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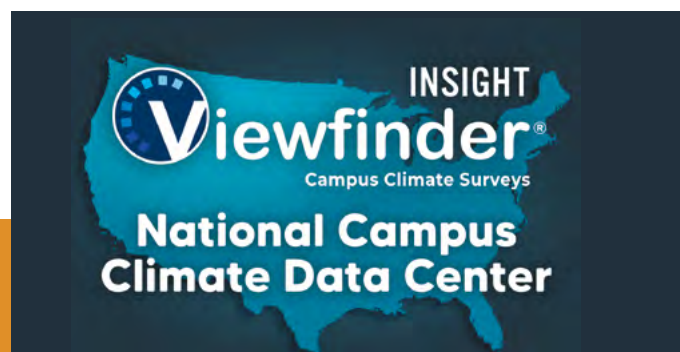
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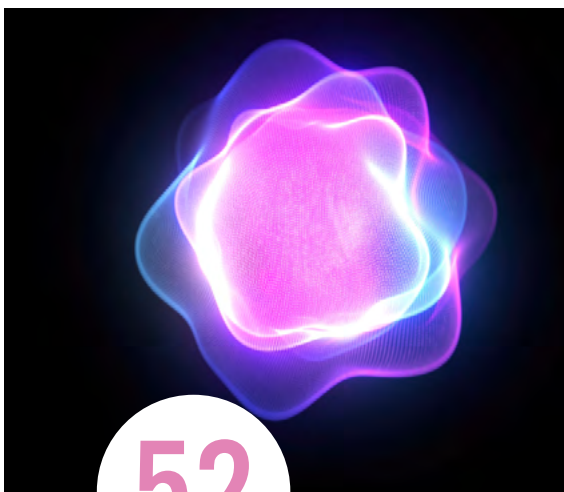
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Listening Our Way Through Division: How Courageous Conversations Can Build Connection

By Yves-Rose Porcena

I am probably not the person you'd expect to write about conversation. I'm known to spend long car rides with loved ones absorbed in spreadsheets and papers rather than small talk.

But I am also a great listener. When I encountered research suggesting that the best conversations often begin with listening, I began to think that perhaps listening is not a contradiction to leading and writing about conversations, but the ultimate qualification.

When I arrived at Agnes Scott College in 2019, its gothic spires, green quads, and remarkably diverse community felt like an academic sanctuary. But I soon noticed a culture of calling out even minor imperfections, raising the question of how to move beyond call-outs toward courageous conversations and what others might call constructive dialogue.

To be clear, the instinct to hold one another accountable is not wrong. College campuses should foster vigorous debate and make space for every voice. What struck me, however, was the way accountability often favored public judgement over understanding, and calling out rather than calling in.

Over time, students retreated into echo chambers and many, myself included, spent hours rewriting emails and tiptoeing around delicate topics, often choosing silence over risk. The result was a community committed to belonging, yet often unable to sustain the conversations that foster inclusive growth.

It was within this contradiction that I explored courageous conversations.

These are not about avoiding tension or smoothing over differences, but about creating space for honest dialogue, deep listening, and staying present through discomfort. They rely on calling in: seeking accountability through love, respect and empathy, rather than public shaming. They begin with attention, not critique. They require the courage to listen and allow another perspective to inform your own.

At Agnes Scott, I saw this practice take root in workshops where students explored identity as a lived complex experience, in circles where staff admitted uncertainty and were met with curiosity, and in gatherings where vulnerability, not certainty, defined leadership.

These were not perfect moments. But they were courageous ones.

We launched Courageous Conversations in 2019 with a simple yet ambitious goal: to create spaces where justice and belonging were not abstract values, but lived experiences shared one conversation at a time.

The series paired participants across various topics shaped by their interests and paced for authentic depth, relying on simple agreements rather than scripts, and emphasizing brave space over perfect speech, with support for reflection and debriefing.

The series culminated in a community debrief during MLK and Coretta Scott King Commemorative Week: a facilitated three-prompt, three-course "soup and substance" dinner.

The campus gathered not only to reflect on individual dialogues, but to witness the collective courage of engaging difference with openness, heart, and to repair post-call-out culture.

The Courageous Conversations initiative expanded into the college's culture, engaging students, employees, alumni, and trustees alike.

With students, it was integrated into the signature orientation, signaling from the very beginning that belonging at Agnes Scott is not about fitting in, but about knowing that you are connected no matter your identity or viewpoint.

For senior leadership, it focused on transparency and vulnerability in decision-making, later reflected in employee surveys rating the leadership team as the most transparent they had experienced.

It was extended to alumnae as a lifelong skill, and by including trustees, the work was affirmed as central to our

identity and future.

The lessons extend far beyond Agnes Scott. In a fractured society, Courageous Conversations offers a model for engaging ideological, racial, generational, and cultural differences without erasing it.

They operate at both campus and civic levels, reminding us that disagreement need not mean disconnection. If citizens can learn to stay in conversation with one another despite profound divides, the possibility of collective progress remains alive.

The impact is measured not only by participation, but by a cultural shift in small moments that reshape relationships, soften assumptions, and open long-closed doors. They require rethinking "success" in dialogue: not winning or correcting, but remaining in relationships despite disagreement.

Courageous Conversations began as a response to a culture of call-outs; they now affirm that belonging is not created by erasing difference, but by engaging it with courage.

As schools prepare students for the world they will inherit, we must foster the courage to engage across differences and listen, especially when our culture rewards eloquence over understanding. What matters is not only what students know, but how they listen and remain in dialogue when walking away would be easier. Leaders who practice listening model a humility that makes others feel safe enough to speak.

Ultimately, Courageous Conversations are not a luxury, but a necessity in a divided time. Our task is to resist both silence and judgment, remain at the table, and speak and listen with heart.

Yves-Rose Porcena is vice president for global diversity and inclusion at Agnes Scott College. For more information about Courageous Conversations, email at cgdi@agnesscott.edu.

HIGHER ED HEROES

Higher education is powered by people.



Behind every thriving campus are faculty and staff members who mentor students, build community, create opportunity, and lead with purpose. Their impact often extends far beyond the classroom or office, shaping lives, strengthening institutions, and connecting campuses to the broader world. Insight Into Academia is excited to highlight this month's Higher Ed Heroes, spotlighting the special individuals who make a meaningful difference at colleges across the country.

We celebrate the people who make contributions that strengthen higher education from within. Whether guiding students toward career success, building inclusive spaces, mentoring first-generation scholars, advancing innovation, or establishing community partnerships, Higher Ed Heroes exists to recognize them for their contributions.

Kathleen Henderson University of Dayton



Kathleen Henderson, Director of College Access, Transition and Success at the University of Dayton, has been recognized as a Higher Ed Hero for more than four decades of transformative work supporting first-generation and lower-income students.

She was nominated by Meagan Pant, Associate Director of News and Communications, who highlighted how Kathleen's own experience as a first-generation student shapes everything she does. Kathleen worked a full-time night job while earning her degree, navigating campus without a guide. Today, she makes sure her students don't have to do the same.

As a leader of the Flyer Promise Scholars program, which serves students from lower-income backgrounds, Kathleen brings a hands-on, deeply personal approach to mentorship. Her presence is a major reason why 84% of students in the program go on to graduate. She is known for spotting obstacles before they become crises, whether that means helping a student navigate administrative red tape or simply providing the encouragement needed to stay the course during a difficult stretch.

Many of her students say they might not have graduated without her. For Kathleen, the work doesn't end until her students cross the graduation stage.

Claudia George Brenau University



Claudia George, Director of Research and Planning at Brenau University, has been recognized as a Higher Ed Hero for her extraordinary range of contributions to campus life, from the data that keeps the institution running to the personal connections that make it thrive.

She was nominated by Mandy Bartell, Assistant Professor of Education, who described Claudia as the definition of an unsung hero. While her official role centers on compiling critical institutional data and managing high-pressure national reporting deadlines, her impact extends far beyond those responsibilities.

A U.S. Army Reserve veteran and double alumna of Brenau, Claudia brings a spirit of service to everything she does. She previously co-chaired the Campus Connections Committee, launched a weekly campus running group that brings together faculty, staff, and students, and earned both the university's Wellness Points competition and the 2023 Hagerman-Thompson Staff Excellence Award. Her commitment to wellness and work-life balance has made her a model and mentor for colleagues across campus.

Her connection to students is equally remarkable. Despite a role rooted in statistics and reporting, Claudia joined the university's Friendship Program to help a student from Panama integrate into the community, now serves as advisor for the Hispanic/Latino Student Association, and has used her Spanish language skills to be a familiar and comforting presence for international students. She has also served as an officer in Phi Kappa Phi, personally reaching out to students about fellowships and study abroad opportunities to make sure they don't miss their chance.

Whether she is crunching data, leading a run, or mentoring a student navigating an unfamiliar place, Claudia George lifts up everyone around her. That is what makes her a Higher Ed Hero.

Martine Garcia Arizona State University



Martine Garcia, Assistant Director of Strategic Initiatives at Arizona State University, has been recognized as a Higher Ed Hero for his dedication to student success and his exceptional work supporting first-generation college students.

He was nominated by Sonia Sharma, Senior Clinician at ASU Counseling Services, who described Martine as someone who consistently goes above and beyond to help students explore their options and feel confident in their next steps. He actively encourages student engagement with Career Services, connecting students to workshops, appointments, and networking opportunities that open doors they might not have known existed.

Sharma witnessed firsthand the quality of Martine's support while observing him work with a student at the Poly Campus, offering guidance that was both practical and empowering. She also attended the First-Generation Student Conference in February 2026, an event Martine helped organize. His ability to engage attendees through humor, intentionality, and genuine passion for the students he serves left a clear impression on everyone in the room.

Approachable, dedicated, and deeply invested in the students around him, Martine Garcia exemplifies what it means to be a Higher Ed Hero.

Know someone who deserves to be recognized?

Submitting a nomination takes just a few minutes. Simply share the nominee's name, institution, and a brief reflection on the impact they've made. You can also upload a short video directly from your phone if you'd like to amplify their story across our social channels.

Submit a
nomination for
your Higher Ed
Hero here:





Faculty Buyouts Sweep Higher Education as Institutions Grapple With Financial Strain

By Erik Cliburn

American universities are shrinking their faculties at an accelerated pace in 2026, with voluntary buyout programs emerging as the preferred tool for managing costs without the legal and reputational fallout of mass layoffs—though questions are mounting about the longer-term toll on students and academic culture.

The scale is striking. Syracuse University offered early retirement packages to roughly 175 faculty members while simultaneously moving to eliminate nearly 100 academic programs.

The University of Nebraska system saw 98 faculty members accept buyouts to help close a \$40 million budget gap. The University of North Texas (UNT) approved around 40 buyouts in response to a \$45 million deficit. Similar programs have rolled out at Rowan University, Stockton University, East Carolina University, San Francisco State University, and more.

The common thread is financial pressure arriving from multiple directions at once: shrinking enrollment, rising operating costs, diminished state dollars, and steep drops in international student enrollment—a trend accelerated in part by the Trump administration's visa

approval slowdowns and restrictions on foreign student admissions.

At Syracuse, outgoing Chancellor and President Kent Syverud, JD, captured the broader mood last fall.

"Many of our peers are running serious deficits and are experiencing deep budget cuts and large-scale layoffs," he says.

Buyouts offer institutions a degree of control that layoffs do not. They are voluntary, easier to negotiate with unions, and can sidestep the morale crises that forced terminations tend to trigger.

Terms vary widely. UNT offered eligible tenured faculty a full year's base pay to exit; Rowan structured its program to scale by years of service; Syracuse offered two weeks of pay per year worked, capped at the employee's annual salary.

But the strategy carries real tradeoffs. Institutions cannot control who accepts the opportunity, and it's often the most senior and specialized faculty—seasoned researchers, mentors to doctoral students, teachers of niche or required courses—who accept it.

When the 98 faculty members exited the University of Nebraska system in a single cycle, the concern wasn't just

headcount. It was the accumulated expertise, the graduate committee memberships, and the required courses that now need teaching coverage.

At University of Nebraska-Lincoln's law school, for instance, one departing professor taught a required first-year course the school won't be able to replace before the next academic year begins.

At UNT, several departing faculty members cited not just budget pressures, but a political climate they described as increasingly hostile to academic inquiry. State legislation targeting diversity and inclusion programs, AI-assisted reviews of course syllabi, and the loss of federal arts funding all factored into decisions to leave, suggesting that buyouts are not always purely economic decisions. For some, they appear to represent an exit from an environment that feels fundamentally changed.

Whether driven by budget, politics, or both, the buyout wave is reshaping American higher education's faculty, and by extension, what students can expect in the classroom. Institutions are gaining short-term fiscal breathing room while accepting longer-term uncertainties they may not yet fully grasp. ●



The Most Misunderstood Function on Campus

By Jamie M. Smith, MBA

Marketing is one of the few

functions on a college campus that everyone believes they understand, yet few comprehend its true value. Too often, it is viewed as a cost center rather than the strategic driver of enrollment, reputation and institutional growth that it is. Just as often, people misunderstand what marketers actually do.

“You design stuff, right?”

Or the proverbial question often said as a statement:

“How come no one knows about us.”

I once joined an organization where many of my colleagues indicated my function was not needed as they proudly boasted, “what we offer is free and we pay people to participate!” I politely offered another perspective with the comment, “Oh, people don’t have a choice?”

It didn’t take long for them to realize that even in a free market, with competing organizations offering similar services, communicating value and building brand loyalty are necessary to sustain and grow market share. (For those of you still wondering, it was clinical research, and it was highly regulated. Try marketing where every word, image, and placement was critically evaluated.)

We’re all competing for the same few seconds of attention. In a world where audiences are constantly bombarded with information and advertisements, earning attention has never been more difficult.

Marketing professionals have long referenced the “Rule of Seven,” the idea that a prospective customer may need multiple exposures to a message before taking action. While the exact number varies by audience and channel, repeated exposure remains essential to building awareness and trust. Wait, are

you still here?

On top of that, the market is saturated with so much advertising noise, we’re plagued with where to look first. And I’m willing to bet that if you’re reading this online, I’m competing with an ad that has retargeted you for whatever you’re currently looking to consume. Has your vacuum recently broken or were you just talking about the Formula 1 races and you’re being teased with an advertisement for the ultimate driving experience?

With the market, especially in higher education, more competitive than it’s ever been, plus natural inflation, the cost of promotion has significantly increased. Leaning on public relations aids our effort but, it too, is plagued with noise saturation and the sad reality is that most people can’t tell the difference between what’s real, AI-generated, or what they dismiss as “fake news.” Last, but not least, everyone has an idea of how to market your product.

Why don’t I see your enrollment advertisements?

As a professor, I always take the opportunity to educate. So, when a stakeholder or influencer says, “my friends and network say they don’t see our advertisements,” I ask, “do they have a vested interest? Do they need a college degree, have children or is their passion education?”

I then ask what kind of car they drive. Let’s say it’s a Mercedes. Is it fair to say that since driving a Mercedes, you now notice them more on the road. The answer is almost always a resounding, yes. To which I reply, thank you, now help us create a vested interest.

Despite these obstacles, effective marketing remains one of the most powerful tools institutions have for

driving enrollment and strengthening their brand.

So, how do we tackle these challenges and declare victory? How do we fill our pipeline with quality leads that become loyal students, stakeholders, and even influencers?

We creatively tell a story using as many mediums as possible with a focused goal, whether that is to increase bachelor’s degree enrollment, reach Hispanic students or grow a nursing program.

For example, using an integrated marketing and communications campaign, my team was able to increase the headcount enrollment in baccalaureate programs by 5.9% and 12.9% in credit hours. That took strategic focus.

How? We performed a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis because effective marketing starts with understanding where opportunity exists, not promoting everything equally. And this was before AI.

I want to emphasize the importance of performing a SWOT analysis with each campaign and creating focused campaigns based on goals and a clear set of priorities. With higher education institutions having very broad program offerings, it’s nearly impossible to promote every single one on the budgets we’re given with successful performance outcomes.

Lastly, research consistently shows that influencers are the top referral source for college students, which supports advertising on every possible medium, including print—that despite being declared irrelevant—still has an impact. ●

Jamie M. Smith is the public information officer and associate vice president of government relations at State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota and a member of the Insight Into Academia Editorial Board.

HBCUs Unite to Claim Standing Among Research Powerhouses

Harvard partnership helps coalition build on research impact and national influence

By Erik Cliburn

For decades, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have conducted research that elite institutions rarely prioritize such as on sickle cell disease, Black maternal health, and Black unemployment.

Now, 15 HBCUs have formalized a collective push to earn the research credentials that would give their research a larger platform, more federal dollars, and a stronger claim to national influence.

On April 29, the Association of HBCU Research Institutions (AHRI) officially launched at Howard University in Washington, D.C.—the only HBCU in the country currently holding R1 Carnegie Classification status, which is the nation's highest designation for research activity.

The remaining 14 AHRI members, 13 of which hold R2 status, are aiming to close that gap. Their coalition office will be co-located with the Association of American Universities. They launch with a three-year, \$1.05 million grant from Harvard University's Legacy of Slavery Initiative.

The R1 bar is concrete and demanding, requiring at least \$50 million in annual research expenditures and 70 doctoral degrees conferred each year. For institutions that have operated for generations with fewer resources than their predominantly White peers—a product of systemic inequity, not lack of ambition—those thresholds represent a significant hill to climb.

Yet the AHRI member schools collectively account for half of all competitively awarded federal research funding among HBCUs, a figure that underscores both their existing strength and the scale of what's been missing

"It's the first time in the history of American higher education that a group of HBCUs has elevated themselves to the elite ranks of research institutions."

David K. Wilson, EdD

from the national research conversation.

"It's the first time in the history of American higher education that a group of HBCUs has elevated themselves to the elite ranks of research institutions," says David K. Wilson, EdD, president of Morgan State University and AHRI board chair.

The coalition's partnership with Harvard carries particular symbolic weight. The Legacy of Slavery Initiative was created in 2022 after a presidential committee formally documented Harvard's historical ties to the slave trade.

One of the committee's recommendations called on the university to build enduring partnerships with HBCUs.

The AHRI grant directly fulfills that charge, and Harvard's Office of the Vice Provost for Research and Office for Sponsored Programs will provide hands-on technical assistance—hosting HBCU administrative staff at Harvard, helping with grant lifecycle management, and strengthening research compliance infrastructure across member institutions.

Ruth Simmons, PhD, the former president of Brown University, Smith College, and Prairie View A&M University, now serves as Harvard's senior adviser on HBCU engagement. She was instrumental in the coalition's formation. She described HBCUs' long-standing isolation from dominant research networks as both a problem of structure and of assumption. "The whole notion that some people in this country are less important than other people has held us hostage for many, many years," says Simmons.

The coalition model matters precisely because individual institutions working alone face steeper odds. Wayne A.I. Frederick, MD, interim president of Howard University and AHRI's interim president, acknowledges that member schools carry significant infrastructure needs and face challenges recruiting enough faculty to study complex problems from multiple disciplinary angles.

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A coordinated coalition can pool resources, share expertise, and present a unified voice to federal agencies and philanthropic funders in ways that no single institution could manage independently.

The research these colleges and universities are already producing illustrates what's at stake. This year alone, Morgan State secured the first DARPA grant ever awarded to an HBCU for a \$2.4 million project exploring how to convert nuclear radiation into electrical energy.

A Howard University research team published findings on postpartum care gaps affecting Black mothers in both the United States and Ghana. A Texas Southern researcher received \$100,000 to study firearm deaths among people recently released from incarceration.

"We are privileged to leverage our expertise in research infrastructure and capacity-building to help strengthen the foundation for HBCU research excellence and support more institutions on the path from R2 to R1 status," says Sara Naomi Bleich, PhD, vice provost for special projects at Harvard.

These are not niche academic exercises. They are investigations into some of the most persistent and consequential failures of American society—pursued by institutions that have always understood, from the inside, what's missing.

AHRI was formally incorporated in June 2023 and held its first board meeting that October. The public launch this spring coincided with the coalition's inaugural research symposium, "Expanding the Research Mission of HBCUs," convening university leaders, policymakers, and industry partners to map the path forward. AHRI's leaders have also issued a direct call to government agencies, corporations, and philanthropists to invest in the effort.

Even though the destination is R1 status, the argument is that these HBCUs were always doing R1 work. ●

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Elevating Voices. Inspiring Action.

NYU and SUNY Team Up to Find Out What's Working in Higher Education

By Erik Cliburn

When colleges launch new student programs they rarely have the time to determine whether those programs are making a difference. A new research partnership between New York University (NYU) and the State University of New York (SUNY) system aims to change that.

Both institutions announced in January 2026 the creation of the Higher Education Design Lab, a joint initiative that will apply rigorous evaluation methods to the types of civic engagement, career readiness, and dialogue programs that have been proliferating across American campuses. The lab will be housed at NYU's Marron Institute of Urban Management.

The timing reflects a broader anxiety in higher education. Colleges have been racing to roll out new initiatives in response to a changing workforce, rising political polarization, and slipping public confidence in higher education as a whole.

But according to the lab's founders, that flurry of activity rarely comes with any serious attempt to measure results before programs are expanded.

The partnership draws on an unusually large and varied student population. NYU is the country's largest private nonprofit university, while SUNY is the largest comprehensive public university system.

NYU President Linda Mills says the sector's habit of scaling programs without evaluating them first is precisely what the lab is designed to address.

"Many colleges and universities are testing new programs or invigorating old practices to help students thrive as they encounter a transformed workforce and cultural landscape. But our improvements are only as good as



the insights we gain into what works and what doesn't," she says. "To succeed today, we must equip students with the skills needed to collaborate with others who hold different perspectives, to think critically, and to follow the evidence—especially when it challenges their assumptions."

SUNY Chancellor John B. King Jr. emphasizes the value of scale and diversity in the research base.

"The strength of this partnership is that it spans two of the largest and most diverse higher education systems in the nation," King says. "That gives us a rare ability to study new and old initiatives across institutions of every size, mission, and geographic setting."

The lab's first evaluations will focus on NYU's Perspectives Dialogue modules—a required component for first-year students developed by the Constructive Dialogue Institute—and SUNY's Civil Discourse and Civic Education programming. Both were chosen for their emphasis on preparing students to work and communicate across ideological and cultural differences.

Beyond those initial programs, the lab intends to examine career readiness initiatives, first-year orientation experiences, teaching innovations, and community-based learning.

The goal is to build a set of metrics and frameworks that any college or university could eventually adopt.

The City University of New York (CUNY), the nation's largest urban public university system, has signed on to the advisory board. CUNY Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez cited the institution's reach of nearly 250,000 students from across New York City and beyond as a reason for participating.

Mindy Tarlow, a Senior Fellow at the Marron Institute who will help lead the lab, says the effort is designed to follow the evidence wherever it leads.

"The Lab's role will be to listen, test ideas, and share outcomes—whether they affirm or challenge our approach," she says.

Jonathan Haidt, founder of the Constructive Dialogue Institute and a professor at NYU's Stern School of Business, says the proliferation of civic education programs across the country is encouraging, but that measuring their impact is now the critical next step.

"The Higher Education Design Lab will break new ground by evaluating how institutions can best strengthen their commitments to evidence-based innovation," he says. ●

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FROM BRAND TO PROOF

The Rise of Outcomes-First Marketing

By Misty Evans

For generations, colleges and universities marketed themselves through aspiration. Glossy brochures featured ivy-covered buildings, bustling campuses, and sweeping promises about transformation, discovery, and possibility.

Today, many institutions are leading with something far more concrete: graduate employment rates, starting salaries, internship placement numbers, research funding totals, and return-on-investment calculators, as institutions are increasingly being asked to prove their value with measurable outcomes.

Students and families want evidence that a degree will lead to opportunity. Faculty members want to see institutional research impact. Governing boards and lawmakers want accountability metrics tied to enrollment, retention, and workforce development.

In response, institutions are transforming data into one of their most powerful marketing assets.

The shift comes at a pivotal moment for higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, undergraduate enrollment in the United States declined by roughly 15% between 2010 and 2021 before stabilizing in recent years. At the same time, concerns about student debt and post-graduation outcomes have intensified nationwide.

A 2024 public opinion survey from Gallup and the Lumina Foundation found that confidence in higher education remains closely tied to career outcomes and economic value, particularly among younger Americans and working adults considering college.

That pressure is reshaping enrollment marketing strategies across the country.

According to higher education technology company Modern Campus, “Students approach higher education as informed consumers, evaluating programs based on return on investment rather than institutional prestige.”

The organization advises institutions to replace generalized claims about student success with documented outcomes. Increasingly, colleges are doing exactly that.

Purdue University, for example, has emphasized affordability and debt transparency as part of its national brand positioning, including its long-running tuition freeze initiative.

Arizona State University frequently highlights innovation metrics, workforce partnerships, and research commercialization efforts in recruitment materials and public messaging.

Georgia State University has become nationally recognized for its use of predictive analytics and student success data to improve retention and graduation outcomes, particularly among underserved student populations.

Career outcome dashboards are also becoming important recruitment tools.

Many institutions now publicly display graduate employment rates, internship participation, median potential earnings, and employer partnership data directly on admissions and academic program pages. Some are also integrating labor market analytics into student advising and program development.

Lightcast, a labor market analytics company that partners with colleges and universities, argues that students increasingly expect institutions to provide “clear, actionable guidance” connecting degrees to workforce demand and long-term career opportunities.

The University of Utah’s David Eccles School of Business, for example, publicly reported a 97% employment rate for graduate students and a 96% placement rate for undergraduate students in 2023.

Outcome metrics like these are no longer hidden in institutional research reports. They are increasingly featured in advertising campaigns, digital recruitment materials, and social media strategies.

Colleges now regularly market their faculty publication output, federal grant totals, startup incubators, patents, and interdisciplinary research initiatives as evidence of institutional relevance and innovation.

According to the National Science Foundation’s Higher Education Research and Development Survey, U.S. universities spent more than \$108 billion on research and development in fiscal year 2023, underscoring the growing importance of research impact in institutional positioning.

Federal systems such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), already require institutions to report graduation rates, retention measures, and other outcomes.

Meanwhile, many public university systems now partner with state

workforce agencies to track graduate employment and earnings data through labor market records.

According to the Association for Institutional Research, some institutions including the University of Texas System and Pennsylvania State University have developed extensive post-graduation outcome tracking initiatives to better understand workforce trends and success measures after graduation.

Yet the rise of outcome-based marketing also raises difficult questions about the future identity of higher education itself.

Critics warn that reducing institutional value to earnings potential and employment metrics risks oversimplifying the purpose of college. Programs in the humanities, arts, and social sciences are already struggling in environments increasingly dominated by workforce language and economic

return narratives.

Many higher education leaders argue that colleges still serve broader civic, intellectual, and social missions that are difficult to quantify through data dashboards alone.

A 2025 analysis by Ruffalo Noel Levitz found that institutions are increasingly expanding definitions of student success. Many incorporate well-being, belonging, resilience, and student engagement into broader frameworks.

Still, transparency is rapidly becoming a competitive necessity.

Higher education marketers are now expected to demonstrate not only institutional excellence but also institutional effectiveness. According to higher education marketing agency Carnegie Higher Ed, institutions increasingly measure recruitment campaigns through inquiry conversion rates, enrollment yield, engagement

analytics, and audience trust metrics rather than brand awareness alone.

The rise of AI and predictive analytics is likely to accelerate this transformation. Institutions now have access to tools capable of forecasting enrollment behavior, personalizing recruitment messaging, analyzing labor market trends, and identifying student success risks in real time.

As demographic shifts intensify enrollment competition nationwide, many colleges and universities may have little choice but to become evidence-driven when they communicate their value.

Prestige still matters, but not as much as verification. Reputation alone no longer closes the deal, because increasingly, institutions must prove not only who they are, but what they deliver. ●



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Building Creator-Led Marketing Ecosystems

By Misty Evans



A prospective student scrolling TikTok encounters two college campus videos.

The first is a polished advertisement highlighting rankings, campus facilities, and institutional achievements. The second is a 30-second video filmed by a student rushing between classes, grabbing coffee before an exam, and sharing what they wish they had known before arriving on campus.

Increasingly, it is the second video that captures the student's attention.

Across higher education, institutions are discovering that some of their most effective marketers are not communications professionals at all. They are students documenting daily life, faculty explaining their research, alumni sharing career journeys, and campus ambassadors offering behind-the-scenes glimpses of university life.

The shift reflects a broader transformation in how trust is built online. As audiences become more skeptical of traditional advertising and institutional messaging, they increasingly look to peers, creators, and community voices for information and validation. For universities facing enrollment pressures, demographic shifts, and growing public scrutiny, creator-led storytelling is becoming more than a marketing tactic. It is emerging as a new model for institutional communication.

Why Authenticity Matters More Than Ever

For decades, university marketing operated through centralized communications offices that carefully crafted messages and distributed them through brochures, websites, advertising campaigns, and official social media channels.

That model still plays an important role. But it is no longer sufficient on its own.

Today's prospective students have grown up in an environment saturated with digital content. They are adept at recognizing promotional messaging and often seek out perspectives that feel more personal and authentic.

Research from the Edelman Trust Barometer has consistently found that trust increasingly flows through peers and communities rather than traditional top-down sources. People are often more likely to trust individuals they perceive as relatable than institutions speaking through formal marketing channels.

This shift helps explain why creator-led content has become so influential.

"Creator-led storytelling stands out more and offers a real, authentic glimpse into what life and class on campus are actually like," says Matthew Pittman, associate professor in the Tombras School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT).

According to Pittman, prospective students respond to creator content because it reflects someone's personal, lived experience, rather than attempting to speak for an entire institution.

"It's real, from an individual perspective, instead of trying to represent tens of thousands of people at the university," Pittman says. "It's more akin to what those prospective students will actually encounter there."

The appeal is not simply entertainment. It is credibility.

Research from Morning Consult found that trust in creators among younger audiences has risen significantly in recent years, reflecting broader shifts in how Generation Z consumes information and makes decisions. For colleges, this means prospective students increasingly evaluate institutions through the lens of creator culture, where authenticity often carries more weight.

From Campaigns to Ecosystems

The institutions seeing the greatest success with creator-led marketing are not simply encouraging students and employees to post on social media.

They are building ecosystems.

They often include student ambassadors, faculty, alumni storytellers, social media interns, academic departments, athletics programs, and campus organizations. Together, these contributors create a distributed network of authentic voices operating within a shared institutional framework.

This approach allows colleges to tell a broader range of stories than a centralized marketing team could produce alone.

A main social media account may highlight major announcements and institutional priorities. But creator networks can highlight specialized academic programs, undergraduate research projects, study-abroad experiences, residence hall life, student organizations, internships, and career pathways.

"They can showcase more individual, quirky, or specialized aspects of the university," Pittman says. "The main accounts simply don't have time to cover everything."

This breadth is particularly important as students increasingly seek evidence of personal fit rather than institutional prestige alone.

A prospective engineering student may be more interested in hearing from another engineering student than reading a college mission statement. A first-generation student may trust the experiences of current first-generation students more than institutional recruitment materials.

Creator ecosystems allow colleges to meet students where they are while providing the peer-to-peer perspectives students actively seek.

Case Study: Building the Infrastructure for Student Storytelling

Institutions are moving beyond occasional student testimonials and building formal structures that support creator-led storytelling.

At the University of Michigan (UM), student-centered storytelling has become embedded across multiple units. The College of Literature, Science, and the Arts connects prospective applicants with student ambassadors through videos, virtual events, and direct outreach. Rather than relying solely on admissions materials, prospective students have opportunities to hear directly from peers about academics, campus culture, and day-to-day life.

UM has also developed programs that train students in content creation and digital communication. Through the Michigan Online Influencer Program, participants learn about brand strategy, social media content creation, writing, and audience engagement while building professional portfolios and gaining experience representing the university.

Meanwhile, Arizona State University (ASU) has embraced the creator economy from an academic perspective. The university offers a bachelor's degree in content creation designed to prepare students for careers in digital storytelling, audience development, and creator-led media.

The program reflects ASU's broader philosophy that content creation is not simply a marketing tactic, but an emerging professional skill set. Students learn how to create compelling digital narratives while simultaneously serving as authentic ambassadors for the institution.

While UM and ASU have adopted different approaches, both illustrate the same principle: successful creator ecosystems do not emerge organically. They require training, support, institutional investment, and a clear understanding of how authentic storytelling contributes to recruitment, engagement, and brand perception.

Balancing Authenticity and Brand Control

The rise of this type of marketing presents a challenge for many institutions.

Colleges have traditionally maintained tight control over their brands, messaging, and public image. Creator-led content requires a different mindset.

The challenge is finding the balance between authenticity and oversight.

Too much control risks making creator content feel scripted and artificial. Too little can create reputational concerns or inconsistent messaging.

Pittman points to UT's approach as an example of how institutions can navigate this balance. Student and staff creators receive training and operate within established brand frameworks while still maintaining their own personalities and voices.

"It's still branded in the big orange 'Powered by the T' logo," Pittman says. "So it has the institutional weight of the main school, but also the individual personality of the person making the content."

This model represents an important evolution in the role of higher ed communications professionals.

Rather than acting solely as gatekeepers, marketing teams increasingly function as coaches, trainers, and facilitators. Their role is not necessarily to create every story, but to establish the infrastructure, guidelines, and support systems that allow others to tell them effectively.

Successful creator ecosystems typically include media training, social media guidelines, content review processes when appropriate, and clear expectations regarding brand standards.

The goal is not to eliminate authenticity. It's to create guardrails that allow authenticity to thrive.

The Enrollment Connection

The growth of creator-led marketing arrives at a critical moment for higher education.

Many institutions face declining numbers of traditional-age college students, increasing competition for enrollment, and persistent questions about the value of a college degree.

In this environment, trust matters.

Students and families are no longer evaluating colleges solely through rankings, facilities, and promotional materials. They are searching for evidence that a campus community aligns with their goals, values, and aspirations.

Creator-led content provides that evidence in ways traditional marketing often cannot.

A faculty member explaining how students contribute to research projects. A student documenting their internship experience. An alum describing how a degree influenced their career trajectory. These stories help prospective students visualize their own futures.

The impact extends beyond recruitment.

As public confidence in institutions fluctuates, universities face growing pressure to demonstrate transparency, relevance, and value. Creator-led storytelling allows for that in ways that resonate with viewers.

As such, in many ways, creator ecosystems are becoming trust ecosystems.

The Future of Higher Ed Storytelling

Creator-led marketing is often discussed as a social media trend. In reality, it reflects a deeper shift in institutional communication.

Colleges are moving away from a model in which a small group of professionals speaks exclusively on behalf of the institution and toward one in which students, faculty, staff, and alumni collectively contribute to the public narrative.

The institutions that succeed will be those that empower credible storytellers across their communities.

"More universities are going to strive to find the balance of maintaining their authority and prestige while also embracing approachability, honesty, and authenticity," Pittman says.

That will look different for every institution. But the underlying challenge is increasingly universal.

In an era when trust is earned through people rather than brands, higher education's most important storytellers may no longer be found exclusively in the marketing office. They are in classrooms, residence halls, laboratories, student organizations and alumni networks.

The future of higher ed marketing is not simply about telling better stories. It's about creating the framework and environment for thousands of authentic stories to be told. ●



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Building the Future of University Marketing Creator-Led Storytelling with Mathew Pittman

Students trust people more than institutions. What does that mean for university marketing?

University of Tennessee professor and digital marketing expert Mathew Pittman explores why creator-led storytelling is becoming one of the most effective marketing strategies in higher education. Learn how institutions can empower students, faculty, alumni, and staff to become authentic ambassadors, build trust with prospective students, and create scalable content ecosystems that drive engagement and enrollment.

Key takeaways:

- Why authentic creators outperform traditional institutional messaging
- How universities can build sustainable creator programs
- Strategies for increasing engagement through trusted voices

Dr. Shannon B. Lundeen on Belonging, Leadership, and the Future of Higher Education

What does it actually take to build a college experience where students feel seen, challenged, and prepared for the real world?

In this episode of Beyond the Quadcast, we sit down with Dr. Shannon B. Lundeen, president of Stephens College, for a candid conversation about leadership, belonging, resilience, and the future of higher education.

You will hear:

- Why higher ed must move beyond "comfort" and focus on true belonging
- How residential campuses can transform student development
- What institutions get wrong about student-centered education
- Why relationships matter more than programming
- The challenge of financial sustainability in modern higher ed
- Stephens College's innovative programs in equestrian studies, theatre, and women's workforce development
- How colleges can prepare students for an AI-driven workforce while still cultivating deeply human skills

Dr. Lundeen also opens up about leadership, integrity, mentorship, movement as self-care, and what gives her hope about higher ed right now.

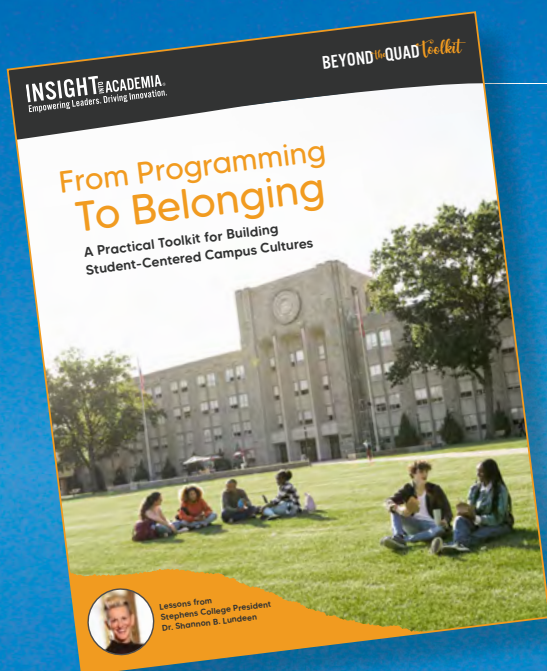
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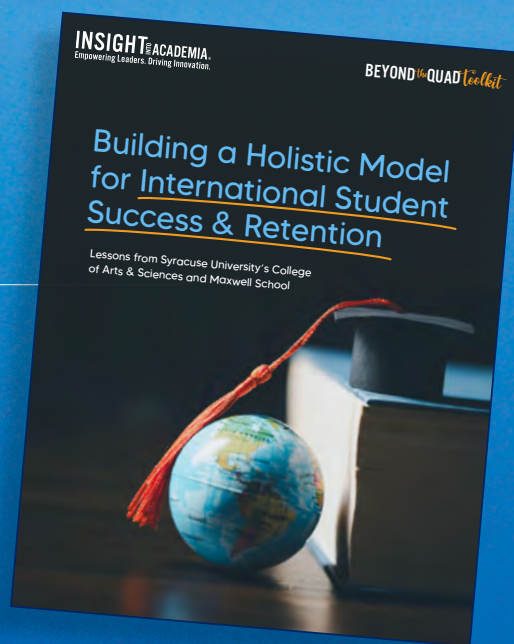
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The Experience Economy

Immersive Access Is Reshaping Higher Education Marketing

By Misty Evans

Wearing a virtual reality headset in a classroom thousands of miles from campus, a prospective student explores a simulated biology lab, manipulates DNA models in real time, and interacts with faculty and students before ever submitting an application for admission.

For colleges and universities, moments like this are becoming increasingly critical to recruitment efforts.

Higher education is entering the “experience economy,” a marketplace where potential students and faculty expect to experience an institution before committing to it. In an era shaped by digital transparency, social proof, and consumer personalization, traditional recruitment materials and a nicely designed website alone are no longer enough to persuade a prospect that a campus is the right fit.

Instead, institutions are investing heavily in immersive strategies designed to reduce uncertainty, increase engagement, and build trust.

Across the country, colleges and universities are expanding beyond using brochures and campus tours to draw new students and employees. They are now using virtual reality simulations, extended campus visits, overnight programs, student-for-a-day experiences, interactive digital classrooms, and faculty immersion weekends—all aimed at helping future students and employees envision themselves within their institutional culture before making major life decisions.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education projects that

the number of traditional-age high school graduates will begin declining nationally after years of growth, intensifying competition for incoming students across much of the country.

“Students want to know not just what an institution says about itself, but what it actually feels like to be there,” says researchers in an EDUCAUSE analysis examining digital engagement and student expectations in higher education. Institutions are increasingly expected to provide personalized, accessible, and experience-driven engagement opportunities that mirror broader consumer expectations shaped by digital industries. This shift is reshaping marketing strategies across the sector.

At Arizona State University, immersive learning initiatives such as Dreamscape Learn combine virtual reality, storytelling, and simulation-based instruction to create interactive educational experiences. Originally developed as a teaching tool, programs like this also function as highly visible demonstrations of institutional innovation and student life.

Other schools are using immersive technologies to replicate engineering labs, nursing simulations, archaeological digs, or study abroad experiences for students who may never have the opportunity to physically visit campus before applying.

Research suggests these approaches can significantly influence engagement when thoughtfully implemented.

For institutions facing geographic and financial barriers to recruitment, immersive access can also expand opportunity.

Virtual experiences may help reach first-generation and rural students, adult learners, international applicants, and students who cannot afford to travel for campus visits. Institutions increasingly see immersive recruitment as both an access strategy and a marketing strategy. Yet experts caution that technology alone is not enough.

A growing body of higher education research emphasizes that immersive recruitment tools are only effective when they authentically reflect institutional culture and student reality. Poorly designed experiences or overly curated digital environments can undermine trust rather than build it.

That concern has become particularly important as students increasingly prioritize belonging, wellness, and campus climate alongside academic reputation. “Authenticity” has emerged as one of the most important currencies in modern enrollment marketing because Generation Z students often approach institutional messaging with skepticism, relying heavily on peer experiences, digital transparency, and firsthand interaction.

Many now expect institutions to demonstrate student support, inclusion, academic flexibility, career preparation, and campus culture through direct experience rather than polished messaging alone.

As a result, immersive recruitment increasingly extends beyond technology itself. Many institutions are expanding overnight visits, faculty shadowing opportunities, undergraduate research

previews, cohort-based recruitment weekends, and extended orientation-style experiences that allow prospective students to engage directly with campus life before enrolling.

Some now offer multi-day admitted student experiences designed less like traditional campus tours and more like immersion into the rhythms of institutional life. Prospective students may attend classes, meet faculty mentors, stay in residence halls,

fit before commitment.

Enrollment leaders and student success professionals increasingly recognize that recruitment and retention are deeply connected. Students who enter college with a clearer understanding of institutional expectations, campus culture, and available support systems may be more likely to persist and succeed after enrollment.

That alignment between marketing



“Authenticity”

has emerged as one of the most important currencies in modern enrollment marketing because Generation Z students often approach institutional messaging with skepticism, relying heavily on peer experiences, digital transparency, and firsthand interaction.

participate in student organizations, or experience surrounding communities before committing. The same trend is reshaping faculty recruitment.

Colleges competing for top researchers and instructors increasingly recognize that candidates are evaluating institutional culture as much as compensation packages or prestige rankings.

Extended campus experiences allow faculty recruits to assess collaboration opportunities, community fit, student engagement, research support, and quality of life in ways traditional interviews cannot fully capture. For institutions, these strategies serve another important purpose: improving

and lived experience may ultimately become the defining challenge of higher education’s experience economy. Immersive recruitment can attract attention. But if institutional reality fails to match the experience being marketed, those who come may disengage quickly. In that sense, the rise of immersive access represents something larger than a technological trend. It reflects a broader transformation in how trust is initially built in higher education.

For today’s students and faculty, the question is no longer simply whether a university looks impressive from the outside. It’s whether they can already imagine themselves inside it. ●

The BTS Effect

Why Colleges Are Studying a South Korean Music Group to Better Understand Global Economics, Sociology, Business and Psychology

By Misty Evans

Photos by Natalie Jumper



When people referenced BTS

in the past, topics typically focused on sold-out music venues, chart-topping albums, and one of the most passionate fan communities in the world, known as ARMY.

Increasingly, however, researchers, business leaders, and educators are looking at the South Korean music group through a completely different lens. To them, BTS represents one of the most significant case studies of the digital era, offering insights into globalization, community-building, audience engagement, and the future of organizational marketing.

That alternative perspective is reflected in both academic research and economic analysis. Over the past decade, BTS has become the subject of college courses, scholarly journals, business school case studies, and economic impact studies seeking to understand how seven musicians from South Korea built a global community of millions.

Their influence extends far beyond entertainment, reaching into tourism, consumer behavior, digital communication, and cultural diplomacy.

For colleges and universities navigating enrollment challenges, declining public trust, and increasingly fragmented audiences, the BTS phenomenon raises an intriguing question: What can higher education learn from one of the most successful global community-building efforts of the twenty-first century?

The BTS Economy

The scale of BTS's economic impact helps explain why researchers have taken such an interest in the group.

In 2018, the Hyundai Research Institute estimated that BTS generated more than \$3.6 billion annually for South Korea's economy. Subsequent analyses placed the group's economic contribution at approximately \$4.65 billion per year through tourism, exports, consumer spending, and related activity.

Researchers estimated that nearly 800,000 foreign visitors traveled to South Korea annually because of BTS,



representing approximately one in every 13 international tourists entering the country at the time.

The group's influence has extended into industries far removed from music. Researchers and economists have linked BTS to increased exports of Korean cosmetics, fashion, goods, food products, and entertainment content.

Interest in learning the language has surged globally alongside the growth of Korean popular culture, often referred to as the Korean Wave, or Hallyu. The Bank of Korea has estimated that BTS contributes billions of dollars annually through both direct and indirect economic activity, making the group one of the country's largest cultural exports.

The phenomenon has continued even after the group's temporary hiatus

for mandatory military service. Ahead of BTS's anticipated reunion in 2026, analysts projected that related tourism and consumer spending could exceed \$5 billion globally. Reuters reported that economists and industry analysts have adopted the term "BTSnomics" to describe the measurable ripple effects generated by the group.

For higher education leaders, these numbers are significant because they illustrate how a brand can become an engine of economic development, deep brand loyalty, and global visibility.

Like BTS, colleges are often tasked with building reputation, attracting visitors, generating economic activity, building community on campus and off, and creating long-term relationships with diverse audiences.

Why Scholars Study BTS

The economic impact alone does not explain the growing academic interest in BTS.

Researchers are drawn in because it offers a unique opportunity to study some of the defining social and technological trends of the modern era. BTS sits at the intersection of globalization, social media, creator economies, digital communities, and participatory culture. Few contemporary organizations provide a richer case study for understanding how people form identities, build trust, and create communities online.

Scholars have examined the group and their fan community through a wide range of disciplinary lenses. Researchers in communications and media studies have explored how fans participate in content creation and community-building.

Sociologists delved into the ways global fandoms create shared identities across geographic and cultural differences. Linguists are interested in the jump in learning the Korean language, while researchers in psychology studied the group's messaging around mental health, resilience, and self-acceptance.

The academic literature continues to expand. In 2020, *The Journal of Fandom Studies* published a special issue devoted entirely to BTS and ARMY.

Other research has examined BTS's influence on philanthropy, activism, digital organizing, and collective action. Many scholars see the group as a living laboratory for understanding how communities form and thrive in an increasingly connected world.

Those questions are highly relevant to higher education. Colleges are grappling with many of the same challenges researchers are finding BTS has accomplished such as how to foster belonging, build trust across diverse populations, sustain engagement over time, and create communities that extend beyond physical boundaries.



Natalie Jumper

Over the past decade, BTS has become the subject of college courses, scholarly journals, business school case studies, and economic impact studies seeking to understand how seven musicians from South Korea built a global community of millions.

From Stadiums to Seminars

The growing body of research surrounding BTS has also found its way into the classroom.

In 2020, the University of California, Berkeley offered a course titled “Next Generation Leaders: BTS.” The class explored the group’s cultural significance and themes including leadership, identity, social influence, and community formation.

It attracted widespread attention not because it focused on celebrity culture, but because it used BTS as a framework for understanding broader social and cultural behavior and thinking.

Berkeley is not alone. Faculty members at institutions around the world have incorporated BTS into coursework in communications, globalization, digital culture, media studies, sociology, and business.

The group has become a useful teaching tool because its influence touches so many disciplines simultaneously. In many ways, BTS offers educators a real-world case study to connect abstract classroom concepts to concrete examples that students already recognize and understand.

BTS Didn’t Build an Audience. They Built a Community.

Perhaps the most important lesson emerging from both scholarly literature and business case studies is that BTS fundamentally reimagined the relationship between organizations and their audiences.

Traditional marketing models are largely transactional. Organizations create messages, distribute content, and attempt to persuade audiences to take specific actions. BTS adopted a different approach. Rather than treating fans as ‘consumers,’ the group cultivated a sense of participation and shared ownership.

From the beginning, BTS members communicated directly with supporters through social media, livestreams, behind-the-scenes content, and personal storytelling. In turn, this helped create a sense of accessibility and authenticity that distinguished

them from traditional celebrity brands.

Harvard Business School researchers have identified this direct relationship with followers as one of the central drivers of their global growth.

The result was the emergence of ARMY, one of the most engaged communities in modern times. Members routinely translate content into multiple languages, organize charitable initiatives, create educational resources, and produce vast amounts of user-generated content.

Researchers studying participatory culture frequently point to ARMY as an example of how digital communities can become active contributors rather than passive consumers.

This distinction matters because it highlights a shift that extends far beyond entertainment. Successful organizations are not simply attracting audiences. They are creating communities that actively participate in the organization’s growth and success.

Many of the marketing principles that helped BTS build a global community are increasingly visible across higher education. As explored in this issue’s article on creator-led university marketing (page 18), institutions are shifting away from purely top-down messaging toward models that empower students, alumni, faculty, and staff to tell authentic stories about their experiences.

The parallel to BTS is not exact, but it is instructive. Both approaches recognize that trust is often built through people, rather than the institution itself. In each case, community members become advocates, storytellers, and ambassadors who help expand the reach and credibility of the larger organization.

The Takeaway for Higher Ed Leaders

The group’s success illustrates several principles that are becoming increasingly important across sectors.

First, community matters. Organizations that foster a sense of belonging typically generate deeper engagement and stronger loyalty than

those focused solely on transactional relationships.

Second, authenticity matters. Audiences increasingly respond to transparency, personality, and genuine storytelling versus highly polished institutional messaging.

Third, participation matters. People are more likely to engage with organizations that invite them to contribute, create, and share experiences rather than simply consume information.

These lessons are particularly relevant to higher education as the competition to attract students, donors, and top professionals continues to increase. Prospective students and employees are not just evaluating academic programs. They want to belong, envision what their experience could be, and determine how the institution supports and interacts with its community.

BTS succeeded because it created meaningful connections between themselves and their fans, and their fans with each other. They understood this was about people. The group built trust, encouraged participation, and fostered a sense of belonging that transcended cultures, languages, and geographic boundaries.

Those achievements generated billions of dollars in economic activity. What the Beatles and Ed Sullivan may have started in 1964, BTS brought into the modern era with a force not seen before.

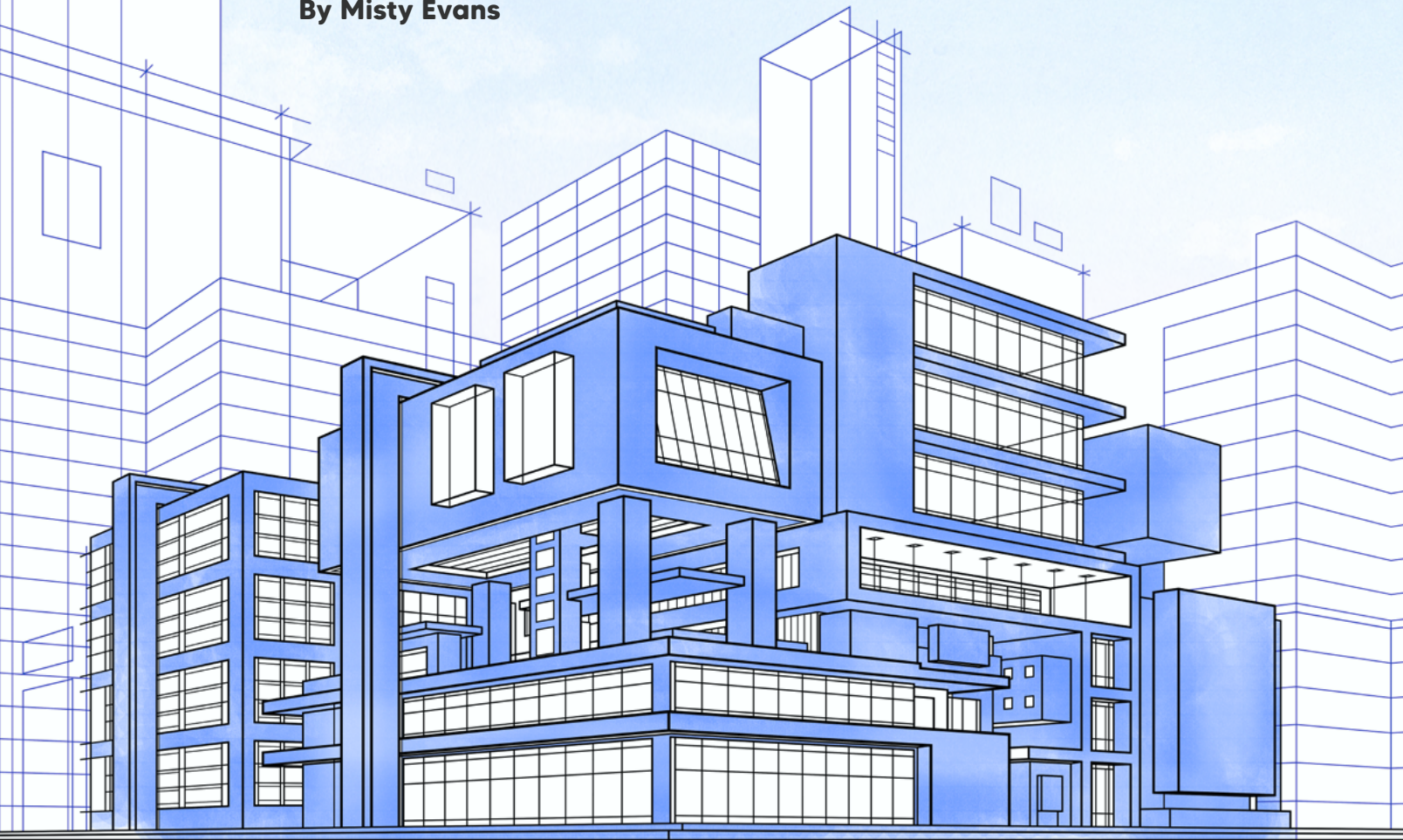
For higher education leaders, the takeaway may be that the future of branding and marketing is not simply about visibility. It’s about community—about people. The institutions that thrive in the future will not necessarily be those with the largest budgets or the loudest messages. They will be the ones that create environments people want to be a part of, contribute to, champion before they arrive, and long after they leave.

In that respect, BTS may be more than a musical group and cultural phenomenon. It may be one of the most important academic marketing case studies of the decade. ●

Location, Location, Location

Institutions Leverage Geography
as Part of Their Brand Identity

By Misty Evans



For decades, higher education marketing focused on academic excellence, rankings and campus amenities to attract potential students and employees. Increasingly, institutions are broadening that narrative to emphasize their geography and connection to surrounding communities, industries, and innovation networks as a draw.

The shift reflects a growing understanding that universities do not operate in isolation. Research has long identified colleges and universities as community “anchors” that help drive economic development, attract talent, and increase regional innovation. Colleges serve as hubs connecting students, researchers, employers, entrepreneurs, and policymakers, creating environments that extend far beyond campus boundaries.

For prospective students, these networks can translate into internships, career opportunities, research experiences, and more.

According to research from the European University Association, colleges play a critical role in regional innovation by supplying talent, facilitating collaboration, and helping attract investment and industry partnerships. Those connections are increasingly viewed as competitive advantages for both institutions and the regions they serve.

In many cases, they are beginning to market these advantages directly.

Selling Opportunity, Not Just Degrees

Some of the nation’s most successful colleges have built powerful institutional identities around their locations.

At Arizona State University (ASU), the brand is deeply intertwined with the rapid growth of the Phoenix metropolitan region. As Arizona attracts billions of dollars in semiconductor and advanced manufacturing investment from companies including TSMC, Intel, and Microchip Technology, ASU frequently highlights its role in workforce development, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Similarly, Georgia Institute of Technology leverages its location in

Atlanta, emphasizing connections to one of the nation’s fastest-growing technology and startup areas. Students are not simply enrolling in an engineering program, they are gaining access to a network of corporations, entrepreneurs, and innovation hubs.

At Carnegie Mellon University, proximity to Pittsburgh’s robotics and artificial intelligence sectors has become an integral part of the institution’s identity. Their partnerships with industry leaders and their role in transforming Pittsburgh into a global innovation center reinforce the value of location as a strategic asset.

The University of Utah offers another example. They increasingly highlight their connections to Utah’s “Silicon Slopes” technology sector, biotechnology industry, and world-renowned outdoor recreation opportunities. For many prospective students and faculty members, the combination of career opportunity and lifestyle appeal can be as compelling as any academic offering.

The underlying strategy is simple: colleges are selling access to opportunity. Research examining innovation and economic development continues to show that talent, entrepreneurship, and high-value industries remain concentrated in geographic clusters.

Despite advances in remote work and digital communication, proximity still matters. Students understand that reality and are increasingly evaluating institutions not only based on academic reputation but also on where a degree can take them.

The Faculty Flywheel

The same dynamics shaping student recruitment are transforming faculty recruitment.

Across higher education, institutions

face growing competition for top talent, particularly in high-demand fields such as artificial intelligence, data science, engineering, nursing, and healthcare. Private industry often offers salaries that colleges struggle to match, making recruitment increasingly challenging.

In response, some are expanding the value proposition.

Rather than focusing solely on compensation, they are highlighting research infrastructure, interdisciplinary collaboration, startup support, quality of life, and opportunities for community engagement.

The goal is to attract scholars who want more than a job. Colleges are competing to position themselves as a place where faculty can build impactful careers and lives.

This strategy creates what might be called a faculty flywheel.

Faculty attract research funding, graduate student enrollment, and industry partnerships. Their discoveries generate visibility and prestige. That growing reputation helps attract additional faculty, students, and investment.

The cycle reinforces itself. Research on innovation ecosystems consistently demonstrates that leading scholars often serve as magnets for external partnerships and funding. Their networks create opportunities that benefit entire institutions and regions.

As a result, reinforcing where an institution is situated and the opportunities it offers is increasingly becoming a marketing strategy to recruit faculty.

In this environment, location is no longer just geography. ●



Building the Future of the Legal Profession

The 2026 Excellence In Innovation Award: Law School winners are pioneering modern legal education

Legal education is at an inflection point.

The profession law schools prepare students to enter is being reshaped by artificial intelligence, widening access-to-justice gaps, shifting workforce demands, and growing pressure to produce graduates who are not just knowledgeable but genuinely ready to practice from day one. The institutions that will define the next era of legal education are waiting and watching to see how things unfold. They are the ones blazing a trail to something better.

We are proud to present the recipients of the 2026 Insight Into Academia Excellence in Innovation Award: Law Schools, honoring law schools where innovation is not a committee initiative or a strategic plan footnote, but a living, breathing commitment embedded in how students are taught, supported, and launched into the profession.

This year's honorees have reimagined what a legal education can be and who it can serve. Some award winners have compressed the time and cost of a law degree without sacrificing rigor. Others have placed first-year students in front of real clients, built clinics that serve courts and entities instead of individuals, or created alternative pathways to licensure. Several are training students to use artificial intelligence not as a shortcut, but as a tool for sharper legal thinking. And a

number are reaching people who never imagined law school was an option for them. They begin outreach as early as fifth grade, offer virtual programs for rural communities and working adults, and meet the needs of learners in ways a traditional classroom never could.

"What strikes us about this year's honorees is that their innovations are not decorative," says Lenore Pearlstein, co-publisher of Insight Into Academia. "They are structural. These institutions have made choices about curriculum, resources, and priorities. The result is legal education that is more accessible, more forward-thinking, and more aligned with the realities their graduates will face."

Selected for their ability to identify both students' and the workforce's needs and meet them with creativity, rigor, and commitment, this year's honorees represent a remarkable range of institution types, sizes, geographic areas, and approaches. What unites them is not a shared method but a shared conviction: that legal education, at its best, is not merely preparation for the bar exam. It is preparation for a career of meaning and consequence. Through their stories, readers will find practical models, replicable approaches, and a picture of what it looks like when a law school decides to rethink what legal education could be.



Suparna Dutta, M.D., Chief of Medicine at Hartford Hospital and medical champion for UConn Law-Hartford Hospital Medical Legal Partnership; law student Cael Losenegger; law student Gabriella Kuzawa; and Jay E. Sicklick, Visiting Assistant Clinical Professor of Law and Director, Health Equity Clinic—A Medical Legal Partnership

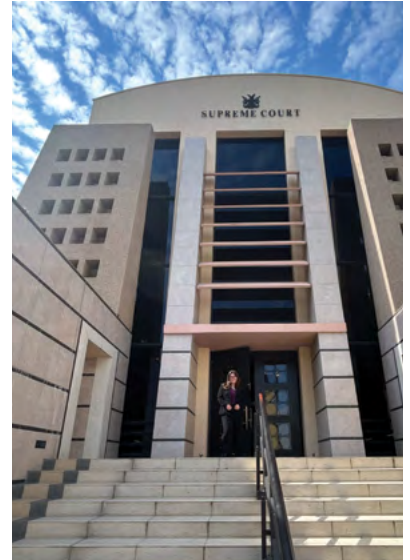


University of South Carolina Rice School of Law Children's Law Concentration May 2026 graduates with concentration director, Stephanie Nye, Dean William Hubbard, and the benefactors of the Lisa S. Rice and Ann E. Rice Ervin Children's Law Training Center.



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CONGRATULATIONS TO CAMPBELL LAW SCHOOL ON EARNING *INSIGHT INTO ACADEMIA* MAGAZINE'S 2026 EXCELLENCE IN INNOVATION AWARD

National distinction honoring innovation in legal education

Campbell Law School has received the 2026 Excellence in Innovation Award: Law Schools from *Insight Into Academia* magazine, the nation's longest-running publication advancing best practices in higher education, Dean J. Rich Leonard has announced.

This new honor celebrates law schools redefining the future of legal education. Through transformative programs and initiatives, these schools are reimagining curriculum, experiential learning,

technology and AI integration, access to legal education, professional pathways and more to better serve the evolving needs of students and meet the changing demands of today's workforce.

Insight Into Academia magazine selected Campbell Law for its new Joseph E. Zaytoun International Judicial Clerkship Initiative. Eight Campbell Law students are currently working as judicial clerks in the high courts in three African nations.

FOLLOW US TO LEARN HOW CAMPBELL LAW HAS BEEN EDUCATING LEGAL LEADERS FOR 50 YEARS.



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The 2026 Excellence in Innovation Award: Law Schools Winners

Boston University School of Law

California Western School of Law

Campbell University Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law

Case Western Reserve University School of Law

Cooley Law School

Elon University School of Law

Florida International University College of Law (2 programs)

Fordham University School of Law

Hofstra University - Maurice A. Deane School of Law

Indiana University Maurer School of Law

J. Reuben Clark Law School, Brigham Young University

Lewis & Clark Law School

Loyola University Chicago School of Law

Mitchell Hamline School of Law

Monterey College of Law

Northern Illinois University College of Law

Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law

Pepperdine Caruso School of Law

Purdue Global Law School

Rutgers Law School

Saint Louis University School of Law

Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University

Seattle University School of Law

Stetson University College of Law

Suffolk University Law School

Syracuse University College of Law

Touro University Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center

UC Davis School of Law

University of Connecticut School of Law

University of Houston Law Center

University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law

University of Pittsburgh School of Law

University of San Diego School of Law

University of San Francisco School of Law

University of South Carolina Joseph F. Rice School of Law

University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law

Vanderbilt Law School



AI and Technology in Legal Education: Building the Lawyer of Tomorrow

A generation ago, a law student's toolkit consisted of casebooks, Westlaw terminals, and a highlighter. Today, the tools are changing faster than most law schools can track—and the most innovative aren't playing catch-up—they're leading the charge. Several of this year's Excellence in Innovation Award: Law Schools honorees have built programs that place AI and emerging technology at the center of legal education, not as a one-off or elective, but as a core professional competency.

Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law (NSU Law) has built one of the most institutionally comprehensive legal technology programs in the country. At its center is the NSU-NSLT Advanced Legal Technology Certificate, an 18-hour program combining live CLE training with online modules covering generative AI, e-discovery, digital forensics, cybersecurity, and professional responsibility—open to both law students and practicing attorneys. More than 200 attendees participated in the January 2026 CLE alone. NSU Law embeds technology training from the first day of orientation through upper-level concentrations in IP, Cybersecurity, and Technology, and extends its reach into the community through the annual Sharon & Mitchell W. Berger Entrepreneur Bootcamp, which has equipped more than a thousand small business owners with legal and technology knowledge. Its student-led Nova Law Review symposium on navigating AI brought scholars, practitioners, and judges together around one of the most consequential issues shaping the profession.

Vanderbilt Law School's AI Law Lab (VAILL), launched in November 2023, describes itself as a hub where innovative minds converge to reimagine the future of law through the lens of AI. Its work spans collaborations with law firms of all sizes to implement ethical AI solutions, CLE sessions and bar association presentations, community events including a Women + AI Summit that has drawn hundreds of scholars and practitioners from around the world, a rigorous AI curriculum for students, and publicly available tools including an AI Governance Bills Tracker and a Generative AI for Legal Services Primer. VAILL's democratizing philosophy—that AI knowledge should be accessible to the full legal community, not just those at elite institutions—distinguishes it from more narrowly conceived programs.

Northern Illinois University College of Law found a specific, practical problem to solve: law students preparing for appellate advocacy oral arguments were nervous, underprepared, and had limited access



Brigham Young University Law's AI Law & Policy Academy introduced students to the rapidly evolving fields of artificial intelligence law and public policy. Students gained insights into advising AI clients as they met with top-flight practitioners, practiced navigating regulatory challenges and ethical considerations, and used AI tools firsthand.



University of Maryland Carey Law delivers a cutting-edge curriculum in technology and the law, blending foundational learning with real-world skills. From AI and cybersecurity to data privacy and bioethics, students dive in through hands-on courses like AI Skills for Lawyers and Cyber Boot Camp.

to realistic practice opportunities. The legal writing department's response was to create Oyez, a custom GPT that allows students to practice with either targeted question prompts or full voice-activated simulations that replicate the experience of arguing before a panel. Faculty also developed a user guide to help students get the most from the tool before their spring term oral arguments. The results were clear: students were less anxious, performed measurably better, and the overall appellate advocacy program improved. NIU is already planning to use Oyez with incoming first-year students each year going forward.

At **Hofstra University's Maurice A. Deane School of Law**, innovation is not just in what technology students are building—it's who they are building it with. The Deans' Legal-Tech Fellowship pairs law students and computer science students as equal partners to develop technology-based tools addressing real-world legal challenges. In its first year, fellows built a multilingual chatbot to guide users through New York State Small Claims Court. In its second year, the Fellowship partnered with Hofstra's Medical-Legal Partnership to develop a guided interview tool to help users determine Social Security Disability eligibility—incorporating visual prompts and dropdown menus to translate complex medical histories into the Bluebook's legal framework. The interdisciplinary model, grounded in real legal needs rather than hypothetical exercises, mirrors exactly the kind of cross-disciplinary collaboration that modern legal practice increasingly demands.

Pepperdine Caruso School of Law's Pepperdine AI Readiness (PAIR) for Lawyering is distinctive for one reason above all others: it brings together not just students and faculty, but also staff, alumni, and employers, in a single coordinated initiative.

Launched in spring 2026, PAIR began with listening: a community-wide survey in which more than 95% of first-year students participated alongside faculty, staff, alumni, and employers. The results shaped three core priorities: an AI credential for students, practical AI workshops for every constituency, and a compass framework—grounded in ethics, justice, compassion, and accuracy—to guide the institution's ongoing AI decisions. In a landscape where many law schools are still figuring out what to do about AI, Pepperdine has already built a community-wide infrastructure for doing it thoughtfully.

The Clinic as Classroom: Experiential Learning and Real-World Impact

Gaining a legal education from classroom lectures only goes so far—the realities of practice involve dealing with people, in complex situations, that can be unpredictable



In 2019, Seattle University School of Law students assisted 119 clients, offering support in domestic violence protection orders, family law matters, and related legal needs.



Elizabeth Rowell '26, a Leadership Fellow at Elon Law, poses a question to judges of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit following a hearing in Elon Law's Robert E. Long courtroom. Students regularly interact with judges and attorneys through court visits, hearings and other experiential learning opportunities.



As part of a class taught by UC Davis Law Professor Karrigan Börk, students get a firsthand look at water law issues while rafting on the American River in Sacramento, California.



Purdue Global Law School's moot court team of Carlos Cepeda-Ojo, left, and Brian Gatus hold their Fourth Place Brief Award certificates following their success at the 2025 National Criminal Procedure Tournament at the University of San Diego School of Law.

and change quickly. The following honorees understand that inherently. Through clinics, fellowships, and hands-on programs that place students in real legal cases, real courtrooms, and real moments of consequence—serving communities while developing the skills and judgment that no casebook can fully convey—these law schools are preparing their students to be successful from day one after graduation.

Suffolk University Law School's Legal Innovation & Technology Center and its LIT Lab have built something genuinely unique: a law school clinic whose clients are not individuals but courts, legal aid organizations, and tribal entities.

Founded in 2017, the LIT Lab pairs law students with practitioner-faculty to break down complicated laws, write code, and build guided online interview tools that help unrepresented litigants file restraining order applications, navigate eviction appeals, or access military benefits. The Lab's flagship Document Assembly Line, an open-source system supported by State Justice Institute funding, has partnered with more than 10 states. A mobile-friendly tool to help Massachusetts residents seal eligible eviction records—launched in May 2025—produced more than

Our Next Issue

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Cooley Law School launched its peer learning initiative, the Dean's Fellow program, in 2023. Designed to foster collaboration, belonging, and practical skill development, the program connects students with peer educators who understand the unique demands of legal education.



Campbell University School of Law students, faculty, dean, and UCC staff outside Ghanaian High Court.

3,200 filings in its first year, representing roughly half of the total statewide volume. Suffolk Law has been named the number one legal tech program in the country by National Jurist on multiple occasions.

California Western School of Law's Innocence and Justice Clinic (IJC), founded in 1999 as one of the oldest innocence clinics in the country, has been involved in the release or exoneration of 50 wrongfully convicted or unjustly incarcerated individuals. But its impact extends well beyond individual cases. The Clinic has been instrumental in changing California law related to preserving evidence, litigating innocence claims, and compensating exonerees—including supporting the Juvenile Custodial Interrogations Reform Bill, which prohibits law enforcement from using deception, false threats, and psychologically manipulative tactics on young suspects. Students commit to a year-long program during which they identify, investigate, and litigate claims of actual innocence, working directly with clients under close supervision. The Clinic's dedicated workspace makes a deliberate educational statement. It is decorated with art by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists, reminding students of the resilience and humanity of the clients they serve.

Rutgers Law School offers recent graduates something that is truly innovative: a one-year post-graduate residency program modeled on medical school residencies, through Rutgers Law Associates (RLA). Fellows work full-time under close supervision at a boutique firm operating at the law school in both Newark and Camden, handling divorce, custody, bankruptcy, employment discrimination, immigration, mental health

law, and more. Since 2014, RLA has served more than 1,600 low- and moderate-income clients, garnered more than \$2.2 million in grants, and provided more than 150,000 hours of pro bono or low bono legal service. Of the 100 program completers to date, 97 were employed within a month of graduating.

The University of San Diego School of Law's Housing Rights Clinic and its Eviction Negotiation Program (ENP) have built a model of courthouse-based advocacy that expands legal aid capacity in ways traditional structures cannot match. Rather than the one-attorney-per-client model, the ENP connects tenants with legal counsel on the day of their eviction trial—immediate, on-the-spot advocacy at the courthouse when it matters most. In 2025 alone, the combined programs assisted 153 households: 47 families remained in their homes, 71 secured additional time to relocate without immediate displacement, and students helped save tenants more than \$523,000 in claimed housing debt. Traditional legal aid models may assist approximately 100 households per attorney annually; the ENP model is projected to nearly double that reach. Students develop advanced litigation, negotiation, and client counseling skills in real-time, high-stakes environments while serving San Diego's most vulnerable residents.

Opening Doors to the Profession: Access, Pipeline, and Belonging

The legal profession has a long-standing fundamental tension: the law affects everyone, but legal education

has historically been accessible to only a slice of society. The following honorees are working to change that by building programs that reach prospective students before they ever apply, supporting those who might otherwise be overlooked once they arrive, and creating pathways for people who had been told, explicitly or implicitly, that the profession was not for them.

Indiana University Maurer School of Law created the Maurer Vision Program (MVP) to address a problem that begins long before the LSAT: many talented students never consider law school because they cannot envision themselves belonging in the profession. The program is a multi-stage, statewide pipeline initiative beginning as early as fifth grade and extending through law school and legal careers in Indiana. Its components include Outreach for Legal Literacy, a student-led initiative bringing mock trials and legal career exposure to local grade-school students; Law 101, a six-week hybrid program for Indiana high school seniors; and the MVP Scholars Program, which pairs undergraduates with Maurer law student mentors for individualized advising and LSAT preparation throughout the academic year.



Students walk down Main Street at Vanderbilt Law.

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During the 2025-26 cycle, the Scholars Program received approximately 100 applications and enrolled between 20 and 24 scholars. As Dean Christiana Ochoa has noted, many students are not merely seeking advising, they are seeking connection. To see and hear from people who shared their experiences and succeeded.

Fordham University School of Law's Empowering Every Mind program addresses a different but equally important access challenge: Once neurodiverse students arrive in law school, many find the environment was not built with them in mind. Launched at the start of the 2024-25 academic year, the program offers individualized academic support, specialized tutoring, assistive technologies, and regular check-ins through coaches and peer mentors, alongside monthly community meetings and specialized support for navigating the complex bar accommodations process.

A 2024 Bloomberg Law survey found that approximately 25% of law students identify as neurodivergent—and Empowering Every Mind is designed to ensure those students have the support they need to flourish. The program has grown to 32 participants, with much of that growth driven by student-to-student referrals.

Purdue Global Law School's Foundations for Law School Excellence (FLEX) program addresses a challenge unique to online legal education: how to expand access for students with lower admissions predictors without compromising academic rigor or institutional integrity. FLEX is an eight-week pre-admission program in which applicants complete structured work in core legal skills before being offered admission to the JD program. The results have been striking: among those who then entered the JD program, second-term persistence rates exceeded those of higher-scoring students who entered without taking FLEX, at 77% versus 67%. Third-term persistence rates for FLEX students reached 89%, compared to 60% for non-FLEX students—even though non-FLEX students had admissions scores averaging seven points higher. The program has made it possible for more students from socioeconomically underserved communities to enter and succeed in law school without the school lowering its standards.

Saint Louis University School of Law's (SLU Law) Accessing the Legal Profession (ALP) Mini-Camp reaches prospective students before they begin to apply. The free, fully virtual four-day program demystifies the law school admissions process for first-generation and underrepresented prospective students, covering LSAT preparation, application



At the annual Legal Innovation & Tech Conference (LIT Con) in April, the Suffolk University Law LIT Lab and LIT Clinic students presented on their newest digital smart tools. The apps help walk litigants through health insurance coverage appeals, small claims matters, adult guardianship reviews, and paperwork for simple divorces.



Touro University Law Center FlexTime JD students catch up in between classes at the Manhattan campus.



Monterey College of Law hybrid online students.

strategy, personal statement development, and financing a legal education. Because the program is virtual, participants from across the country can attend live or access recorded sessions on their own schedule. Now in its fifth year, ALP has attracted more than 250 registrants each summer. Of the 107 individuals who attended at least one live session in the most recent summer, 15 ultimately applied to law school, with two planning to enroll at SLU Law this fall and 39 more indicating plans to apply in the upcoming cycle.

Reimagining the JD: Flexible Pathways and the Future of Legal Training

The traditional Juris Doctor degree—three years, full-time, on campus—has long been the only recognized path to a legal career. But for millions of working adults, caregivers, rural residents, those adhering to religious schedules, and career changers, that structure has created a barrier to pursuing what may have been a dream career. The following honorees have reimagined when, where, and how legal education is delivered—reducing cost and time, expanding access, and in some cases rethinking what a law degree needs to look like in order to serve the communities that need lawyers most.

Elon University School of Law has been offering a 2.5-year Juris Doctor since 2015, and in the decade since, its outcomes have made the case that accelerated legal education is not a compromise but a competitive advantage. Students complete seven consecutive trimesters, culminating in a required 10-week, full-time Residency-in-Practice in which every student works in a judicial chamber, law firm, business, or agency under supervision.

Elon Law graduates have completed residencies in 23 other states and as far away as New Zealand. The outcomes are compelling: an average of 90% of their graduates have secured employment within 10 months of graduation since 2017, including 96% of the Class of 2023. In February 2026, the Class of 2025 achieved a first-time North Carolina bar passage rate of 91.96%, significantly exceeding the statewide average of 78.8%.

Loyola University Chicago School of Law launched its Weekend JD in 2016 as one of the first weekend part-time law programs in the nation, and is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year with a meaningful redesign. Beginning this fall, the program will shift to three on-campus weekends per semester, with approximately 70% of coursework completed online. The change is driven by equity: flying to Chicago seven times a semester is expensive for non-local students, and the redesigned format reduces those costs while preserving the in-person community that students and faculty value. The program



ZoomInfo workshop with Lewis & Clark Law School students.



Case Western Reserve University School of Law students at the Kramer Law Clinic.



Syracuse University College of Law advocacy students participate in a variety of competitions, including appellate advocacy.

has attracted students from their 20s through their 60s from across the country and abroad, and its alumni include an Illinois human rights commissioner, the strategic executive partner in the office of the Chicago Bears' president and CEO, and a candidate for Illinois lieutenant governor.

The University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law has reimagined the pathway to licensure itself. The Public Service Pathway (PSP), established in February 2025 by the South Dakota Supreme Court as a five-year pilot, offers an alternative route to licensure that does not require passing the bar exam. Instead, PSP students complete 500 hours of work in a public sector legal office during the fall of their final year, develop a portfolio of written work assessed for minimum competence, complete additional coursework in the spring, and then commit to two years of public sector legal work in South Dakota after graduation.

The inaugural cohort of nine students has completed the program, with all nine accepting positions in South Dakota's public legal sector—directly addressing a persistent shortage of attorneys willing to serve in rural and public interest roles across the state. As one graduate described it, the person who walked into the Pennington County State's Attorney's Office at the start of the program was not the same person who emerged at the end.

Mitchell Hamline School of Law's Wrongful Conviction



Students from Hofstra University School of Law participated in the University's Bioscience Business Innovation Program (BBIP)—an interdisciplinary initiative in partnership with Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory that turns groundbreaking bioscience ideas into viable business ventures.

Clinic, launched in 2022, stands as a compelling demonstration that rigorous clinical legal education is possible in an online format. Working in collaboration with the Minnesota Attorney General's Conviction Review Unit, students investigate claims of innocence in pairs, working through thousands of pages of case files including trial transcripts, forensic results, and witness recordings. Each semester includes structured online instruction, biweekly team supervision sessions, and an on-campus capstone week dedicated to on-the-ground investigation—visiting clients in prison, reviewing physical evidence, and interviewing witnesses. Students have described it as the most educational experience of their law school careers. As more law schools develop online programs, Mitchell Hamline's experience demonstrates how rigorous clinical education can be delivered across distances without sacrificing depth.

Building the Bar: Judicial Pathways, Advocacy, and the Craft of Lawyering

Some of the most important innovations in legal education are not about what students learn but about how they

prepare to perform—under pressure, in front of a judge, on behalf of a client who has no one else. The following honorees have built programs focused on the craft of lawyering itself: the preparation, the practice, the mentorship, and the professional formation that transform law students into lawyers.

Boston University School of Law (BU Law) has built a judicial clerkship culture remarkable in its breadth and visibility. Rather than treating clerkships as opportunities pursued only by a narrow subset of highly credentialed students, BU Law has intentionally integrated clerkship education throughout the entire student experience—beginning with first-year summer judicial internships funded by the law school, progressing through academic-year externships for credit, and extending to the distinctive annual Oscar party, a movie-themed celebration in which students who have submitted federal clerkship applications walk a red carpet and receive mock Oscar statuettes.

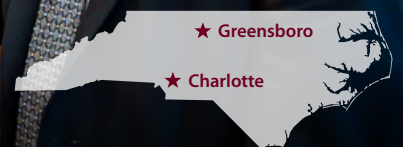
What could be an isolating and stressful experience becomes a joyful, community-supported milestone. Faculty wear "Ask Me About Clerkships" buttons at



Florida International University College of Law's Academic Excellence Program is built on three core principles: contextualization, self-regulated learning, and formative assessment. All skills are taught within the context of doctrinal classes, where students monitor their own progress and use personalized feedback to drive academic growth.

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student events to normalize clerkship conversations across the student body.

Over the past five years, BU Law students have averaged approximately 52 summer judicial internships annually, growing from 27 funded students in Summer 2022 to more than 40 in recent years. During a period when the ABA reported an 8.2% national decline in clerkship placements, BU Law's decline was substantially smaller—a testament to the strength of its institutional pipeline.

Campbell University Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law has taken judicial clerkship innovation to an entirely different geography—another country. Dean J. Rich Leonard, who has traveled to Africa approximately 80 times over a 30-year career focused on judicial reform, used his relationships with chief justices in Ghana, Namibia, and Rwanda to establish the Joseph E. Zaytoun International Judicial Clerkship Fellowship—funded by a \$500,000 gift providing each fellow with a \$12,000 stipend. Eight Campbell Law students traveled to Africa in May 2026 to serve as judicial clerks in the high courts of three nations. As inaugural fellow Angelena Antenucci '27 says about her time



Campbell University School of Law students and dean outside the Ghanaian Supreme Court.



A volunteer for Street Medicine at Pitt (left); Mary Crossley, John E. Murray Faculty Scholar and Professor of Law, University of Pittsburgh School of Law (center); and Anna Marie White, Assistant Professor of Family and Community Medicine, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Medical Director of Street Medicine at Pitt, and Director of the Center for Street Medicine at Pitt School of Medicine, deliver food during night rounds as part of Street Medicine at Pitt on Nov. 19, 2025. (Photo by Rayni Shiring, University of Pittsburgh).



Rutgers Law School Associates cohort working in Newark, New Jersey.



Jon Garon, Julie Hough, Michael Epstein, and Timothy Shields, speakers at the 2025 Sharon and Mitchell Berger Entrepreneur Boot Camp at Nova Southeastern University College of Law.

in Namibia, “The opportunity is both a privilege and a responsibility—a chance not only to grow as a law student but to engage with the law in a global context, shaped by different histories, cultures, and communities.”

J. Reuben Clark Law School at Brigham Young University (BYU Law) has built its Academies Program into one of the most distinctive career preparation initiatives in legal education. Now in its eighth year, the program offers immersive, simulation-based weeklong experiences in major legal markets across the United States and abroad—each led jointly by BYU Law faculty and practicing attorneys. Spring 2026 saw 10 Academies, the most in the program's history, including the Deals Academy in New York City hosted with Kirkland & Ellis, the Startups Academy in Palo Alto led by Wilson Sonsini, an International Commercial Arbitration Academy in Geneva, and an AI Law and Policy Academy in Washington, D.C. Beginning in fall 2026, BYU Law is shifting the Academies to October of students' first year, in direct response to Big Law's increasingly accelerated hiring timeline. As one faculty mentor



Scott Hall, home of Saint Louis University School of Law in downtown St. Louis, Missouri.



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said after the Deals Academy: one day students were in a classroom in Provo learning basic M&A principles; 72 hours later they were on the 51st floor of an elite New York law firm negotiating complex deal provisions.

Stetson University College of Law's Stetson Inns were created to address a challenge that has become increasingly pressing across legal education: the challenge of belonging. The Inns, modeled on the British Inns of Court, place incoming first-year students into cohorts of approximately 40 members, each led by a senior faculty member known for teaching excellence and paired with about 10 upper-level student mentors. The Inns completely reimaged Orientation: where students once spent two days in large groups listening to presentations, they now engage in values-clarification exercises, setting expectations, conversations and structured dialogue about the norms of the profession. The results are significant. Before the Inns, 54% of students reported building community during Orientation; with the Inns, 97% did. Before the Inns, 33% felt they had a faculty member or administrator they could comfortably reach out to; with the Inns, 96% did. Stetson's transfer rates have also dropped significantly since the program was established—a meaningful proxy for the sense of belonging the Inns have created.

Syracuse University College of Law has built a national reputation in advocacy education that extends well beyond its own student body. Its intercollegiate competitions include the country's only deposition competition: the Syracuse Deposition Competition—which addresses a genuine gap in legal education, given that depositions occur in nearly every complex civil matter while most advocacy programs focus exclusively on trial. It also offers the National Trial League, the country's only full-semester online trial competition structured like a sports league, now in its sixth year with 14 schools competing weekly. The Transatlantic Negotiation Competition, developed with Queen's University Belfast, waives registration fees for schools from developing and under-resourced regions; the 2025 competition featured 24 teams spanning five continents and more than 10 time zones. Syracuse Law has also created the country's only fully integrated joint JD/LLM. in Advocacy and Litigation, allowing students to earn both degrees simultaneously at no additional cost, which has quickly become the law school's most popular joint degree. ●



Mitchell Hamline law clinic students with the Minnesota Attorney General's Office Conviction Review Unit reviewing documents in a homicide case.



Graduates of the Public Service Pathways Program at their hooding ceremony at the University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law.

5 Trends

Shaping the Future Lawyer

AI & Legal Research

55% of law schools reported offering courses focused on AI, legal technology, or related emerging technologies.



Legal Technology

79% of law firms increased their use of legal technology tools over the past several years.



Data Privacy

70% of organizations cite privacy regulation compliance as a top legal concern.



Alternative Admissions

More than 80 ABA-accredited law schools now accept the GRE as an alternative to the LSAT.



Remote Legal Practice

74% of attorneys report using virtual meeting platforms regularly with clients.



Law Schools Race to Catch Up as NextGen Bar Exam Reshapes Legal Education

By Erik Cliburn

The bar exam is getting a makeover, and law schools are scrambling to keep pace.

Starting this July, the NextGen Uniform Bar Exam makes its debut in 10 jurisdictions—Connecticut, Maryland, Missouri, Oregon, Washington, and several U.S. territories—replacing the current 12-hour, memorization-heavy test with a nine-hour, skills-based assessment.

By July 2028, the exam will have rolled out to nearly every U.S. jurisdiction, including New York, Texas, Florida, and Pennsylvania.

The shift is seismic. Where the current exam tests 14 subject areas, NextGen narrows the field to eight core subjects: business associations, civil procedure, constitutional law, contracts, criminal law, evidence, real property, and torts.

Family law, which for now appears only in skills-focused questions with legal resources provided, will be added as a full foundational subject in July 2028. Beyond the slimmer list, the format itself looks different—three three-hour sessions spread across a day and a half, administered on examinees' own laptops in a secure online environment.

The new exam is the work of the National Conference of Bar Examiners (NCBE), the nonprofit organization that has long developed and administered bar licensing exams across the country.

The NCBE launched the NextGen project in response to mounting concerns that the existing Uniform Bar Exam had drifted out of step

with actual legal practice—testing rote memorization of a broad swath of legal doctrine at a moment when globalization, technology, and a changing workforce were reshaping what lawyers actually need to know and do.

The recalibration, years in the making, aims to ensure that new attorneys are equipped for the demands of a profession in flux, not merely just capable of recalling black-letter law under pressure. More than 40 jurisdictions have already committed to adopting it.

“The rollout is already prompting law schools to retool curricula, students to reassess preparation strategies, and employers to reconsider how licensure timelines affect hiring and training.”

Perhaps most significantly, the new exam flips the script on what it means to be prepared. On the current Uniform Bar Exam, roughly 80% of the test demands memorization and traditional issue-spotting.

On NextGen, approximately 60% requires candidates to read, digest, and apply primary legal sources under time pressure—statutes, case excerpts, procedural rules—just as they would in actual practice. That's a fundamental change in what law schools have to do to prepare graduates.

The skills being tested have expanded dramatically as well. Where the current exam assessed only issue-spotting, analysis, and legal

writing, NextGen adds legal research, investigation and evaluation, client counseling and advising, negotiation and dispute resolution, and client relationship management—seven foundational skill categories in total.

“The rollout is already prompting law schools to retool curricula, students to reassess preparation strategies, and employers to reconsider how licensure timelines affect hiring and training,” write Evelyn Woo, Grace Schuette, and Atinuke Lardner, three JD candidates at the University

of Pennsylvania Carey Law School.

For most law schools, built around doctrinal instruction and multiple-choice bar prep, those changes represent a major curriculum challenge.

LSAC's Legal Education Consulting Group, which hosted a webinar for associate deans on the subject, recommends a three-step action plan, which includes assessing current student aptitude, convening faculty-wide discussions, and then preparing a concrete plan.

Employing the principle that “many hands make light work,” the LSAC advises spreading skills instruction across all three years of study rather than concentrating it in academic

support programs. Most law schools, according to available reporting, are still in the early assessment stages.

One institution stands apart. The Appalachian School of Law (ASL), a small school in Grundy, Virginia, became the first in the country to announce a fully revised curriculum designed specifically for NextGen—and it has already implemented changes for students who arrived in fall 2024.

The process began in 2023 with a curriculum-mapping exercise in which faculty surveyed every required course to gauge how well it addressed each of the 27 foundational skills outlined in the NCBE’s content scope documents. Of those skills, 14 were found to be adequately incorporated. The rest needed work.

“Changes to the first-year curriculum have been implemented for the class that arrived on campus in fall 2024,” says Dawn Figueiras, JD, associate professor of law at the Appalachian School of Law.

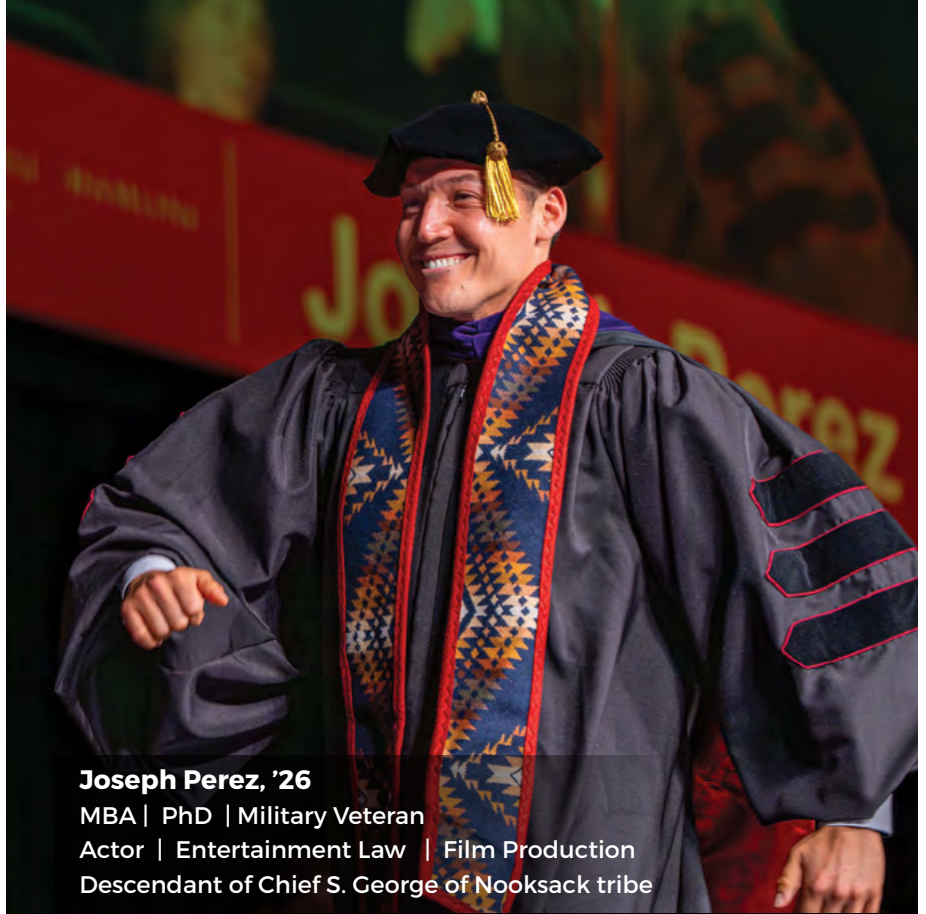
Among the changes ASL adopted are a required practicum course in the first year, new required doctrinal courses, a third-year Lawyering Skills course, and a required elective focused on statutory and regulatory interpretation. Four skills related to dispute resolution—previously offered only as electives—were grouped together into a new required course designation.

The implications for legal education extend well beyond any one school. The debate over NextGen has also renewed scrutiny of alternative pathways to bar admission, including supervised practice programs, diploma privilege, and apprenticeship models—all of which some researchers argue better assess actual lawyering competence than any standardized test.

Those conversations are unlikely to slow down as the July 2026 rollout puts the new exam to its first real-world test.

For now, students entering law school this year and next will be the first generation to sit for NextGen. Whether their schools are ready is another matter entirely. ●

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Beyond AI Literacy

Why the Future of Legal Education Is Still Human-Based

By Misty Evans

Artificial intelligence can now draft contracts, summarize case law, conduct legal research and generate legal arguments in seconds. Yet, according to Boston University (BU) School of Law Dean Angela Onwuachi-Willig, the rise of AI is making traditional legal education more important, not less.

As law schools across the country rush to integrate AI into their curricula, many are grappling with the same question: What does it mean to prepare future lawyers in a profession increasingly shaped by technology?

For Onwuachi-Willig, the answer begins with a distinction that often gets lost in discussions about technological innovation.

“I don’t think that the meaning of thinking like a lawyer changes,” she says. “What changes is how a lawyer might perform their job, how they might use AI to make them a more efficient and more effective counsel for their clients.”

That philosophy is helping frame Boston University School of Law’s new Certificate in AI for Law Practice, a program designed to give students hands-on experience with AI tools while examining the ethical, legal, and societal questions surrounding their use. The initiative includes new coursework, partnerships with legal technology companies, with AI integration across the curriculum.

But the program’s larger purpose is not simply to teach students how to use emerging technologies, it’s to teach them how to think critically about them.



Insight talks with Angela Onwuachi-Willig, Dean of Boston University School of Law and a 2026 Excellence in Innovation: Law Schools Award winner, about the impact of AI on legal education and the profession.

A common narrative surrounding AI suggests that technology may eventually reduce the need for traditional legal training. Onwuachi-Willig believes that premise is being short-sighted.

“I think a common misconception about AI is that this technology will somehow replace the need for really deep legal thinking, really deep legal and rigorous training,” she says. “The opposite is true.”

While AI can accelerate research and drafting, it cannot independently exercise legal judgment, identify strategic risks, counsel clients, or make ethical decisions. Those responsibilities remain firmly in human hands.

As a result, law schools are increasingly focused on preparing students not only to use AI tools but also to evaluate their limitations.

“We’re teaching our students to be critical consumers and users of AI,” Onwuachi-Willig says.

That emphasis reflects a broader shift occurring throughout legal education. Rather than replacing traditional instruction, AI is being woven into existing foundations. Students must still learn how to analyze cases, construct arguments, write persuasively, and understand legal doctrine.

“You have to know how to do it yourself in order to know how to use it effectively,” she says.

That challenge is particularly important because graduates must still pass the bar exam, which requires them to demonstrate legal reasoning without the assistance of AI.

The Hidden Risk of Automation

While much of the public conversation around AI focuses on efficiency gains, Onwuachi-Willig worries about a less discussed consequence: the future development of legal expertise.

Historically, junior attorneys have built their skills through research, drafting, document review, and mentorship from senior attorneys. As AI automates portions of that work, some law firms may require fewer entry-level lawyers.

That trend could create issues down the road.

“I’m worried our junior attorneys aren’t going to be getting the level of mentoring and skills that they need to become the kind of senior lawyers who can rely so effectively on AI,” she says.

The concern reflects a paradox facing the profession. AI may make today’s lawyers more productive, but if fewer young attorneys receive hands-on training, the profession could eventually face a shortage of experienced practitioners capable of exercising the judgment AI cannot provide.

For law schools, that means preparing graduates not only to work alongside technology but also to develop the human expertise needed to use that technology effectively.

Teaching Students to Question the Technology

Onwuachi-Willig’s perspective is informed in part by her scholarship examining law, inequality and institutional systems. That lens also shapes how she thinks about AI.

Among her concerns is the possibility that AI systems may reinforce existing societal biases.

Because AI systems are created and trained on human-generated information, it can reproduce patterns that already exist within legal, economic, and social institutions.

“I’m worried about bias being reinforced,” she says.

That reality has made critical analysis a central component of BU Law’s AI initiative. Students are encouraged to examine not only what AI produces but also how those outputs are generated and who may be affected by them.

The goal is not technological adoption for its own sake. Rather, it’s to ensure future lawyers understand both the promise and the limitations of these tools.

Expanding Access to Justice

At the same time, Onwuachi-Willig sees significant opportunities for AI to improve access to legal information

and services.

Across the United States, legal aid organizations and public defender offices remain critically underfunded. Millions of Americans navigate legal challenges without representation because they cannot afford an attorney.

At BU Law, faculty are exploring how AI-powered tools can help address some of those gaps. For example, faculty are working on housing and eviction cases where technology may help provide legal information and guidance to individuals who otherwise would have little or no access to assistance.

Such tools cannot replace an attorney standing beside a client in court. But they may offer a meaningful improvement over having no legal support at all.

The Future Remains Human-Based

BU’s certificate program reflects a growing recognition that AI competency is, and will become an even more important part of legal practice. The law school has expanded its AI-related offerings, introducing courses that explore both the practical applications of artificial intelligence and the broader legal questions surrounding privacy, regulation, intellectual property, and ethics.

Yet throughout the conversation, Onwuachi-Willig repeatedly returned to the same idea that technology does not change the fundamental purpose of legal education.

Law remains a profession built on trust, centered on relationships, and requiring human judgment.

“We’re a service industry,” she says. “It’s about the relationships you build with people.”

As law schools race to prepare students for an AI-enabled future, Onwuachi-Willig believes the qualities that distinguish great lawyers will remain remarkably familiar, such as judgment, trust, empathy, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making.

“All the things that matter most,” she says, “are things that only human beings can do.” ●



States Chip Away at ABA's Century-Old Grip on Legal Education

By Erik Cliburn

For more than a century, the American Bar Association has served as the de facto gatekeeper of American legal education. That arrangement is now unraveling at a pace that would have seemed unimaginable just two years ago, as a growing number of states move to sideline the organization from their bar licensing processes—a shift driven in large part by the federal government's crackdown on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) requirements that advocates say have been essential to broadening access to the legal profession.

The latest development came in late May, when the Supreme Court of Ohio announced it would publish proposed rule amendments allowing graduates of non-ABA-accredited law schools to sit for the Ohio Bar, while simultaneously directing its administrative director to begin building a state-run accreditation

process. Chief Justice Sharon L. Kennedy framed the move as collaborative rather than combative.

"We remain committed to supporting our law schools and ensuring their perspectives are reflected in this process," she says in a statement. "This effort took coordination across all levels of government, incorporating essential input from state law schools, state legislators, and federal legislators."

Ohio is far from alone. Texas became the first state to formally sever its reliance on the ABA when its supreme court finalized a new approval system in January. Florida and Alabama have similarly restructured their licensing rules, and Washington State announced in May that it will begin allowing graduates of non-ABA-accredited schools to sit for its bar exam starting in September.

The Washington State Bar

Association was careful to note it is not trying to "denigrate the ABA accreditation process," saying instead it is "honoring the ABA accreditation process while eliminating unnecessary barriers to the legal profession."

The ABA's managing director of accreditation, Jenn Rosato Perea, has sought to minimize the significance of the departures, saying Washington's change does not "substantively affect the current national accreditation system." But the cumulative weight of state-level defections tells a more complicated story.

At the center of the turbulence is DEI. The ABA's Standard 206, which required law schools to demonstrate concrete commitments to diversity in admissions, recruitment, and programming, has been suspended since February 2025 under pressure from the Trump administration, which called the requirement unlawful

in light of the Supreme Court's 2023 decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*.

In May, the ABA's accreditation council voted to eliminate the standard entirely—a move that one council member, David Brennen, a former dean of the University of Kentucky College of Law, defended reluctantly.

"Even though I personally agree with [the diversity and inclusion standard] and what it tries to achieve," Brennen says, "I think it's appropriate as an accrediting body that we eliminate that standard so we don't inhibit the diversity of ideas out there in various types of legal education environments."

For supporters of DEI in legal education, the rollback represents a serious blow. The diversity standard had served for decades as a lever for increasing representation of women and people of color in the profession.

Its elimination, critics argue, removes

one of the few structural mechanisms available to law schools for building more equitable student bodies and faculties. The ABA received substantial public comment urging it to retain or strengthen the rule—mostly from legal educators—before a key committee recommended elimination as the price of preserving the organization's federal accreditor status.

The practical consequences for law schools in states that have moved away from the ABA remain uncertain. Supporters of a national accreditation system warn of "portability chaos," a scenario in which graduates of schools approved in one state find themselves unable to practice in another.

Patricia Salkin and Gabrielle Rosenblum, writing for the New York State Bar Association, noted that employers may grow increasingly selective about which schools they recruit from, and prospective students

may face difficult choices about where to enroll based on where they ultimately want to practice.

Others see the disruption as long overdue. Critics of the ABA's model have argued for years that its requirements drive up tuition and limit innovation, effectively pricing many aspiring lawyers out of the profession—the very access-to-justice problem that DEI advocates have sought to address through diversity mandates.

What is clear is that the decentralization now underway will reshape legal education in ways that are still difficult to predict. As Ohio, Tennessee, and other states continue weighing their options, the patchwork of state-by-state standards grows more complex—and the national uniformity that the ABA's accreditation system once provided grows harder to reconstruct. ●

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The Most Powerful Force for Family Court Reform Might Be Law School

How legal education can reshape custody decisions, protect children, and transform the future of family law.

By Misty Evans

Every year, family courts make life-altering decisions about where children will live, who will care for them, and what happens when allegations of abuse, neglect, coercive control, or family violence collide with competing claims of parental rights.

Family court decisions are delivered by judges, argued by attorneys, influenced by custody evaluators, and shaped by legislation. But long before any of those professionals enter a courtroom, they pass through another institution first: law school.



For decades, efforts to reform family courts have largely focused on legislation, judicial elections, policy advocacy, and procedural changes. Yet, one of the most powerful and underutilized levers for reform may be sitting in plain sight. Law schools do not simply teach family law; they shape the people who will ultimately define it.

Every future family court judge, guardian ad litem, custody attorney, appellate advocate, policymaker, and legal scholar learns how to think about families, evidence, conflict, justice, and child welfare.

If family courts consistently struggle to recognize trauma, understand coercive control, or balance parental rights against children's developmental needs, legal education must ask an uncomfortable question. What exactly are we teaching?

As new research challenges long-held assumptions about custody, attachment, family violence, and child well-being, law schools have an opportunity not only to respond to those developments, but to lead them.

What Future Lawyers Might Not Be Learning

The American Psychological Association's (APA) 2022 Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations provide a roadmap for what modern family court decision-making should look like.

They emphasize that custody evaluations should be grounded in the best interests of the children and include screening for family violence, coercive control, maltreatment, and substance use disorders. They also stress the importance of understanding developmental needs, attachment relationships, trauma, cultural context, and parent-child dynamics.

Perhaps most importantly, the guidelines reject formulaic approaches to custody. The "best interests of the child" standard, according to the APA, is a child-specific determination that depends on the unique circumstances, relationships, and developmental needs of each one.

Yet many legal professionals

historically received far more training on concepts such as parental alienation than on these critical issues.

That imbalance has had significant consequences, according to Joan Meier, founding director of the National Family Violence Law Center at George Washington University Law School and lead researcher of the first national empirical study examining family court responses to abuse and alienation claims.

"Judges are not effectively trained on family violence, especially child abuse," Meier says. "Legal culture prioritizes parenting time for fathers at nearly all costs."

According to Meier, parental alienation claims frequently receive more attention than evidence of abuse, creating an environment where legitimate safety concerns can be minimized or overlooked.

"Parental alienation is used as a trump card to negate abuse claims," she says.

The implications extend far beyond individual cases. When future attorneys, judges, and policymakers are not adequately educated on these topics, blind spots become embedded throughout the legal system itself.

Why Law Schools Matter

Today's law students become tomorrow's decision makers. That gives legal education the unique ability to influence the future of family law.

If law schools want to produce attorneys equipped to navigate increasingly complex custody disputes, legal doctrine alone is not enough.

A single custody case may involve developmental psychology, trauma science, domestic violence research, attachment theory, substance abuse knowledge, mental health awareness, and family systems dynamics.

Yet, legal education often remains siloed from the very disciplines generating the research that family courts increasingly need. This disconnect creates a significant opportunity.

Rather than treating family law primarily as a legal dispute between parents, law schools could embrace a more interdisciplinary approach that

prepares students to understand how children experience divorce, conflict, attachment disruption, trauma, and family violence. Such an approach would not replace legal analysis. It would strengthen it.

A Statewide Experiment in Retraining the System

Evidence that education can change professional practice is already emerging.

Danielle Hawkes, a Utah family law attorney and former chair of the Family Law Executive Committee at the Utah State Bar, has spent years helping develop family law education programs for judges and legal professionals throughout the state.

Her experience provides a striking example of how professional training can reshape legal culture.

"I was trained through AFCC," Hawkes says, referring to the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts. "I was used to always being really hyper-vigilant for alienation. And I was not trained on domestic violence in my first 10 years of practice."

That experience, she says, was not unusual. For many years, family law professionals were encouraged to focus heavily on preserving parent-child relationships and identifying signs of alienation, while receiving comparatively little education about other factors.

As new research emerged and Utah adopted reforms designed to improve family court responses to domestic violence and coercive control, Hawkes says many professionals began reassessing longstanding assumptions.

She has been involved in statewide efforts to bring judges, attorneys, guardians ad litem, custody evaluators, and mental health professionals together for training on family violence and child welfare issues.

Those educational initiatives have exposed these family court participants to research that was often absent and have encouraged more nuanced discussions about how to evaluate allegations of abuse.

Today, family law professionals across

Rather than treating family law primarily as a legal dispute between parents, law schools could embrace a more interdisciplinary approach that prepares students to understand how children experience divorce, conflict, attachment disruption, trauma, and family violence. Such an approach would not replace legal analysis. It would strengthen it.

Utah are receiving significantly more education on family violence dynamics than they did even a few years ago.

"We are hearing about it now," Hawkes says. "We are learning about it as lawyers and judges and commissioners."

She emphasizes that the goal is not to replace one rigid framework with another, but to better understand the realities families bring into court. This kind of additional training gives decision makers additional tools for evaluating evidence and assessing risk, particularly in high-conflict custody cases where children's safety and well-being may be at stake.

Hawkes also notes that meaningful change requires ongoing education. Judges rotate assignments, new attorneys enter a family law practice, and evolving research continues to reshape understanding. Sustained professional learning, she says, is essential if courts are going to keep pace with emerging evidence.

The Power of Interdisciplinary Learning

For law schools, the next frontier may be deeper collaboration across disciplines. Many of the most important questions in family court are not purely legal questions.

How do children form secure attachments? What does trauma look like in children? How does coercive control affect parenting capacity? How should courts interpret a child's fear of a parent? What developmental factors should influence parenting schedules? These questions require expertise beyond traditional law school curriculum.

Law schools are uniquely positioned to bridge that gap through

interdisciplinary clinics, joint degree programs, collaborative research initiatives, and partnerships with departments of psychology, social work, education, public health, and child development.

Some institutions are already moving in this direction (see page 26 for some Insight Into Academia Excellence in Innovation Award: Law School winners). Family law clinics increasingly expose students to real-world custody disputes. Trauma-informed legal education programs are expanding, and scholars across disciplines are collaborating on topic-related research.

The opportunity is not simply to graduate better family lawyers. It's also to produce future judges, policymakers, and scholars who understand both the law and the science behind the lives the law affects.

Moving Past Mathematical Fairness: Let's Not Split the Baby

One of the most significant debates in family law today centers on the distinction between parental fairness and child well-being.

Conversations about custody often focus on equal parenting time. Developmental science asks a different question: What does this child need?

Research supporting ideal shared custody arrangements generally reflects situations in which both parents maintain healthy relationships with the child and are capable of effective co-parenting. But that is not always the reality.

Those findings do not necessarily apply in situations involving abuse, coercive control, significant conflict, neglect, or safety concerns.

That distinction matters.

The goal of family court should not be to achieve mathematical equality between adults but rather to create arrangements that best support children's emotional, psychological, developmental, and physical well-being.

The APA's custody evaluation guidelines reinforce this principle, emphasizing individualized assessments over rigid formulas. Law schools are uniquely positioned to help future legal professionals understand that difference.

The Future of Family Court Reform Begins Here

Law schools often describe themselves as institutions that shape the future. In family law, that is literally true.

The theories students learn today will become tomorrow's judicial opinions, custody evaluations, statutes, courtroom arguments, and public policy decisions. Law school curriculum will shape the lives of children and families in the future.

If legal education continues to approach family law primarily as a dispute between adults, family courts will continue producing adult-centered outcomes.

But if law schools begin incorporating the understanding of child development, trauma, coercive control, attachment, and family violence with the same rigor they teach precedent, procedure, and constitutional doctrine, they have the power to transform the system itself.

The next generation of leaders driving and enacting this change is sitting in law school classrooms right now. ●

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