

The Privilege of Speaking with You

By Tish Vincent

Every autumn and spring, I travel around Michigan visiting the state's law students in their professional responsibility classes. This is one of the things I love most about my job. I meet the newest members of our profession and share with them some knowledge and understanding about the stresses of becoming and being a lawyer. More importantly, I have the privilege of meeting them and hearing about their experiences of becoming lawyers.

What stresses concern them? In the classroom, they talk of the competition, the long hours studying, the amount of work expected, and their fear of falling behind others. In private after the presentation, they talk of family problems, relationship problems, and histories of substance-use disorders or emotional illnesses that worsen in law school.

In telephone calls, we hear from those who struggle to pass the bar exam, those who feel their law school is not a safe place to speak of their problems, and those fearing the character and fitness process. Some come in and work with the State Bar's Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program to address their difficulties. We are privileged to see these law students develop resiliency, strength, and stamina.

Yet many others never reach out to us; we don't know if our presentations were helpful or not. Other lawyers' assistance programs have similar experiences.

In my most recent Practicing Wellness columns, I've discussed the 2017 National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being report *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change*, which includes nine recommendations for law schools.¹ In the first paragraph of the introduction to these recommendations, the

authors quote Abigail Patthoff and her study of law schools: "Research suggests that law students are among the most dissatisfied, demoralized, and depressed of graduate-student populations."² They also quote Lawrence Kreiger, who said "[r]esearch tells us that within the first three months of law school students experience a significant increase in anxiety and depression."³

When presenting to law students, we share these research findings. Many students are relieved. Some come up afterward and say, "Whew! I thought it was only me!"

The task force report contains the following recommendations for law schools:

- Create best practices for detecting and assisting students experiencing psychological distress.
 - Provide training to faculty members relating to student mental health and substance use disorders.
 - Adopt a uniform attendance policy to detect early warning signs of students in crisis.
 - Provide mental health and substance-use disorder resources.
- Assess law school practices and offer faculty education on promoting well-being in the classroom.
- Empower students to help fellow students in need.
- Include well-being topics in courses on professional responsibility.
- Commit resources for onsite professional counselors.
- Facilitate a confidential recovery network.
- Provide education opportunities on well-being related topics.
 - Provide well-being programming during the 1L year.
 - Create a well-being course and lecture series for students.
- Discourage alcohol-centered social events.
- Conduct anonymous surveys relating to student well-being.⁴

The task force calls on stakeholders in the legal profession to study these recommendations, consider which changes they can endorse, and find a way to be active in support of these changes.

Professional responsibility course professors impress me with their concern for their students' well-being. These professors understand that students need to tend to their personal health to stay fit to practice in the future and maintain resiliency throughout their law school careers.

The point of entry to the legal culture is law school. The nation's law schools need

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to embrace or build on these recommendations willingly and see the wisdom presented by the task force. I would begin with training faculty members on student mental health and substance-use disorders, providing well-being programming during the first year, and discouraging alcohol-centered social events.⁵

As licensed members of the legal profession, we need to understand the unique challenges today's law students face. Reading the task force report; taking an interest

in the recommendations; and asking your alma mater what it is doing to promote well-being, educate faculty, and diminish the emphasis on alcohol at social events will make a difference. As our law schools become more supportive of well-being, the profession as a whole will benefit. ■

Tish Vincent is the program administrator for the State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program.

ENDNOTES

1. Buchanan & Coyle, *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change*, American Bar Association (August 2017) <<https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportFINAL.pdf>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed April 10, 2018.
2. *Id.*, p 35. See also Patthoff, *This is Your Brain on Law School: The Impact of Fear-Based Narratives on Law Students*, 2015 Utah L Rev 391 (2015) <<https://dc.law.utah.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1092&context=ulr>>.
3. *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being*, p 35. See also Kreiger, *Institutional Denial About the Dark Side of Law School, and Fresh Empirical Guidance for Constructively Breaking the Silence*, 52 J Legal Educ 112 (2002) <<https://ir.law.fsu.edu/articles/99/>>.
4. *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being*, pp 35-40.
5. I'm not alone in suggesting this. See, e.g., Jaffe, *The Key to Law Student Well Being? We Have to Love Our Law Students*, NALP PD Quarterly (February 2018), pp 11-18 <<https://www.wcl.american.edu/impact/lawwire/the-key-to-law-student-well-being-we-have-to-love-our-law-students/>>.



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