

Building Resilience:

Case Studies on Student Interventions & Psychological Insights

A White Paper on the May 2024 inaugural Building Resilience Conference, hosted by the University of Pittsburgh School of Law

BY ANN SINSHEIMER, JD/PHD, ANDRELE ST. VAL, JD,
OMID FOTUHI, PHD, & CIARA WILLETT, PHD

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Introduction

In May 2024, the University of Pittsburgh School of Law hosted an inaugural conference focused on cultivating psychological resilience, well-being, and adaptive mindsets among law students. As future lawyers navigate the rigorous and high-pressure environment of law school, they encounter a myriad of stressors that can significantly impact their well-being and long-term professional and personal success. Compounded over time, such stressors have the potential to derail students from their academic and professional pursuits, and worse, instill in them a sense that they simply don't belong in any law-related program. In contrast, programs that instill students with essential skills and adaptive mindsets contribute to the ethical practice of law, reduce burnout, and improve retention rates in the profession.

The Building Resilience conference series aims to transform how law schools and other professional programs address student resilience, well-being, and belonging. At the inaugural conference, presenters and attendees were invited to explore student interventions that can be seamlessly integrated into legal education and other professional programs. By bringing together experts from a diverse group of legal educators, psychologists, and practitioners, the conference set the stage for significant advancements in legal education, ultimately benefiting both students and the legal profession as a whole. This conference serves as more than just a discussion forum but a launchpad for collaborative efforts to implement these strategies in law schools across the country.

This white paper outlines the key goals of the conference, provides a detailed account of the presentations and discussions, and proposes next steps for implementing the insights gained. By documenting the collective wisdom and actionable strategies derived from the conference, this paper seeks to serve as a valuable resource for law schools aiming to foster a supportive and resilient academic environment. **Through continued collaboration and innovation, we can ensure that future generations of lawyers are intellectually equipped, psychologically resilient, and ready to thrive in their demanding careers.**

Goals of the Conference

TO TRANSFORM THE LEGAL EDUCATION SPACE BY...

1. Convening Legal and Psychological Experts. The conference fostered interdisciplinary collaboration among legal scholars, psychology researchers, and educators. By leveraging the expertise of a diverse group of professionals, the conference adopted a holistic approach to supporting students.

2. Forming an Advisory Board. To continue sharing knowledge, ideas, and resources across institutions, the conference established a network of like-minded professionals who are committed to transforming the legal education space. One of the board's primary functions will be to help scale these interventions nationally. New members will continue to be actively sought in order to expand this effort.

3. Exploring and Encouraging Innovation. By sharing the latest research findings and encouraging collaboration across institutions, the conference aimed to drive continuous innovation in psychological interventions and educational strategies that support law and professional students.

4. Fostering Inclusive Learning Environments. Students from underrepresented groups are often at greater risk of questioning their place and value in competitive domains because of the added burden of negative stereotypes, which drain limited cognitive resources, place unnecessary emotional strain, and increased belonging uncertainty. The conference highlighted ways to promote a sense of belonging and an inclusive law school community.

5. Supporting Long-Term Professional Success. Topics focused on equipping law students with the skills necessary for long-term professional success. This includes fostering traits such as emotional regulation, stress management, and adaptability, which are essential for thriving in the legal profession.

6. Developing Actionable Strategies. A key goal was to translate insights into actionable strategies that law schools can implement to create supportive learning environments. A designated round-table discussion helped facilitate the sharing of ideas and feedback among conference attendees.

Conference Proceedings

KEYNOTE TALKS & INVITED SPEAKERS

SHANNON BRADY, PHD

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY

Dr. Brady's extensive research focuses on how institutional practice can impact students' well-being, relationships, and academic achievement. Her keynote address highlighted "meaning-making", and how institutional messaging can either contribute to or mitigate inequality in education.



VICTOR QUINTANILLA, JD/PHD

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Dr. Quintanilla's keynote address highlighted how to incorporate psychological resilience in legal education, provided actionable strategies for fostering supportive learning environments, and emphasized the importance of resilience in achieving long-term professional success.

FOSTERING RESILIENCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN LAW STUDENTS

Ann Sinsheimer, JD/PhD, Andrele St. Val, JD, and Omid Fotuhi, PhD

introduced the Resilience & Engagement program, which uses research-backed interventions to promote resilience and well-being among law students. Depending on student needs and resources, these interventions can be implemented on a short-term basis (guided classroom discussions during critical periods of stress) or ideally, long-term (classes designed to promote belonging and resilience).

FAILURE IS ALWAYS AN OPTION: BUILDING RESILIENCE AMONG LAW STUDENTS THROUGH IMPROV

Ben Bratman, JD, and Olwyn Conway, JD, discussed their cross-institution efforts to foster student resilience by introducing improvisation activities in the classroom. The class emphasizes embracing failure as a learning opportunity and creating a supportive community so that students can thrive. Through improv, students build transferable skills like listening, empathy, nonverbal communication, and the ability to handle the unexpected.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH A RESILIENCE FOCUSED PRE-LAW AND FIRST-YEAR CURRICULUM

Susan Tanner, JD/PhD and **Jess Findley, PhD** presented their cross-institutional research on innovative approaches to enhancing student well-being. The JD-Next program is a pre-law asynchronous online course designed to bridge the gap between undergraduate education and law school. Students participate in a combination of skill-development workshops (case briefings, legal writing, etc.), mentoring from law professionals and educators, and resilience training modules that focus on stress management, mindfulness, and coping strategies. The Resilience-Focused First-Year Curriculum is designed for 1L students and aligns with ABA Standard 303, with an emphasis on professional identity development alongside traditional legal instruction. Students attend professional identity workshops, form peer support groups, and have access to well-being resources like mental health professionals, mindfulness exercises, and stress-relief activities.

THE STETSON INNS: FOSTERING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION THROUGH RELATIONSHIP-RICH EDUCATION

Anne Mullins, JD, and **Kelley Thompson, JD,** introduced The Stetson Inns -- a new approach to fostering authentic engagement and a deep sense of belonging. During orientation, students from all academic sections are divided into Inns and assigned an upper-level mentor and faculty advisor. Since the introduction of the Inns, campus engagement has increased, and more students report feeling like they built community during orientation, have support from at least one upper-level student, have support from at least one faculty or staff member, and like they joined the profession by the end of orientation.

MINDFULNESS: A TOOL TO PROMOTE RESILIENCE AND WELL-BEING FOR LAW STUDENTS

Lynn Su, JD, explained how regular mindfulness practices (meditation, breath work, mindful movement) can strengthen law students' resilience and improve their overall well-being. In Su's "Mindful Lawyering" course, students learn how to practice mindfulness and purposefully become present in the moment without judgment, which allows them to accept adversity with grace, find joy in their work, and navigate challenges and setbacks with resilience, resolve, and equanimity.

EQUIPPING FACULTY TO INTEGRATE CHARACTER: A WORKSHOP ON TEACHING RESILIENCE

Nancy Winfrey, PhD, described an innovative partnership with the Program for Leadership and Character in the Professional Schools, which balances the traditional habits of mind ("Think like a lawyer") with dispositions of character ("Who you are matters"). During a faculty workshop, attendees discuss the importance of resilience, how to integrate resilience-focused strategies at relevant and meaningful points in their courses, and push students to grapple with their perception of resilience.

CREATING SPACE FOR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BELONGING

Kevin Binning, PhD, discussed how mounting evidence suggests that having students spontaneously talk to each other about belonging can have a profound impact on their experiences, yet they are unlikely to do so without the proper foundation and guidance. He presented findings from his large field experiments testing the impact of implementing belonging conversations in classrooms, and provided principles for guiding conversations around belonging with students.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY IN ADDRESSING TRAUMA AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

Brenda Gibson, JD discussed the issue of trauma, the importance of building community in our classrooms and the profession, and how this fosters resilience. Drawing from her own experience, she discussed the strategies she uses in her teaching to help make the classroom a brave space, including growth mindset readings and exercises and the opportunities her assignments create for students to “fail forward.”

RESILIENCE: OVERCOMING EMOTIONAL BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Mary Nicol Bowman, JD discussed the roles of mental health challenges, learning disabilities, trauma experiences, and emotion in learning and how law schools often implicitly suggest that struggle is failure rather than a normal part of the path to success. She offered concrete universal design strategies that law faculty can use to help all students build resilience and therefore improve student learning: encouraging bravery, providing context and connections, removing shame from the struggle, addressing procrastination, and using feedback in the learning process.

TEACHING RESILIENCE TO CLINIC STUDENTS

Natalie Netzel, JD/MSE introduced the “Resilient Practice for Clinic Students” course, which is grounded in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration’s tenets of trauma-informed care. Together, the students and professor unpack the law school experience and explore how “trauma-informed lawyering” can benefit clients, lawyers, and law students. Students are encouraged to meet their own needs as they engage in mutual care and collectively develop strategies to remain resilient throughout their career.

NAVIGATING MENTAL HEALTH TOGETHER

Sheila Confer, EdD, Haley Hayden, MA, Marcy Yonkey, MFA, and Susan Graff, MS presented a documentary in which students, staff, and faculty discuss ways they recognize and manage mental health challenges in themselves and others. The presenters encouraged attendees to adopt a shared humanity perspective, in order to create an environment in which all students feel supported and validated, and can cultivate mental wellness and resilience.

THE MINDFUL LAWYER: INCORPORATING MINDFULNESS INTO THE LAW SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Allie Linsenmeyer, MSE, provided an overview of different wellness initiatives at Pitt Law. In response to recent data showing a decline in students’ mental wellness, Pitt Law has made a substantial effort to encourage students to recognize the importance of wellness and be proactive in their physical and mental health. In her Mindful Lawyer course, Linsenmeyer introduces students to the eight dimensions of wellness for law students and practicing lawyers.

BUILDING LAW STUDENT RESILIENCE THROUGH DIALOGUE

Nicole Appleberry described “Dialogue Across Difference”, a course that cultivates legal skills using intergroup dialogue techniques. Every aspect of the course is infused with trauma-informed neuroscience principles in order to foster mindfulness, respect, compassion, and student well being. Students report feeling more connected to their peers (even those with divergent views), that they are more able to handle challenging encounters with their friends and families and are less likely to react with trauma responses, and can navigate law school and life with more resilience.

Key Takeaways



LAW STUDENTS CARRY HIGH LEVELS OF STRESS

In law school, students experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression due to academic demands, competition, and future career pressures.



STRESS IS AN EMOTIONAL BARRIER TO LEARNING

The cognitive energy required to cope with emotional barriers -- such as stress, trauma, anxiety, and fear of failure -- can impede students' ability to focus, retain information, and learn.



SCHOOLS MUST ADAPT & OFFER MORE SUPPORT

Law school is an environment characterized by high expectations and a competitive culture, and often lacks the necessary support systems for students to thrive.

Actionable Strategies

Create inclusive and supportive learning environments by promoting open dialogue about mental health, providing mental health resources, and creating safe spaces for students to share their concerns and experiences. Students will feel better supported by their peers and mentors, develop stronger connections, and feel less isolated during their time in law school.

Train faculty to promote resilience.

Workshops, seminars, and professional development opportunities can help equip faculty with the knowledge and skills to support students' mental health, recognize signs of distress, and create an inclusive and supportive classroom environment.

Teach practical skills for building student resilience. Providing students with the tools and coping mechanisms to emotionally regulate and manage stress can help to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. For example, mindfulness practices like meditation, breathing exercises, journaling, and mindful movement, have been shown to improve attention, reduce stress, and enhance student resilience.

Normalize failure and encourage a growth mindset. Embracing failure as a learning experience can help reduce students' fear of making mistakes and build resilience. For example, improvisation can be incorporated into the classroom to create an environment where students can take risks and learn from mistakes.

Final Thoughts

The journey to fostering resilience and well-being in law students is ongoing, and it requires a collective effort from the entire legal education community. The University of Pittsburgh School of Law's conference has provided a roadmap for this journey, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, evidence-based interventions, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Together, we can create a legal education system that not only prepares students for professional success but also supports their mental health and overall well-being.

Our inaugural Building Resilience in Law conference has been tremendously successful in starting the conversation about the need for such programs. Now, we look forward to continuing to support the sharing of insights, nurturing meaningful collaborations, and investing in the continued facilitation and dissemination of valuable and actionable insights. Through these collaborative efforts, we can ensure that the next generation of lawyers is resilient, adaptable, and ready to make a positive impact on the world.

- Ann Sinsheimer, Andrele St. Val, Omid Fotuhi, & Ciara Willett

How to Get Involved

The Resilience and Engagement group invites law and professional schools to reach out and join our advisory board, participate in pilot programs, or otherwise engage with our initiative.

Website: tinyurl.com/PittLawPsy

Email: lawpsy@gmail.com

Facebook & LinkedIn: LawPsy

Instagram: LawPsyProject

