want conflict to occur with other first-year students and we did not want to assume students from HEGs wanted to study topics with more direct or obvious links to marginalization just because of their identities.

Students participate in a mock class for approximately 90 minutes per day during the Ascent week. Prior to the sessions, students are expected to read assigned cases as part of their preparation. The professor introduces the Socratic method and shares examples of how first-year doctrinal classes may run. Following each mock class, students participate in sessions taught by a professor in the Academic Achievement Program (AAP). On a daily basis, the professor dissects the previous session, helping to ensure students understand the materials. They also discuss strategies such as how to brief a case, how to take notes, and how to answer questions in class.

⁷⁵ In a study comparing emotional distress of law students to medical students, researchers found that class size and ratio of students to teachers can directly affect feelings of competition and distress, noting that medical school training involves small groups of five to twelve students in contrast to law schools (that generally have upwards of 20 students for each faculty member). See Stephen B. Shanfield & G. Andrew. H. Benjamin, *Psychiatric Distress in Law Students*, 35 J. LEGAL. EDUC. 65, 70 (1985).

⁷⁶ The incoming class of 2021 included 243 students; the incoming class of 2022 enrolled 281 students, indicating a 15.6% increase in the first-year class. See UNIV. OF DENVER, STANDARD 509 INFORMATION REPORT (2021), <https://www.law.du.edu/sites/default/files/2021-12/Std509InfoReport-23-24-12-22-2021%2015-17-48.pdf> [https://perma.cc/PM4B-WQCR]; STURM COLLEGE OF LAW, AT A GLANCE: 2022 INCOMING CLASS (2022), https://www.law.du.edu/sites/default/files/2022-09/Sturm%20College%20of%20Law_At%20A%20Glance_Sept%202022.pdf [https://perma.cc/2YSU-SX9S].

⁷⁷ The incoming class of 2021 was 21.5%; the incoming class of 2022 was 30% students of color. See *id.*

⁷⁸ Carole Silver, Lewis Rocconi, Heather Haeger, & Lindsay Watkins, *Gaining from the System: Lessons from the Law School Survey of Student Engagement About Student Development in Law School*, 10 U. ST. THOMAS L.J. 286, 312 (2012).

On the final day of the Ascent week, students have the option to take a mock exam. In the first two years of the program, virtually all students took the exam.⁷⁹ The mock exam is graded on a “check” scale versus with a letter grade, designed to provide students with a basic idea of their performance. Students have the option to receive more detailed feedback from the professor and can also debrief with the Academic Achievement professor. Even the thought of finals can cause a law student’s stomach to drop, because most law school finals are single “high-stakes summative assessments” that do not necessarily indicate student effort or ability.⁸⁰ Therefore, providing knowledge of “the goals and purposes of the exam and exactly what is expected of students . . . [is] empowering.”⁸¹ In addition to teaching about how to take an exam or what an exam is, providing academic support on how to prepare for an exam is invaluable as “[t]eaching the process of outlining can help students who have limited exposure to the law” and the “process of outlining changes the way students read cases and take notes in lecture.”⁸²

Ascent pre-orientation week also includes engagement with Denver Law’s professional library faculty and staff. Professors introduce the concept of legal research databases, share relevant acronyms, and generally discuss the role of the library and librarians in their academic journeys. They attempt to demystify the legal work systems lawyers employ as well as promote interaction with the library faculty to support students’ learning processes. Connections to faculty—whether librarians, first-year professors, or academic support professionals—matter. In a study about professional and academic gains in law schools, researchers found that students who interact with faculty reported higher professional and academic gains than those who did not.⁸³ Cultivating interactions and relationships between students and faculty can create community and a sense of belonging, as well as help “expand the boundaries of students’ established notions and encourage them to explore new ideas, resulting in an increase sense of professional growth.”⁸⁴

Additionally, creating intentional relationships between students and faculty makes it more likely that students will ask for help.⁸⁵ Professors often state that “the students who need help are the ones who don’t seek it out.”⁸⁶ Students may feel less comfortable reaching out to a professor if they do share the same identities and backgrounds. Students from HEGs may not even know where to go for help.⁸⁷ Fostering faculty mentorship for students can “communicate to the students that the law school has made a significant investment in the group’s and each member’s law school success.”⁸⁸

While the pre-orientation week provides a critical foundation in academic preparation, such academic support continues throughout the Ascent students’ time at Denver Law, particularly in the first year. This occurs namely through engagement with

⁷⁹ Data on file with Alexi Freeman.

⁸⁰ L. Danielle Tully, *What Law Schools Should Leave Behind*, 2022 UTAH L. REV. 837, 857–58 (2022).

⁸¹ RUTA K. STROPUS & CHARLOTTE D. TAYLOR, BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN COLLEGE AND LAW SCHOOL: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS 95 (2d ed. 2009).

⁸² Sean Darling-Hammond & Kristen Holmquist, *Creating Wise Classrooms to Empower Diverse Law Students: Lessons in Pedagogy from Transformative Law Professors*, 24 NAT’L BLACK L.J. 1, 39 (2015).

⁸³ Silver, *supra* note 78, at 305, 311.

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 305.

⁸⁵ Soled & Hoffman, *supra* note 12, at 292.

⁸⁶ Catherine Martin Christopher, *Normalizing Struggles*, 73 ARK. L. REV. 27, 39 (2020).

⁸⁷ *Id.*

⁸⁸ Michael Hunter Schwartz, *50 More Years of CLEO Scholars: The Past, the Present, and a Vision for the Future*, 48 VAL. U. L. REV. 621, 622 (2014).

Denver Law's Academic Achievement Program. Each semester, second- and third-year law students are selected by their professors to serve as AAP leaders for first-year courses, essentially paid teaching assistants. While no set formula exists and each professor organizes their AAP leaders' roles as they see fit, most offer additional optional sessions to ensure understanding of the material taught in class and in the textbooks; to help with topics such as briefing, note-taking, outlining, and exam writing; and to provide specific support as other questions and issues arise. AAP sessions are offered to all students enrolled in the course. While Ascent students can attend these sessions, separate Ascent AAP sessions covering the same material and lesson plan are available for all first-year courses for Ascent students. This allows the students to continue to bond with their cohort, while also reviewing material in an even smaller setting.

Typically, AAP leaders, along with various groups—student organizations and the Office of Student Affairs for example—offer exam preparation sessions during the year to help students prepare. Faculty members of the AAP program and individual faculty lead such sessions as well. Ascent students—like all other students—can, and should, attend such events. Ascent administrators also offer at least two related workshops to Ascent students, including outlining, exam writing, or other similar topics. This allows the cohort to reunite, across first-year sections, and learn and ask questions in a comfortable, familiar, and smaller setting.

While the material shared by the leaders remains consistent, Ascent AAP leaders and Ascent students share informally that the students generally feel empowered to ask questions in these smaller sessions—questions that relate to identity, societal context, and historical matters—and appreciate the time with their cohort members. The students' qualitative experiences align with best practices. Research shows that the small group or one-on-one meetings are “important learning environment[s] for students” and have a positive correlation with grades.⁸⁹ These small group or one-on-one meetings can relieve pressures that students may feel in front of their peers.

C. *Formal Mentorship*

Former Ascent students assist throughout the pre-orientation week to help Ascent 1Ls become acclimated. Beyond that informal support, every Ascent student is assigned both a peer and professional mentor during that first immersive week. Ascent students are asked for (1) any preferences for their mentors' identities, (2) whether they have an interest in particular practice areas or legal settings, and (3) their identity status.

Peer mentors are intentionally selected. The previous cohort of Ascent students often serves as mentors as do other students from similar backgrounds. Denver Law's Student Affairs office offers a peer mentoring program outside of Ascent, and mentors may be solicited from it, if needed.

Professional mentors are identified through solicitations and relationships with affinity bar organizations, including the Asian Pacific American Bar Association, the Center for Legal Inclusiveness, Colorado Hispanic Bar Association, the Colorado LGBT

⁸⁹ DeShun Harris, *Office Hours Are Not Obsolete: Fostering Learning Through One-on-One Student Meetings*, 57 DUQ. L. REV. 43, 45 (2019).

Bar Association, the Sam Cary Bar Association, South Asian Bar Association,⁹⁰ as well as Denver Law Alumni groups. In the future, mentors will be solicited from the newly formed Colorado Disability Lawyers Association as well.⁹¹ Mentorship and sponsorship are extremely valuable and “are among best practices for diversity retention because they provide personal, tailored advice and support . . . and cultivate necessary leadership and business skills not taught in law school.”⁹² Additionally, mentoring relationships between members of similar backgrounds “may be more natural and more effective when people share common interests . . . cultural experiences, [or] language[s].”⁹³ Ultimately, lawyers are typically eager and excited to engage with Ascent students, with some willing to formally mentor more than one student. When possible, we create mentoring circles—where a mentor can meet with both a first- and second- year Ascent student together, which helps relationships from at multiple levels.

The benefit of mentorship has long been supported by decades of lived experience and research studies. Relationships among students are a critical influence on professional and academic development.⁹⁴ Peer mentorships can help create positive peer relationships, which are “critical in promoting [a] sense of belonging and increasing student persistence.”⁹⁵ Additionally, peer mentorship is “positively associated with the mentee’s likelihood of retention, success in obtaining grants and fellowships, and interest in pursuing an academic career.”⁹⁶

Moreover, peer mentorships offer something distinct and valuable in addition to having a faculty mentor because “peer-mentoring relationships are less hierarchical, tend to involve individuals who are closer in age, and are more likely to create opportunities for reciprocal exchanges of support and resources.”⁹⁷ Additionally, peer mentors are better “able to relate on a personal level to what their mentees are going through both inside and outside of the classroom” and in turn, can “empathize and encourage mentees to stay motivated.”⁹⁸

⁹⁰ See, e.g., ASIAN PACIFIC AM. BAR ASS’N OF COLO., <https://www.apaba-colorado.org/> [<https://perma.cc/C6GQ-MHWW>] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023); CTR. FOR LEGAL INCLUSIVENESS, <https://centerforlegalinclusiveness.org/> [<https://perma.cc/DS47-ZF9Q>] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023); COLO. HISP. BAR ASS’N, <https://chba.net/> [<https://perma.cc/4UMM-NCES>] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023); COLO. LGBT BAR ASS’N, <https://coloradolgbtbar.org/> [<https://perma.cc/6CAH-GYQE>] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023); SAM CARY BAR ASS’N, <https://samcarybar.clubexpress.com/> [<https://perma.cc/SS7Q-M3G3>] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023); S. ASIAN BAR ASS’N OF COLO., <https://sabacolorado.wildapricot.org/> [<https://perma.cc/B8UC-QYHK>] (last visited Oct. 26, 2023).

⁹¹ See, e.g., Anita Schutte & Judge Sueanna Johnson, *The Colorado Disability Bar Association: A Diversity Bar in the Making*, COLO. WOMEN’S BAR ASS’N (Jun. 17, 2022), <https://www.the1891-cwba.org/post/the-colorado-disability-bar-association-a-diversity-bar-in-the-making> [<https://perma.cc/CD7W-3MAX>].

⁹² Lucy Lee Helm & Shelley K. Napolitano, *Let’s Meet for Coffee: Encouraging Diversity Retention and Inclusion through Mentorship*, 57 NO. 8 DRI FOR DEF. 58 (2015).

⁹³ Susan Athey, Christopher Avery, & Peter Zemsky, *Mentoring and Diversity*, 90 AM. ECON. REV. 765, 766 (2000).

⁹⁴ Silver, Rocconi, Haeger, & Watkins, *supra* note 78, at 312.

⁹⁵ Jacqueline M. O’Bryant & Katharine Traylor Schaffzin, *First-Generation Students in Law School: A Proven Success Model*, 70 ARK. L. REV. 913, 954 (2018).

⁹⁶ Meera E. Deo & Kimberly A. Griffin, *The Social Capital Benefits of Peer-Mentoring Relationships in Law School*, 38 OHIO N.U. L. REV. 305, 311 (2011).

⁹⁷ *Id.* at 309.

⁹⁸ *Id.* at 325.

Peer mentors provide not only psychosocial support, but also act as an avenue of information exchange and academic guidance.⁹⁹ Creating a mentoring program that specifically pairs a first-year law student with an upper-division law student can help first-year students navigate some of the “hidden curriculum” (such as which professors to take or where to find cheaper textbooks) which can “facilitate[] their transition to law school and may lead to improved academic performance.”¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, peer mentors may be “especially helpful for students of color and other marginalized students whose lack of high-status social capital often puts them at a disadvantage even before classes begin.”¹⁰¹ If possible, having peer mentorships between students with similar identities can help create community.

D. *Networking*

Many Ascent students are first generation law students. The majority also did not live in Metro Denver immediately before matriculation. Collectively, this results in little knowledge of or connection with lawyers, let alone lawyers in this specific geographic region. While professional mentors help foster such connections, during the pre-orientation week, we attempt to introduce students to other members of the legal community. More specifically, we host one to two events in which members of Denver Law’s alumni council and Colorado’s various affinity bar associations meet with the cohort. Students often make connections at these events that extend beyond the week, as they begin to grow their rolodex of lawyers. Studies show that networking is essential to “build and maintain informal contacts that enhance career success.”¹⁰² Additionally, “[i]ndividuals who engage in networking behaviors are more satisfied with their careers.”¹⁰³ Networking for HEGs is especially important to help students gain equal footing with students who are “advantaged by their connections to upper-class students or graduates who can share doctrinal class notes, practice exams, and informal networks.”¹⁰⁴ Networking also helps students think about legal practice and non-curricular engagement, both of which may help students become more invested in their legal education.

E. *Non-Curricular Information Sharing*

While much of the first year of law school is spent digesting the intense curriculum, students tend to spend a significant amount of time engaging in activities outside of the law classroom. Because of this, even though the law school offers multiple opportunities to learn about student organizations, law journals, and experiential options throughout the year, we intentionally introduce such ideas early to avoid too much overwhelm later and to ensure the students have at least heard of certain topics and heard certain phrases. In this space, they can digest the initial introductory information in a comfortable setting. They can take notes to store for the future and ask questions with little fear of stigma. In

⁹⁹ *Id.* at 311.

¹⁰⁰ *Id.* at 325.

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 311.

¹⁰² Hans-Georg Wolff & Klaus Moser, *Effects of Networking on Career Success: A Longitudinal Study*, 94 J. APPLIED PSYCH. 196, 196 (2009) (citing Monica L. Forret & Thomas W. Dougherty, *Networking Behaviors and Career Outcomes: Differences for Men and Women?*, 25 J. ORG. BEHAV. 419 (2004)).

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 202.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, *supra* note 55, at 40.

partnership with the student organization the First-Generation Student Alliance, handouts are provided with common language and definitions. They learn the relevant acronyms often utilized and can easily return to such material as the year progresses. Follow up sessions that relate to law review, clinical legal education, and more are offered sporadically throughout the year, again creating supportive spaces to learn and ask questions. Studies demonstrate “a correlation between campus involvement and positive educational outcomes, including achieving learning objectives such as critical thinking, cognitive development, and retention.”¹⁰⁵ Encouraging students to participate in activities within the law school and legal environment enables students to “connect with their peers and the institution, relationships that are associated with academic persistence and satisfaction.”¹⁰⁶

F. *Community Building*

A critical part of Ascent includes building community with peers and other members of the law school community. During the pre-orientation week, students experience multiple opportunities to gather with each other. Research now supports the idea that breaking bread with others contributes to belonging.¹⁰⁷ Those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support.¹⁰⁸ Thus, we intentionally build in “down time” for students to share with each other and build friendships.

We also try to introduce students to members of the Denver Law community more generally. For example, Ascent students get time to mingle with student affinity group leaders. Counselors and staff from the Office of Career Development and Opportunities, the Externship Office, and the Academic Advising department are brought in so their respective roles and key staff can be established early on. Faculty members that are teaching in the program as well as faculty and staff from Ascent administrator offices join for various meals, as the AAP attempts to break down barriers and begin to build that trust before classes begin.

While students form friendships organically through Ascent, Ascent administrators also create space throughout the academic year so that all Ascent students can simply eat together and have fellowship, without a specific agenda, often including the faculty and staff involved in the program. This offers an opportunity for students across sections to reunite, for students from both cohorts to spend time together, and for faculty and staff to keep their connections strong and serve as resources.

III. PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND MOTIVATIONS

The research we’ve outlined documents the need for and value of Denver Law Ascent, and the authors’ personal experiences prior to and during law school echo these sentiments. As a multiracial and multifaith law student who has lived a life of “being on

¹⁰⁵ Soled & Hoffman, *supra* note 12, at 290.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.*

¹⁰⁷ See generally DAVID F. PURNELL, BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH FOOD: STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATION, FAMILIES, AND SOCIAL CAPITAL (2019).

¹⁰⁸ *Id.*

the bubble” and experienced on and off isolation because of that, Ascent has been a labor of love for author Alexi Freeman. At Harvard Law School, the incoming class of first-year law students has always been much larger than Denver Law—with over 550 1Ls—but the engagement of Black law faculty and students helped make it feel much smaller for Freeman—and much more supportive. The Black Law Students Association hosted an admitted students’ weekend, introducing students to each other right away, followed by an orientation weekend once school began to nearby Martha’s Vineyard. During this whirlwind weekend, students built community with each other, with Black law faculty, and with various Black alumni. It was these early seminal weekends that impacted the trajectory of Freeman’s law school experience. Freeman felt a sense of community immediately, making it more navigable to sit amongst an eighty-person section of students on day one in a school reeking from the benefits of slavery and legacy.¹⁰⁹ It made it easier to find peers to reflect with after particularly tough, sometimes identity-charged conversations in class; it made it slightly less intimidating to approach and eventually meaningfully connect with particularly Black faculty; it helped ensure there was always a group to sit with during breaks between classes—small things that matter greatly for belonging and confidence.

It was these experiences, along with conversations with Denver Law students over the past years, that informed the development of Ascent. Today, the demographics at Harvard Law—both by race and gender identity status at least—represent far greater diversity as compared to Denver Law.¹¹⁰ It is not surprising that over the years students at Denver Law have reported feeling shell-shocked after attending their Orientation, wondering if they truly are “the only one like them” at the school. It is not surprising that students have raised questions and concerns around classroom discussions, tired of the pressure they feel to ensure the perspectives of certain communities are heard in those dialogues. Ascent does not necessarily erase those feelings and certainly does not alter the reality of the demographics of the student body or the city of Denver as a whole.¹¹¹ What it does do is introduce students to a range of supports early on—their peers, faculty and staff, and to leaders in the legal community who share affinity—and push back against some of the long-standing research that that insists schools do everything they can to avoid students navigating such realities so alone.

IV. EARLY OUTCOMES

Program administrators have not conducted a validated empirical study of Denver Law Ascent. It is premature to do so given that the first cohort has not yet graduated.

¹⁰⁹ See THE PRESIDENTIAL COMM. ON HARV. & THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY, HARVARD & THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY (2022), <https://legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/report/introduction-and-findings-summary-of-the-reports-key-findings> [<https://perma.cc/JV32-GVLU>].

¹¹⁰ *Harvard Law School Demographics*, NALP DIRECTORY OF L. SCHS., https://www.nalplawschools.org/employer_profile?FormID=1132&QuestionTabID=34&SearchCondJSON=%7B%22SearchOrgTypeID%22%3A%223%22%2C%22SearchEmployerName%22%3A%22harvard%20law%20school%22%2C%22StudentsEn... [<https://perma.cc/WG7B-ZHUQ>] (last visited June 27, 2023) (2022–23 demographics).

¹¹¹ *Quick Facts: Denver City, Colorado; Denver County, Colorado*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/denvercitycolorado,denvercountycolorado/PST04522> [<https://perma.cc/XV2A-E9E2>] (last visited June 27, 2023).

However, administrators have engaged in initial analysis and assessment of the program, examining multiple data points that offer insight into student satisfaction and achievement.

Annually, administrators gather formal and informal feedback from Ascent students after the pre-orientation week in writing or orally. While students always offer valuable constructive feedback, student response overwhelmingly suggests that students enjoyed and valued all aspects of the program at that juncture. Given the relationships formed with members of the three leading offices, administrators continue to engage informally with Ascent students and anecdotally, feedback continues to be positive. There has not been a formal qualitative analysis with participants. While administrators recognize this might be particularly helpful for publications, replication, and marketing, administrators are cognizant of two things. First, students are already busy, stressed, and overburdened. This is particularly relevant for students who may be experiencing more intense moments of stress and overwhelm as it relates to their identities and who may be, unfortunately, tapped more than their peers to engage in the invisible labor that is common for so many students from historically excluded groups.¹¹² Second, administrators do not want students to feel like they are being studied. Akin to the harmful effects of tokenization, this may contribute to feelings of isolation or a lack of belonging.¹¹³

To review the program, administrators examined various data to assess the student experience. First, administrators looked at retention and measures that may indicate academic success and understanding. Of cohort one and two, three students left Denver Law and legal education.¹¹⁴ Administrators reviewed the grade point averages of two cohorts, which includes two years for the second-year students and one year for the first-year students. Over 80% of the Ascent students currently maintain at least a 3.0 grade point average.¹¹⁵

Administrators also reviewed other academic markers outside of standard grading. We considered how many of the second-year Ascent students were hired into teaching assistant roles, either as teaching assistants for the first-year legal research and writing class or as AAP leaders for other first-year courses, as students in these roles have typically achieved well in at least one course. Administrators similarly looked at the number of students who were selected as paid research assistants for professors. Collectively, 37% of the second-year Ascent students serve in one of these roles.¹¹⁶ Finally, administrators considered membership in one of Denver Law's five law journals. Almost 30% of Ascent students are currently members of a law review.¹¹⁷

¹¹² See Craig Klugman, *Our Response to Racism Should Not Be More Unpaid Work for Black Faculty, Part I*, BIOETHICS TODAY (June 10, 2020), <https://bioethicstoday.org/blog/our-response-to-racism-should-not-be-more-unpaid-work-for-black-faculty-part-i/> [<https://perma.cc/3NLK-A8KZ>].

¹¹³ See Claire Gillespie, *Tokenism: What It Is and Its Mental Health Effects*, HEALTH (Dec. 7, 2022), <https://www.health.com/mind-body/health-diversity-inclusion/tokenism> [<https://perma.cc/JWR6-JUMF>] (noting that people who are tokenized often feel isolated, burnt out, pigeonholed, and consistently scrutinized because of the consistent spotlight shone upon them). Tokenism is defined as “the practice of doing something (such as hiring a person who belongs to a minority group) only to prevent criticism and give the appearance that people are being treated fairly.” *Tokenism*, THE BRITANNICA DICTIONARY, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/tokenism> [<https://perma.cc/6RCB-XUDZ>] (last visited Oct. 8, 2023).

¹¹⁴ Because of the personal nature of this, we are unable to provide any more specific information.

¹¹⁵ Data on file with Alexi Freeman. Note: we did not compare GPA data of Ascent students with other non-Ascent students for this article.

¹¹⁶ *Id.*

¹¹⁷ *Id.*

Denver Law offers a robust experiential learning curriculum.¹¹⁸ Because of this, administrators examined Ascent students' engagement with two key components of that curriculum: enrollment in Denver Law's in-house nationally ranked clinic program and enrollment in legal externships for credit. By fall 2023, 95% of the Ascent cohort completed at least one externship or one clinic, with 50% already completing more than one externship.¹¹⁹

Finally, administrators considered markers that might indicate success, satisfaction, and belonging, outside of academic related roles. Administrators reviewed whether second-year Ascent students were elected as leaders of student organizations. Becoming a leader within a student organization seems to indicate some level of interest and commitment to the Denver Law community, which administrators hope signals evidence of belonging. Fifty percent of 2L and 3L Ascent students hold a leadership role in a student organization, with a handful holding multiple leadership positions.

V. TWO KEY COMPONENTS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

At a minimum, effective implementation of Ascent requires ongoing financial support and engagement by multiple faculty and staff. We briefly discuss each below.

A. *Budgetary Needs*

Ascent requires ongoing financial support. Denver Law's experience indicates that funding is critical to implement the following components of Ascent:

- **Compensation for teaching faculty:** We are mindful of time spent by faculty who teach curriculum in any pre-orientation programming and throughout the year. This is particularly important when considering workplace equity and the research on the unpaid labor that many faculty from HEGs endure.¹²⁰
- **Food, beverages, and receptions:** Not only does food bring people together—from students and mentors alike—but it is also helpful to sustain energy and engagement from participants. Maintaining sustenance can quickly drain a budget and advance planning is needed.
- **Compensation for speakers and trainers:** Research has long documented the unpaid labor that women and people of color are often forced to undertake.¹²¹ Initiatives centered on diversity, equity, and inclusion should proactively address this by offering compensation. Relatedly, outside presenters and consultants may charge speaking fees.

¹¹⁸ U.S. News & World Report ranks DU #13 in Legal Writing, #9 in Clinical Training, and #6 in Trial Advocacy. *University of Denver (Sturm)*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools/university-of-denver-03024> [(last visited Aug. 30, 2023)]; *see also Practical Experience*, STURM COLL. OF L., <https://www.law.du.edu/academics/practical-experience> [<https://perma.cc/U6ED-KV3L>] (last visited Feb. 13, 2023).

¹¹⁹ Data on file with Alexi Freeman.

¹²⁰ Klugman, *supra* note 112 (stating that faculty of color have a larger service burden to help make universities look diverse).

¹²¹ *See, e.g.,* Holly Corbett, *The New Unpaid Office Housework for Women: Being DEI Leaders*, FORBES (Sept. 28, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hollycorbett/2021/09/28/the-new-unpaid-office-housework-for-women-being-dei-leaders/?sh=5bd12ae656e8> [<https://perma.cc/EKS8-2SFW>].

- **Supplies:** Like any program with administrative needs, various costs arise around things like printing and office needs.
- **Faculty and staff time:** When faculty and staff implement such a program, they will likely have less time to engage in other responsibilities. Some opportunity costs will exist.

Ultimately, we conclude that identifying outside sponsors is helpful for long-term sustainability. It is unlikely that in-house law school budgets can continuously cover expenses over time. Growing such a program also requires additional funds. Longevity requires working with law school leadership and development officers to develop a fundraising strategy.

B. Stakeholder Buy-In

While individual faculty and staff have some varying ability to craft their own work, an initiative such as Ascent arguably requires, and certainly benefits from, buy-in and commitment from law school leadership. While budgeting is one critical factor for such buy-in, commitment ideally should extend beyond that. Ascent requires the engagement of internal staff and faculty. Promotion and support of a program from leadership trickles down, helping to secure commitment by others, which is critical to the program's success. For example, attendance of career professionals, advising staff, and others at sessions builds connections for students and allows for targeted programming. Collaboration with law school admissions departments is needed to help with initial advertising efforts and for thoughtful and meaningful program promotion.

CONCLUSION

Law schools “are not yet even playing fields for all students.”¹²² Students from HEGs “are [still] experiencing law school differently from their mainstream classmates.”¹²³ These students “are expected to excel in law school burdened by doubt, presumptions of incompetence, subtle implicit bias, and the pervasive stereotypes that hijack their interactions with others.”¹²⁴ Law school faculty and administrators must recognize this reality and take action to help students from historically underrepresented backgrounds succeed in law school.

Denver Law Ascent is an example of how one school heeded this call for action. While Denver Law will ultimately benefit from a more in-depth study and analysis of the program, for now, we forge ahead, recognizing that Ascent is aligned with research and has had a positive impact on our students' experiences. As one second-year student shared:

It is easy to feel alone in upper education when none of your peers look like you. The Ascent program was the first time I had ever been in an educational setting surrounded by so many like-minded diverse students. I will never forget that experience and I will hold onto it closely....my educational

¹²² Bodamer, *supra* note 19, at 463 (citing Elizabeth Mertz, *Inside the Law School Classroom: Toward a New Realist Pedagogy*, 60 VAND. L. REV. 483, 511 (2007)).

¹²³ *Id.*

¹²⁴ *Id.* at 478.

experience has felt quite lonely at times so having people who are so invested in my happiness and success meant the world to me. Because of Ascent, I feel at home every time I sit down in class or walk the halls of the law school. The Ascent program offered me fellowship and assured me that I was exactly where I needed to be.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Survey Feedback from Marcus Collins, 2L Ascent student at DU (Aug. 25, 2021) (on file with Alexi Freeman).