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## Legal education takes mentoring, modeling and trust

Rachel A. Van Cleave

*Golden Gate University School of Law*, [rvanleave@ggu.edu](mailto:rvanleave@ggu.edu)

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PERSPECTIVE

## Legal education takes mentoring, modeling and trust

By Rachel Van Cleave

As the new academic year began, I decided to meet individually with each and every one of our first year students. I believe that this is one effective way to convey to students that the faculty, staff, alumni and other students — all members of our community — are committed to their success. In addition, my colleagues and I deeply appreciate that very soon these first year students will be our colleagues in the legal community — what an awesome opportunity and responsibility to be able to cultivate the qualities and traits that we value in our future peers. I am learning that forging and strengthening this community will serve to positively transform the legal profession and our society.

Individual meetings with the dean are an initial step in this process. Another is the coaching program that we started last year in which each student is assigned a faculty coach to support the student's transition to law school and ultimately to the legal profession. I have come to believe that these programs are also important ways we can model significant values and habits of heart and mind. Is this the solution to all of the challenges facing legal education and the profession? Probably not, but it comes closer to bringing us back to the soul of the law and its relevance.

Recent writings propose myriad suggestions for solving today's problems related to employment, the meaning and purpose of higher education, and combating moral decay. Frank Bruni asserts that colleges should instruct students to move out of their comfort zones so that today's students can eventually

break us out of our polarizing political and social deadlock (NYT Sunday Review, Sept. 7, 2014). Thomas Friedman claims that colleges and universities must work more closely with employers to ensure graduates have the technical skills necessary for today's workforce (NYT Sept. 10, 2014). David Brooks expresses concern about the decreasing importance of moral education at elite (why only elite?) universities (NYT Sept. 9, 2014). Each writer highlights important components of the society we have consistently aspired to achieve — one of an informed, compassionate and problem-solving citizenry. Yet, each writer misses the mark.

### Recent writings propose myriad suggestions for solving today's problems related to employment, the meaning and purpose of higher education, and combating moral decay.

While Bruni is right about the importance of being open to different perspectives and different points of view, this is hardly something colleges, or anyone, can instruct or demand. Certainly, Friedman is correct that marketable skills are important, but he does not define these, nor does he recognize that these skills are constantly changing — more so today than ever before. Given such dynamic and rapid change, the most valuable skill is to know how to learn something new, and to have the confidence such a growth mindset requires. Brooks is absolutely correct about the importance of cultivating moral, emotional and spiritual growth, yet, like Stephen Pinker, whom he quotes,

seems to throw up his hands as to how to achieve this if it cannot be taught.

Each writer ignores the importance of modeling and mentoring. Though Friedman refers to mentorship (rather, the paucity thereof) his piece emphasizes the importance of skills and how mentoring can better inform college students about the skills they need. No doubt, Brooks and Pinker are correct that morality cannot be taught, but it can certainly be modeled. A mentoring relationship is one effective way to model a variety of valuable traits, characteristics and mindsets to connect, as Brooks says “the head and the heart.”

An effective mentor or coach meets students where they are and sees each student's goals, strengths and challenges. An effective mentor is a good listener who respects each student's personal narrative. The characteristics of an effective mentor are precisely the traits Brooks and Bruni emphasize as crucial to the future of our society — empathy, compassion and an openness to learning. This is what mentors can model. Certainly, these are important traits for an effective lawyer to have along with the analytical skills required to “think like a lawyer.”

My colleagues and I deeply appreciate the need to support our students as they transition first to law school and then to the legal profession, which is undergoing dramatic upheaval and transformation. We recognize this as a time of paramount importance, where we must engage in mentoring and be mindful of what we are modeling to protect the future of legal practice. In fact, our newest students consistently speak of the sense of community they feel from other students, faculty, staff and alumni.

It has been extremely gratifying to hear that our newest students are experiencing the type of environment that we have sought to foster. Further, our community is a concrete example that such a community can exist at a law school. This, in turn, demonstrates that it is possible to build such a community within the legal profession, as well.

In my meetings with our students I have learned about the struggles, aspirations, doubts and successes that they have carried with them to law school, and those they are in the process of experiencing during their first few weeks of classes. The openness with which they have talked to me is a reminder that mentoring and modeling is hardly a one-way street. Indeed, our students model such strength and trust in revealing their vulnerability; it is incredibly inspiring, energizing and humbling.

This mutuality serves to build relationships and a community in which each member is invested in and committed to the success of everyone else. I believe this will serve our students, and ultimately all of us well as they become lawyers and bring with them an understanding of the importance of collaboration, relationship building, trust and other habits of heart and soul as they contribute to the strengthening of our legal system.

**Rachel Van Cleave** is dean of Golden Gate University School of Law.



RACHEL VAN CLEAVE  
Golden Gate University