Essay

Belongingness

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ESSAY CONTENTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Belongingness is increasingly included in conversations with diversity, equity, and inclusion, under the acronym DEIB. They are related concepts to be sure, but belongingness focuses on feeling free and safe to be one's authentic self in a given space.

A sense of belongingness is critical for law students—it can be a better predictor of law school success than LSAT score or undergraduate GPA. And belongingness is particularly important for law students who may feel vulnerable on the basis of their race, gender, sexual orientation, first-generation status, or socioeconomic class. For these students, stereotype threat and bias negatively impact belongingness in a way that is detrimental to their wellbeing.

This essay mines the psychological, sociological, and educational literature to identify changes in the law school environment that can support and nurture a sense of belonging, particularly for vulnerable and systematically excluded students. In doing so, this essay urges professors to embrace the significance of belongingness and to actively work to facilitate a sense of belongingness for all students.

II. UNDERSTANDING BELONGINGNESS

This section describes the evolution and current understanding of the concept of belongingness in general and in the academic setting, before illustrating the stakes of belongingness in the law school context in particular.

A. *What is Belongingness?*

The idea of "belonging" has been defined many different ways in literature,[1] but all iterations of the concept relate to a person's "subjective evaluation of the level of integration in a particular context such as family,

[1] TERRELL L. STRAYHORN, COLLEGE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING 11 (2d ed. 2019).

school, or college."[2] A sense of belonging is an interpersonal connection that includes "stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future."[3] Belongingness is related to the feeling that "one matters, is valued or appreciated by others."[4]

Psychologist Abraham Maslow included belongingness on his pyramid of basic human needs, after first-level physical needs such as food and water and second-level safety concerns.[5] In that context, "belongingness refers to a human emotional need for interpersonal relationships, affiliating, connectedness, and being part of a group. Examples of belongingness needs include friendship, intimacy, trust, and acceptance, receiving and giving affection, and love."[6] As a fundamental human need, belongingness drives human behavior.[7] "[A]ll people want to feel special, part of something larger, cared about by others, needed, valued, supported, and somewhat indispensable as the object of someone else's affection."[8]

Academic belongingness refers to "the extent to which individuals feel like a valued, accepted, and legitimate member in their academic domain."[9] It is a "'general inference' of a student's fit in their law school. In other words, it is about how students subjectively feel a part of their law school community."[10]

Although belongingness is about more than just academic performance,[11] in the educational environment, students need to feel they belong in a variety of spaces—in the classroom, in the institution at large, and in their chosen profession.[12] Belongingness must be present in the learning spaces themselves—the classrooms and not just campus life in general—for the benefits to be realized.[13] Thus, belongingness includes

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[2] *Id.*

[3] Roy F. Baumeister & Mark R. Leary, *The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation*, 117 PSYCH. BULL. 497, 500 (1995).

[4] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 36.

[5] A. H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, 50 PSYCH. REV. 370, 372, 376, 380 (1943).

[6] Saul McLeod, *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, SIMPLY PSYCH., https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html (last updated Dec. 29, 2020).

[7] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 32.

[8] *Id.*

[9] Karyn L. Lewis et al., *Fitting In or Opting Out: A Review of Key Social-Psychological Factors Influencing a Sense of Belonging for Women in Physics*, 12 PHYSICAL REV. PHYSICS EDUC. RSCH. 020110-1 (2016). In an academic setting, a "sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers." STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 4.

[10] 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, 458–59 (2020).

[11] "[A]cademic performance does not necessarily promote or diminish sense of belonging." STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 22.

[12] *Id.* at 1.

[13] *Id.* at 34–35.

relationships at multiple levels of the educational system: microsystem (with friends and peers), mesosystem (between the student, peers, teachers), and macrosystem (student and educational establishment).[14]

Belongingness is often included in conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. The concepts are related but distinct. Diversity refers to having people of different backgrounds occupying the same space, while equity asks if all people have the same opportunities to grow and develop.[15] Inclusion demands that people are celebrated for their uniqueness so everyone can be empowered to contribute.[16] Belongingness refers to the degree to which people feel safe and free to express their authentic selves in a particular environment.[17]

Although the notion of belonging sounds like merely the need for social contact and feelings of friendship and connection, it is much more.[18] "More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual."[19]

Belongingness is also different from, yet related to, the idea of students' involvement or engagement in an academic setting. [20] Involvement refers to the amount of energy students devote to the academic experience—academic activities, extracurricular activities, social engagements, working on campus.[21] Engagement is "the time and energy that students devote to educationally purposeful activities and the extent to which the institution gets students to participate in activities that lead to student success."[22] Thus,

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[14] URIE BRONFENBRENNER, THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT 7, 8 (1979).

[15] *A Guide to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB)*, WILSONHCG (Jan. 5, 2021), https://www.wilsonhcg.com/blog/what-does-deib-mean-wilsonhcg.

[16] *Id.*

[17] *Id.*

> There is a famous quote by Verna Myers, a leading diversity and inclusion expert that says, "Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion means being asked to dance." We'd go one step further. If *diversity* is being invited to the party, and *inclusion* means being asked to dance, then *belonging* is being asked for input into the playlist for the dance music and feeling free to ask anyone you want to dance with you.

Michael Seitchik, *How to Make the Leap from Inclusion to Belonging*, BATES (Feb. 10, 2020), https://www.bates-communications.com/bates-blog/how-to-make-the-leap-from-inclusion-to-belonging.

[18] Baumeister & Leary, *supra* note 3, at 500.

[19] Carol Goodenow, *Classroom Belonging Among Early Adolescent Students: Relationships to Motivation and Achievement*, 13 J. EARLY ADOLESCENCE 21, 25 (1993).

[20] "[W]e have been given the mistaken view that students' investment of time and energy into the college experience is involvement, engagement, and belonging, all at once." STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 24.

[21] *Id.* at 143.

[22] Adrianna Kezar & Jillian Kinzie, *Examining the Ways Institutions Create Student Engagement: The Role of Mission*, 47 J. COLL. STUDENT DEV. 149, 150 (2006).

involvement and engagement describe what students *do* on campus; belongingness is more about what they *need* and *feel*.[23]

B. *Why is it Important?*

A sense of belonging can greatly impact a person's overall wellbeing and happiness.[24] "Empirical studies have linked perceptions of school and campus belonging to positive psychological outcomes, including positive emotions, feelings of self-worth and social acceptance."[25]

In the academic environment, belongingness can enhance a student's motivation, engagement, and performance in a particular course.[26] Students who feel they belong have a higher belief in their chances to succeed in a course,[27] and they report "higher enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, interest, and more confidence in engaging in learning activities."[28] Indeed, "a sense of belonging significantly predicted students' overall experience in law school, whether they would choose to go to law school again, and their academic success (i.e., law school GPA) above and beyond traditional predictors such as LSAT scores and undergraduate GPA."[29]

Beyond just engagement and achievement in the classroom, a sense of belonging can improve a student's overall enjoyment of the academic world by decreasing school-related stress and anxiety[30] and creating positive

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[23] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 143.

[24] 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. "Satisfying the need to belong leads to a plethora of positive and/or prosocial outcomes such as achievement, engagement, wellbeing, happiness, and optimal functioning in a particular context or domain, to name a few." STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 39.

[25] UNIV. COLL. OF LONDON, BAME AWARDING GAP PROJECT: STAFF TOOLKIT 2020 30 (2020) [hereinafter BAME] (citing Laura D. Pittman & Adeya Richmond, *Academic and Psychological Functioning in Late Adolescence: The Importance of School Belonging*, 75 J. EXPERIMENTAL EDUC. 270 (2010); Denise Wilson et al., *Belonging and Academic Engagement Among Undergraduate STEM Students: A Multi-Institutional Study*, 56 RSCH. IN HIGHER EDUC. 750 (2015)).

[26] Sharon Zumbrunn et al., *Support, Belonging, Motivation, and Engagement in the College Classroom: A Mixed Method Study*, 42 INSTRUCTIONAL SCI. 661, 677 (2014).

[27] CIA VERSHELDEN, BANDWIDTH RECOVERY: HELPING STUDENTS RECLAIM COGNITIVE RESOURCES LOST TO POVERTY, RACISM, AND SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION 1 (2017). "Under conditions that signal they matter and play a role, graduate students were motivated to learn, ready to participate in class discussions or lab demonstrations, and willing to seek help when needed. All of these are activities that positively influence one's grades, thereby linking sense of belonging to academic success in graduate school." STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 134.

[28] *Sense of Belonging: Background Literature*, SCKOOL, https://sckool.org/sense-of-belonging-background-literature.html (last visited Mar. 7, 2022).

[29] Victor D. Quintanilla, *Guest Post: A LSSSE Collaboration on the Role of Belonging in Law School Experience and Performance*, LSSSE (Jan. 25, 2019), https://lssse.indiana.edu/blog/role-of-belonging-in-law-school-experience-and-performance.

[30] SCKOOL, *supra* note 28.

feelings about the learning experience.[31] It can increase help-seeking behavior for campus services like advising or financial aid[32] or any academic assistance if needed.[33] Moreover, "[s]tudents who feel confident in their belonging may experience the social world in a way that reinforces this feeling. They may initiate more relationships and thus obtain more opportunities for belonging and growth."[34] In this way, belongingness builds on itself and generates increasing feelings of connectivity. A sense of belonging, cultivated early enough with a prospective student, can even impact a student's choice of one university over another.[35]

Conversely, people who lack a sense of belonging describe feelings of alienation, rejection, social isolation, loneliness, disengagement, and marginalization.[36] "Social isolation, loneliness, and low social status harm not only subjective well-being but also intellectual achievement and immune function and health."[37] On a societal level, lack of belongingness has been associated with negative behavioral and psychological outcomes including "mental illness, criminal tendency, and social isolation,"[38] as well as low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and suicide.[39]

In an academic setting, lack of belongingness can result in students being less engaged, less motivated, and less accomplished.[40] "They may sit in the back of class, be inattentive during lecture, or avoid participation in discussion or group activities. They may even skip class or show up late more often than others."[41] Students lacking belongingness may have lower levels of self-efficacy, which can impact problem solving and persistence in educational activities.[42] "When students worry that they may not belong in

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[31] *See* Sylvia Hurtado et al., *Predicting Transition and Adjustment to College: Biomedical and Behavioral Science Aspirants' and Minority Students' First Year of College*, 48 RSCH. HIGHER EDUC. 841 (2007) ("[O]ur study confirms that academic adjustment and sense of belonging are strongly linked for all students in the first year of college.").

[32] Johnson, *supra* note 24.

[33] RICHARD S. NEWMAN, GOALS AND SELF-REGULATED LEARNING: WHAT MOTIVATES CHILDREN TO SEEK ACADEMIC HELP? 151–184 (1991).

[34] Gregory M. Walton & Geoffrey L. Cohen, *A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students*, 331 SCIENCE 1447, 1450 (2011).

[35] Emma Winter & Chris Chapleo, *An Exploration of the Effect of Servicescape on Student Institution Choice in UK Universities*, 41 J. FURTHER & HIGHER EDUC. 187, 195 (2017).

[36] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 2.

[37] Walton & Cohen, *supra* note 34, at 1447.

[38] SCKOOL, *supra* note 28.

[39] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 40.

[40] *Id.* at 20.

[41] *Shaping a Positive Learning Environment*, OHIO STATE UNIV.: TEACHING & LEARNING RES. CTR., https://teaching.resources.osu.edu/teaching-topics/shaping-positive-learning (last visited Nov. 22, 2021).

[42] Martin M. Chemers, Li-tze Hu & Ben F. Garcia, *Academic Self-Efficacy and First-Year College Student Performance and Adjustment*, 93 J. EDUC. PSYCH. 55 (2001). "[W]hen students become integrated into the social and academic systems of the university, they develop a psychological sense of belonging to the university community, which is an important precursor to desirable outcomes such as

law school, they are more likely to experience anxiety that can interfere with learning and are less likely to reach out to faculty, join study groups, seek out friends, or succeed in the law school environment over time."[43]

In an unfamiliar or unwelcoming social situation, students' thoughts may be preoccupied with concerns about whether they will be accepted. They may worry that their input is not wanted or valued—that seeking to contribute might actually be an imposition. By contrast, in a welcoming space where students subjectively feel like a part of the community, their thoughts are focused, and contributions come easily. Surely if students are not worrying about or expending mental energy deciding when and how to participate, they will have more space to fully immerse themselves in the material itself and in being creative in embracing their own take on the material.

In addition to improving academic achievement, belongingness can also impact students on a larger scale—it can link their future to the changing legal landscape.[44] Increased participation in legal education by a diverse group of people who feel like they belong in that environment can have ripple effects for the entire profession.

III. The Imperative for Minoritized Student Populations to Belong

A sense of belonging is especially important for vulnerable or stigmatized student populations, including racially minoritized groups, first-generation law students, or students from disadvantaged socioeconomic classes.[45] "[S]ocial identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion converge and intersect in ways that simultaneously influence sense of belonging."[46] Race, gender, and other characteristics influence how people perceive themselves and experience a particular environment, including law school.[47]

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increased commitment and persistence." Leslie R. M. Hausmann et al., *Sense of Belonging and Persistence in White and African American First-Year Students*, 50 Rsch. Higher Educ. 649, 650 (2009). Indeed, "[s]tudents who do not feel like they belong rarely stay in college." Strayhorn, *supra* note 1, at 2.

[43] Quintanilla, *supra* note 29.

[44] Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 457.

[45] Mary C. Murphy, Kathryn Boucher & Christine Logel, *How to Help Students Feel a Sense of Belonging During the Pandemic*, Greater Good Mag. (Jan. 19, 2021), https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_help_students_feel_a_sense_of_belonging_durin g_the_pandemic. "Because of the long history of exclusion and discriminatory treatment that their groups and families have experienced in the American education system, students from disadvantaged backgrounds have reasons to question whether instructors and peers value, respect, and welcome them." *Id.*

[46] Strayhorn, *supra* note 1, at 37.

[47] Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 460–61.

"Underrepresented students enter new contexts vigilant to the possibility that they may be devalued, viewed through the lens of negative stereotypes, and rejected on the basis of their group identity, and that they may otherwise not belong."[48] This vigilance is distracting—it sucks up time, energy, and focus.[49] This anxiety, combined with feelings of not belonging, can lower academic performance and interfere with relationships with peer and professors;[50] "[s]uch negative outcomes" then only "reinforce feelings of nonbelonging and stereotype threat."[51] Thus, minoritized students' sense of belonging is significantly and adversely affected by "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."[52] Indeed, belongingness can be the remedy to the anxiety and threats that students feel in law school.

Arriving at law school primed to fear that they will not belong, vulnerable populations often confront familiar "negative stereotypes about their intellectual ability, numeric underrepresentation, and other group-based threats on campus."[53] As a result, these students may worry about whether they will fit in with the student body,[54] and "may wonder whether a 'person like me' will be able to belong or succeed in law school and the profession."[55] "Being the only student, or one of a few, of a particular identity group can lead students to feel detached, apathetic, or reluctant to participate."[56]

Minoritized groups experience law school very differently than their majority-group classmates.[57] They may be less likely to seek help from professors or other offices on campus,[58] or they may be unaware of what resources exist to help.[59] These students may be less likely to participate in

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[48] Victor D. Quintanilla & Sam Erman, *Mindsets in Legal Education*, 69 J. LEGAL EDUC. 412, 423 (2020) (footnotes omitted).

[49] *Id.*

[50] *Id.* at 424.

[51] *Id.*

[52] Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 477. "Minoritized students are expected to excel in law school burdened by doubt, presumptions of incompetence, subtle implicit bias, and the pervasive stereotypes that highjack their interactions with others. These findings have implications for students' persistence, engagement, and achievement, which have been empirically linked to sense of belonging." *Id.* at 478.

[53] David S. Yeager et al., *Teaching a Lay Theory Before College Narrows Achievement Gaps at Scale*, 113 PNAS E3341, E3342 (2016).

[54] *Id.*

[55] Quintanilla, *supra* note 29.

[56] OHIO STATE UNIV., *supra* note 41

[57] Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 463.

[58] BAME, *supra* note 25, at 34.

[59] Elizabeth Salazar, First-Generation College Students: Sense of Belonging on Campus 7 (May 2019) (M.E. thesis, Merrimack College) (on file with Merrimack College Library system); Alecea Standlee, *Supporting First-Generation Students*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Apr. 11, 2019)

activities on campus or to seek out and develop relationships with their peers[60] or with faculty members.[61] Thus, they may wind up feeling left out and without a place to belong in the institution.[62]

In addition, stereotype threat and fear of bias can negatively impact minoritized students' sense of belonging.[63] At its simplest, stereotype threat refers to "the fear of confirming negative stereotypes," which can impact performance and executive functioning.[64] "[A]s a result of long-standing stereotypes about their intellectual abilities, stigmatized students find higher educational environments threatening to their social identities,"[65] and fear of stereotypes and bias may keep students from seeking help and admitting when they do not understand a concept.[66]

Tragically, the typical academic challenges of law school only exacerbate the harms that minoritized groups already feel from stereotypes and bias. Most law students worry about fitting in when they first arrive at law school, but that worry is particularly salient for minoritized or first-generation students,[67] and the situational cues of the first semester (and beyond) can reinforce those concerns.[68] Thus, the common challenges that all students face in law school—cold calling as part of the Socratic method, casebooks that are hard to read and understand, writing assignments that

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https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/04/11/policies-and-practices-help-first-generation-college-students-succeed-opinion.

[60] Tommy DeRossett, Emily K. Marler & Hailey A. Hatch, *The Role of Identification, Generational Status, and Covid-19 in Academic Success*, SCHOLARSHIP, TEACHING & LEARNING PSYCH. 1, 2 (2021), http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/stl0000293.

[61] Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 48, at 424.

[62] 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); Lisa Schelbe et al., *First Generation College Students' Perceptions of an Academic Retention Program*, 19 J. SCHOLARSHIP TEACHING & LEARNING 61, 63 (2019).

[63] "[P]erceived experiences of bias and students' concerns about stereotypes associated with their social identity are pervasive in law school." Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 457. "All forms of perceived experiences of bias and stereotype concerns are significantly and adversely associated with sense of belonging." *Id.* at 475.

[64] RUSSELL A. MCCLAIN, THE GUIDE TO BELONGING IN LAW SCHOOL 21 (2020); Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 48, at 423. "[T]hese stereotypes of minoritized groups have a detrimental effect on performance and academic outcomes because members of minoritized groups are afraid of conforming to these stereotypes." Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 461.

[65] Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 461. "[S]ituational cues lead underrepresented minority students to worry about being judged in terms of stereotypes and about whether they belong, which may, in turn, undermine their executive functioning and the focus necessary for learning, ultimately leading to underperformance." Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 48, at 423.

[66] Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 463.

[67] Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 48, at 428.

[68] "Research shows that these worries about belonging and identity threat, if reinforced by interactions with the social environment, interfere with learning and 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." *Id.* at 423.

receive critical feedback, the competitive culture created by the curve—can be internalized for disadvantaged students as proof that they cannot succeed.[69] They perceive academic struggle as evidence that they do not belong in that environment,[70] and many of the students "lack insight about why they are struggling and do not understand how students 'like them' can improve."[71]

Student survey results confirm the impacts of stereotype threat, bias, and struggles faced by systematically excluded student groups. The Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) collected data from approximately 13,000 law students in 2020, and the survey specifically asked about feelings of belongingness.[72] "White students are more likely to have a strong sense of belonging than their classmates of color."[73] For example, when asked whether students feel like they are "part of the community at this institution," the following percentages in various groups "strongly agree[d]":[74]

White	31%
Latinx	28%
Asian American	26%
Multiracial	25%
Black	21%
Native American	21%
Students whose parents have at least a bachelor's degree	31%
First-Generation Students	23%

It is clear that "[m]any of our most vulnerable students—including those who are marginalized based on their race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, debt load, and first-gen[eration] status—are telling us that we

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[69] Quintanilla, *supra* note 29.

[70] Gregory M. Walton & Geoffrey L. Cohen, *A Question of Belonging: Race, Social Fit, and Achievement*, 92 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 82, 94 (2007). "Students feel they do not belong because of the experiences they are having while in law school." Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 478.

[71] Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, *supra* note 62, at 944.

[72] LAW SCHOOL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, DIVERSITY & EXCLUSION: 2020 ANNUAL SURVEY RESULTS 6 (2020).

[73] *Id.*

[74] *Id.* Although the focus of this particular essay is the relative sense of belongingness among diverse student populations, it is worth noting that the numbers perhaps suggest an overall belongingness problem in law school more broadly given that less than one-third of any group strongly agrees that they feel a part of the community. All the more reason to devote attention to belongingness.

need to do more to show we value them, to prove they belong, to make them comfortable in legal education and the legal profession."[75]

IV. HOW TO NURTURE AND SUPPORT BELONGINGNESS

This section identifies ways institutions and individual professors can inculcate a sense of belonging throughout the law school experience. Before discussing possible remedies, some caveats are necessary.

Although beyond the scope of this article, the primary and most important work law school professors and administrators can do to create welcoming and safe places for minoritized students is to alleviate their own bias.[76] "[A]ll law professors have an obligation to take affirmative steps to acknowledge and mitigate their biases to avoid perpetuating the harm that law school and other areas of our institutions cause to Black and other underrepresented students."[77] Faculty members must be willing to take risks and be vulnerable. Without this necessary but difficult work, any other efforts to connect with minoritized student populations will be pointless and have the potential to cause additional harm.

Additionally, a major hindrance for minoritized students to feel they belong in law school is the systematic exclusion of those populations from the narrative of the law in general. The pedagogical foundation of legal education relies on precedents that are anything but neutral and instead are centered on white culture and experiences, including centuries of racist and exclusionary history. The solutions offered below are important steps to increasing belongingness, though they often do not address the underlying structure of legal education.

Finally, I recognize that this essay paints with a broad brush to include many minoritized population groups, each with vastly different history and challenges. In doing so, I want to stress the importance of belongingness for all students, regardless of their backgrounds, and I hope to ignite many conversations about various student groups. I am not intending to minimize

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[75] Laura Bagby, *Law Schools Can Create More Inclusive Environments, New Study Finds*, 2CIVILITY (Oct. 8, 2020), https://www.2civility.org/law-schools-can-create-more-inclusive-environments-new-study-finds/.

[76] Anastasia M. Boles, *Seeking Inclusion from the Inside Out: Towards a Paradigm of Culturally Proficient Legal Education*, 11 CHARLESTON L. REV. 209, 214–15 (2017). *See generally* Anne D. Gordon, *Better Than Our Biases: Using Psychological Research to Inform Our Approach to Inclusive, Effective Feedback*, 27 CLINICAL L. REV. 195 (2021) ("In order to mitigate our biases, we must first acknowledge that we have them; both our cognitive biases as a result of being human, and the implicit biases as a result of living in a white supremacist (and misogynist, ableist, and homophobic) culture. Acknowledging these biases is critical because such biases affect our interactions with our students by interfering with our teaching, our students' learning, and the opportunities that all of our students deserve. It is therefore imperative that law professors take affirmative steps to mitigate our cognitive and implicit biases.").

[77] Anne Gordon, *Debias Yourself to Debias Your Teaching*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Mar. 19, 2021), https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/03/19/mitigating-implicit-bias-classroom-opinion.

or diminish the distinctive challenges of students from different backgrounds or to ignore the unique struggles presented by intersectionality of group membership. I recognize that minoritized groups may experience the isolation and exclusion in legal education in wildly different ways and that the effectiveness of any interventions suggested below may vary based on the student populations.

A. *Before Matriculation*

Messaging designed to encourage belongingness can begin even before the students arrive on campus or start classes. Summer bridge programs designed for historically excluded populations can introduce students to the law school environment, provide social and academic support for them, and jump start their relationships with peers and faculty members,[78] all of which contribute to a sense of belonging within the institution. Law schools can also celebrate the achievements and backgrounds of the incoming class by sharing news of admitted students on social media and highlighting their individual and collective diversity.[79]

Law school marketing and promotional materials can also initiate conversations about belongingness. The message could be as simple as "You Belong Here" as part of a general marketing campaign or, perhaps more effectively, sent to individual students from often excluded communities.[80] This sincere statement can assure students that they are an important part of the law school family, which contributes to a sense of belonging.[81]

New student orientation programs, usually held right before classes start, can be another place to nurture a sense of belonging by facilitating relationships among the students with each other and with law school faculty and staff.[82] "One aspect of belonging or feeling a sense of membership on a

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[78] Schelbe et al., *supra* note 62, at 63; *see also LSAC Prelaw Undergraduate Scholars (PLUS) Programs*, LAW SCH. ADMISSION COUNCIL, https://www.lsac.org/discover-law/diversity-law-school/prelaw-undergraduate-scholars-plus-programs (last visited Mar. 6, 2022) (discussing generally the Law School Admission Council's Prelaw Undergraduate Scholars Program).

[79] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 138.

[80] *Id.* at 170; *see also* Hausmann et al., *supra* note 42, at 665–66 ("[S]ending correspondence and paraphernalia to students to emphasize their valued membership in the college community . . . had the intended effect on sense of belonging for white students . . . . Sense of belonging and persistence of African American students, however, were unaffected by the intervention."). However, "[w]hile some institutions might find it tempting to resort to just telling students, 'you belong here,' . . . outreach efforts need to go deeper to be effective." Johnson, *supra* note 24.

[81] Debra Cureton & Phil Gravestock, *'We Belong': Differential Sense of Belonging and Its Meaning for Different Ethnicity Groups in Higher Education*, 12 COMPASS: J. LEARNING & TEACHING 1, 7 (2019).

[82] *See* LIZ THOMAS, BUILDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND BELONGING IN HIGHER EDUCATION AT A TIME OF CHANGE: FINAL REPORT FROM THE WHAT WORKS? STUDENT RETENTION & SUCCESS PROGRAMME 24–26 (2012) (discussing the impact of a summer introductory event on retention and success); STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 136 (noting the importance of socialization between graduate students and professors).

college campus is merely *feeling part of* something and knowing something about the place."[83] Orientation is a good time to introduce students to the history, values, and traditions of the school so they can start classes feeling like "insiders" in the legal community.[84]

It is also important in orientation to be mindful of the faces and voices the students encounter as part of their earliest law school classroom experiences. If faculty of color are a prominent part of the orientation program,[85] it reinforces to students that the people of color are leaders and authorities in their profession. On the other hand, not including faculty of color in orientation programming can exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation.

Finally, orientation is the perfect time to convey that the transition into law school is difficult and that many people doubt their ability to succeed and to belong.[86] This messaging at the outset can help students interpret struggles they may soon face as a natural part of the process and not so much as a personal weakness.[87]

B. *Relationships Upon Arrival*

Because the nature of belongingness is relational, students will benefit from being members of a group that will care for and support them.[88] Thus, to the extent the law school can facilitate relationships between and among students, faculty, and staff, group membership can increase everyone's sense of belonging.

Law schools can encourage students to bond with their peers by creating small study groups that may allow for organic introductions and built-in membership from the start.[89] Group assignments in class or other collaborative course work might serve a similar purpose.[90] Beyond academic groups, however, meaningful student involvement in campus activities can increase feelings of belonging.[91] Clubs, organizations, affinity groups,

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[83] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 166.

[84] "Socialization matters because it produces certain outcomes that move individuals from being perpetual 'outsiders' to valued 'insiders'—that is, bone fide members of a group or society to which they belong." *Id.* at 132. Although take caution: it may be that the history, values, and traditions of an institutions can be the very things that negate belongingness for student groups not reflected in that history.

[85] Participation by faculty members of color is important and vital to the work of belongingness, but I do acknowledge the burden imposed by asking faculty members of color to take on yet another service obligation in the name of diversity.

[86] *See* Yeager et al., *supra* note 53, at E3341 (noting that "challenges in the transition are common and not cause to doubt one's prospects of belonging and success").

[87] *Id.*

[88] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 4.

[89] Standlee, *supra* note 59.

[90] *Id.*; THOMAS, *supra* note 82, at 52.

[91] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 22.

intramural sports teams, and student government allow students to connect to others with shared interests and affirm their own identity, interests, and values.[92] A building-wide book club, for example, might give students and faculty a shared experience to talk about.[93] Involvement in these activities reinforces "a feeling among students that they matter to others and others depend on them, which are main features of students' sense of belonging."[94]

In addition to relationships with peers, positive relationships with faculty members can enhance a student's sense of belonging.[95] Indeed "the more often students have out-of-classroom interactions (e.g., office visits) with their university teachers, the better the quality of the relationship and the more connected the students to the university."[96] Law schools can create opportunities for meaningful interaction between students and professors outside of the classroom, including social gatherings, a brown-bag lecture series, common areas where faculty and students can congregate, or even faculty-student research collaborations.[97] "Engaging others in meaningful activities of this sort nurtures graduate students' sense of belonging and ensures their success."[98]Additionally, faculty members—all faculty members, not just the already-overburdened female faculty of color—can make a point to check in with students periodically, even by sending a short email, to offer support and encouragement.[99]

C. *In the Classroom*

Professors can do a variety of things in the classroom that can facilitate students' academic success but also reassure them that they belong in this learning space. "Simple efforts to establish a welcoming atmosphere in the early days and weeks of class can help students feel more comfortable, included, and confident."[100] Professors who encourage student participation and interaction, who are organized, and who demonstrate warmth and

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[92] *Id.* at 146–47.

[93] *Id.* at 168.

[94] *Id.* at 152.

[95] PENNY J. BURKE ET AL., CAPABILITY, BELONGING AND EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE APPROACHES, THE UNIV. OF NEWCASTLE, AUSTL. 1, 51 (2016). For some students, including many first-generation students, relationships with faculty members "may be the most significant connections that they will make when it comes to academic success." Standlee, *supra* note 59.

[96] Gerda Hagenauer & Simone E. Volet, *Teacher-Student Relationship at University: An Important Yet Under-Researched Field*, OXFORD REV. EDUC. 370, 373 (2014).

[97] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 136–37.

[98] *Id.* at 138.

[99] Murphy et al., *supra* note 45.

[100] OHIO STATE UNIV., *supra* note 41.

openness,[101] positively impact students' sense of belonging.[102] Professors can create a positive welcoming atmosphere by sharing encouraging messages about student success[103] and communicating that professors have high standards and believe that students can meet those standards.[104]

Good teaching practices also help students feel comfortable in the classroom and contribute to feelings of belongingness, particularly for students from traditionally minoritized groups.[105] For example, it is important that professors learn students' names and pronounce them correctly,[106] have clear grading policies and transparent assessment mechanisms,[107] and provide prompt and thorough feedback.[108] "[I]nclusive legal curriculum and transformative pedagogy will not only enrich students' learning, but will encourage students from all backgrounds to contribute and to feel that their contributions are valued."[109]

Responding to conflict or objectionable behavior can reassure students that the classroom is meant to be a respectful space for learning and development.[110] "The training and support for faculty as effective and inclusive facilitators in the classroom will send students, especially minoritized students, the encouraging message of inclusivity to counter marginalizing experiences and concerns."[111]

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[101] *See* Emily Grant, *Beyond Best Practices: Lessons from Tina Stark About the First Day of Class*, 95 OR. L. REV. 397, 405–406 (2017) (discussing ways to develop rapport with students starting on the first day of class).

[102] *Id.*; *see generally* Scott Freeman, David Haak & Mary Pat Wenderoth, *Increased Course Structure Improves Performance in Introductory Biology*, 10 CBE LIFE SCIS. EDUC. 175 (2011) (discussing how course structure can positively impact student performance).

[103] OHIO ST. UNIV., *supra* note 41.

[104] Murphy & Boucher, *supra* note 45; *see also* Grant, *supra* note 101, at 419–20 (providing an example of how to communicate to students a professor's high standards for the semester).

[105] MASS. INST. OF TECH., *Academic Belonging*, TEACHING + LEARNING LAB, https://tll.mit.edu/teaching-resources/inclusive-classroom/academic-belonging/ (last visited Nov. 24, 2021).

[106] *Id.*; BAME, *supra* note 25, at 45; Michael T. Gibson, *A Critique of Best Practices in Legal Education: Five Things All Law Professors Should Know*, 42 U. BALT. L. REV. 1, 72 n.412 (2012) (citing Judith A. Sanders & Richard L. Wiseman, *The Effects of Verbal and Nonverbal Teacher Immediacy on Perceived Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Learning in the Multicultural Classroom*, 39 COMM. EDUC. 341, 348 (1990) ("describing that a study of 952 college students in Western universities found that using student names and maintaining eye contact with them were 'significantly related to behavioral learning for all four ethnic groups, i.e., Asian, [B]lack, Hispanic, and [w]hite'")).

[107] Standlee, *supra* note 59; MASS. INST. OF TECH., *supra* note 105.

[108] MASS. INST. OF TECH., *supra* note 105; OHIO STATE UNIV., *supra* note 41.

[109] Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 479.

[110] OHIO ST. UNIV., *supra* note 41. "Research shows that students will take cues from teachers about how to react in tense moments, therefore, ignoring challenging behavior can further marginalize students, and squander opportunities to promote mutual understanding and dispel stereotypes." BAME, *supra* note 25, at 45.

[111] Bodamer, *supra* note 10, at 479.

Finally, "microaffirmations" in and out of the classroom can positively impact students' sense of belonging within their academic communities.[112] Microaffirmations are "tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening."[113] These gestures replace the hostility and damage of microaggressions[114] with positive messages of excellence and inclusion.[115] Examples include engaging in active listening, affirming emotional responses of students, validating student experiences, or giving explicit credit to students for ideas or comments.[116] If appropriate, professors could also highlight experiences of minoritized or first-generation students that may be relevant to the class discussion as a signal of belonging.[117]

D. *Academic Help Beyond the Classroom*

Professors, advisors, and academic support professionals who provide academic help contribute to a student's sense of belonging by shoring up skills necessary to succeed in law school, while at the same time reinforcing the message that the student belongs in the profession.[118] Faculty members can promote a growth mindset in students, to give them resilience in the face of academic challenges, by encouraging and applauding effort over innate intelligence.[119] Moreover, academic support professionals are often "in the frontline of developing, strengthening, and securing . . . students in positive relationships with others throughout [the] law school's learning communities," and those relationships promote belonging.[120]

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[112] Mica Estrada et al., *The Influence of Microaffirmations on Undergraduate Persistence in Science Career Pathways*, 18 CBE—LIFE SCIS. EDUC. 1, 13 (2019).

[113] Mary Rowe, *Micro-Affirmations & Micro-Inequities*, 1 J. OF THE INT'L OMBUDSMAN ASS'N 45, 46 (2008). They are "small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed." *Id.*

[114] Microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color." Derald Wing Sue et al., *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice*, 6 AM. PSYCH. 271, 271 (2007).

[115] Candice Powell, Cynthia Demetriou & Annice Fisher, *Micro-Affirmations in Academic Advising: Small Acts, Big Impact*, 15 MENTOR: AN ACAD. ADVISING J. (2013), https://journals.psu.edu/mentor/article/view/61286/60919.

[116] BAME, *supra* note 25, at 46.

[117] Standlee, *supra* note 59.59

[118] "[I]f you accept that one's mind is a major battlefield for belonging where many thoughts arise leading one to be uncertain about whether or not they belong, then one way to help facilitate belonging is to reduce such uncertainties, strengthen confidence, and affirms one's belief that they belong in college." STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 169.

[119] MASS. INST. OF TECH., *supra* note 105.

[120] Steven Foster, *The Importance of Relationships in Enhancing Belonging and Academic Achievement*, LAW SCH. ACAD. SUPPORT BLOG (Aug. 29, 2019), https://lawprofessors.typepad.com/academic_support/2019/08/on-belonging.html.

The terminology used in talking to academically struggling students can affect whether and how students see themselves as legitimate members of the community.[121] "Advisors, counselors, and faculty alike would do well to avoid labeling students in ways that diminish their sense of efficacy and self: at-risk, endangered, high-risk, troubled, borderline, illegal, alien, and more."[122] Even terminology used in academic probation letters can influence students' feelings about their abilities to succeed: "framing probation as a process not a label, communicating 'you're not the only one,' acknowledging specific, valid reasons students can struggle in college, and offering hope for returning to good standing."[123]

E. *Overall Institutional Inclusivity*

 "[I]nstitutions should place greater emphasis on valuing students from all backgrounds, creating an inclusive community, and integrating diversity into the curriculum."[124]Having a culturally engaged campus humanizes the student experience and reinforces messages of belonging as a member of a diverse community.[125]

A law school can focus on inclusive practices within the classroom, including "the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all . . . embrac[ing] a view of the individual and individual difference as the course of diversity that can enrich the lives and learnings of others."[126] For example, students from diverse backgrounds can discuss how differences shape their experience in school and in the world generally.[127] This conversation can "increase[] intergroup understanding and collaboration, empathy, and civic engagement."[128]Classrooms that are inclusive, and by definition not exclusionary, increase a student's sense of belonging.[129]

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[121] STRAYHORN, *supra* note 1, at 168.

[122] *Id.* at 169–70.

[123] Greg Walton & Timothy Wilson, *"Psychologically Attuned" Academic Probation Letters Decreased Feelings of Shame and Stigma and Improved Academic Behaviors Among College Students*, WISE INTERVENTIONS, https://www.wiseinterventions.org/posters/psychologically-attuned-academic-probation-letters-decreased-feelings-of-shame-and-stigma-and-improved-academic-behaviors-among-college-students-over-a-year (last visited Apr. 14, 2022) (citing Shannon T. Brady, A Scarlet Letter? Institutional Messages About Probation Can but Need Not, Elicit Shame and Stigma (August 2017) (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University)).

[124] Petzold, *supra* note 72.

[125] Salazar, *supra* note 59, at 27.

[126] CHRISTINE HOCKINGS, INCLUSIVE LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH 1 (2010).

[127] Stephens et al., *supra* note 62, at 944.

[128] *Id.*

[129] MASS. INST. OF TECH., *supra* note 105.

Professors can model inclusive behavior by being precise with language and avoiding idioms, unnecessary jargon, or niche cultural references that might not be translated literally or that students of particular backgrounds might not understand.[130] Similarly, professors would be well served to refraining from stereotypes about who does or does not belong in the profession.[131] Symbols and objects in and around the classroom should also reflect diversity and inclusivity.[132] For example, professors can create hypotheticals or images on PowerPoint slides that involve attorneys from a variety of different backgrounds.

In addition to classroom practices, law schools can strive for an inclusive curriculum, "one where all students' entitlement to access and participate in a course is anticipated and taken into account."[133] Such a curriculum will include courses studying different perspectives and readings from authors of a variety of backgrounds.[134]

Finally, having faculty members and other role models that are also members of typically excluded groups can create an inclusive academic environment that fosters belongingness.[135] This is only true, however, if the diverse faculty members are a substantive and integral part of the school's programming and community events. Merely having faculty from underrepresented populations is not enough to signal to students that they belong. Valuing people just for their diversity is tokenism, but valuing people for who they are creates belonging.

F. *Belongingness Concerns*

The last category of interventions that support belongingness, although perhaps the most significant category in terms of effects on vulnerable student populations, is the idea of normalizing uncertainty and doubt about

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[130] "Modeling inclusiveness can provide a power learning experience for all students." SUSAN A. AMBROSE ET AL., HOW LEARNING WORKS: SEVEN RESEARCH-BASED PRINCIPLES FOR SMART TEACHING 183 (2010).

[131] MASS. INST. OF TECH., *supra* note 105; Lewis et al., *supra* note 9, at 7.

[132] MASS. INST. OF TECH., *supra* note 105; Lewis et al., *supra* note 9, at 7.

[133] HANNAH MORGAN & ANN-MARIE HOUGHTON, INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM DESIGN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE ACROSS AND WITHIN SUBJECT AREAS 7 (2011). Kimberly M. Mutcherson, Co-Dean and Professor of Law at Rutgers Law School, urged law schools to "re-visit their curricula and note how they fail to adequately grapple with law as a tool of oppression (past and present)." Kimberly M. Mutcherson, *Foreword* to LAW SCHOOL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (LSSSE), 2020 ANNUAL SURVEY RESULTS 4.

[134] BAME, *supra* note 25, at 11; OHIO STATE UNIV., *supra* note 41.

[135] BAME, *supra* note 25, at 33; Johnson, *supra* note 24. Again, Dean Mutcherson advises law schools to "reflect on hiring, tenure, and promotion practices that reinforce a self-perpetuating elitism. Mutcherson, *supra* note 133, at 4.

belonging.[136] Minoritized populations need to hear the message that people like them deserve to be in school and can succeed even through struggles.[137] "The aim is to flip self-fulfilling expectations of nonbelonging and stereotype threat into ones of safety and belonging."[138]

One way to normalize these challenges is to explicitly tell students that the struggles are common to many people and will dissipate over time.[139] This conversation "provide[s] students a nonthreatening frame for interpreting the daily challenges of school."[140] Additionally, it "de-racialize[s] the meaning of hardship in college and the doubt about belonging that it can trigger"[141] so that minoritized students are "less likely to view hardships and doubts as signs that they do not belong."[142] Instead, students can attribute struggles to the natural academic transitions rather than their own failures or lack of belongingness.[143]

Additionally, students about to graduate can share with incoming students how their diverse backgrounds shaped their academic experience and how they succeeded.[144] Focusing this conversation on the influence of their backgrounds, rather than just on how they adjusted to school, provides greater benefit to incoming diverse students who might be worried about belonging.[145]

Relatedly, two recent psychological studies suggest a specific intervention to normalize belongingness concerns and also provide a framework for minoritized students to see themselves in the academic environment. Both studies worked with underrepresented populations—one with first-generation students at a private university[146] and the other with women in a male-dominated engineering program.[147] In each study, the intervention featured people talking about how their background shaped their school experience and how they had and overcame concerns about

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[136] Murphy et al., *supra* notes 45. "Social-belonging interventions often work by helping matriculating students understand common worries about fitting in and belonging as normal and temporary." Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 48, at 434.

[137] Stephens et al., *supra* note 62, at 944.

[138] Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 61, at 434.

[139] Hausmann et al., *supra* note 42, at 652; Walton & Cohen, *supra* note 34, at 1448 ("Concerns about belonging were thus represented as common at first, as temporary, and as due to the challenging nature of the college transition.").

[140] Walton & Cohen, *supra* note 34, at 1450.

[141] Walton & Cohen, *supra* note 70, at 94.

[142] MASS. INST. OF TECH., *supra* note 105.

[143] Gregory M. Walton et al., *Two Brief Interventions to Mitigate a "Chilly Climate" Transform Women's Experience, Relationships, and Achievement in Engineering*, 107 J. EDUC. PSYCH. 468, 469 (2014).

[144] MASS. INST. OF TECH., *supra* note 105.

[145] *Id.*

[146] Stephens et al., *supra* note 62, at 945.

[147] Walton et al., *supra* note 143, at 471.

belonging.[148] After receiving that information, the participants in the study were asked to write a summary of what they had heard and also incorporate their own experience and story either in a video testimonial or letter to a future student.[149] Both studies found the intervention helped the participants integrate into their programs with better psychological health and levels of engagement.[150]

Law schools could replicate this intervention for incoming minoritized student groups. For example, a school could host a panel of third-year students who have diverse backgrounds in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, first-generation status who are willing to share their experiences. Prior to the panel discussion, have members of the student body complete a survey so the results can be shared with the incoming students to set the stage. The survey could ask students to indicate the strength of their agreement or disagreement with statements related to belonging. For example:

- When I started law school:
    - I worried about whether I would fit in.
    - I worried about whether I would be taken seriously by professors or classmates.
    - I worried about whether I would be respected in the law school environment.
    - I was intimidated by professors.
    - I was intimidated by my classmates.
    - I felt confident that I had the ability to succeed.
- Now in my third year:
    - I feel like I fit in.
    - I am comfortable in the academic environment.
    - I am confident that others view me in a positive light.
    - I have made good friends with my classmates.
    - I have good relationships with professors.
    - I feel confident I can be a competent lawyer.

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[148] Stephens et al., *supra* note 62, at 945–46; Walton et al., *supra* note 143, at 472–73.
[149] Stephens et al., *supra* note 62, at 946; Walton et al., *supra* note 143, at 473.
[150] Stephens et al., *supra* note 62, at 949; Walton et al., *supra* note 143, at 481.

After providing the results of this survey to the incoming students, highlight some important takeaways, including that many students initially question whether they belong in law school.

The panelist could present in person or answer questions in writing to be given to incoming students. But the focus of the conversation should be on how students' different backgrounds influenced their law school experience, how they came to feel like they belong at that institution and struggles they may have faced and overcome. Possible questions include:[151]

- Students can have a wide variety of experiences with their transition to law school from many different backgrounds. Thinking back, what was the transition to law school like for you?

- What were your impressions of law school and how you might fit into the community when you first started? How did that change over time?

- Share some specific challenges about coming to law school. Can you provide an example of an obstacle you faced when you started law school and how you overcame it?

- What would you advise students with similar backgrounds as your own as they start law school?

- What experiences that you had prior to law school prepared you to excel in ways that you wouldn't have anticipated at the time?

As with all DEIB work, however, the burden cannot and should not fall on diverse populations alone. It is vital to educate students in the majority groups and then include them into the work of belongingness as well. Students from the majority population groups could join panel discussions to share work they did for themselves to increase community and belongingness for classmates who did not share their same dominant cultural experiences.

A final part of the intervention designed to help incoming students internalize the messages they heard is the "saying-is-believing" component.[152] This step of the process requires the incoming students to do two things. First, write a brief summary of the presentation, both of the statistics from the survey and the panel discussion.[153] They could also write

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[151] Adapted from Stephens et al., *supra* note 62, at 946.

[152] *Id.* at 946; Walton et al., *supra* note 143, at 473; René F. Kizilcec et al., *Closing Global Achievement Gaps in MOOCS*, 355 SCIENCE 251 (2017).

[153] Walton et al., *supra* note 143, at 473.

this information in the context of a survey: what were the three most important takeaways from the session?[154] Second, the incoming students should describe the information they heard in the context of their own personal background and offer advice to next year's students.[155] This activity encourages students to see themselves as helping others and also allows them to apply the survey results and panelists' stories to their own upcoming experience in law school.

This series of relatively small interventions can have a large impact on incoming students who are members of systematically excluded populations. It can help to normalize the doubts and worries about belonging in a new environment.

V. CONCLUSION

Belongingness is critical to a student's success in law school. While schools have consciously worked to improve the diversity of their class profiles and to ensure a more inclusive and equitable environment, these factors do not necessarily result in a student subjectively feeling like part of the community. Law faculty and administrators can address this important aspect of the educational experience by first being aware of the issues, particularly for systematically excluded students, and then taking steps, including the ones identified in this essay, to foster a sense of belongingness among all students. To be clear, these students are not victims; they are high achieving people with goals and dreams, and we all must work to alleviate the systemic institutional and personal biases so that they feel safe, authentic, and welcome in the legal academy.

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[154] Stephens et al., *supra* note 62, at 946.
[155] *Id.*; Walton et al., *supra* note 143, at 473.