LSSSE at Fifteen: Celebrating Our Success and Planning Our Future

Meera E. Deo

It brings me tremendous pride and enormous pleasure to introduce this issue of the *Journal of Legal Education*, which celebrates the fifteenth anniversary of the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE). As the current director of LSSSE (pronounced as "LESS-see"), I appreciate this unique opportunity to reflect on the origins and development of the project, give thanks to those who guided LSSSE before me, and contemplate how we can be most effective in the future. The LSSSE project originated in 2004 with a modest survey offered at forty-two law schools across the country; over the subsequent decade and a half, the project has grown to collect and share perspectives from over 380,000 law students at 203 law schools throughout the United States, Canada, and Australia.

The objectives and basic design of LSSSE remain relatively unchanged from its origins. We seek to understand and enhance the law student experience, thereby improving legal education. For fifteen years, LSSSE has conducted an annual survey of law students in partnership with participating schools. Given our robust response rate, schools know they will get valid, reliable data about their students' behaviors, attitudes, and experiences. Because dozens of institutions partner with us every year, each one also receives valuable aggregate comparative data from those identified as "peer schools" as well as national averages. Whether a school wants to evaluate the effectiveness of its career services office, investigate the level of student engagement by gender, or track trends of preferred employment over time, the LSSSE data reveal important information on the student experience.

In addition to sharing data with partner schools, LSSSE staff also analyze the data to document, contribute to, and influence broad trends in legal education. Over the years, LSSSE reports have highlighted racial debt disparities, the successes of women students, and the ways in which students' relationships with faculty, staff, and peers promote academic and professional success.[1] The LSSSE Insights Blog offers opportunities for LSSSE staff and guest authors to share perspectives on current aspects of legal education, which have included the experience of LL.M. students, preparation for leadership, law library satisfaction, and tips for improving online teaching and learning.[2]

Over fifteen years, LSSSE has been a key player in discussing and shaping critical conversations in legal education. Our 2015 and 2016 Annual Reports—revealing that 61% of Black and 56% of Latinx respondents expected to graduate owing over $100,000, compared with 40% of whites—spurred national discussions about the cost of law school, revealing how financial burdens are borne disproportionately by students of color.[3] Our 2019 Report on The Cost of Women's Success spurred the media and policymakers to consider the sacrifices of women students on the path to reaching academic and professional achievements—including a majority (51%) who sleep less than five hours per night.[4] Our 2020 Annual Report, Diversity & Exclusion, adds a legal education dimension to the ongoing national conversation on anti-racism revealing that while most privileged students are satisfied with diversity efforts on campus, 21% of Black, Latinx, and Native American students are not comfortable being themselves on campus, and 38% of students with the highest levels of educational debt believe their schools do not value them.[5] The LSSSE data provide us with an opportunity to celebrate successes in legal education while striving for a better, more equitable future.

As LSSSE director it has been my great honor to inspire change in legal education, analyze data collected through our annual survey administration, and publish reports to broaden conversation through the media, in academic

1. LSSSE Annual Reports and Special Reports are available at *Annual Results*, Law School Survey of Student Engagement, https://lssse.indiana.edu/annual-results (last visited Apr. 2, 2021).

2. *LSSSE Insights Blog*, Law School Survey of Student Engagement, https://lssse.indiana.edu/insights/ (last visited Apr. 2, 2021).

3. Aaron N. Taylor et al., *2015 Annual Survey Results: How a Decade of Debt Changed the Law Student Experience*, Law School Survey of Student Engagement (2016), https://lssse.indiana.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/LSSSE-Annual-Report-2015-Update-FINAL-revised-web.pdf.
    Aaron N. Taylor & Chad Christensen, *2016 Annual Survey Results: Law School Scholarship Policies: Engines of Inequity*, Law School Survey of Student Engagement (2017), https://lssse.indiana.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/LSSSE-2016-Annual-Report-1.pdf.

4. Meera E. Deo & Chad Christensen, *2019 Annual Survey Results: The Cost of Women's Success*, Law School Survey of Student Engagement (2019), https://lssse.indiana.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/LSSSE-AnnualSurvey-Gender-Final.pdf.

5. Meera E. Deo & Chad Christensen, *2020 Annual Survey Results: Diversity & Exclusion*, Law School Survey of Student Engagement (2020), https://lssse.indiana.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Diversity-and-Exclusion-Final-9.29.20.pdf.

circles, and with various legal education institutions. Before joining, I had been an admirer of LSSSE for many years, while working as an empirical scholar to document the student experience and improve legal education. As a law student, I was a named intervening defendant and member of the legal team in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, supporting affirmative action and pushing for greater racial equality through educational advancement.[6] While I worked on the legal arguments, our social science experts crafted a consistent message that affirmative action was necessary not only to support educational diversity but also to promote racial justice.

And what experts they were! The intervenors' team included John Hope Franklin, Eric Foner, Walter Allen, Gary Orfield, Frank Wu, and Richard Lempert. My vacation from my first job as a lawyer—as the ACLU National Legal Department William J. Brennan First Amendment Fellow—was spent in snowy Detroit learning from these experts during the *Grutter* trial. Seeing experts of this caliber in action, it is perhaps no surprise that after a few more years of practicing law I entered graduate school to pursue a Ph.D. in sociology. The training in both theory and methods that I received at UCLA under the tutelage of Walter Allen, Min Zhou, Devon Carbado, and others, set the stage for the empirical work I continue now almost two decades later with dozens of published articles revealing challenges facing law students of color, proposals for alternative compelling state interests to support affirmative action, and blueprints to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in legal education.

In spite of this background demonstrating my commitment to empirical research in legal education, I was truly surprised to receive an e-mail from Aaron Taylor (then-director of LSSSE) in 2017 inviting me to apply for the position he was leaving. Through the interview process I met a small but mighty team of dedicated personnel—each one devoted to making higher education better for students, faculty, and staff. When I joined as director in January 2018, I knew I had a legacy to protect as well as the flexibility to craft a vision to guide us forward. From the start, I emphasized two priorities: encouraging partner schools to get comfortable with the data so they could maximize usage to help their own students, and collaborating with academics who could use the data to further scholarly projects and publications.

This issue of the *Journal of Legal Education* includes many key academic partners who have utilized LSSSE data in their own work. Various themes infuse the issue. Three of the scholarly articles focus directly on the importance of assessment, which has been at the forefront of changes in legal education in the past decade. In "Writing Like a Lawyer," Kirsten Winek utilizes blocked stepwise multiple regression to consider how various "involvement activities" lead to improvements in student writing over time. Victor Quintanilla and Sam Erman share insights from their groundbreaking partnership with the

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6.   539 U.S. 306 (2003). For more on the *Grutter* intervenors, see Meera E. Deo, *The Promise of Grutter: Diverse Interactions at the University of Michigan Law School*, 17 Mich. J. Race & L. 63, 70 n.35 (2011) and Rachel F. Moran, *The Heirs of Brown: The Story of* Grutter v. Bollinger, *in* Race Law Stories 451 (Rachel F. Moran & Devon W. Carbado eds., 2008).

State Bar of California suggesting new directions in the psychological study of the student experience and how these influence bar passage. In his piece on the development of professional competencies, LSSSE Project Manager Chad Christensen shares findings on how future success as a lawyer can be shaped in law school by emphasizing teamwork, initiative, and cultural competency. Together, these authors demonstrate that increased engagement, as measured by LSSSE, can have significant positive results for both academic achievement and professional success.

Another current running through the issue involves intersectional analyses, considering how compound identity characteristics affect student experiences and outcomes.[7] In this issue, authors take advantage of the robust LSSSE sample to run analyses by race, gender, first-gen status, socioeconomic background, and more. I have written previously about how the combination of *raceXgender* (the multiplicative effect of having two devalued identity characteristics) creates unique challenges for women of color in legal education.[8] The LSSSE data provide opportunities to examine and compare various intersectional perspectives including the effects of raceXgender and resulting disparities. For instance, the collaborative article by Shih-Chun Chien, Ajay K. Mehrotra, and George Wang shares how research from the American Bar Foundation (ABF) draws from LSSSE data in various projects; in "Portrait Project 2.0" they investigate clerkship disparities (among other phenomena), finding that white women drive an alleged "women's preference" for clerkships, with 8.0% of white women reporting interest in clerkships as compared with 6.5% of Latinas, 5.5% of Asian American women, and only 4.9% of African American women. Quintanilla and Erman also delve into intersectional analysis, meticulously tracking the interaction of personal identity characteristics (including race/ ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background) with "societal stereotypes and environmental cues [that] shape thoughts, feelings, and behavior." Finally, Elizabeth Bodamer's fascinating dissertation research reveals that women of color experience not only a lower sense of belonging than other groups, but also the highest rates of bias; she notes: "The significant raceXgender differences found throughout this study highlight the vulnerability and marginalization of women of color in legal education."

This issue's emphasis on intersectional analysis is a testament to the commitment of many authors toward pursuing anti-racism far beyond bland references to diversity. Especially now, in the wake of George Floyd's killing and mass protests supporting Black Lives Matter and opposing police and vigilante violence, an increasing number of law schools have taken up the mantle, committing themselves to infuse race into the first-year curriculum, purposefully promote greater diversity in hiring, and increase efforts at

7. The term "intersectionality" refers to the ways in which those with multiple devalued identity characteristics (i.e., women of color, lesbians) face unique challenges based on the full spectrum of their background. Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 Stan. L. Rev. 1241, 1241–44 (1991).

8. Meera E. Deo, Unequal Profession: Race and Gender in Legal Academia (2019).

inclusion and thereby retention for faculty, staff, and students.[9] As a consultant to dozens of law schools, I have seen firsthand their commitment to change and the ability of LSSSE and other empirical data to reveal hard truths about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

Interspersed with the academic articles illustrating these themes using empirical data are more personal essays from former LSSSE directors and current board members highlighting their own involvement with the project over fifteen years. These narratives share a powerful story of the evolution of LSSSE from its origins as a nascent outgrowth of an ongoing "big-sister" study to its current standing as a powerful national voice on legal education. George Kuh and Patrick O'Day unveil how the project began—from the graduate student who sparked the initial extension of a national undergraduate survey to the center director who brought the project to life in the law school arena. When Carole Silver took over as director in 2012, she quickly recognized that she had to prioritize "explaining why LSSSE *could* and *should* matter to law schools." She continues that explanation in her essay, thoughtfully reflecting on the ways in which LSSSE reveals far more than what *U.S. News & World Report* measures and reminding us to place the power and inequities of legal education in the context of ongoing national racial disparities. As the third LSSSE director, Aaron Taylor used his influence to center and highlight student priorities, drawing from student perspectives to emphasize not only ongoing trends but necessary changes to legal education. Though legal education was in the midst of a national crisis, he recognized an opportunity to make LSSSE even more relevant and accessible—creating visualizations, conducting special analyses, and educating law school professionals on how they could use the data to improve the experience for their students. I will always be grateful to the three visionary former directors of LSSSE for laying the foundation that allowed me to pursue a broader vision for the project.

Key contributors have joined with LSSSE staff to guide the project over the past fifteen years. Dean Bryant Garth has been the chair of the advisory board since LSSSE's inception; his written reflections reveal the importance of LSSSE data for deans and other administrators responsive to the changing needs of their students; his remarks also address how crises, including the murder of George Floyd and the global pandemic, can refocus our attention on particular data points to make even greater changes to legal education. LSAC President and CEO (and former law school Dean) Kellye Testy, one of the newest LSSSE board members, instantly recognized the importance of institutional collaboration. Believing that "strong educational programs are made stronger by reliable evidence-based longitudinal assessments of

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9.   The Law Deans Antiracist Clearinghouse Project, spearheaded by five Black women law deans in summer 2020, provides a blueprint of sorts for institutions seeking to become truly anti-racist, suggesting five phases on the path toward anti-racism. More information is available at *Law Deans Antiracist Clearinghouse Project*, The Association of American Law Schools, https://www.aals.org/antiracist-clearinghouse (last visited Apr. 2, 2021).

student learning and engagement," she urges schools to partner with LSSSE, track students throughout legal education, and work to create "a data-sharing consortium for legal education." Finally, the afterword is written by Indiana University Provost Lauren Robel, who participated in the creation of LSSSE and shares her vision for the future of the project.

I am confident that readers will enjoy reviewing and reflecting on each piece in this issue. The scholarly articles offer insights on how we can use data to enhance the academic and professional lives of students. The personal essays reflect on LSSSE's fifteen-year track record of working to advance student perspectives and improve legal education. I would venture that the most important takeaway from the issue as a whole is this: Working in partnership with LSSSE, whether you are an individual or an institution, offers enormous benefits for those planning a better future for legal education, whether as law school staff, faculty members, administrators, or institutional leaders. I look forward to continuing this journey together.