Social Capital Benefits of Peer Mentoring Relationships in Law School

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Abstract

Scholars have addressed the rigors of law school and suggest mentorship may help students better navigate their educational environments. However, literature largely addresses the role of faculty mentors, less often considering peer mentors in the law school context. This study explores first year law students’ motivation in forming peer mentoring relationships and the roles peer mentors play in students’ lives. Analyses of survey and focus group data collected from 203 first-year law students at 11 institutions reveal that the majority rely on peer support, forming formal, informal, and “organizational” peer mentoring relationships. Relationship formation is motivated by students’ acknowledged need for help transitioning into law school, a lack of formal academic advising, and the discomfort associated with seeking faculty assistance. Mentoring relationships also represent an important form of social capital for new students, introducing them to the academic rigors of law school while also offering individualized social support.

(148 words)

Keywords: Legal education; peer mentoring; support; educational transitions
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Introduction

Law school is not supposed to be easy. Recent studies have shown that many law students see their campus environments as not only challenging, but also unfriendly and sometimes even hostile. Students of all backgrounds report that law school can be a frustrating and even debilitating experience. Studies suggest that law students experience significant levels of stress, as well as emotional and psychological distress, exceeding levels observed amongst the general public or students in other professional degree programs. These negative outcomes may be exacerbated for female students and underrepresented or marginalized students of color, who often find themselves enrolled in law schools that remain geared toward white male norms.

According to Iijima, legal education instigates multiple forms of psychological dysfunction and distress, partly because law school requires some level of disconnection from those outside of the educational environment. A heavy time commitment to studying and

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4 See generally, LANI GUINIER, MICHELLE FINE & JANE BALIN, *BECOMING GENTLEMEN: WOMEN, LAW SCHOOL, AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE* (Beacon Press 1997) (highlighting the alienation women have experienced in the law school environment).
8 Id.
9 Guinier, supra note 4.
10 Iijima, supra note 5, at 525.
12 Guinier, supra note 4.
13 Iijima, supra note 5, at 525-529.
coursework coupled with a focus on immersion in a new environment with its own culture, rules, and norms often leaves little time for maintenance of relationships with friends and family away from school. Iijima notes that large classes and inflated faculty-student ratios also often discourage close mentoring relationships with professors. Further, the aggressive nature of legal education, marked by competition between classmates, tests graded on a curve, and a teaching pedagogy driven by the Socratic Method,\textsuperscript{14} may make close relationships with peers challenging to form and maintain.

This competitive edge is perhaps one of the best-known aspects of law school, and the experience within legal education is generally not expected to have a positive influence on the development of strong, supportive relationships.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, higher education researchers have long identified close relationships as critical to student success. Researchers in higher education have established the connections between social relationships and both academic achievement and retention.\textsuperscript{16} Specifically, support in the form of mentoring is often recommended as a way to promote student success and help them manage difficult educational environments.\textsuperscript{17,18,19,20}

Traditional mentoring relationships have been found to hold great value for both graduate and undergraduate students,\textsuperscript{21,22,23,24} and mentorship has been connected to a successful career in

\textsuperscript{14} The Socratic Method is a standard law school teaching technique whereby the professor call on one student at a time rather than accepting volunteers; that student is then forced to participate and often answer set questions, as well as follow-up questions (Nussbaum, 2003).
\textsuperscript{15} Robert P. Schuwerk, The Law Professor as Fiduciary: What Duties Do We Owe to Our Students, 45 S. TEX. L. REV. 753 (2004).
\textsuperscript{16} Vincent Tinto, Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (The University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed. 1993).
\textsuperscript{17} Guinier, supra note 4.
\textsuperscript{18} Shalonda Kelly & John H. Schweitzer, Mentoring within a Graduate School Setting, 33 C. STUDENT J. 130 (1999).
\textsuperscript{20} Jennifer H. Waldeck, Victoria O. Orrego, Timothy G. Plax & Patricia Kearney, Graduate Student/Faculty Mentoring Relationships: Who Gets Mentored, How It Happens, and to What End, 45 COMM. Q. 93 (1997).
However, few studies explore the occurrence or outcomes associated with mentoring during law school. One of the few studies on mentoring and support in law school suggests that while some law students rely on faculty for mentorship, a higher percentage report that their law school classmates provide strong support. As students often have more access to peers than professors, and faculty may view mentoring as a troublesome time commitment, which competes with the need to focus on tenure related activities, peers may be an important advising alternative. This may be particularly true within law schools, where faculty can often be perceived as distant and disinterested in student development.

Research suggests seeking peer support broadly, and engagement in peer mentoring relationships specifically, can lead to increased professional success. Peer mentors can meet many of their mentees’ psycho-social and career development needs in ways fairly similar to traditional mentors. There are also distinctions, including that peer mentoring relationships: are

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23 Kelly, supra note 18.
24 Waldeck, supra note 20.
30 Schuwerk, supra note 15.
33 Rosenthal, supra note 28.
34 Iijima, supra note 5.
35 Schuwerk, supra note 15.
less hierarchical; tend to involve individuals who are closer in age; and are more likely to create opportunities for reciprocal exchanges of support and resources.\textsuperscript{37} 38

This study explores the roles that peer mentors play in the lives of fellow law students. Specifically, this article explores particular factors motivating law students to form developmental relationships with peers and the roles peer mentors may play in fostering future success.

**Relevant Literature**

**Theoretical Framework – Social Capital Theory**

Two schools of thought incorporating social capital theory frame this study. Social capital consists of relationships that lead to positive outcomes for those involved.\textsuperscript{39} Through the lens of social capital, relationships are seen as resources that individuals can draw on in times of need.\textsuperscript{40} 41 42 Of course, not all relationships or types of social capital are equal. Social capital can be either sanctioned or undervalued, depending on whether those in power view a particular relationship as worthwhile or not; knowing the “right” people may be beneficial whereas relationships with the “wrong” sorts, detrimental.

While most scholars examine social capital through an investigation of one-on-one relationships, social capital can also be obtained through group membership. Social capital theorists have studied the ways in which socially supportive communities and relationships


\textsuperscript{38} Kram, supra note 36.


\textsuperscript{40} James S. Coleman, Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital, 94 AM. J. SOC. 95 (1998).


\textsuperscript{42} Francis Fukuyama, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Development, 22 THIRD WORLD Q. 7 (2001).
create environments that allow members to thrive; in these settings, norms are introduced and
enforced with nurturing support rather than the threat of sanction or exclusion.43 44 45 Thus,
social capital may be important whether the relationships create a fear of sanctions, which
thereby demand conformity, or a warm environment encouraging both growth and compliance
with local norms.

The strength of the relationship may matter, as well, and is addressed in the second
school of thought which informs this study: Granovetter’s framework addressing the strength of
weak ties. Conventional wisdom holds that the most beneficial of relationships are formed with
strong supporters who will push for a particular individual’s advancement. However, “weak ties”
may be just as helpful. Rather than relying on strong bonds with a few close-knit individuals,
Granovetter suggests that more tenuous relationships with a diverse network may yield more
useful contacts and benefits.46

Social capital frameworks have been used in studies of the legal profession, facilitating
understanding of how associates gain access to resources and information.47 Mentoring
relationships are one way in which individuals can gain access to social capital, including the
information and social support that can be helpful in the development of legal careers.48 For
example, Laband & Lentz suggest that mentorship can produce positive outcomes in the legal
profession through increased access to knowledge and competencies that may be specific to the
organization or institution.49 Thus, within the context of this study, mentoring relationships

43 Coleman, supra note 40.
44 SOCIAL CAPITAL: THEORY AND RESEARCH 3-334 (Nan Lin, Karen Cook & Ronald S. Burt eds., Aldine de Gruyter
2001).
45 ROBERT PUTNAM, BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY (Simon & Schuster
2000).
47 Ramaswami, supra note 26.
48 Ramaswami, supra note 26.
49 Laband, supra note 25.
generally, and those between peers specifically, are understood as a form of social capital. They are perceived as having the potential to provide resources to students in times of need and facilitate transitions in a more safe and nurturing environment. Granovetter’s work on the strength of loose ties also suggests that these relationships do not necessarily have to be close, intimate friendships to be beneficial. Rather, having multiple, more tenuous bonds to a diverse network can in fact be more useful in gaining access to information and resources.

**Peer Mentoring and Student Success**

Based on the extant literature, mentors provide their students with important information and resources, consistent with the social capital framework. Mentors offer both academic and emotional support, leading to increases in satisfaction with the educational experience, likelihood of retention, success in obtaining grants and fellowships, and interest in pursuing academic careers. Peer mentors may also be especially helpful for students of color and other marginalized students whose lack of high-status social capital, which often puts them at a disadvantage even before classes begin.

These findings reinforce the importance of mentoring for students broadly, and particularly within graduate and professional education. However, past research does not specifically investigate this topic in the law school setting and only a limited number of studies focus on peer mentors. Yet, peer mentors can offer important support, performing multiple functions in their mentees’ lives. They are described as having the potential to “fill the roles of

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50 Granovetter, supra note 46.
51 Adams, supra note 21.
52 Kelly, supra note 18.
53 Waldeck, supra note 20.
advocate, orchestrator, dissonance mediator, boundary spanner, and cultural guide” for their protégés.\(^{57}\)

Research on peer mentoring connects these relationships to several positive outcomes. A formal peer mentoring program for MBAs was linked to new member socialization, as well as stress-management.\(^{58}\) Rosenthal and Shinebarger’s assessment of a peer mentoring program revealed increased academic performance (i.e., GPAs) for mentees.\(^{59}\) In addition, participation in a peer mentoring program was linked to increases in academic achievement and a more positive attitude toward school amongst at-risk students.\(^{60}\) Students in a nursing program reported increases in their feelings of validation and sense of belonging based on their participation in a peer mentoring program.\(^{61}\) Similarly, graduate students who had more contact with their peer mentors received more psycho-social and instrumental support during the academic year than those who did not.\(^{62}\)

Viewing these relationships as a source of social capital, it becomes clear how the likelihood of multiple connections with diverse people/groups may have benefits,\(^{63}\) while reliance on safe, supportive individuals or groups to provide specialized knowledge could also lead to advancement for the mentee.\(^{64}\)\(^\text{65}\) Glass and Walter suggest that peer mentoring programs are a part of creating warm and positive climates that lend to personal and professional growth.\(^{66}\)

\(^{57}\) Rosenthal, supra note 28, at 25.
\(^{59}\) Rosenthal, supra note 28.
\(^{62}\) Elisa J. Grant-Vallone & Ellen A. Ensher, Effects of Peer Mentoring on Types of Mentor Support, Program Satisfaction and Graduate Student Stress: A Dyadic Perspective, 41 J. C. STUD. DEV. 637 (2000).
\(^{63}\) Granovetter, supra note 46.
\(^{64}\) Coleman, supra note 40.
\(^{65}\) Lin, supra note 44.
\(^{66}\) Glass, supra note 61.
In addition to offering advice and feedback regarding career- and work- related experiences, peer mentors often offer emotional support and share perceptions of their work environments.\textsuperscript{67} Rosenthal and Shinebarger highlight the accessibility and flexibility of peer mentors as compared to faculty, and suggest that peer mentors may be more comfortable dealing with non-academic concerns outside of the traditional advising relationship.\textsuperscript{68} They also may be more willing to meet students’ needs in regards to learning, facilitating a deeper understanding of course concepts beyond being able to correctly answer questions on an exam.\textsuperscript{69} Allen, McManus, and Russell hypothesize that mentees may be more comfortable in approaching peers than more senior individuals about power and political dynamics, and that peers may have a better sense of what skills are necessary to improve performance on day-to-day tasks than senior colleagues or supervisors who may be somewhat removed from the mentee’s work life.\textsuperscript{70}

\textbf{Empirical Methods: Testing Theory}

Student support, an integral piece of the student achievement puzzle, can take many forms. Various studies have focused on college-level support through faculty,\textsuperscript{71} family,\textsuperscript{72} and engagement with friends or peers.\textsuperscript{73 74 75} A few studies examining the law school experience have touched on these issues as well.\textsuperscript{76 77 78 79} However, the authors were unable to locate

\textsuperscript{67}Kram, \textit{supra} note 32.
\textsuperscript{68} Rosenthal, \textit{supra} note 28.
\textsuperscript{69} Id.
\textsuperscript{70} Allen, \textit{supra} note 58.
\textsuperscript{73} Astin, \textit{supra} note 22.
\textsuperscript{75} Tinto, \textit{supra} note 16.
\textsuperscript{76} Deo, \textit{supra} note 27.
empirical work that focuses on the prevalence and function of peer mentorship in law school. This study fills the gap in the literature by examining the formation and developmental of peer mentor relationships in law school. This study addresses two questions:

1. How do first year law students in peer mentoring relationships describe their motivation for seeking peer mentors?
2. What roles do peer mentors play in the academic and psycho-social lives of their mentees?

Sample

We address these questions through an analysis of data collected in a larger, mixed-methods research project. The Educational Diversity Project (EDP) is a collaborative, three-year, longitudinal study conducted by a national team of researchers examining law school diversity. EDP followed a cross-national sample of students who entered law school in 2004 (N=8063) through their three-year educational experience. The racial composition of the group mirrors the national gender and racial distribution of law students in ABA-accredited schools: 52% female; and 9% Black/African American, 5% Latino, 9% Asian/Pacific Islander (API), 2% Multiracial, 73% white and 2% from other racial backgrounds.

All participants completed a broad one-hour survey during orientation activities at their respective schools in Fall 2004. EDP followed a subsample (n=203) of these students throughout law school, conducting focus group interviews and collecting survey data during each Spring semester of the students’ first (2005), second (2006), and third (2007) years of law

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school. The subsample is 59% female and 28% Black/African American, 8% Latino, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander (API), 50% white, and 4% from other racial backgrounds.

Procedures

This article presents findings from EDP’s first year of data collection (2004-2005) when students were in their first year, a time of adjustment and introduction to the norms of law school. Schools were selected to gain a broad representation of law school characteristics by status, faculty to student ratio, school diversity, selectivity, and geographic location. The survey focused on six specific diversity domains, namely: student background, family background, past academic and discrimination experiences, perspectives and socio-political attitudes, educational expectations for law school, and career aspirations for after law school. Surveys took about one hour to complete and were offered to each student at each participating school. All students were asked if the EDP team could re-contact them for future research.

In Spring 2005, EDP conducted follow-up surveys and focus groups with students at 11 law schools drawn from the full sample. Schools in this sub-sample were selected to be geographically diverse, and also based on overall rates of response to the 2004 orientation survey and student interest in participation. In order to capture a broad array of experiences from students of color, EDP also oversampled historically Black law schools (HBLSs), including three HBLSs in the sample of 11 follow up schools. Each student from the 11 schools who had agreed to be re-contacted was invited to participate in the follow-up focus groups.

After recruitment, via email and phone calls, 203 students agreed to participate. Focus group sessions were held in law school classrooms with one to seven students in each group. All students were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. All quotes used below are attributed to these pseudonyms, not the actual names of the student participants. Students were
given a light lunch as well as movie tickets as a small token of appreciation for participating in the study. To encourage comfort in discussing sensitive racial topics, the overwhelming majority of the groups were racially homogenous and facilitated by a researcher of the same race.

Participating students first completed a survey (over approximately 15 minutes), and then participated in a focus group discussion (over approximately 45 minutes). In 2005, the pre-focus group survey instrument asked about racial interaction, sources of support, involvement in student organizations, and the law school experience generally. The focus group protocol in 2005 focused on the first-year curriculum, interactions with peers and professors, involvement in student organizations, and law school diversity.

Analyses

The nature of this study lends itself particularly well to a mixed-methods design, allowing the authors to triangulate data and examine multiple aspects of the development and influence of peer mentorship. Quantitative modes of analysis were conducted on pre-focus group survey data, which were entered into SPSS. Specifically, basic descriptive analyses were conducted on student responses to the question asking students to indicate levels of support they received during law school on a scale of 1 (No Support) to 3 (Strong Support) from various sources, including: family, classmates/law school friends, other friends, law school faculty, other mentors, religion, and other sources. T-tests were used to examine differences in the sources from which students received support, and ANOVAs explore differences by race or gender in level of reliance on a specific form of support.

The qualitative component of this study informs the survey data, adding to our understanding of the nature and perceived influence of peer mentoring. All focus group sessions were audio-taped, professionally transcribed, and reviewed for transcription errors, spelling, grammar, and law school context before data analysis. Data were coded using a soft version of grounded theory, drawing out themes in the data whereby familiarity with the data led to particular themes being explored.82

A comprehensive codebook developed for the EDP project was utilized to analyze data for this study. A preliminary list of codes was developed based on questions asked on the pre-focus group survey and the focus group interview protocol. This list of codes was amended based on a preliminary review of the data in order to include emerging concepts and phenomena. Transcripts were then coded using ATLAS.ti software.

A subsection of the codebook and coded data which specifically addresses mentoring were re-analyzed for this study. Particular attention was paid to data coded to categorize the different forms of mentoring relationships students encounter and experience in law school (e.g., Faculty Mentors, Work Mentors, Peer Mentors, Other Mentors). The researchers made distinctions between relationships students described based on definitions of mentoring and developmental relationships. Kram and Isabella’s work suggests peer mentorship is distinctive based on the focus and inclusion of instrumental support and career-related guidance.83 For example, they identify three types of peer relationships, differentiated by the activities within and functions of each relationship: information peers (who exchange information about their work and specific working environments), collegial peers (who rely on trust include emotional support, professional feedback, and career strategizing) and special peer relationships (the most

83 Kram, supra note 32.
intimate and rare, developed over a long period of time, and based on deep trust). This framework adapts well to the context of this study. When peers offer one another emotional or psycho-social support alone, this article considers this relationship to be simply friendship. On the other hand, a relationship is identified as “peer mentoring” if it is based on information exchange (information peers) or integrates psycho-social/emotional and professional support (collegial and special peers).

Based on the researchers’ interest in exploring peer mentoring relationships in particular, the list of codes was amended again to capture the sources of motivation in forming peer mentoring relationships (Peer Mentor Motivation), roles that peer mentors play (Peer Mentor Roles), and outcomes associated with these relationships (Peer Mentor Outcomes). While social capital guides this study, codes were not developed based on this framework. The inclusion of social capital informed the ways in which peer mentorship relationships were viewed and assumptions that these relationships provided access to information and resources.

Data was re-read and these new codes were applied. When re-coding was complete, the authors printed the data that had been assigned a peer mentoring related code to examine relevant data relating to this study. The data were then compared directly to early perceptions about the emerging themes to confirm and challenge those identified in the preliminary stages of data analysis.

**Results: Understanding Peer Mentorship in Law School**

The findings begin with a presentation and brief analysis of results from the survey analysis, which detail various sources of support identified by law students.\(^{84}\) Quantitative

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\(^{84}\) A previous analysis of EDP data reports the varying degrees of support law students receive from family, peers, other friends, faculty, religion, and other sources (Deo et al., 2010). That article presents findings of support from various sources, including peers. However the focus is on differences by race for a few specific resources—namely, faculty, other mentors, and religion. Peer mentor relationships were not fully explored, and are the central focus of
findings are used to frame the qualitative data, which constitute the bulk of the results. The qualitative results begin with an introduction to the types of mentor relationships that are formed in law school. The research questions are then answered sequentially, beginning with motivation for forming peer mentor relationships, and followed by the academic and psycho-social roles that peer mentors play in the lives of their mentees.

**Quantitative Results**

Table 1 presents first year student reports on sources of support, by the level of support received. Only 25% of law students in the EDP sample report receiving “Strong Support” from faculty; similarly, 28% receive “Strong Support” from “other mentors.”

If only about one-quarter of law students are able to effectively harness support from traditional sources, where else do they turn? A great many rely on family, with 80% of all students reporting they receive “Strong Support”. However, as noted earlier, the disconnect between students’ hometown support networks and their educational environment may make it challenging for students to make full use of family as an academic and social resource within the law school context. A majority of law students recognize a more local support system to meet their needs: peers. On average, Students report receiving more support from peers (mean = 2.56) than other friends, faculty, other mentors, and religion (p<.05). Sixty percent of law school student respondents report that they receive “Strong Support” from fellow law school classmates, with an additional 35% noting that they receive “Some Support.” Only 5% of students report that they receive “None.” In other words, the overwhelming majority of law students rely on their peers for support through law school.

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85 Iijima, *supra* note 5.
Table 1. Levels of Support from Various Sources as reported by First Year Law Students (Educational Diversity Project, 2005) (N=203).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Support</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>% None</th>
<th>% Some</th>
<th>% Strong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classmates and Law School Friends</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>60.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>2.77*</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>79.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Friends</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>2.42*</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>2.09*</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Mentors</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>2.00*</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>1.65*</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant difference from Classmates and Law School Friends (p < .05)

Differences in reported levels of support received by peers were examined further, exploring differences by race and sex. Analyses suggest that on average, male (mean = 2.53, sd = .60) and female (mean = 2.59, sd = .56) students receive the same amount of support from their peers. Further, there were no statistically significant differences in means based on students’ reported racial/ethnic background. Asian American (mean = 2.61; sd = .58), Black (mean = 2.65; sd = .48), Latino/Hispanic (mean = 2.53; sd = .64), and White (mean = 2.52; sd = .61) students report roughly equivalently high levels of support from their peers.

**Qualitative Results**

The survey data suggest that law students overwhelmingly rely on their peers for support during law school; however, these data offer little insight into the reasons behind this choice and the forms of support peers offer. Qualitative data from student focus groups can increase our understanding of the reasons behind these choices and the reliance of students on their peers.

This section addresses the ways in which peer relationships can go beyond friendship into a form of peer mentorship, providing a distinctive and valued form of academic and psycho-social support.
Forms of peer mentoring relationships. Analyses of the data suggest students engage in many relationships which can be considered “peer mentorship,” and that these relationships are formed in various ways. Occasionally, the law school sponsors and assigns formal peer mentoring pairs, matching incoming students with second- or third-year students who volunteer their time to help new students navigate law school. Many student organizations relating to various socio-identity groups (e.g., Asian Pacific American Law Students Association (APALSA)) also offer formal peer mentoring programs for incoming law students. Interestingly, some students describe their engagement in specific student groups in ways that suggest they gain access to an informal and collective form of mentorship with all members, not just their formal mentors; this could be considered “organizational mentorship.” Some students reap important academic and psycho-social support through their participation in a variety of workshops and programs planned by these organizations. In other words, these organizations facilitate peer mentoring not only through formal matching of individuals, but informally at an organizational level as well. Finally, students also describe peer mentoring relationships, which are relatively unstructured, taking place outside of formalized groups and organizations established to offer support.

While some may see these relationships as friendships marked exclusively by social interaction and fellowship, the relationships highlighted in this study suggest peers offer academic and career-related support and guidance that go beyond friendship. Below, the article details both the factors which motivate student to seek out peer mentors and the various forms of support they offer.

Motivation to form peer mentoring relationships. Two core themes emerge as driving first year students’ interest in forming peer mentoring relationships: the need for help during the
transition to law school and a lack of connection to faculty. First, students widely acknowledge the challenges of attending law school and cite their need for help in navigating and succeeding academically in their new environment. Francine, a Black student at a historically Black law school, highlights this need, saying that she and other first-year students “need a lot of guidance when we’re first coming in.” Many first-year law students are overwhelmed not only by the level of academic investment that law school requires, but also by the unique challenges facing new students.\textsuperscript{86} Law school is often students’ first introduction to the Socratic Method; it is also the first time many students are graded entirely on one final exam given at the end of the term.\textsuperscript{87}

While many law schools offer career counseling, few have academic counselors to assist students in deciding which courses to take, exam preparation, or generally navigating the challenges of law school. Based on participant narratives, peer mentors may take the primary role in fostering new students’ acclimation to their surroundings. In fact, a number of students in the EDP sample specifically seek out peer mentoring relationships to gain academic support and guidance. For example, Greta, a Black female, makes an observation about her decision to participate in the Black Law Student Alliance (BLSA) and the group’s formal mentoring program. She notes that she joined the group without knowing much about “the background to it,” but was specifically interested in the mentoring program because it was designed to “help with the retention rates here [at my law school]” through the development of relationships with more senior classmates who could offer support and guidance. Somewhat similarly, students like Kai, who is also an African American woman, describe wanting to join student groups particularly because they offer opportunities to be matched with a mentor; Kai herself joined two groups specifically for this reason.

\textsuperscript{86} Iijima, supra note 5. 
\textsuperscript{87} Schuwerk, supra note 15.
Some may assume that incoming law students would seek out faculty as their primary source of academic support during the often tough transition to law school. However, concurrent with the quantitative analysis above, students’ narratives suggest they do not seek professors out as a primary source of support as often as others. Students describe the intimidation they feel when working with professors or even simply sitting in the classroom, making them uncomfortable approaching professors for help. For example, Christina, a White female student, feels her “professor won’t help” when she is facing problems with preparing for exams or has concerns about the competitive behavior of classmates.

This distance between faculty and student may lead students to instead turn to peer mentors for academic guidance and support. For example, a Latina named Amelia describes professors as “very intimidating,” which makes her less comfortable asking questions. She sees this as a “disadvantage,” limiting her access to important information. Instead, she leans more towards connecting with peer mentors than faculty:

I feel that some of the professors are very intimidating and when they’re that intimidating, it creates a disadvantage for me because I don’t feel comfortable going and asking them questions. I feel like everything that I have to learn here is almost by myself or I have to find someone who I’m very comfortable with and I’m not going to be told that I’m dumb for me to ask questions. So I’m going to someone, my mentor who is a third year student. I’ll go to her and I’ll ask and I’ll tell her ahead of time, “Don’t think I’m dumb but I have this stupid question.”

Amelia’s comments reflect the importance of finding someone with whom students are comfortable asking for support, someone who will not judge their intelligence or ability based on their questions. Thus, for Amelia and others, the distance they feel between themselves and
professors, and perhaps their desire to appear more knowledgeable and able to succeed, may motivate them to seek out peer mentors to gain the academic support and information they need.

**Roles and importance of peer mentors.** Peer mentors play various roles, characterized by information exchange and academic guidance and psycho-social support. First, participants’ narratives suggest peer mentors demystify the often complicated and overwhelming environment of law school. In addition, students discuss how their peer mentors offer psycho-social support during their legal education, personalizing their experiences, serving as role models, and providing them with cultural and social connections to their communities.

**Information exchange and academic guidance.** In the absence of specific advisors and considering their limited interactions with faculty, participants describe peer mentoring relationships as demystifying the law school experience and introducing appropriate norms. Many law schools provide new students with a brief orientation; however, it takes months or more to master the wide range of "broad competencies and habits" that are essential to good legal studies and practice, including "the ability to recognize, analyze, and research legal problems," and communicate these effectively and persuasively. Thus, mentorship may serve as a form of social capital, whereby those acting as mentors introduce newcomers to longstanding institutional norms and practices that the mentees can then practice in a safe and nurturing environment.

First-year law students note specific benefits to this form of social capital through connections to fellow students who act as mentors. For instance, a white student named Edna mentions that she was paired with a formal mentor through her membership in the Women Law

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89 Coleman, *supra* note 40.
90 Lin, *supra* note 44.
Student’s Association. She notes that the purpose of first-year students being connected to upper-classmen is to ensure that the often-bewildered entering students have someone more knowledgeable about law school to “talk to them about what classes to take, what professors to take, outlines, everything. … [A] lot of my friends had other people that they were connected to, which were very helpful, who provided tips on what to do. I think that was helpful.” Thus, for Edna, peer mentors are described as helpful due to their ability to share specific knowledge and information about how to make academic decisions and engage in the new classroom environment they encounter in law school.

Peer mentors can also help avoid the “sink-or-swim” approach to law school, instead providing mentees with helpful information, easing their transition to a new environment. For example, both Becca and Charlotte, Asian American/Pacific Islander students, appreciate the advice given by senior classmates and mentors. Both women were told to think carefully about their involvement in extracurricular activities, to be sure they could manage their time commitments and focus on their schoolwork. This again demonstrates how developmental relationships between peers may be a form of social capital, whereby new students are introduced to the local norms and customs by supportive upper-class students who already know the ropes, just as Hamilton and Brabbit suggest.  

In addition to helping students navigate law school more generally, peer mentors are credited with helping students perform better in their classes. For example, Jenn, a Black female student, mentions her appreciation for mentorship as an academic tool, stating, “speaking for myself and people like myself, I may need that extra mentorship component outside of the classroom to actually learn better.” Much of this learning appears to occur through exam preparation. For example, Francine relies on mentors through the Black Law Students

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92 Hamilton, *supra* note 78.
Association (BLSA) for direction during her first year. She recounts the many resources the
group provides to her and other entering students, concluding that her connections to BLSA
members and the materials they share are highly beneficial. Francine specifically describes her
experience with test preparation through BLSA: “They provided mock midterms. They provided
little study or review sessions, or they have a bank where you can look at old exams and things
of that nature.” Rather than face the law school testing environment for the first time in the
classroom, BLSA mentors provide Francine with an opportunity to ease into the environment
with a mock midterm in the safe and comfortable environment of the student organization.

Introduction to outlining—a common way of studying for final exams whereby students
condense an entire semester’s worth of course material into one, lengthy, detailed outline—is
also important. Most first-year law students have never taken a class before where they have just
one graded event at the end of the semester; most have not had an opportunity to learn how to
study for this type of exam. ⁹³ ⁹⁴ Outlining may not necessarily be the most effective exam
preparation tool for all students; however, it is the norm in law school to outline in preparation
for final exams. Becca, an API student member of APALSA, speaks specifically to the need to
develop outlines for her courses, and how reviewing her mentor’s and other APALSA members’
outlines helped her to create her own. She says:

I get [outlines] from the outline bank and . . . my mentor has her own. I think for me it
works best that I have multiple outlines that I look over and I see. Then of course you
change it to fit your style of how you study. Then you can also see what’s most
important, ‘cause then you see it [in each of the outlines so you know to include it in your
own].

⁹³ Schuwerk, supra note 15.
Utilizing mentors’ outlines or using them as templates helps introduce this norm to new students in a safe way. Becca goes on to emphasize how important it was for her to have these outlines to guide her in the first months of law school, when outline creation and law school exam preparation in general were foreign to her: “Like the first semester, I think that was the best help, because we have no idea how to [develop course outlines].”

**Psycho-social support.** In addition to offering students specific information facilitating their transition to law school and academic performance, participants describe their tendency to look to peer mentors for non-academic or psycho-social support. Because peer mentors are able to relate on a personal level to what their mentees are going through both inside and outside of the classroom, they empathize and encourage mentees to stay motivated.

Some mentees need psycho-social support to help address the general challenges of law school; others may benefit from more specific support. For example, the data suggests peer mentors serve unique functions for students who are often underrepresented or marginalized at law schools, including women and people of color. Many students from underserved groups report feelings of alienation and isolation throughout law school; support from peer mentors can help alleviate these feelings and lead to greater engagement with the academic institution. For example, as a Black student at a predominantly white institution, Bobby relies on the bonds he has formed with what he calls his “law school family” to sustain him. This family is largely composed of peer mentors and other individuals he met through his participation in the Black Law Student Association (BLSA). Bobby elaborates on the importance of these relationships for connecting law school to reality, keeping him grounded, and maintaining a connection to his community:

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95 Allen, *supra* note 11.
96 Moran, *supra* note 79.
You need that support. You need other people to relate to. Because if not, like, luckily we’re strong people but this place will really try to take your soul from you because you get bogged down in these courses, you get bogged down, you need to build your resume, you get bogged down, you need to get this job, you need to wear this suit, you need to do all this. They try to make you forget why you really came here: to help your community.

Thus, for Bobby, peer mentors are important to his persistence in law school. He makes clear that his peer mentors help him remember who he is and why he initially made the choice to attend law school when times are tough and he is challenged by the experience.

Similarly, Hope, an API student, benefits from informal peer mentors she met through her involvement with APALSA. These relationships allow her to connect with fellow API students, including peer mentors who understand her experiences and share her perspectives. Specifically, she notes that her involvement in the group “was really helpful just because I was able to meet people who I could complain to about the lack of diversity at the school and who understood what I was talking about. So I was able to get the support that I needed.”

Amelia, a Latina student, mentions that her membership in the Latino Law Student Association (LLSA) connects her to the few other Latinos at her school; their support reaffirms her identity and validates the challenges she faces. She notes that peer mentorship from other LLSA members “gives me support, it gives me a sense of support. It gives me a sense of identity. It makes me feel that even though there’s only maybe ten of us at each meeting, that it’s not easy and that it’s okay that it’s not easy.”

It may not be essential to have close relationships with all of these peers or to rely on each individual of the group for support; sometimes, just knowing that there are others in a similar situation may itself be comforting. A Black student named Kirsten notes that while being
an underrepresented minority on her law school campus presents unique challenges, her connection to the other members of BLSA is important to her. She says,

There’s forty-two Black students out of a class of four hundred and forty-one. I know the ten in my section. I mean, do I like all of them? No. Do I get along with them? No. Are they all going to be my best friends? No. But I know who they all are, and that’s important to me too.

Thus, while she might not pursue friendships with all of these students, their presence serves as a source of support.

Interestingly, comments by Hope, Bobby, Amelia, and Kirsten suggest they rely not only on individuals, but on particular organizations for the psycho-social support necessary to sustain them throughout their challenging first year of school. The race/ethnic-specific groups to which they belong provide an array of potential resources and “organizational peer mentorship” for each newcomer. The relationships may be a form of social capital because first year law students draw on these resources in times of need, when they need help with outlining or to find someone who shares their “sense of identity” and also “understood what I was talking about.”

When both the mentee and the peer mentor have a shared identity, entering students may also look up to their peer mentor as a role model who encourages their success. Valerie, a Latina student at a historically Black law school, has both a formal peer mentor arranged by the school and an informal peer mentor she found through a race/ethnic-specific law student organization. While Valerie relies on her formal mentor for advice and support, she also appreciates the unique encouragement she gets through her mentor relationship with the President of the Latino Law Student Association (LLSA), who acts as a role model for her. She says the following about this informal peer mentor relationship:
I also found a mentor in LLSA, the student [organization] president. I also go to her for things, almost as much as I go to my [formal] mentor. So it’s just that sometimes when you see the likeness of yourself or when you feel there’s some connection there—maybe it’s just the language—it’s just something that makes a difference I think.

Thus, because of their shared cultural identity, Valerie sees her peer mentor as a role model, whose own success inspires Valerie to do well.

Participants also describe receiving much needed individual attention through their peer mentoring relationships. As Greta, an African American student at a historically Black law school, notes, “[J]ust being able to talk to upper classmates one-on-one, has been very helpful.” Brittany, a white female student, notes that the personalization that her peer mentors provide has been invaluable; hers “offer a lot to help in both finding the right legal path for yourself and getting through the school process.” This comment speaks to the importance of individualized guidance peers can provide, which helps students make decisions and identify opportunities based on their specific needs and interests. Charlotte, an API student, also explains that while the academic support she receives from the mentors in the APALSA mentor program is helpful, she is especially appreciative of the personal nature of these mentoring relationships. She says, “I think that is also sort of a good thing with APALSA because it’s just not like you’re in a big group. You actually have some type of personal attention.”

**Discussion and Implications: What Have We Learned?**

Participants’ descriptions of their transition to and experiences within their first year of law school are consistent with those who describe law school as a challenging, stressful environment which can be difficult to navigate. Students’ motivation for forming

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97 Buckner, *supra* note 2.
peer mentoring relationships stems primarily from their interest in finding helpful and encouraging guides to help them through their new environment. Because professors are often unavailable, students tend to turn toward classmates. In fact, some join student organizations for the purpose of having a broader range of potential mentors available (referred to as “organizational peer mentorship”), perhaps drawing on Granovetter’s suggestion to rely on the strength of weak ties to move ahead. In addition, students specifically rely on peer mentors for both academic and psycho-social support. They learn the ropes of law school in a safe environment through these developmental relationships. Peers also provide a sympathetic ear for any personal or professional problems that new students may need help working through. In all of these ways, law students rely on peers to help sustain them through school.

Similar to Rosenthal and Shinebarger’s suggestion that peer mentors can fulfill multiple academic and nonacademic roles, the peer mentors in this study have a variety of functions, which can be organized into two categories. The first category includes efforts related to academic support. While Rosenthal and Shinebarger note peer mentors can help facilitate a deeper level of learning beyond doing well on exams, this does not seem to be a core aspect of peer mentor relationships in law school. Rather, the participants in this study focus more on the ways in which their peer mentors help them learn how to prepare for classes and exams than pushing their understanding of tough concepts. Second- and third-year students introduce students to the law school testing environment through mock exams, test preparation sessions, and advice on how to outline courses.

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99 Guinier, supra note 4.  
100 Iijima, supra note 5.  
101 Krieger, supra note 6.  
102 Soonpaa, supra note 7.  
103 Granovetter, supra note 46.  
104 Rosenthal, supra note 27.
The second form of support peer mentors offer goes beyond fostering students’ academic skills. Peer mentors, perhaps more importantly, appear to facilitate their mentees’ understanding of academic norms. Whether they are loaning out outlines, suggesting which classes/professors to take, or helping first-year students prepare for exams, peer mentors seem to do so in a supportive and nurturing way. One distinct pattern from the data is that peers offer advice and assistance during the difficult first semester of law school, a time of transition when many students admit they do not know their way around (literally and figuratively). The peer mentor relationship then becomes a form of social capital, as new law students learn to draw on these relationships during a time of great need and benefit from the introduction to law school that peer mentors provide.

These relationships may take on an even greater level of psycho-social importance for students of color and women, who are often underrepresented in law school and can be especially likely to experience the environment as uncomfortable and unwelcoming. In a case study of the University of Michigan Law School, Allen & Solórzano’s participants of color describe the campus environment as one “characterized by racial separation, racial conflict and racial misunderstanding.” Similarly, Moran notes that “[t]he absence of women of color in the student body and on the faculty created conditions of isolation,” for many students who were already marginalized at Boalt Hall, the law school of the University of California, Berkeley.

105 Buckner, supra note 2.  
106 Dowd, supra note 3.  
107 Guinier, supra note 4.  
108 Allen, supra note 11.  
109 Id. at 300.  
110 Moran, supra note 79.  
111 Id. at 2269.
Interestingly, White students in this study are equally likely to rely on peer support as students of color. Similarly, women and men report receiving similar levels of support from peers. However, the narratives of women and students of color highlighting the important roles that peer mentors play in their adjustment to and success within law school suggest that these relationships may take on a different nature for students from marginalized groups. Women and students of color are especially vocal about describing their concerns about their transition to law school and reluctance to approach faculty. The narratives highlighting the importance of role-modeling also may suggest women and students of color may feel a need to make connections with those who may have common life experiences and share similar concerns or challenges once in law school. These findings are consistent with literature suggesting that homophily, or similarity in demographic characteristics, can hold great importance in mentoring relationships.\(^{112}\) \(^{113}\) Students of color often report their preference for mentors who share their racial or ethnic background,\(^{114}\) \(^{115}\) \(^{116}\) and it appears that similar patterns emerge in peer mentoring relationships as well.

While some mentors are discovered through an institution-wide program matching entering students with second- and third-years, it is more common for first-year students to find mentors through their involvement in race/ethnic- or gender-specific organizations. For instance, many law school campuses have a chapter of the Women Law Students Association (WLSA),

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\(^{115}\) Patton, *supra* note 19.

the Black Law Student Association (BLSA), the Asian Pacific American Law Students Association (APALSA) and the Latino Law Students Association (LLSA). Many of these groups seem to provide a great deal of organizational assistance to new members in addition to creating formal mentoring programs. The organizational support is another key finding of this study, as peer mentorship seems to go beyond one-on-one support between individuals and extend to the collective group of newcomers to the organization (and to law school) vis-à-vis the existing group members. This article refers to this phenomenon as “organizational peer mentoring,” and it is certainly worthy of further study in the future.

The accessibility and individualized support peer mentors offer is particularly important when compared to the ways in which faculty is perceived by first year law students. Students may have a hard time building relationships with faculty due to faculty members’ commitment to activities more closely related to tenure and advancement (i.e. research). Mentorship may be considered a time consuming distraction for faculty members at many institutions, and the desire to focus one’s attention on research may make faculty less accessible to their students and less interested in serving as mentors. The findings of this study support this line of research, with participants more likely to indicate that they receive support from peers than from faculty. The qualitative findings highlight the nuanced reasons why this may be the case. Students rarely note that they turn to their peers after being personally affronted or rejected by faculty; rather, first-year law students perceive faculty as distant, intimidating, and somewhat unsympathetic. These observations are consistent with Iijima’s assessment of law school professors as generally disconnected from students.119

117 Schuwerk, supra note 15.
118 Tierney, supra note 31.
119 Iijima, supra note 5.
At first glance, the findings of this study may appear to suggest that a lack of faculty mentorship is resolved through the academic and psycho-social support that peer mentors provide; however, this is not the case. Peer mentors seem quite adept at calming the academic fears of first-year students and encouraging them to succeed; however, they cannot play the role of a faculty member. Individuals need to build diverse social networks, forming relationships with a variety of mentors who are able to provide different forms of support and information.\footnote{120 Id.} These data demonstrate that peer mentors are important and helpful; however, support from peer mentors alone may not culminate in students’ reaching their highest potential. For instance, individuals with mentors who are significantly more senior than themselves (“traditional mentors”) indicate greater satisfaction with their relationships and more vocational and role modeling support than those with peer mentors.\footnote{121 Ensher, supra note 37.} Additionally, if weak ties to diverse individuals are optimal for success, students must cultivate relationships not only with peers, but also with faculty, alumni, and others who will help them succeed.\footnote{122 Granovetter, supra note 46.} Schuwerk concurs, recommending that law professors take more of an interest in students and their development, moving beyond myopically attending to performance on exams to getting to know their students and attending to their personal needs as they navigate law school and move into legal practice.\footnote{123 Schuwerk, supra note 15.}

Grant-Vallone & Ensher suggest that peer mentors may be better suited for offering psycho-social support, while faculty may be better equipped to provide instrumental support and fulfill the career-related functions of developmental relationships.\footnote{124 Grant-Vallone, supra note 62.} Interestingly, peer mentors in the current study are described as offering both psycho-social and instrumental support. However, the instrumental support they are able to provide focuses more on navigating law
school and performing well on exams rather than more career-related guidance such as
internships, choosing a specialization, or networking with those in the legal field. While this
may be linked to the fact that study participants are first-year students and perhaps more
concerned with short term achievement in their courses rather than longer term career
development at this nascent stage of their law school careers, it is important to note that faculty
are likely to be able to provide that guidance, perhaps more so than peer mentors who are also in
the process of learning or are just beginning their own careers. Thus, while this study certainly
highlights the importance of peer mentorship, faculty must continue to engage and interact with
students in meaningful ways to promote long term student success in the field of law.

Peer mentors must be applauded for their efforts to couple socio-emotional support with
academic and career-based information that may positively influence the scholarly and
professional outcomes of mentees. As policymakers, faculty, staff, and administrators seek to
better support students through hostile law school environments and improve their experiences
overall, it is important to consider how we can encourage students to go beyond building
friendships to forming mentoring relationships with their classmates to facilitate their
development and success, both in law school and beyond. Some students form these
relationships spontaneously, informally making ties with senior students who can offer guidance;
however, not all students may perceive the need to find a peer mentor despite the benefits they
can offer. Thus, stressing the importance of forming these relationships early could potentially
help facilitate these helpful interactions and a smoother transition into legal education. This
could be accomplished through the development of formal programs where first-year students
are assigned mentors at the institutional level. While participants suggest these programs are
perhaps less successful than the informal relationships they form themselves, institutionally-
sanctioned programs could be important in ensuring that every first year student has a touchstone or person to whom they can address their questions without concern of appearing naïve or unknowledgeable.

Importantly, the findings highlight the importance of student organizations in providing first-year students with peer mentorship. Findings suggest that many students are paired with mentors through their participation in student organizations. Additionally, the organization itself serves the function of a peer mentor. Encouraging student organizations to provide opportunities for peer mentorship with institutional and financial support may also be helpful in promoting these relationships. These organizations, particularly those focused on serving students who are members of groups underrepresented in law, provide students with academic information, access to senior students who can serve as formal and informal mentors, and a sense of social and emotional support as they transition into their new environments. As such, offering student organizations financial and institutional support to expand the services they are able to offer would be a positive step towards promoting mentorships and student achievement.