



RAISING THE BAR

EVIDENCE-BASED THINKING ABOUT THE BAR EXAM

Summer 2026
Volume 9 Issue 3

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Welcome to the third annual PLEDGE takeover issue of *Raising the Bar*. Now entering its fifth cohort, the Professionals in Legal Education Developing Greater Equity (PLEDGE) is a 14-month professional development program that trains law school administrators and faculty in empirical research methods. PLEDGE Fellows apply their training in quantitative and qualitative methods to research hypotheticals derived from their professional insights and institutional data. The PLEDGE program is classic AccessLex.

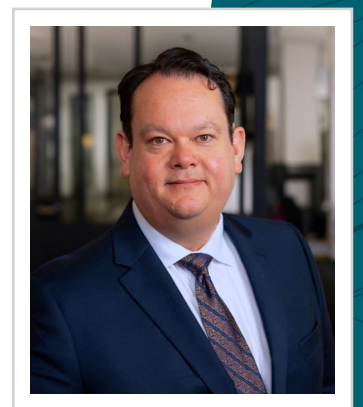
Our programming at AccessLex Institute® is defined by collaboration, as we consistently engage peers in the legal education field to create programs that generate insights and confirm outcomes that benefit law students. The PLEDGE program is distinctive in that it also seeks to cultivate new empirical research peers from the legal education community. The capstone project that PLEDGE Fellows complete at the conclusion of their 14-month program typically marks their first empirical research project. But, as newly minted research practitioners, PLEDGE Fellows continue to engage in research and publications that elevate the field and the academe.



The application period for the next cohort of PLEDGE Fellows is open now through July 12th. Consider applying today.

As you reflect on your place in the ranks of practitioner researchers, we welcome you to engage with the insights of past PLEDGE Fellows highlighted in this takeover issue of *Raising the Bar*. In this issue, PLEDGE Fellowship teams investigated:

- The value of bar preparation stipends beyond the dollar amount (Brooklyn Law School);
- Recruitment as an unsuspected barrier to academic peer support programs (Thomas M. Cooley Law School);
- The impact of duration on law school pipeline and bridge programs (The Catholic University of America Columbus School of Law and Howard University School of Law); and
- The experiences and resilience of double-first generation students in law school (Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center and University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law).



I hope that the work of these AccessLex Institute PLEDGE Fellows sparks an idea and desire to participate in this or other programs. Whether your first step in engaging is applying to the PLEDGE program, or attending our [LexCon annual conference](#), we always value your insights and welcome your collaboration.

Joel Chanvisanuruk, M.P.A., J.D.

Senior Director, Programs for Academic and Bar Success
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PLEDGE FELLOWSHIP RESEARCH AND REFLECTIONS

Brooklyn Law School

Julie Brown is the Registrar and Robert Fisher is the Associate Director of Bar Preparation at Brooklyn Law School. They are 2025-26 PLEDGE Fellows.

It's well established that law students now graduate with more debt than law students in the past. Rent is more expensive than ever, food is more expensive than ever, and tuition is more expensive than ever. Studying for the bar exam can further stress students financially. Bar preparation courses have never been cheap, and taking the time to study can mean giving up working hours or adding expenses such as extra help with childcare. Many students fund much of their summer study with credit cards.

Knowing that these pressures are particularly acute for students going to law school in the heart of New York City, Brooklyn Law School has provided students with grants to help defray the costs of bar study. During recent administrations of the bar exam, the grants have been for \$1,000 and open to students taking the bar exam for the first time with both financial need and academic indicators that suggest that they are at higher risk of not succeeding.

The funds have come with relatively few strings attached. Essentially the only requirement for students to receive the funds has been that they affirm that they will use them for purposes of bar study and indicate which bar review course they will be using.



Given that these students are in significant debt and the grant amount is relatively small, it has been posited that these grants, on their own, simply do not move the needle in a meaningful way for students.

Through the PLEDGE Fellowship, we have been collecting feedback from students who received these grants in the last couple of years. As part of our research, we have interviewed students to determine whether the grants are really making a difference to them in their studies. We have sought to learn how students use the funds. Do they use it to pay for food? Rent? Bar study courses or supplements? Did receiving the money allow them to reduce work hours? Did it make them feel more supported by the school? More inclined to study?

Or is it simply not enough to make any difference in the scheme of hundred-thousand-plus dollars in debt?

In addition, we have been collecting feedback on whether students prefer receiving the funds or would rather the school provide them with access to direct academic interventions such as consistent tutoring sessions or specific study supplements.

We are also exploring students' feelings towards adding requirements for receiving the funds, such as a regular check-in component with a member of academic success or a requirement that students complete a certain percentage of their bar study program before funds are released to them.

The interviews conducted thus far suggest that students have benefited from the grant in a number of ways, both tangibly in terms of covering bar and living expenses and emotionally through increased feelings that the school supported them and believed in their abilities to pass.

We look forward to presenting our full findings at LexCon '26



Thomas M. Cooley Law School

Lesley Cremeans, Ph.D., is the Assistant Director at the Teaching and Learning Center, and Tonya Krause-Phelan is the Associate Dean of Academics and Professor at Thomas M. Cooley Law School. They were 2024-25 PLEDGE Fellows.

While peer learning programs are well established in undergraduate and medical education, there is comparatively limited research examining peer learning in law schools. Existing scholarship consistently demonstrates that peer teaching and mentoring can strengthen student learning outcomes while also deepening peer educators' own understanding of course material. However, little is known about how law schools recruit and select peer educators or whether those processes promote equitable access to leadership opportunities.

At Thomas M. Cooley Law School, student success and educational equity are central to the institution's mission. In fall 2023, the law school launched a peer learning program, the Dean's Fellow program, through its Academic Resource Center (ARC) to provide peer-to-peer academic support for first-year law students. Designed to foster collaboration, belonging, and practical skill development, the peer learning program connects students with peer educators who understand the unique demands of legal education.

The Dean's Fellow program offers one-on-one and small-group support focused on essential law school competencies, including case analysis, briefing and outlining, exam preparation, and legal reasoning. Because Cooley serves a student body with diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds, the program was also intended to create more inclusive pathways for academic engagement and student success. This was the catalyst for exploring whether the Dean's Fellow program was as accessible as intended.

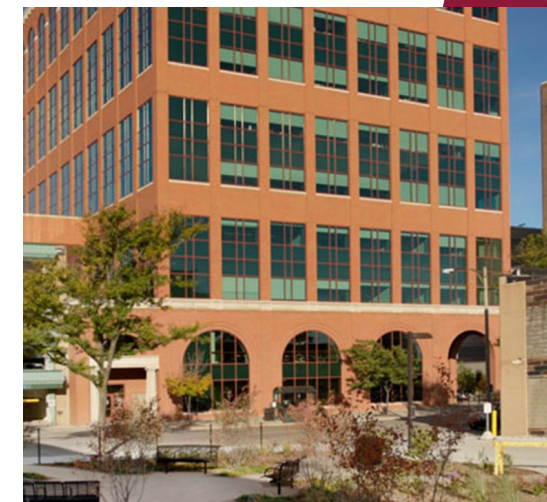
Our qualitative study explores how peer learning programs at ABA-accredited independent law schools approach recruitment and selection practices, while also examining student perceptions of Cooley's Dean's Fellow program.

We conducted both a landscape analysis and a qualitative survey. The landscape analysis examined peer learning programs at 14 ABA-accredited independent law schools through institutional websites, online searches, and publicly available promotional materials. We intentionally focused on independent law schools because their structures more closely resemble Cooley's stand-alone institutional model.

The survey component targeted students who matriculated during the fall 2023 term, when the Dean's Fellow program was introduced. Ninety students were invited to participate, and the survey achieved a 40% response rate. The survey included both open- and closed-ended questions designed to capture student experiences and perceptions of the program.

Three major findings emerged, each pointing to the same underlying problem: a lack of visible, accessible information. First, we found limited publicly available information about peer learning programs at comparable law schools. In many cases, information regarding participation criteria, application procedures, and program structure was difficult to locate. This lack of visibility may unintentionally limit student awareness and access to opportunities.

Second, although students were generally aware of the Dean's Fellow program, many lacked a clear understanding of the eligibility requirements for becoming a peer educator. Participants commonly recognized the minimum GPA requirement but were less aware of additional criteria, including the required grade in Research and Writing and the completion of at least two academic terms. We noted that unclear communication about eligibility may unintentionally discourage otherwise qualified students from pursuing leadership opportunities.





Third, students reported concerns about transparency in the recruitment and selection process. Several participants believed that selection may depend primarily on faculty recommendation or informal recruitment rather than an open application process. These perceptions contributed to uncertainty about how students could become involved.

Based on these findings, we recommend that law schools make peer learning opportunities and selection criteria more visible, accessible, and transparent. Suggested strategies include publicizing application requirements across multiple platforms, engaging faculty and student organizations in outreach efforts, and intentionally communicating with first-term students about future leadership pathways.

At Cooley, we plan to implement several changes informed by the study, including publishing participation requirements on the institution's website and internal communication platforms, increasing informational outreach, and evaluating whether existing GPA requirements create unintended barriers to participation. This paper is in the process of being submitted for publication.



The Catholic University of America Columbus School of Law Howard University School of Law

Shani J.P. Butts is the Assistant Dean for Admissions and Financial Aid at The Catholic University of America, and Tracy L. Simmons is the Associate Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs at Howard University School of Law. They are 2025-26 PLEDGE Fellows.

Prior to June 2023, the use of race in higher education admissions was shaped by two key Supreme Court rulings: [Regents of the University of California v. Bakke](#), which permits the use of race as one of several admissions criteria, and [Grutter v. Bollinger](#), which permits the use of race as one variable in a highly individualized review. Together, these cases created the framework by which admissions professionals had to operate for the past several decades. In the summer of 2023, the Supreme Court issued their ruling in the [Students for Fair Admissions \(SFFA\) v. President and Fellows of Harvard College](#) and the [Students for Fair Admissions \(SFFA\) v. UNC](#) cases, which ban the use of race-conscious admissions in higher education. While the specific language of the ruling is limited to higher education admissions, over the past three years we have seen this ruling used as a basis to dismantle DEI efforts that go far beyond higher education admissions. We are interested in learning to what extent prospective law students feel the effects of that ruling.

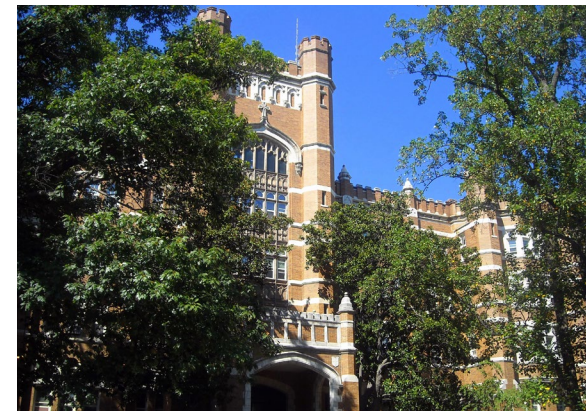
Historically speaking, law school pipeline programs allowed law schools to expand their outreach and helped increase access and opportunity to prospective students from a variety of backgrounds. In many instances, pipeline programs tend to primarily serve first-generation college students, students who come from historically marginalized groups, or students from low-income households. We are interested in learning about what students are experiencing in these programs since the most recent rulings in the summer of 2023.

Our research for this Fellowship focuses on the experiences of pre-law students in short-term and long-term law school pipeline programs. We define short-term programs as a program that is less than four days and a long-term program as a program that is 12 months or longer. Program instruction is delivered either in-person, online, or a hybrid of both.

We came into the Fellowship believing law school pipeline programs are essential. In our experience, the programs not only help expand access by providing step-by-step law school application guidance, they also continue to provide a good level of service and support for students who are starting law school. As we approach the midpoint in our Fellowship, the research seems to suggest that law school pipeline programs go beyond just expanding access to law school, they may even impact the overarching law school experience. Our goal is to ensure that we highlight the aspects of the program that students find most beneficial.

Initially, we were going to focus on two specific programs that we are both familiar with and have worked with extensively over the last several years. However, we ran into a bit of a snag with one of the institution's concerns about the attention they might receive. Specifically, potential backlash in the current political climate related to anything that could be viewed as DEI related, such as programs providing specific support for first-generation students, historically underrepresented students, students of color, etc. While we both know that all the pre-law pipeline programs we research are open to all prospective law students, regardless of race, the perception that the programs could benefit a specific group of people still lingers.

Fortunately, with the help of our AccessLex PLEDGE Fellowship mentors, we were able to pivot quickly. Instead of focusing on one specific short-term law school pipeline program and one specific long-term pipeline program, we opened up our study to include all law school pipeline programs that are less than four days or more than 12 months. We now have a general call for research participants for current law students that have participated in any pipeline program that fits the expanded criteria.



With a number of interviews completed, we have initial observations that present several common themes:

- After completing the program, students felt more confident about their ability to navigate the law school application process.
- After completing the program, students believe there is a place for them in law schools/the legal profession based on interactions with law school deans, professors, and current students who “look like them”.
- After completing the program, students feel a sense of belonging and inclusion as they build friendships and establish support systems with other participants in the program who tend to be first-generation students, historically underrepresented students or students of color.

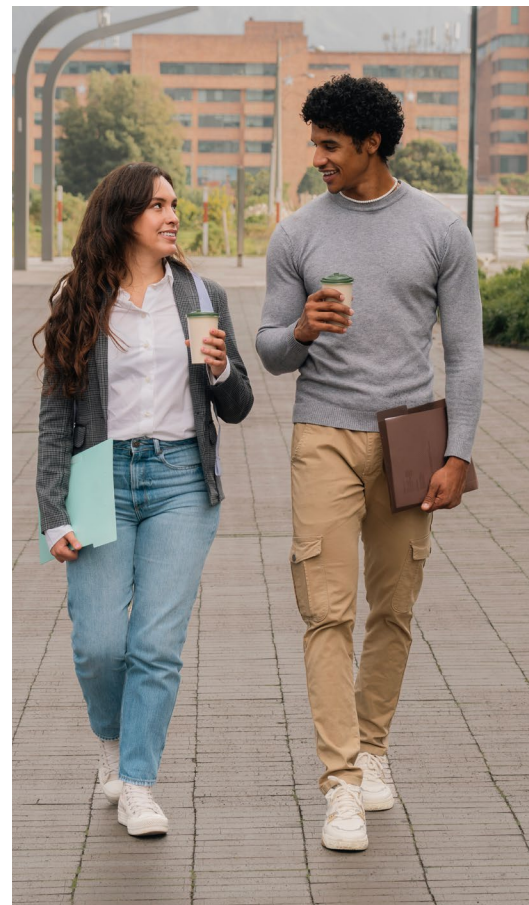
At the start of this Fellowship, our primary research goal was to discover the extent to which students believe their participation in law school pipeline programs assisted them during the admissions process and share the aspects of the program that students found most beneficial on their journey to law school. As we continue to interview law school pipeline program participants, we are discovering that many students believe the positive impacts of the programs go beyond the admissions process. We look forward to continuing our interviews and are excited by what we will discover.



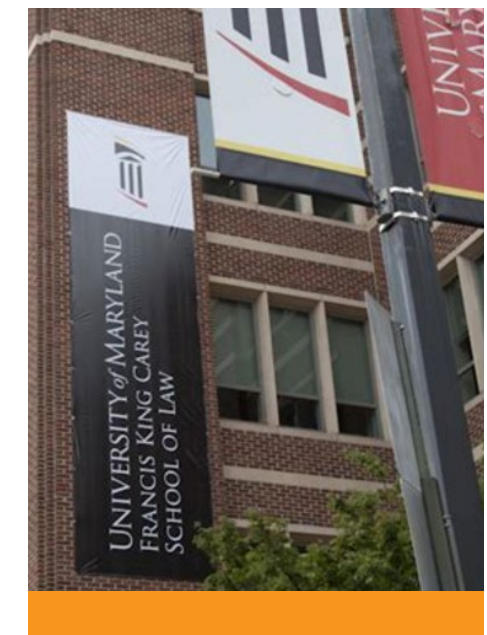
Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law

Aimee Self-Pittman is the Associate Director of Instruction, Research, and Reference at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law. Jennifer Cooper is an Assistant Professor of Law at Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center. They are 2025-26 PLEDGE Fellows.

Our PLEDGE Fellowship project examines how double first-generation students at LSU Law, those who were the first in their families to attend both college and law school, experienced their first semester of law school without a roadmap from those closest to them. We focused particularly on the transition from undergraduate to law school, the barriers and supports that shaped academic performance and well-being, how study and learning strategies evolved, and the role that belonging, confidence, and identity played in their early development as law students. Research has long established that first-generation students face distinct challenges in higher education, but law school presents its own set of dynamics that make it uniquely challenging. Its culture, unspoken norms, and high-stakes academic structure create an environment that compounds the challenges these students already face.



By the time they arrive at law school, continuing-generation students have typically had years to absorb the hidden curriculum of college academic life: how to approach a professor, how to ask for help without exposing what you don't know, and how to signal that you belong. Double first-gen students already cracked that code once, navigating an entirely unfamiliar college culture without a guide and succeeding well enough to earn a seat in law school. But law school does not offer credit for that accomplishment. Instead, it asks them to do it again, to decode a new and even denser hidden curriculum, master a new professional culture, and develop a new kind of fluency, while the academic stakes are higher, the competition is more intense, and the margin for error feels much smaller. They do this while also managing something harder to name but no less real: the ongoing cognitive and emotional work of reading rooms, assessing belonging, and performing confidence in an environment that was not designed with them in mind. That is not just difficult. It is difficult in ways that are largely invisible to everyone around them.





LSU Law's 2025-26 1L class included 58 students who met our double first-gen criteria. We completed hour-long interviews with 33 of those students, and we are currently in the process of reviewing and analyzing the data collected. Neither of us interviewed students we had personally taught, which allowed participants to speak candidly in a low-stakes setting. We designed the interview protocol to surface not just challenges, but also the strategies, supports, and strengths that students drew on as they moved through their first semester. Questions moved from students' backgrounds and motivations to their sense of belonging and self-efficacy, their encounters with the hidden curriculum, their use of institutional resources, and how their study habits evolved from undergraduate to law school. We also asked students to reflect on their first semester and what that experience revealed to them about themselves as law students.



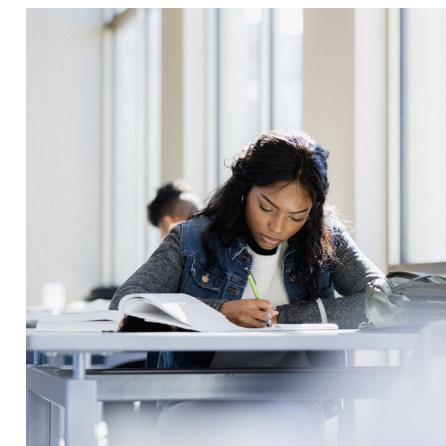
What struck us most in this early data review is the range of perspectives our participants brought to the interview. Their experiences, strategies, challenges, and sources of resilience varied in ways that resist easy generalization. Some students described a steep learning curve around professional norms and expectations; others spoke about the particular weight of feeling they could not ask certain questions without revealing what they did not know. Still others surprised us with the confidence and resourcefulness they brought to bear, often drawing on experiences their continuing-generation peers had not had, such as navigating complex governmental systems, advocating for themselves and their families, and balancing working while studying. This diversity of experience is itself an important finding, and a reminder of why first-generation students deserve to be understood on their own terms rather than through a single deficit-focused narrative.

We are grateful to AccessLex and the PLEDGE Fellowship for supporting this work and for creating a community of scholar-practitioners committed to equity in legal education. We have been pushed to think rigorously about methodology and to situate our work within the broader conversations about how law schools can better serve all students.

We look forward to completing our analysis over the coming months and to sharing findings that can be useful to law schools working to support students who arrive with enormous potential but without the invisible advantages that institutional familiarity so often provides.

PLEDGE
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**Professionals in Legal Education
Developing Greater Equity**



CONFERENCE CORNER

- Ⓐ [Legal Writing Institute Conference \(July 15-18\)](#)
- [American Association of Law Libraries Annual Meeting \(July 18-21\)](#)
- Ⓐ [Southeastern Association of Law Schools \(SEALS\) Annual Conference \(July 26-August 1\)](#)
 - [AccessLex Institute® and Helix Bar Review® Luncheon \(July 27\)](#)
- [Workshop on Research Design for Causal Inference \(August 3-7\)](#)
- [Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference \(November 3-6\)](#)
- Ⓐ [LexCon '26 Financial Capability and Student Success Conference \(November 11-13\)](#)
- Ⓐ [Association of American Law Schools Annual Meeting \(January 5-8, 2027\)](#)

Please email RTB@accesslex.org about upcoming bar-related conferences.

Ⓐ Indicates that AccessLex will have a presence at this conference.

PUBLICATIONS AND POSTS

- Douglas Belkin, [The Number of Law-School Grads Getting Extra Time for the Bar Exam Is Surging](#), Wall St. J. (Apr. 5, 2026).
- Brian R. Gallini, [Licensure Reform, Not Alternative Pathways](#), 57 U. Pac. L. Rev. (forthcoming 2026).
- Robert R. Kuehn, [The Effects of Political Interference on Law School Clinic Faculty](#), Clinical Legal Educ. Ass'n Newsl., Vol. 35, No. 2, at 12 (2026).
- Antonia Miceli, [Accommodating Justice: The Fragmented Path to Legal Licensure for Students with Disabilities](#), 57 Univ. Mem. L. Rev. (forthcoming 2026).
- Andrew D. Realon, [Designing Better Law School Courses: An Iterative Model of Curricular Improvement](#), 4 J. L. Teaching & Learning (forthcoming 2026).
- Andrew D. Realon & Michael Loch, [The NextGen Uniform Bar Exam and Forum Choice: A Dilemma for Repeat Takers](#), 57 Seton Hall L. Rev. (forthcoming 2026).

Please email RTB@accesslex.org with recent and forthcoming bar-related publications, posts, and podcasts to be included in future issues of *Raising the Bar*.

RESOURCES FOR LEGAL EDUCATORS AND LAW STUDENTS

Research and Data

- [AccessLex Resource Collections](#)
- [Analytix by AccessLex®](#)
- [Legal Education Data Deck](#)

Student Resources

- [AccessLex Law School Scholarship Databank](#)
- [AccessLex Student Loan Calculator](#)
- [MAX by AccessLex®](#)

Please email RTB@accesslex.org with information about resources for faculty and students in your jurisdiction.

Research Fellowships, Grants, and Partnerships

- [AccessLex Bar Success Intervention Grant Program](#)
- [AccessLex Bar Success Research Grant Program](#)
- [American Association of Law Libraries \(AALL\)](#)
- [Bar Exam Success Analyses Program](#)
- [Professionals in Legal Education Developing Greater Equity \(PLEDGE\) Initiative](#)

ASP and Bar Success Resources

- [ABA Bar Information for Applicants with Disabilities](#)
- [AccessLex Building Bar Skills Modules](#)
- [CALI Lessons](#)
- [JDEdge by AccessLex®](#)
- [NCBE Bar Admission Guide](#)
- [NCBE Bar Exam Fundamentals for Legal Educators](#)
- [NCBE's The Bar Examiner](#)
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EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LAWYERS®

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