

# THE STAYING POWER OF RPL: FOSTERING BELONGING AMONG STUDENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last three years, we have seen great shifts in the amount of attention and support that anti-racism efforts and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices have received. During the summer of 2020, as protests dominated the streets in the wake of George Floyd's murder, institutions and individuals became "woke," seemingly overnight.<sup>1</sup> This was acutely the case within K-12 and higher education institutions.<sup>2</sup> *Education Week* published a collection of articles on these efforts within K-12 schools, noting that "[s]chool districts in some communities have been pushed to disband or overhaul policing and discipline practices that disproportionately target Black students, rewrite curriculum to include more voices from people of color, and diversify their teaching force."<sup>3</sup> Harvard

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1. Valerie Wirtschafter, *How George Floyd Changed the Online Conversation Around BLM*, BROOKINGS INST. (June 17, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-george-floyd-changed-the-online-conversation-around-black-lives-matter/>; *How George Floyd's Death Reignited a Movement*, CNN (May 21, 2021, 2:57 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/21/us/gallery/george-floyd-protests-2020-look-back/index.html> (showing photographs of nationwide responses following the release of video footage of George Floyd's murder); Saharsh Agarwal & Ananya Sena, *Antiracist Curriculum and Digital Platforms: Evidence from Black Lives Matter*, 68 MGMT. SCI. 2932, 2932 (2022).

2. Denise Forte, *The Impact of George Floyd's Murder: One Year Later*, THE EDUCATION TRUST (May 25, 2021), <https://edtrust.org/the-equity-line/the-impact-of-george-floyds-murder-one-year-later/>; Kara Arundel, *Study: George Floyd's Murder Sparked Teacher Demand for Anti-Racist Resources*, K-12 DIVE (June 23, 2021), <https://www.k12dive.com/news/study-floyds-murder-sparked-teacher-demand-for-anti-racist-resources/602225/>.

3. *How the Murder of George Floyd Changed K-12 Schooling: A Collection*, EDUC. WEEK, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/how-the-murder-of-george-floyd-changed-k-12-schooling-a-collection> (last visited Feb. 21, 2024).

University's School of Public Health issued a letter stating, "Our community stands united in doing everything we can to live these values—in both our personal and professional capacities—to be agents of anti-racist social transformation and advance the well-being of all people around the globe."<sup>4</sup> At Penn State Dickinson School of Law, faculty passed a unanimous resolution, recognizing racism as an "incessant malady" and acknowledging that:

[R]acism is an affliction that we must never enable but should all be active antiracists in taking responsibility to condemn and to end, that we need to identify and challenge systemic prejudice wherever it exists, that we are all accountable for doing the work necessary for policy changes that dismantle structural systems of oppression that perpetuate racial inequities in our society, that we will strive to be better listeners and supporters of those who are the victims of racism.<sup>5</sup>

And, in June 2020, a group of Black law school deans launched the Law Deans Antiracist Clearinghouse Project,<sup>6</sup> which shares a wealth of resources and information to address racism.

Fast-forward three years later, and the United States Supreme Court issued its landmark decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*.<sup>7</sup> This decision is likely to have devastating consequences on law school admissions for generations to come, and has already had an indirect effect on DEI policies and practices outside of admissions within higher education. For example, in August 2023, a conservative activist sued two law firms—Perkins Coie and Morrison & Foerster—over their diversity fellowship programs, targeting their recruitment of particular populations, specifically those from communities underrepresented in the legal profession more broadly.<sup>8</sup> The law firms ultimately changed their hiring criteria to allow for broader eligibility before the lawsuits progressed.<sup>9</sup>

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4. Michelle A. Williams, *Regarding the Death of George Floyd*, HARV. T.H. CHAN SCH. OF PUB. HEALTH (June 1, 2020), <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/deans-office/2020/06/01/regarding-the-death-of-george-floyd/>.

5. Michael A. Mogill, *Faculty Resolution*, PENN STATE DICKINSON L. (June 2, 2020), <https://dickinsonlaw.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2020-06/faculty-resolution.pdf>.

6. Danielle M. Conway, Danielle Holley-Walker, Kimberly Mutcherson, Angela Onwuachi-Willig, & Carla D. Pratt, *Law Deans Antiracist Clearinghouse Project*, THE ASS'N OF AM. L. SCHS., <https://www.aals.org/antiracist-clearinghouse/> (last visited Feb. 21, 2024).

7. *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard Coll.*, 600 U.S. 181, 230–31 (2023) (holding affirmative action in college admissions decisions unconstitutional).

8. Julian Mark & Taylor Telford, *Conservative Activist Sues 2 Major Law Firms over Diversity Fellowships*, WASH. POST (Aug. 23, 2023, 9:28 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/08/22/diversity-fellowships-lawsuit-affirmative-action-employment/>.

9. Nate Raymond, *Affirmative Action Opponent Drops Case Over Law Firm's Diversity Fellowship*, REUTERS (Oct. 11, 2023, 11:19 AM), <https://www.reuters.com/legal/affirmative-action-opponent-drops-case-over-law-firms-diversity-fellowship-2023-10-11/>; Nate Raymond, *US Law Firm Alters Diversity Fellowship Criteria After Lawsuit*, REUTERS (Sept. 6, 2023, 6:07 PM), <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/society-equity/us-law-firm-alters-diversity-fellowship-criteria-after-lawsuit-2023-09-06/>.

Since late 2022, lawmakers across the country have introduced forty anti-DEI bills affecting higher education institutions.<sup>10</sup> These anti-DEI laws “take aim at essential institutional practices, including mandatory DEI training for employees, required diversity statements in hiring, DEI office programming, and curriculum and concepts related to systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege.”<sup>11</sup> In Florida and Texas, “universities are renaming or eliminating DEI roles” in response to related bills.<sup>12</sup> In South Carolina, in anticipation of legislative efforts, the University of South Carolina closed and restructured its Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.<sup>13</sup> In May 2023, Florida passed a law barring transgender students and employees from using bathrooms that align with their gender identity.<sup>14</sup> In September 2023, the Florida State Board of Education developed stricter penalties for transgender students and employees at state colleges who violate this law.<sup>15</sup> The Board noted that “staff who use campus bathrooms that don’t match their sex assigned at birth more than once, even after being told to leave, may face ‘verbal warnings, written reprimands, suspension without pay, and *termination . . .*’”<sup>16</sup>

While these policy and administrative changes seem more likely to occur in states with particular political leanings, the pendulum swing within the last three years from 2020 to now is apparent.<sup>17</sup> This change paints a bleak—and terrifying—picture for so many of us, including those within the higher education space. Students in higher education institutions may become concerned about the lack of resources and support available to them. They might become more hesitant or nervous to speak out about their identities, beliefs, and needs. Similarly, faculty and staff occupying DEI roles may worry about job security, a potential influx of ineq-

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10. *The War on DEI*, INSIGHT INTO DIVERSITY, <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/the-war-on-dei/> (last visited Feb. 22, 2024).

11. *Id.*

12. Insight Staff, *University of South Carolina Removes ‘DEI’ from Top Diversity Official’s Title*, INSIGHT INTO DIVERSITY (Aug. 23, 2023), <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/university-of-south-carolina-removes-dei-from-top-diversity-officials-title/>.

13. Nikki Brahm, *USC Dissolves DEI Office, Campus Pride Removes Colleges From ‘Best’ List*, INSIGHT INTO DIVERSITY (Sept. 17, 2023), <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/usc-dissolves-dei-office-campus-pride-removes-colleges-from-best-list/>.

14. H.R. 1521, 2023 Leg., Reg. Sess. (Fla. 2023).

15. FLA. ADMIN. CODE ANN. r. 6A-14.00612 (2023).

16. Insight Staff, *Florida College Staff Face Strict Penalties for Violating Transgender Bathroom Policies*, INSIGHT INTO DIVERSITY (Aug. 28, 2023), <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/florida-cracks-down-on-college-staff-over-transgender-bathroom-policy/> (emphasis added).

17. Chronicle Staff, *DEI Legislation Tracker*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Jan. 12, 2024), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts>; Adrienne Lu, *Diversity Statements Are Being Banned. Here’s What Might Replace Them.*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Oct. 6, 2023), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/diversity-statements-are-being-banned-heres-what-might-replace-them>; Adrienne Lu, *After Supreme Court Ruling, DEI Work Gets More Challenging and Crucial, Experts Say*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (July 6, 2023), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/after-supreme-court-ruling-dei-work-gets-more-challenging-and-crucial-experts-say>; Vinay Bhaskara, *DEI Is Under Attack at Colleges and Universities*, FORBES (July 7, 2023, 9:00 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/vinaybhaskara/2023/07/07/dei-is-under-attack-at-colleges-and-universities/?sh=2d0f29677dae>.

uitable top-down politics, and decreased budgets. They may become cautious about what kind of programs they run and may feel less empowered to speak out or direct their support towards certain student communities. While we hope that individuals occupying these positions do not operate from a place of fear, it is not unreasonable to believe that they do, or soon will. And it will not be at all surprising if (or when) DEI positions and offices are ultimately slashed or reorganized in schools across the country.

In these moments we are reminded of the value of, and need for, groups like the Rocky Mountain Collective on Race, Place & Law (RPL).<sup>18</sup> In this state of uncertainty and unrest, it is critical for those who do not occupy official DEI roles to fill gaps, provide support, and complement existing efforts. While there have always been individuals who bring critical perspectives to higher education and challenge institutional barriers, an established, cohesive cohort of individuals has the potential to allow for greater visibility and greater power.<sup>19</sup> Enhancing the power and visibility of individuals who stand for principles like those of RPL<sup>20</sup> can create many benefits; one of the most significant being the positive effect and influence on students from traditionally and currently marginalized and underrepresented groups within higher education.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, I argue that, through its existence and programming, RPL fills a void by helping foster belonging among these students. In this Essay, I will briefly

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18. See Mhairi Bowe, Juliet R. H. Wakefield, Blerina Kellezi, Clifford Stevenson, Niamh McNamara, Bethany A. Jones, Alex Sumich, & Nadja Heym, *The Mental Health Benefits of Community Helping During Crisis: Coordinated Helping, Community Identification and Sense of Unity During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 32 J. CMTY. APPLIED SCI. 521, 529–30 (2021) (“Despite dominant media narratives of panic and self-centered behaviour, historical analyses reveal humans’ great capacity to overcome emergencies with positive, coordinated and altruistic action. . . . During disasters, unifying community responses can buffer against distress and even boost mental well-being . . .”); Monita K. Bell, *Making Space*, LEARNING FOR JUST. (Summer 2015), <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/summer-2015/making-space>.

19. Arguably, this is related to the concept of collective organizing. Marshall Ganz, *People, Power and Change*, HARVARD KENNEDY SCH. 3–4, 12, <https://wcl.nwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Marshall-Ganz-People-Power-and-Change.pdf> (last visited Feb. 26, 2024) (“Organizing is a form of leadership that enables a constituency to turn its resources into the power to achieve its goals through recruitment, training, and development of leadership. Organizing is about equipping people (constituency) with the power (story and strategy) to make change (real outcomes) . . . . Because powerlessness is the source of so many of the problems people face, organizing not only enables people to solve those problems, but also, by working together, to become more powerful people . . . . [W]hen we organize we are actually building new relationships which, in turn, can become a source not only of a particular resource, but of leadership, commitment, imagination, and, of course, more relationships.”)

20. See *Rocky Mountain Collective on Race, Place & Law*, STURM COLL. OF L., <https://www.law.du.edu/content/rocky-mountain-collective-race-place-law> (last visited Feb. 26, 2024) (enumerating RPL’s Statement of Principles).

21. As an analogy, consider the effect of Critical Race Theory—a major element of RPL—on students. Theresa Montaño & Tricia Gallagher-Geurtsen, *Yes, Critical Race Theory Should Be Taught in Your School: Undoing Racism in K-12 Schooling and Classrooms Through CRT*, UCLA L. REV. (Mar. 29, 2022), <https://www.uclalawreview.org/yes-critical-race-theory-should-be-taught-in-your-school-undoing-racism-in-k-12-schooling-and-classrooms-through-crt/> (“[A] facet of CRT utilized in ethnic studies is the idea that from the ashes of oppression and marginalization faced by communities of color comes the beauty and richness of the cultural knowledge, stories of resistance, literary writings, songs and music, and linguistic diversity used to express the humanism, collectivism, healing, and community intrinsic in communities of color.”).

discuss belonging—what it is and why it matters—and then share examples of how RPL’s engagement with students promotes a sense of belonging.

### I. THE IMPACT OF BELONGING IN LAW SCHOOL

Belonging means “feeling like part of the institutional community, fitting in, and being comfortable on campus.”<sup>22</sup> Feeling a lack of belonging is a significant challenge for many students, especially those who occupy identities that have been and continue to be underrepresented and minoritized in the legal field. There are tangible, negative outcomes when students feel like they do not belong. For example, a recent article notes:

When law students first arrive at law school, they often worry about whether they will fit in and belong. Moreover, students who are members of stigmatized groups (e.g., law students who are older, underrepresented persons of color, gay, or first-generation college students) often worry about being judged in terms of stereotypes and having their social-group memberships be devalued or disrespected. 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.

. . . threatening situational 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. 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.

. . . . When stereotype threat and feelings of nonbelonging arise, they can cause distraction and rumination, provoke anxiety, diminish academic performance, impede development of relationships with peers and faculty, and diminish motivation and engagement.<sup>23</sup>

As further documented in the 2020 Law School Survey of Student Engagement’s Diversity and Exclusion Report—a survey tool offering a qualitative perspective on the student experience—a lack of belonging is more prevalent in certain student communities than others.<sup>24</sup> The survey

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22. Meera E. Deo, *Better than BIPOC*, L. SCH. SURV. OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (Mar. 23, 2023), <https://lssse.indiana.edu/blog/better-than-bipoc/> (citing T.L. STRAYHORN, COLLEGE STUDENTS’ SENSE OF BELONGING: A KEY TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS (2018)).

23. Victor D. Quintanilla & Sam Erman, *Mindsets in Legal Education*, 69 J. LEGAL EDUC. 412, 423–24 (2020).

24. L. SCH. SURV. OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, 2020 ANNUAL SURVEY RESULTS 9–10 (2020) [hereinafter LSSSE] (“For instance, when asked whether they feel they are ‘part of the community at this institution,’ a full 31% of White students strongly agree—though lower percentages of students of color do, including only 21% of Native American and Black students.”).

found that compared to students of color, white students have a stronger sense of belonging than their classmates of color.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, the survey found that “students of color . . . are more likely than their white classmates to think their schools do ‘very little’ to ensure students are not stigmatized based on various identity characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation . . . .”<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the survey found that “women of color are more likely than men from their same racial/ethnic backgrounds to feel that they are not part of the campus community . . . .”<sup>27</sup> The author of the survey also concluded “those who are most affected by policies involving diversity—the very students who are underrepresented, marginalized, and non-traditional participants in legal education—are the least satisfied with diversity efforts on campuses nationwide. . . . [N]on-traditional students remain marginalized on campus, [excluded from] the community, devalued, and underappreciated.”<sup>28</sup>

Using the same data set, another scholar found that “sense of belonging directly and significantly predicts law students’ educational satisfaction and academic performance” and that “law students from disadvantaged backgrounds reported weaker relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, which predicted a lower sense of belonging compared with their classmates from advantaged backgrounds.”<sup>29</sup> This study also indicated that “perceived experiences of 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 all significantly and adversely influence students’ sense of belonging—increasing the probability of a low sense of belonging.”<sup>30</sup> Relatedly, “compared with white men, white women and women of color have a higher probability of a low sense of belonging in part because of their perceived experiences of bias and stereotype concerns.”<sup>31</sup>

Imposter syndrome can also contribute to the lack of a sense of belonging.<sup>32</sup> In 1978, scholars Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes first coined the term “imposter syndrome” after studying 150 “highly successful women” who, despite their various academic and professional accolades, did not “experience an internal sense of success” and considered

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25. Deo, *supra* note 22.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. LSSSE, *supra* note 24, at 5.

29. 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, 457 (2020).

30. *Id.* at 477.

31. *Id.*

32. Nancy Rivera, Elana A. Feldman, Dimitri A. Augustin, Wendy Caceres, Hayley A. Gans, & Rebecca Blankenburg, *Do I Belong Here? Confronting Imposter Syndrome at an Individual, Peer, and Institutional Level in Health Professionals*, MEDEDPORTAL, July 6, 2021, at 1–2 (“Imposter syndrome (IS) is the internalized feeling of self-doubt and not belonging in a particular group that can lead to the fear of being discovered as a fraud. . . . Furthermore, IS fosters self-doubt and impacts ability to receive feedback, resiliency, well-being, and success.”).

themselves “imposters.”<sup>33</sup> Clance and Imes explained how women who experience the imposter phenomenon “maintain a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise.”<sup>34</sup> Due to the lack of “collaborative culture with communal affordances and opportunities,”<sup>35</sup> legal education can exacerbate imposter syndrome. Additional research demonstrates that “women suffer from the imposter syndrome more commonly than do men, first-generation college students experience it more often than do multigeneration college students, and students of color are particularly susceptible to feeling like imposters.”<sup>36</sup> If people feel like imposters, then they feel like they do not belong. If law students doubt their abilities, particularly if their doubt is confounded by the fact that they do not see many people with similar backgrounds in their classes, then everything within their legal education is harder and all their perceived failures are likely to hurt more.<sup>37</sup>

These challenges are palpable for students; many feel this lack of belonging every day, in every class, with every interaction. It has always been impossible for one person, one position, or one office to effectively push back against the deeply entrenched lack of belonging that some students experience within legal education. Today’s political landscape makes that impossibility appear even more salient. Without undermining the tremendous work of DEI officials (my efforts as a DEI dean included), the reality is that law students—particularly law students of color and those from marginalized backgrounds more broadly—need more from their institutions and deserve more from their institutions. While RPL’s actions do not uproot these challenges entirely or relieve the institution of its responsibility to do more, RPL’s members can connect students and provide a layer of support that helps students feel seen, feel heard, and feel less isolated.

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33. Pauline Rose Clance & Suzanne Imes, *The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention*, PSYCHOTHERAPY THEORY, RSCH. PRAC., Fall 1978, at 1, 6.

34. *Id.*

35. Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 23, at 428.

36. Amy H. Soled & Barbara Hoffman, *Building Bridges: How Law Schools Can Better Prepare Students from Historically Underserved Communities to Excel in Law School*, 69 J. LEGAL EDUC. 268, 286–87 (2020).

37. Countless conversations with students over the past ten years at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law (Sturm) demonstrates this is the lived experience of many students of color, disabled students, and students who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. See Afran Ahmed, Tatyana Cruz, Aarushi Kaushal, Yusuke Kobuse, & Kristen Wang, *Why is There a Higher Rate of Impostor Syndrome Among BIPOC?*, ACROSS SPECTRUM OF SOCIOECONOMICS, Aug. 13, 2020, at 1, 2 (“One undeniable effect of such underrepresentation of BIPOC in professional environments is reluctance to join a minimally diverse environment or workplace, or self-doubt, or a lack of sense of belonging in white-dominated higher-achievement fields. In correspondence to our research, this self-doubt is inflicted by the impostor syndrome.”) (citations omitted); *Impostor Feelings Fuel Negative Mental Health Outcomes for Minority Students, Study*, THE UNIV. OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN (Apr. 5, 2017), <https://news.utexas.edu/2017/04/05/impostorism-impacts-the-mental-health-of-minority-students/> (“Unlike white students who may experience impostorism, I believe that the ethnic minority student experience of impostorism is often racialized because ethnic minority students are aware of the stereotypes about intelligence that exist about their racial/ethnic groups.”) (citations omitted).

Research shows that “interventions related to both messaging on mindset and stereotypes can improve sense of belonging and encourage students’ career aspirations.”<sup>38</sup> Relatedly, “[i]nteractions between students and their social environment can also result in feelings of belonging. In turn, students may develop more frequent social interactions with peers and faculty, form better relationships on campus, increase their social integration, benefit their well-being, and improve their engagement and success in law school.”<sup>39</sup> Further, social psychology research suggests that people can shift the cyclical nature and effects—such as imposter syndrome—of negative thinking. Scholars discuss how people “constantly make meaning and sense” about themselves, their experiences, others, and events.<sup>40</sup> For example, people’s mindsets and perspectives may change based on how they feel and what they witness. At “critical moments of change, transition, friction, or problems,” individuals can revise their perception of themselves with “targeted psychologically attuned interventions.”<sup>41</sup> The American Psychology Association discusses attunement as it relates to caregivers: “Attunement communicates to the infant that the parent can understand and share the infant’s feeling.”<sup>42</sup> Psychologists focus more generally on the “power of emotional attunement—being aware of and empathizing with someone’s feelings and emotional needs.”<sup>43</sup> Even actions as simple as acknowledgment statements, supportive body language, and validation of feelings can serve as impactful interventions. Such interventions can help people feel connected to others.<sup>44</sup>

This is where RPL comes in. By proactively providing opportunities for engagement and taking reactive action when needed, RPL helps students interact and build community with one other. Additionally, RPL allows faculty to intentionally validate students’ academic existence and intervene when other activities threaten that sense of belonging.

## II. RPL’S ROLE IN FOSTERING BELONGING

I will now briefly discuss some of RPL’s actions that are directed towards students, paying particular attention to how they contribute to students’ sense of belonging.

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38. Bodamer, *supra* note 29, at 480.

39. Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 23, at 424–25.

40. Victor D. Quintanilla & Sam Erman, *Mindsets in Legal Education*, PENN CAREY L. UNIV. OF PA. (Sept. 1, 2021), <https://www.law.upenn.edu/live/news/13949-mindsets-in-legal-education>.

41. Quintanilla & Erman, *supra* note 23, at 413, 430; *see, e.g., The Big Picture of Three Families of Psychological Process*, WISE INTERVENTIONS, <https://www.wiseinterventions.org/glossary/the-big-picture> (last visited Feb. 27, 2024).

42. *Attunement*, AM. PSYCH. ASS’N: APA DICTIONARY OF PSYCH., <https://dictionary.apa.org/attunement> (last visited Apr. 11, 2024).

43. *See* Jonice Webb, *Why Emotional Attunement Is So Important, and So Healing*, PSYCH. TODAY (Feb. 8, 2023), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/childhood-emotional-neglect/202211/the-opposite-emotional-neglect-emotional-attunement>; Odelya Gertel Kraybill, *Attunement and Love in Psychotherapy*, PSYCH. TODAY (Jan. 31, 2021), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/expressive-trauma-integration/202101/attunement-and-love-in-psychotherapy>.

44. *See The Big Picture of Three Families of Psychological Process*, *supra* note 41.



*A. Social Events: Annual Welcome Gathering*

RPL hosts an annual event for its faculty, staff members, and students. The welcome gathering, hosted at a professor's house, is an opportunity to break bread and build community with RPL members. It is marketed as an event designed to support students in making connections with the diverse community at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law (Sturm). The welcome gathering typically occurs within the first two weeks of September, after students have been in school for approximately three to four weeks. We find that in the first two weeks, first-year law students tend to be in shock, overwhelmed academically, and unable to fathom attending extracurricular events. While this feeling does not disappear after a few weeks (arguably it worsens), we notice that students begin to feel alone a few weeks into the semester. The shock has worn off slightly, perhaps now they are more worried, disappointed, frustrated, or even angry about the lack of diversity, and often their feelings of being an imposter become heightened. RPL wants to ensure students know early on that they are not alone: that not only do they have peers outside of their respective sections, but faculty who share similar identities or align with DEI principles and values are also present.

The evening's only agenda is to introduce RPL as an entity and its individual members; the event is focused solely on bringing people together. While a DEI dean or official can—and should—host events serving a similar purpose, the old saying that there is power in numbers rings true. Having multiple Sturm faculty and staff members present simultaneously shows students that they are not alone and encourages everyone in attendance to share their experiences. Many of us faced similar circumstances as students, and we can both empathize with the students' day-to-day experiences and offer tips for navigating institutions predominately comprised of individuals from majority populations (white, cis-gender, etc.). While one event does not establish nurturing relationships, it is a jumpstart designed to expand students' social circles and help them recognize multiple familiar faces in hallways—faces that want to support them and foster their development. Hopefully, after getting to know one another at the welcome gathering, students and faculty are motivated to remain in contact, acknowledge one another in the building, reach out with concerns or questions, and offer general support. Periodically, RPL hosts additional social gatherings, but this opening event sets the tone for remaining programming.<sup>45</sup>

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45. Students consistently share that this event is their favorite of the year and that it sets an important tone for them in the midst of a busy, stressful start to the school year. See STURM COLL. OF L., *supra* note 20 (visit RPL Sponsored Activities & News section).

*B. Reactive Events: Alternative Programming in Response to Controversial Speakers and Events*

Controversial speakers are a mainstay in higher education and the law school setting is no different. Controversial speakers may be invited to the law school by outside groups, student organizations, or even the University of Denver (DU) itself. While speakers are allowed to visit campus and share their views, since its founding, RPL has offered alternative programming to contribute to discussions of important issues, build solidarity among community members, and help foster belonging for those who may feel offended or harmed by the speakers' views.

For example, about five years ago, a Sturm student group invited Jason L. Riley to speak on campus. Mr. Riley offered a view on Black empowerment that was completely misaligned with RPL's principles.<sup>46</sup> In response, RPL hosted two distinct events: a teach-in exploring the historical dimensions and contemporary meanings of Black and Brown power, and an outing to a free private viewing of the movie *Black Panther*, which celebrates African American culture and imagination. One counter-event was purposefully designed to be instructive, and the other to build community. Both served to remind students of alternative views—views held by multiple faculty members.

More recently, in spring 2023, a student group invited Ilya Shapiro to speak at Sturm. Mr. Shapiro seeks to dismantle DEI efforts in higher education and shared disparaging words about Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson online prior to her confirmation.<sup>47</sup> Again, RPL refused to sit back and watch idly. Instead, RPL held a joy-as-resistance event at the same time as the Shapiro event to provide students with a space to celebrate Justice Brown Jackson. Attendees of the RPL event intentionally chose to ignore hate and, instead, focus on joy—a form of resistance rooted in Black culture—by playing team trivia with questions about Justice Brown Jackson and taking selfies with a life-size cutout of the Justice.<sup>48</sup>

Importantly, RPL's alternative programming and messaging does not excuse DU from being held accountable for hosting such speakers. It is the institution's responsibility to take ownership of such decisions. RPL's efforts also do not remove the pain and trauma that some students experience

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46. Riley authored the book, *False Black Power?* See generally JASON L. RILEY, FALSE BLACK POWER? (Templeton Press 2017).

47. See Anemona Hartocollis, *A Conservative Quits Georgetown's Law School Amid Free Speech Fight*, N.Y. TIMES (June 6, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/06/us/georgetown-ilya-shapiro.html>; Tunku Varadarajan, *DEI at Law Schools Could Bring Down America*, WALL ST. J. (Mar. 28, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/woke-law-schools-could-bring-down-america-ilya-shapiro-dei-bureaucracy-stanford-supreme-court-rule-of-law-34c402c2>.

48. See, e.g., TRACEY MICHAEL LEWIS-GIGGETTS, BLACK JOY: STORIES OF RESISTANCE, RESILIENCE, AND RESTORATION (Gallery Books 2022); LINDSEY STEWART, THE POLITICS OF BLACK JOY: ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND NEO-ABOLITIONISM (Northwestern University Press 2021).

when such speakers are invited to campus. Instead, RPL's efforts let students know that there are individuals at DU, including faculty, who do not sanction a particular student group or institution's decisions and actions. By pushing back with counter-programming, RPL reminds students they are not alone.<sup>49</sup>

### C. Curriculum Development

As discussed further by my colleague Lindsey Webb,<sup>50</sup> RPL members have developed courses at Sturm specifically focused on racial justice.<sup>51</sup> These courses elevate topics that are historically insignificant parts of a law school's curriculum and serve as another way to introduce students to professors who hold particular values. There may also be connection with a professor's identity and lived experience as someone from an underrepresented or marginalized group. As a result, and perhaps for the first time, students see themselves and their life experiences in their professor (or professors), in their readings, and in class discussions. Being seen swings the pendulum towards greater belonging.

### CONCLUSION

Ultimately, as we navigate various disheartening news headlines, the endless hateful legislation proposed by lawmakers across the country, speakers who visit universities trying to make waves and spark outrage, and potential court decisions that further remind us of the limits of the law, we can become overwhelmed, frightened, and discouraged. These feelings are warranted. Navigating these feelings, however, amid an already stressful legal education is particularly challenging. Research shows that belonging is no longer an amorphous word with no effect on student performance or student well-being. On the contrary, belonging matters—a lot. Law school leadership must work to combat students' feelings of not belonging on multiple fronts. However, voices that do not represent the institution are just as critical for fostering feelings of belonging, both in optimistic and pessimistic times. While RPL cannot eradicate the realities we face and the inevitable future crises, it can ensure students remember that they are not alone. This has been a significant part of RPL's work over the last ten years, and I hope it will continue to be a part of its legacy for years to come.

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49. Students who attended alternative programming events have anecdotally shared that although such counter events did not erase the negative feelings they experienced, the counter events were still valuable and helped them feel seen.

50. See Lindsey Webb, *From a RPL in the Classroom to a Wave in the World: Coursework Focused on Race, Place & Law*, 101 DENV. L. REV. 479 (2024).

51. See, e.g., STURM COLL. OF L., *supra* note 20 (visit Related Courses section); *University of Denver Bulletin*, UNIV. OF DENVER, <http://bulletin.du.edu/search/?P=LAWS%204278> (last visited Feb. 27, 2024).