

First-Gen Success through Grit and Offices of Academic Support

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The law school environment is filled with students of different backgrounds. The various background classifications can be race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, or first-generation. Students are often classified based on their backgrounds. The most common background classifications tend to be race, gender, and religion. A less common classification is that of first-generation students. For the purposes of this article first-generation law students are classified as students for whom neither parent possess a bachelor's degree. On the converse, non-first-generation students are classified as students with at least one parent possessing a bachelor's degree.

Predictors of law school performance are commonly thought of as undergraduate GPA and LSAT scores. Law schools often use these numbers as determining factors for admission into law school. Another indicator for success that some students are labeled with or classified as is first-generation. When classifying students as first-generation, the students' potential for success is based solely on the achievements of their parents and not the abilities of the students. Is it fair to say that a parents' educational attainment is a determining factor for student success? Or would the more accurate inquiry be, do the first-generation students have grit that would make up for their parent's lack of educational attainment. Grit is defined "as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously towards challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress¹."

The first sign of a propensity for grit that first-generation law students show is their ability to successfully complete an undergraduate school program while overcoming obstacles that stood in their way as first-generation college students. Because they have shown this propensity for grit prior to entering law school, that grit will serve them well in law school. Some obstacles and hurdles are faced by both non-first-generation students and first-generation students, while other obstacles are faced solely by first-generation students.

Traditionally, grit has been measured anecdotally, as there is no official way to measure grit. In evaluating grit, the question of can you fake it until you make it comes to mind. The idea of faking it until you make it implies that grit can be somehow learned or gained over time with practice. In today's society, so many things are possible. Law students make many choices on a daily basis, including deciding what type of student they want to be. Just to name a few, they can choose procrastination or hard work, independent study or a study group, or choose to attend class or skip class. With all the options that students are faced with, it is not far-fetched to think that someone would think to choose grit in their approach to law school.

¹ Angela L Duckworth et al., *Personality Progress & Individual Differences Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals*, 92 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1087–1101 (2007).

Grit should not be confused with hard work or determination. Both of those things can absolutely be learned or gained over time. Grit on the other hand is different, it is more than working hard, being determined to succeed or even making sacrifices. Grit requires a higher level of determination that spans for longer periods of time and lasts through failures and plateaus. Efforts to fake it until you make it in a rigorous law program can lead to burnout, which can potentially hinder law school success. Law students may experience burnout due to mental exhaustion or feelings that they are constantly doing law school related work or activities with little to no time for a break.

Faking having grit until you make it may not be the best approach to take when seeking law school success. Law school success can be achieved without grit, so the potential hazard of fake it until you make it may not be worth it, because they may not ever learn or gain grit in the end. Law students would be better served by seeking out their Office of Academic Support (OAS) than attempting to fake it until they make it.

Offices of Academic Support are a common fixture in law schools across the country. Regardless of the specific set up of the offices amongst law schools, OAS at their core, support law student learning. Offices of Academic Support offer assistance and support to students in various ways and at various times throughout their law school matriculation. As it relates to first-generation students, they are not exempt from needing support from OAS. In fact, first-generation students spend less time studying and creating social interactions with faculty members and their peers² than their non-first-generation counterparts. As a result, first-generation students may need a greater level of support than their non-first-generation counterparts. Offices of Academic Support have a unique opportunity to support first-generation students throughout their law school matriculation.

An OAS can be proactive in addressing the needs of first-generation students by creating pathways for interacting with faculty and sharing information and tips for law school success. Utilizing an intrusive advising method forces law schools and OAS to assume that first-generation students will need help, instead of waiting for them to seek out assistance³.

In general, human nature teaches us not to be intrusive. When following societal norms, we tend to offer guidance, advice etc. only when we are asked for our opinions. It is not commonly accepted to offer unsolicited advice on someone else's life or personal situation. However, in the law school environment, OAS teams need to be intrusive. OAS cannot always wait on students to seek out assistance. Often when students are left to their own devices, they will struggle in silence, or they will share their struggles with their peer group. The peer group likely does not have any more law school experience than the first-generation student does. In both scenarios, the first-generation student is not gaining any positive assistance or insight.

An intrusive advising model requires that an advisor is active in initiating contact with students and is active in maintaining the subsequent contacts. Offices of Academic Support will find more success reaching first-generation students by using the intrusive advising method as opposed to a general open invitation for students to schedule an appointment. An intrusive advisor will not only be present at 1L orientation, but will remain present throughout 1L year, and will also maintain an open line of communication with students.

Offices of Academic Support can introduce an intrusive advising model to their students in several ways. One way is to create an OAS or academic advising page on the institution's learning management system. This will help advisors make their initial contacts with students and drive the subsequent contacts. Establishing a page that is exclusively for OAS will go a long way in creating a welcoming and comfortable environment for students. Another way is to send a welcome email that introduces first year students to their advisor or an email reminding students that their advisor is available to them are great first steps toward intrusive advising. The email will entice some students to reach out and start the initial conversation with their advisor.

² Kerry J Strand, *Making Sure They Make It!: Best Practices For Ensuring The Academic Success Of First-Generation College Students* (2013), <https://www.cic.edu/r/r/Documents/CIC-Walmart-Final-Report.pdf> (last visited 2023).

³ Walter R. Earl, *Intrusive Advising of Freshmen in Academic Difficulty*, 8 NACADA Journal 27–33 (1988).

What's more, first-generation students would be greatly benefited by being presented with a resource bank containing information regarding their law school experience. Granting students access to a list of resources on or before day one of law school will help them to get accumulated to the law school environment and provide answers to some of the inevitable questions that they may have. The resource bank should be organized in a manner that best represents the programs and services available at each individual institution. A good starting point in organizing the resource bank will be to organize the information by skills resources and campus resources.

The skills resources section can provide a variety of information and is a great opportunity for an OAS to highlight its office and team members. A starting point for this section could be the location, contact information, and services provided by the OAS. Additionally, information on self-directed learning skills such as study routines, time management and self-reflection would be beneficial in the skills resources section.

Like the skills resources section, the campus resources section can provide lots of different information to students. The focus of the section should be on the various services available at each individual institution. All institutions provide their students with amazing resources, and unfortunately students are sometimes unaware of these resources. Each OAS should tailor the campus resources section to show the resources provided by their institution. The creation of subsections such as technology, student health and books can be a starting point for this section.

While providing resources and services to students, OAS should meet first-generation students where they are and help them grow to where they need to be. It is generally understood that first-generation students may enter law school with less understanding about the law school experience than their non-first-generation counterparts. It should also be understood that the drive, determination and grit that first-generation students possess have helped them to overcome many hurdles and obstacles on their path to and through law school. With the assistance of OAS, these students can have a better understanding of what to expect as it relates to their law school experience. Offices of Academic Support can be an important link to help foster relationships with those first-generation students that will last throughout their law school matriculation.