

# THE PHANTOM MENACE TO PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION AND LAW SUCCESS: IMPOSTER SYNDROME

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“I have written eleven books but each time I think  
‘Uh-oh, they’re going to find out now’ . . . I’ve run a game on everybody,  
and they’re going to find me out.”

Maya Angelou<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Why feeling like a fraud can be a good thing*, BBC NEWS (Apr. 25, 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36082469>.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Professional identity formation, which involves teaching law students to recognize their responsibility to others, particularly clients, and encouraging the students to develop the professional competencies of a practicing lawyer, has gained considerable prominence in the legal academy.<sup>2</sup> In February of 2022, the American Bar Association's ("ABA") House of Delegates concurred in the revision by the ABA's Council of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar to the law curriculum standards, which now require that every law school provide substantial opportunities for each student to develop their professional identity.<sup>3</sup> Over forty law schools already require courses for credit that include some aspect of professional formation or professional development in their first-year curriculum, and nearly twenty more schools require students to learn about professional identity or professional values before graduating.<sup>4</sup>

Professional identity formation relies on students to identify the professional competencies they currently excel in and the competencies they need to improve, and they must work to develop those competencies.<sup>5</sup> Part of that process requires an accurate self-understanding of who law students are.<sup>6</sup> The ABA's revised standard regarding professional identity formation acknowledges that self-reflection and growth must occur over time.<sup>7</sup> Imposter syndrome serves as a sinister force, or a phantom menace, that threatens a law student's ability to develop her professional identity and to succeed as a lawyer.

In 1978, psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes initially identified the imposter syndrome, known as the imposter phenomenon in psychology.<sup>8</sup> They "described it as a feeling of 'phoniness in people who believe that they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy W. Floyd & Kendall L. Kerew, *Marking the Path from Law Student to Lawyer: Using Field Placement Courses to Facilitate the Deliberate Exploration of Professional Identity and Purpose*, 68 MERCER L. REV. 767, 775 (2017).

<sup>3</sup> See American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar Revised Standards for Approval of Law Schools, AM. BAR ASS'N 1 (Feb. 14, 2022), perma.cc/J86X-43QU. Law schools must create a plan to comply with this revision by the Fall of 2022, and they must implement that plan by the Fall of 2023. Neil W. Hamilton & Louis D. Bilonis, *Revised ABA Standards 303(b) and (c) and the Formation of a Lawyer's Professional Identity, Part 1: Understanding the New Requirements*, NALP BULLETIN+ 17 (May 2022), <https://www.nalp.org/revised-aba-standards-part-1>.

<sup>4</sup> *Law School Professional Development Initiatives in the First Year*, U. ST. THOMAS, <https://www.stthomas.edu/hollorancenter/learningoutcomesandprofessionaldevelopment/professionaldevelopmentdatabase/> (last visited Apr. 25, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Floyd & Kerew, *supra* note 2, at 775.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 776–78.

<sup>7</sup> See American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar Revised Standards for Approval of Law Schools, AM. BAR ASS'N 3 (Feb. 14, 2022), perma.cc/J86X-43QU.

<sup>8</sup> *Imposter Syndrome? 8 tactics to combat the anxiety*, A.B.A. (Oct. 2018), <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/publications/youraba/2018/october-2018/tell-yourself-yes--and-other-tips-for-overcoming-impostor-syndr/>; Kristen Weir, *Feel like a fraud?*, AM. PSYCH. ASS'N (Nov. 2013), <https://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud>.

evidence of high achievement.”<sup>9</sup> Imposter syndrome usually involves “perfectionism, black-and-white thinking and intense fear of rejection and failure. These thought patterns create a perfect storm of insecurity, anxiety, and stress.”<sup>10</sup> Imposter syndrome creates a fear in an individual that they do not belong, and others who do belong will soon discover they are a fraud.<sup>11</sup>

Imposter syndrome can affect every type of person in every type of profession, including law students and lawyers.<sup>12</sup> One particular lawyer said this about imposter syndrome, “I still have a little [bit of] impostor syndrome, it never goes away, that you’re actually listening to me.”<sup>13</sup> Michelle Obama, the former First Lady and graduate of Princeton University (*cum laude*) and Harvard Law School, made these remarks at an all-girls school in London in 2018 after being asked how it felt to be a symbol of hope.<sup>14</sup>

If law students cannot properly self-assess who they are and how they are performing, then they cannot fully develop a true professional identity. The pervasiveness and negative effects of imposter syndrome warrant that law schools that incorporate professional identity formation into their curriculum as well as *any* law school that wants its students to succeed, should address imposter syndrome with its students.

Part II of this Article briefly discusses professional identity and how it requires self-reflection and self-awareness. Part III explains imposter syndrome in general, and Part IV discusses imposter syndrome and its prevalence in the legal profession. Part V provides practical, tangible ways for law schools, professors, and law students to address imposter syndrome. This Article concludes that law schools, especially now that professional identity formation must become a part of their curriculum, must help those law students facing imposter syndrome overcome it.

## II. PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION RELIES ON ACCURATE SELF-REFLECTION AND SELF-AWARENESS

Professional identity entails how one’s personal views, values, decision-making processes, and self-consciousness relate to the practice of

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<sup>9</sup> *Imposter Syndrome? 8 tactics to combat the anxiety*, *supra* note 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Diana Uchiyama, *Imposter Syndrome: Do You Feel Like a Fraud?*, 108 ILL. BAR J., Mar. 2020, at 52 (2020).

<sup>12</sup> *See, e.g.*, Susanne Aronowitz, *Managing Your Practice: A Secret Epidemic in the Legal Profession*, 77 OR. ST. B. BULL., Aug.–Sept. 2017, at 36 (stating many lawyers feel imposter syndrome, which is common in the legal profession).

<sup>13</sup> Valerie Young, *Unpacking Michelle Obama’s Imposter Syndrome*, IMPOSTER SYNDROME INST., <https://impostorsyndrome.com/article-featured/unpacking-michelle-obamas-impostor-syndrome/> (last visited Apr. 25, 2022) (alteration in original).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* *First Families: Michelle Obama*, WHITE HOUSE, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/first-families/michelle-obama/> (last visited Apr. 25, 2022).

law.<sup>15</sup> Professional identity formation involves “‘an ongoing self-reflective process involving habits of thinking, feeling, and acting’ and a lifelong commitment to continued progress toward technical excellence and the aspirational goals of the profession.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, professional identity formation requires accurate self-reflection and self-assessment to allow law students to develop their own professional identity and grow as professionals. Imposter syndrome directly affects law students’ ability to understand and enhance their professional identity.

A major aspect of teaching professional identity to law students entails meeting law students where they are to help them develop into competent attorneys.<sup>17</sup> Law schools and professors must recognize that some students may be engaged in a battle with imposter syndrome. Before law schools and professors can help students prevail in that fight, law schools and professors need to understand what imposter syndrome is.

### III. UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

People who suffer from imposter syndrome attribute their success to luck, good timing, or other external factors as opposed to their own abilities, intelligence, and hard work.<sup>18</sup> They “feel unworthy of a position or promotion because they doubt their competence or expertise.”<sup>19</sup> They worry that others will, at any moment, discover they are frauds, they do not belong, and they will soon be dismissed.<sup>20</sup> “Individuals who suffer from Imposter Syndrome often mistake being *inexperienced* with being *unqualified*. The first indicates a lack of familiarity and knowledge while the second denotes a lack of ability.”<sup>21</sup> Imposter syndrome also results in people underestimating and undervaluing their performance.<sup>22</sup>

Imposter syndrome rears its ugly head throughout society. United States Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Academy Award winner Tom Hanks, and tennis phenomenon Serena Williams all suffered

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Walsh Fitzpatrick & Rosemary Queenan, *Professional Identity Formation, Leadership and Exploration of Self*, 89 UMKC L. REV. 539, 539–40 (2021).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 541; American Bar Association Section on Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar Revised Standards for Approval of Law Schools, AM. BAR ASS’N 3 (Feb. 14, 2022), perma.cc/J86X-43QU (“Professional identity focuses on what it means to be a lawyer and the special obligations lawyers have to their clients and society. The development of professional identity should involve an intentional exploration of the values, guiding principles, and well-being practices considered foundational to successful legal practice.”).

<sup>17</sup> Jerome M. Organ, *Is There Sufficient Human Resource Capacity to Support Robust Professional Identity Formation Learning Outcomes?*, 14 U. ST. THOMAS L.J. 458, 461 (2018).

<sup>18</sup> Uchiyama, *supra* note 11, at 52.

<sup>19</sup> Debra Austin, *Windmills of Your Mind: Understanding the Neurobiology of Emotion*, 54 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 931, 964 (2019).

<sup>20</sup> Uchiyama, *supra* note 11, at 52.

<sup>21</sup> Lacy Rakestraw, *How to Stop Feeling Like a Phony in Your Library: Recognizing the Causes of the Imposter Syndrome, and How to Put a Stop to the Cycle*, 109 L. LIBR. J. 465, 473 (2017).

<sup>22</sup> Christyne J. Vachon, *Tiaras, Queen Bees, Imposters and the Board Room: Lean in & Women in Corporate Governance*, 9 J. BUS. & TECH. L. 279, 289–90 (2014).

from imposter syndrome.<sup>23</sup> Studies show that it affects both men and women equally, but women may experience it more intensely and suffer greater negative consequences because of it.<sup>24</sup> Women and minorities may experience imposter syndrome because of “gender discrimination, a lack of diversity and inclusion, male-dominated work environments, and a lack of diversity in leadership roles within the organization or industry.”<sup>25</sup> It is also common for students and people starting new jobs to experience imposter syndrome.<sup>26</sup>

People who suffer from imposter syndrome are not confident about their work or their status, which creates anxiety.<sup>27</sup> Anxiety can lead to procrastination, extreme perfectionism, or overworking to make up for perceived inadequacies.<sup>28</sup> Imposter syndrome can also result in “depression, indecision or other negative mental states or actions.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, when one lacks self-confidence and believes they are not worthy of being where they are, then their performance may suffer, which can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.<sup>30</sup>

#### IV. IMPOSTER SYNDROME PERMEATES LAW SCHOOL AND THE LEGAL PROFESSION

The legal profession acknowledges the prevalence of imposter syndrome, particularly because it affects high achievers, which describes law students and lawyers.<sup>31</sup> Imposter syndrome begins early in the legal profession as first-year law students regularly experience it.<sup>32</sup> “Often the law students feel—secretly—that other students know more, are smarter, are more connected, have better opportunities, etc. The truth is, just about everyone in the room feels exactly the same way.”<sup>33</sup>

Along with first-year students, law students at all levels also experience imposter syndrome. At one law school, 61.8% of law students

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<sup>23</sup> Katherine M. Caflisch, *Imposter Syndrome: The Truth About Feeling Like a Fake*, AM. SOC’Y FOR MICROBIOLOGY (Aug. 14, 2020), <https://asm.org/Articles/2020/August/Imposter-Syndrome-The-Truth-About-Feeling-Like-a-F> (Justice Sotomayor and tennis player Serena Williams); Robert A. Creo, *Our Chosen Business: From Impostor to Imposing Counsel!*, 41 PA. LAW., Mar.–Apr. 2019, at 14 (Justice Sotomayor and actor Tom Hanks).

<sup>24</sup> Leslie P. Culver, *The Rise of Self Sidelining*, 39 WOMEN’S RTS. L. REP. 173, 190 (2018); Vachon, *supra* note 22, at 289–90.

<sup>25</sup> Uchiyama, *supra* note 11, at 52.

<sup>26</sup> Creo, *supra* note 23, at 14.

<sup>27</sup> Uchiyama, *supra* note 11, at 52.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* For lawyers, the costs of imposter syndrome also include spending too much time on an assignment, because the lawyer irrationally believes that she missed something, which means the lawyer loses that time to work on other assignments. Aronowitz, *supra* note 12, at 37.

<sup>29</sup> Creo, *supra* note 23, at 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* Austin, *supra* note 19, at 964–65.

<sup>31</sup> KATHRYNE M. YOUNG, HOW TO BE (SORT OF) HAPPY IN LAW SCHOOL 22 (2018).

<sup>32</sup> Peter F. Lake, *When Fear Knocks: The Myths and Realities of Law School*, 29 STETSON L. REV. 1015, 1030 (2000).

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

admitted in a survey that they “had frequent imposter syndrome experiences.”<sup>34</sup> The law school that administered this survey to its students was Harvard Law School.<sup>35</sup>

Some law students suffering from imposter syndrome lack self-esteem.<sup>36</sup> They believe that they did not deserve to get into law school, that they tricked the law school into admitting them, and they constantly believe that someone will find out they are “in law school under false pretenses.”<sup>37</sup>

First-generation students are particularly vulnerable to imposter syndrome.<sup>38</sup> Learning how to navigate college as first-generation college graduates can be empowering, but then these individuals find out that same approach does not work in law school because one must learn to “think like a lawyer.” Since this involves a completely different process than college, it can be overwhelming, leading to a sense that one does not belong.<sup>39</sup> Also, believing that everyone else has connections to lawyers or potential legal employers can add to the imposter syndrome, but understanding that fruitful connections can be made after they start law school allows law students to help deal with that fear.<sup>40</sup>

Grading on a curve likely exacerbates imposter syndrome because law students naturally begin to compare themselves to their peers whom they will compete with for grades, class rankings, and—in some instances—jobs. Even law students who make the Dean’s List first semester can suffer from imposter syndrome and may feel like they need to achieve the same every semester, or others will believe they do not belong in law school and their accomplishment was a fluke. This can result in seeking extreme perfectionism to overcompensate for those fears.

Imposter syndrome may surface for law students when they start working at their first internship or externship. For instance, they may receive an assignment to review discovery for deficiencies and then draft a meet and confer letter to opposing counsel about those deficiencies. This can make law students feel like they should know how to perform those tasks when they

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<sup>34</sup> Austin, *supra* note 19, at 949.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 948.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Grover, *Personal Integration and Outsider Status as Factors in Law Student Well-Being*, 47 WASHBURN L. J. 419, 430 (2008).

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> John Goodyear, *Traveling Down an Unpaved Road: My Experience as a First-Year College Graduate*, 89 J. KAN. B. ASS’N, July–Aug. 2020, at 66–67 (2020); Barbara J. Dawson, *Seeing and Believing—The Superpower of the Judicial Intern Opportunity Program*, A.B.A. (Oct. 17, 2019), [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/publications/litigation\\_journal/2019-20/fall/seeing-and-believing-the-superpower-the-judicial-intern-opportunity-program/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/publications/litigation_journal/2019-20/fall/seeing-and-believing-the-superpower-the-judicial-intern-opportunity-program/) (stating “first-generation professionals and others who do not see an abundance of role models who look like them may disproportionately fall prey to such doubt.”); Michelle Silverthorn, *First-Generation Lawyers: The Next Diversity Frontier*, 37 LEGAL MGMT., Apr. 2018, at 12 (noting young first-generation lawyers experience a higher incidence of imposter syndrome).

<sup>39</sup> Goodyear, *supra* note 38, at 66–67.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 66.

have never been taught or told how to do it, resulting in feelings of imposter syndrome.

Even though the concept of imposter syndrome has existed for years, I first realized the extent of imposter syndrome in law school while recently teaching my Sports Law class. The class and I were discussing Nicole Lynn, the first black female sports agent to represent a first-round draft pick in the National Football League (“NFL”).<sup>41</sup> Nicole Lynn said that she still deals with imposter syndrome.<sup>42</sup> When I brought this up with the class, the students immediately became highly engaged and mentioned how real and common imposter syndrome is with them. We had a number of first-generation law students at my previous law school (St. Mary’s), and some of them admitted that they have felt imposter syndrome. Even law students who are not first-generation also expressed that they felt it too, both male and female students, second- and third-year students alike.

One of our guest speakers in Sports Law, Nona Lee, the Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer of the Arizona Diamondbacks, a Major League Baseball team, spoke to the class a couple of weeks after our discussion of Nicole Lynn.<sup>43</sup> Nona Lee serendipitously talked about how she experienced imposter syndrome during her brilliant and illustrious career.<sup>44</sup> I asked the students to post about their reactions to her talk, and several students talked about her discussion of imposter syndrome. One said the following:

The confidence she radiated made her an inspiration and someone that you can try to reach their level one day. While her story about imposter syndrome made her feel very relatable at the same time. I think almost all of us have felt a sense of uncertainty of [whether] we belong here, but knowing that even the best of the best in their field have felt that way at one point makes you realize that you belong as long as you put in the effort.<sup>45</sup>

Another student said the following about Ms. Lee’s discussion on imposter syndrome: “I think everyone can relate or had a moment where they felt like they don’t belong somewhere, even though they do.”<sup>46</sup> During that same semester, one of my former students who now works in “Big Law”

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<sup>41</sup> Macaela Mackenzie, *This Female Sports Agent Is Out to Break Up the Boys’ Club at the NFL Draft*, GLAMOUR (July 16, 2019), <https://www.glamour.com/story/this-female-sports-agent-is-out-to-break-up-the-boys-club>.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> Nona Lee – Executive Vice President & Chief Legal Officer, ARIZ. DIAMONDBACKS, <https://www.mlb.com/dbacks/team/front-office/nona-lee> (last visited Apr. 25, 2022).

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*; Posting of Nona Lee Recap to Canvas Course Page (Mar. 17, 2021) (on file with the Law Review).

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

mentioned how, despite being an accomplished and talented lawyer, she feels imposter syndrome.

Imposter syndrome affects the legal profession at every level—law students, lawyers, and even judges, including United States Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who said as recently as 2019 that she still feels like she does not fit in sometimes.<sup>47</sup> As for lawyers, “[i]mposter syndrome is particularly pronounced among . . . women, racial minorities, LGBT, disabled or first-generation professionals.”<sup>48</sup> An Asian-American female attorney stated she suffered from imposter syndrome because of the lack of Asian-American female associates and partners in her firm, which made her feel like a “‘token’ diversity hire” who “did not truly earn, or deserve, [her] position.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, imposter syndrome can paralyze “[l]awyers, especially those in solo practices or small firms.”<sup>50</sup>

The pervasiveness of imposter syndrome in the law mandates that those teaching professional identity formation, and those teaching law students in general, address imposter syndrome.

## V. LAW SCHOOLS MUST ADDRESS IMPOSTER SYNDROME

This part discusses how law schools and professors can address imposter syndrome with law students as a part of the professional identity formation. As an initial matter, law schools can staff first-year courses with professors from historically underrepresented groups in the legal field, such as women and racial minorities, as law students with those same characteristics will benefit from seeing faculty members with whom they can relate. This may help those law students feel like they truly belong. Law schools can also assist students in finding mentors that match one or more characteristics such as their race, gender, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

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<sup>47</sup> Christine Bolaños, *Justice Sonia Sotomayor wasn't always at the top of her game*, PULSO (Sept. 23, 2019), <https://projectpulso.org/2019/09/23/justice-sonia-sotomayor-wasnt-always-at-the-top-of-her-game/>; see also Ruth Marcus, *A justice's memoir*, STARTRIBUNE (Jan. 19, 2013), <https://www.startribune.com/a-justice-s-memoir/187585461/> (noting that Sotomayor suffered from imposter syndrome even after becoming a United States Supreme Court Justice).

<sup>48</sup> Aronowitz, *supra* note 12, at 36. The diversity, equity, and inclusion (“DEI”) efforts of any law school should also include mandatory education on imposter syndrome just as profession identity education should.

<sup>49</sup> Kimberly A. Chojnacki, *Practice Perspective: A Look Forward with an Eye on the Past*, 53 HOUS. LAW., Mar.–Apr. 2016, at 17.

<sup>50</sup> *Imposter Syndrome? 8 Tactics to Combat the Anxiety*, *supra* note 8; Rachel I. Gurvich, *Letters Tweets to A Young 1L*, 21 GREEN BAG 2D 281, 284 (2018) (discussing how imposter syndrome mixes dangerously with “stereotype threat for students of color”); see also Jordan Oglesby, *Pipeline to Tribal Sovereignty: Celebrating the Pre-Law Summer Institute's 50<sup>th</sup> Class*, 66 FED. LAW., Mar.–Apr. 2019, at 59 (stating imposter syndrome represents a barrier to law school for Native Americans); Demetria Frank, *Social Inequity, Cultural Reform & Diversity in the Legal Profession*, 13 S. J. POL'Y & JUST. 25, 40 (2019) (“Students of color often must overcome feelings of imposter syndrome to be successful, as well as manage their own stereotype threats.”).



As for law professors, they should share how common it is for law students, lawyers, and high-achievers in general, to feel imposter syndrome.<sup>51</sup> Law professors can also provide general encouragement to their classes by reaffirming that everyone who is in law school earned their spot and deserves to be there.<sup>52</sup> In addition, professors should give individual encouragement and affirmation when a student demonstrates acumen as a law student and potential lawyer. For example, if a student does well during a recitation of a case, then the professor should tell the student either in person or by email that the student demonstrated excellent advocacy skills, which will help make the student an effective lawyer. Similarly, if a student's reflection paper or written assignment shows excellence in legal writing and analytical skills, then the professor should share that fact with the student. Professors can praise a law student's ability to empathize with others, which is a useful ability for a lawyer. Moreover, if a student consistently participates in class, then a professor can let that student know that their steady preparation will contribute to their success as a lawyer.

Law professors often represent the first lawyers that some law students spend a significant amount of time with, and law students typically value the opinions of their professors.<sup>53</sup> If law professors state that they have seen something in their students that makes the professors believe the students will be effective lawyers, then professors should share it, and the students will likely believe it. Providing students with concrete examples of their abilities and how those abilities will translate into great lawyering will chip away at the notions that they do not belong and they will not be solid lawyers. Building up a law student's confidence also helps erode imposter syndrome.

Law professors can also promote student-led panels (which oftentimes foster empathy, community, and a sense that law students are not alone) or lecture series discussing how imposter syndrome commonly occurs in the law.<sup>54</sup> Professors can also share this Article or other resources on imposter syndrome and ask their classes to post their reactions to the article on internal discussion boards for the class, which provides an excellent means for students to share with their peers, realize that they are not alone, and support each other. They can further provide students with resources to

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<sup>51</sup> Gurvich, *supra* note 50, at 284–85.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.* at 285.

<sup>53</sup> Raymond M. Ripple, *Learning Outside the Fire: The Need for Civility Instruction in Law School*, 15 NOTRE DAME J. L., ETHICS PUB. POL'Y 359, 379 (2001).

<sup>54</sup> Katelyn Albrecht et al., *Wellness as Practice, Not Product: A Collaborative Approach to Fostering a Healthier, Happier Law School Community*, 59 SANTA CLARA L. REV. 369, 379–80 (2019) (discusses students sharing resources to combat imposter syndrome after a first-year class exercise involving a student survey that demonstrates all students feel imposter syndrome); Jordana Alter Confino, *Where Are We on the Path to Law Student Well-Being?: Report on the ABA CoLAP Law Student Assistance Committee Law School Wellness Survey*, 68 J. LEGAL EDUC. 650, 663–64 (2019) (lists Vanderbilt University Law School's "The Psychology of Peak Performance" Program" workshop series that includes a discussion on imposter syndrome).

combat imposter syndrome, including other students willing to help, mental health professionals, and self-assessments.<sup>55</sup>

The following are techniques, tips, and approaches addressed directly to law students that law professors should share with the students to deal with imposter syndrome as a part of professional identity formation:

#### A. *Sharing with Others*

Talk about your feelings with trusted colleagues, mentors, and friends, and you will find out you are not alone; you will find support in others, and you may also make others feel better about themselves because they will realize they feel the same way, too.<sup>56</sup> Talking to a mental health professional about imposter syndrome may also be helpful.<sup>57</sup> Hearing Nona Lee talk about her struggles with imposter syndrome made my students feel better about themselves and their own encounters with imposter syndrome.<sup>58</sup>

#### B. *Remind Yourself of What You Have Done and Who You Are*

Remind yourself of your strengths and accomplishments, including making a list of all of them.<sup>59</sup> You accomplished those things primarily because of your abilities, skills, and efforts, not simply because of luck or some other external factor.<sup>60</sup>

#### C. *Use Your Differences with Others to Get Better*

Some people get bogged down because they think everyone else in the room is smarter than them. The law school environment seems to exacerbate the notion of comparing with grading curves and class rank.

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<sup>55</sup> Albrecht et al., *supra* note 54, at 379–80; Confino, *supra* note 54, 663–64. See PAULINE ROSE CLANCE, THE IMPOSTER PHENOMENON: WHEN SUCCESS MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE A FAKE 20–22 (1985), reprinted in Clance IP Scale, <https://paulineroseclance.com/pdf/IPTestandscoreing.pdf> (last visited Apr. 25, 2022) (excerpting only the Imposter Syndrome Test questions), and Jennifer Tzeses, *Do You Have Imposter Syndrome? Take Our Quiz and Find Out*, PSYCOM, <https://www.psycom.net/imposter-syndrome-quiz>, for examples of these sources (Jan. 25, 2022).

<sup>56</sup> Valerie Young, *10 Steps You Can Use to Overcome Imposter Syndrome*, IMPOSTER SYNDROME INST., <https://impostorsyndrome.com/articles/10-steps-overcome-impostor/> (last visited Apr. 25, 2022); Jessica Bennett, *How to Overcome 'Imposter Syndrome'*, N.Y. TIMES, <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/working-womans-handbook/overcome-impostor-syndrome> (last visited Apr. 25, 2022); Crystal Raypole, *You're Not a Fraud. Here's How to Recognize and Overcome Imposter Syndrome*, HEALTHLINE (Apr. 16, 2021), <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/imposter-syndrome>; *Imposter Syndrome? 8 Tactics to Combat the Anxiety*, *supra* note 8 (lawyers should “[b]uild a strong support system.”).

<sup>57</sup> Rakestraw, *supra* note 21, at 474.

<sup>58</sup> Posting of Nona Lee Recap to Canvas Course Page, *supra* note 44.

<sup>59</sup> Bennett, *supra* note 56; see also Janice Gassam Asare, *4 Ways to Overcome Imposter Syndrome*, FORBES (Jan. 29, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/01/29/4-ways-to-overcome-imposter-syndrome/> (discussing creating a brag sheet); *Imposter Syndrome? 8 Tactics to Combat the Anxiety*, *supra* note 8 (encouraging lawyers to remind themselves of their achievements).

<sup>60</sup> Bennett, *supra* note 56.

Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States, once said, “Comparison is the thief of joy.”<sup>61</sup> Despite the natural inclination to compare, law students should be thinking two things: first, I can learn a lot from my colleagues, and second, we all bring our own gifts and talents that make us unique and special.<sup>62</sup> I was a first-generation law student and did not have any lawyers in my family. I remember my first day in law school, a student answered nearly every question correctly, and he seemed like he knew everything. I went up to him after class and told him he did a tremendous job, and I asked him how he did it. He told me he was using a particular study aid that helped him quite a bit. I took his advice and found that study aid useful myself. Some behaviors or conduct we can emulate from others, but some we cannot. Adopt and learn what you can from others, and they will hopefully do the same with you as you have unique abilities and talents that you should be proud to share yourself.<sup>63</sup>

*D. Put in the Work, Be Ready to Make Mistakes, and Then Learn from Them*<sup>64</sup>

Sometimes worrying that your work product will be deficient or lacking takes time away from doing the best you can on that assignment. Work on the areas you are good at already as well as the areas where you can improve. Also, expect to make mistakes as even the top people in their profession do. But instead of making a mistake and using that to confirm you do not belong, acknowledge that everyone makes mistakes and use it to avoid the same mistake in the future.<sup>65</sup> Also, approaching law school and the legal profession with humility will enable you to make mistakes knowing that you are trying to master the skills necessary to become a great lawyer, but that will only happen through practice over time.<sup>66</sup>

To become great at anything, whether it is law school or being a lawyer, you must put in the time. Imposter syndrome, because it often appears when doing something new, can dissipate over time.<sup>67</sup> The more you do something, the more confidence you will gain as you increase

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<sup>61</sup> Jeff Ross et al., *It's Not All About the Dollars: Three Different Approaches to Incorporating Wellness into Your Daily Life*, 31 S.C. LAW. 54, 61 (2019).

<sup>62</sup> Young, *supra* note 56; Raypole, *supra* note 56.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., Raypole, *supra* note 56 (explaining how imposter syndrome feels as well as the origins and causes of imposter syndrome).

<sup>64</sup> Young, *supra* note 56.

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*; see e.g., Asare, *supra* note 59 (discussing how people should learn from their mistakes); Megan Bess, *Grit, Growth Mindset, and the Path to Successful Lawyering*, 89 UMKC L. REV. 493, 507–08 (2021) (discussing how people with a growth mindset, which means they believe “qualities and intelligence can be cultivated[,]” do not let mistakes define them, but they take on challenging tasks where they can develop their competence and abilities, while people with a fixed mindset believe their “talents and qualities . . . cannot be altered” and they “only [feel] smart when they don’t make a mistake,” which means they often take on tasks that “simply guarantee positive feedback.”).

<sup>66</sup> Floyd & Kerew, *supra* note 2, at 812 (listing humility as a virtue or characteristic of a good lawyer).

<sup>67</sup> Rakestraw, *supra* note 21, at 473.

your proficiency. When you start something new, “you are learning a new skill set and don’t yet have the tools to tackle every question.”<sup>68</sup> Sometimes when we begin something, like law school or a new job as an associate at a law firm, we feel like there is so much to learn and so much we do not know. Those are both accurate statements, but you must think of yourself as a lifelong learner who will continue to learn new things every day. “Your inability to understand everything instantly does not make you unintelligent.”<sup>69</sup> Instead of thinking you should always answer every question correctly or that asking for help or clarification is a sign of weakness, be prepared to get some things wrong and do not be afraid to ask for help. And keep in mind you will improve over time if you put in the work.

*E. Be Nice to Yourself and Be Real with Yourself*

If you do something well, then take the time to congratulate yourself.<sup>70</sup> Also, try to be real with yourself. I always have students in their first semester of law school nearly in tears after calling on them in class. The odd thing is that these students almost always performed well, yet they are so hard on themselves and only focus on the negatives that they cannot properly assess how they performed. I urge them to focus on the positives and appreciate the great things they did while acknowledging there are always a few areas for improvement. Overall, they are well on their way.<sup>71</sup> Law students must learn to “[a]ccept praise at face value, understanding all of the reasons that the source is credible and the praise is accurate.”<sup>72</sup> In their head, they feel judged by their classmates, but most of the time, their classmates are thinking what my old college football coaches would tell me, “better you than me.”<sup>73</sup> Your classmates are just happy you are being called on and not them.

Please recognize being called on in class is much different than the practice of law, which includes arguing a motion. Many times, law students are cold-called in class, meaning they do not even know for sure that they will be speaking that day in class. Also, there are fifty to one-hundred peers watching the law student perform when the student may just be learning how to answer questions in the Socratic method while also learning a new language, the law. If you argue a motion in court, for example, there may be twenty people in the courtroom, and many of those people may be other lawyers waiting for their motions to be heard, meaning they are preparing and not listening to you. Plus, you would have known for weeks, if not months,

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<sup>68</sup> YOUNG, *supra* note 31, at 22.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*

<sup>70</sup> Young, *supra* note 56.

<sup>71</sup> See, e.g., Raypole, *supra* note 56.

<sup>72</sup> Creo, *supra* note 23, at 17.

<sup>73</sup> I was a four-year letterman for the Rice University football team.

that you would be arguing that day—you are not called on the day of the hearing and told now it is your turn to argue a motion.

Part of being real with yourself includes recognizing why you have doubts.<sup>74</sup> Is your doubt based on facts, such as being unprepared or deficient in an area, or does it stem from something else? If it is the former, then work on those deficiencies. If it is the latter, then you may feel these doubts, possibly because you are different from others in the room due to either your race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.<sup>75</sup> “Instead of taking your self-doubt as a sign of your ineptness, recognize that it might be a normal response to being on the receiving end of social stereotypes about competence and intelligence.”<sup>76</sup> Also, the more you succeed and the longer you work at something, the more you will feel you belong, which fosters confidence and helps remove doubts.<sup>77</sup>

#### *F. Visualize Success, Talk Positively to Yourself, and Choose to be Confident*<sup>78</sup>

See yourself succeeding during recitation, moot court, or a job interview. Tell yourself that you are worthy and good enough, and then assert yourself. “Raise your hand. Volunteer your expertise.”<sup>79</sup> Instead of saying “things like ‘I can’t do this,’ or ‘I’ve never been good at this,’ . . . tell[] yourself things like ‘I believe in my abilities,’ and ‘I think this is something I can get good at.’”<sup>80</sup> Early in her prominent career, Nona Lee used to say to herself, “I belong,” and, “people don’t hand out opportunities just to be nice.”<sup>81</sup> Nona Lee talked about being “confident in who we are and . . . work[ing] hard so we can achieve greatness.”<sup>82</sup> Listening to Nona Lee talk about her issues with imposter syndrome gave a law student “who struggles with severe imposter syndrome” hope.<sup>83</sup>

#### *G. Fake It ‘Til You Make It May Not Be What You Think It Is*

Some people follow the mantra: “Fake it ‘til you make it.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, just keep trying until you feel you belong while acting like you belong

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<sup>74</sup> Raypole, *supra* note 56.

<sup>75</sup> Young, *supra* note 56; *see supra* notes 47–48 and accompanying text.

<sup>76</sup> *Id.*

<sup>77</sup> *Id.*

<sup>78</sup> *See generally id.*; Bennett, *supra* note 56; Asare, *supra* note 59.

<sup>79</sup> Bennett, *supra* note 56.

<sup>80</sup> Asare, *supra* note 59.

<sup>81</sup> Posting of Nona Lee Recap to Canvas Course Page, *supra* note 44.

<sup>82</sup> *Id.*

<sup>83</sup> *Id.* Practicing gratitude, optimism, meditation, and mindfulness can also be helpful in combatting imposter syndrome. Austin, *supra* note 19, at 965–69.

<sup>84</sup> Young, *supra* note 56.

the whole time.<sup>85</sup> If this works for you, then that is great, but it is premised on the fallacy that you do not yet belong. Once you are accepted into law school, then you belong at that law school. Once you pass the bar exam, then you belong to a community of practicing lawyers. There is nothing more you need to do to belong. You can and should always strive to improve your skills and abilities as a law student and as a lawyer, but you already deserve to be there.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Professional identity formation is about law students becoming self-aware as professionals and discovering how they make decisions and operate. Imposter syndrome takes aim at those efforts by undermining who law students are and what they are capable of doing.

“Success doesn’t require perfection. True perfection is practically impossible, so failing to achieve it doesn’t make you a fraud.”<sup>86</sup> Law professors can make law students feel like they are worthy of being in law school and that they belong in the legal profession. Encouraging law students to overcome imposter syndrome involves empowering law students to reach their potential and overcome their fears rather than lowering the bar for individuals. Law students can also use techniques in this Article to help them overcome the fear that they do not belong and that they are frauds. Instead of being ruled by fear, law students, who are high achievers with the ability to change people’s lives as lawyers, should be guided by confidence and hope.

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<sup>85</sup> *Id.*

<sup>86</sup> Raypole, *supra* note 56.