SAMPLE OP-ED:
State Support for Legal Education

Aspiring lawyers, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, need our help.

Law school presents a considerable financial commitment. This financial barrier can be particularly steep for low-income students and students of color. Without adequate financial support, these students are left to rely exclusively on loans to fund their education, which increases both the expense and the risks associated with attending law school. Therefore, it is imperative that [State] provide financial aid to students who are qualified to pursue law degrees, but lack the financial means to do so.

As a practitioner, you understand the specific challenges that law students face when it comes to financing their legal education. Here, you may want to incorporate a personal story about, or provide a data point on, underrepresented students to illustrate the human impact that financial support can have.

Earning a law degree can have many benefits. Those who practice law provide essential services premised on ensuring the provision of justice and equity in our country. These lawyers work as prosecutors, public defenders, government attorneys, and in roles throughout the public and private sectors.

Some lawyers also serve as lower cost providers of legal services, a very important role given vast access to justice gaps. Many low-income and middle-class people struggle to afford adequate legal representation. Efforts to fill this gap through publicly-funded or charitable provisions of legal services fail to scratch the surface of the problem—due largely to an overburdened legal aid system, 86 percent of low-income Americans with civil legal issues in 2017 received inadequate or no legal representation, according to the Legal Services Corporation. But research shows that lawyers who come from underserved backgrounds are more likely to practice law in underserved communities.¹ Therefore, broader, representative diversity in the legal profession would not only be a good thing on its own, it would actively contribute to access to justice and, as a result, strengthen faith in our justice system.

State support for law students with financial need could help meet the occupational demand in the legal field. Between 2016 and 2026, lawyers are projected to have the most job openings among occupations that require a graduate or professional degree.² This may be driven, in part, by the demand for attorneys in rural and underserved areas.
Here you may wish to include state-specific information about employment demand. For example, what areas of practice need more qualified attorneys in your state. Localized information is compelling to policymakers and will help them as they consider your viewpoint.

And law degrees encourage economic growth. Lawyers enjoy relatively stable employment and wages, which contribute to their own financial well-being and to that of their larger community. Even those who graduate law school but do not practice law often serve in stable, well-paying roles where their law degree is an asset. The type of economic vitality that is aided by higher education can have societal benefits, such as increased tax revenue, less reliance on public assistance, and less crime.

Here, again, you may want to include local data that will connect with the concerns of your legislators. For example, you can detail how law students are able to earn more and thus contribute more in taxes when they are graduates.

What makes the United States distinctive, if not exceptional, in the world is its adherence to the rule of law. The belief that a functional society could be formed around the notion of free, representative government was a powerful notion when envisioned. And it remains so today. To live up to the lofty ideals of justice and fairness, we must have a legal profession that is broadly accessible. In order to have an accessible profession, legal education must be accessible as well.

A state-based framework for financial aid to law students could take the form of grants targeting aspiring lawyers with financial need. Requirements could include a promise by the recipient to work in specific underserved fields or communities and to work in the state for a certain number of years. There is much precedent for such programs in other fields, such as teaching and medicine. It would help generate economic growth, retain talent in our state, and ensure broad access to critical legal services. In short, it would be a literal investment in the future of [State].
