

# Leveling the Playing Field

## Helping First-Generation Associates Thrive

By Grover Cleveland and Jenny Li

### AT A GLANCE

- ⌚ min read
- First-gen professionals are graduates whose parents did not graduate from college.
- Mentors can have a profound impact on first-gen pros, explaining "unwritten rules."
- Ingredients to help first-gen pros succeed.

"The ingredients were all there. I just needed a recipe."

– Alé Dalton,  
Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP

Growing up, Alé Dalton spent time helping her mother clean the floors of *other people's* houses. Dalton moved to the United States from Colombia when she was 11. Her mother, a nursing assistant, also worked as a housekeeper.

Dalton wanted to be a lawyer. But the work of lawyers was a mystery to her. Big Law was especially arcane.

At a summer associate lunch at an upscale restaurant, Dalton learned for the first time that not all tuna comes



Alé Dalton

Continued on page 20

from a can. And while she had cleaned fancy houses, until she was a summer associate, she had never dined in one.

Dalton is now a senior associate at Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP, practicing health-care M&A in Bradley's Nashville office. This year, Dalton was selected for *Best Lawyers in America – Ones to Watch*. And she has received a slew of other awards. Talking to Dalton, you would assume that practice came naturally. She insists, however, that her legal career got off to a rocky start.

Early on, Dalton says that her reviews focused more on how she was integrating than on critical feedback, something that is common as first-year associates are acclimating to the firm. Dalton also missed some signs that she had room for improvement, such as not being consistently staffed on matters, particularly with the same teams, when everyone else in her group was swamped.

After her second year, her evaluation was more pointed. While she received praise for enthusiasm and being a team player, the review raised issues of attention to detail and consistency with work quality, the calling card of junior associates wanting to advance at firms.

Dalton was stunned.

“I am a good associate,” she recalls thinking.

In reflecting on what she now calls her “inflection point,” Dalton says she eventually concluded there could be some truth to the feedback in her evaluation. As a first-generation lawyer, she felt tremendous pressure not to fail — as if she were carrying her entire community and its expectations on her back. That created anxiety that sometimes caused her to procrastinate, shy away from challenging projects, and consider herself less smart (and capable) than her colleagues.

Rather than ruminate, she sought out resources on being a star associate. She listened to podcasts. She scoured the Ms. JD website ([www.ms-jd.org](http://www.ms-jd.org)). And she “binge-read” *Swimming Lessons for Baby Sharks: The Essential Guide to Thriving as a New Lawyer*. She said a passage about how associates must add value (“A monkey can highlight cases in pink. You need to exercise judgment.”) was “the shock to the system I needed to understand my role in owning my projects and being a valuable team member.” She added that guidance from a partner mentor was also immensely valuable.

With tools to channel her work anxiety and a solid grasp on ways to meet expectations in private practice, Dalton thrived. Looking back, she says, “The ingredients were all there. I just needed a recipe — actionable steps to put it all together into a successful final product.”



## Defining First-Generation Professionals

NALP defines first-generation professionals as college graduates whose parents did not graduate from college. First-generation professionals accounted for nearly 22% of employed graduates for the JD class of 2021, and 56.1% of this group went into private practice.

## Providing the Recipe:

Dalton counsels first-generation professionals to seek out resources, ask questions, and to expand their professional networks using

social media. Here are some tips that firms can use to help give this group the recipe for success:

### 1. Start an Affinity Group

Employers can acknowledge first-generation professionals as another layer of diversity within their organization and provide a platform to foster a sense of community with a forum to openly discuss the unique challenges that such individuals face. For example, Baker Botts founded its First-Generation Professionals Affinity Group at the end of 2020 to foster a diverse, equitable, and inclusive

environment that attracts, develops, retains, and promotes first-generation lawyers at the firm. Through the affinity group, the firm provides networking opportunities to enhance the personal and professional development of the firm's first-generation lawyers. In addition, the affinity group serves as a forum where lawyers of similar backgrounds can discuss issues of common concern, and develop their skills, practice, and career.

## 2. Bolster Mentoring

Mentors can have a profound impact on their first-generation professional mentees. They can provide context on team dynamics, discuss “unwritten rules,” share the work product and communication preferences of partners, and offer advice on how to manage up (to partners and more senior lawyers) and down (to paralegals and other business professionals). Mentors can also help first-generation professionals expand their networks and understand the business aspects of practicing law.

Dalton found many of her mentors through Bradley's Lawyers of Color Resource Group. And Nakia Humphrey, Senior Director of Attorney Development at Gunderson Dettmer, encourages first-generation lawyers to get a variety of mentoring perspectives by forming a personal board of directors.

Morrison Foerster launched MoFo Navigate in 2021 as an umbrella initiative that houses all the firm's mentorship and sponsorship programs. It is supported by training on how to get the most out of the mentor relationship, encourages collaboration, and leverages insight across departments, geographies, and time to create a support system that responds to the changing needs of lawyers as they grow and develop. MoFo Navigate is also uniquely and specifically designed to promote greater equity and inclusion, and train both mentors and mentees on things like the root causes of attrition and how to mentor more effectively across differences.

## Firm Training and Feedback

Formal training to provide a detailed roadmap for success can reduce anxiety for first-generation professionals — and empower *all* junior lawyers to be their best.

## 1. Avoid Assumptions and Offer Grace

Most senior lawyers have long-since forgotten what it is like to be a law student or recent graduate. And increasingly diverse classes come to firms with an array of experiences and backgrounds. Caution lawyers to avoid assumptions about what incoming lawyers “should know,” and if missteps occur, encourage them to offer specific feedback — and grace.

## 2. Explain the “Why” to Help Advice Stick

Sometimes advice does not stick. When developing training or crafting feedback, consider everything that must happen before someone can act on advice:

The person must:

- hear it,
- understand it,
- believe it,
- remember it, and
- know how to act on it.

The “believe” element can be a stumbling block, especially for those with limited exposure to law firms. Providing concrete examples to explain the reasoning behind the advice can make it both more understandable and credible.

Formal training to provide a detailed roadmap for success can reduce anxiety for first-generation professionals.



### 3. Provide Step-By-Step Guidance on Networking and Assignments

Strategies that support first-generation professionals benefit everyone. For most summer associates and junior associates, networking is daunting. The hybrid environment poses even more challenges. On assignments, the required attention to detail is often an unpleasant surprise. Many associates discover belatedly that assigning lawyers view typos as a sign of carelessness — or even disrespect. Step-by-step guidance on completing assignments and building relationships — and juggling both — helps everyone integrate more quickly.

### 4. Offer a Primer on Professionalism

Getting a grasp on professional norms can be especially anxiety-provoking for first-generation professionals. Detailed guidance on basics such as guidelines for business professional tone in emails can help bolster confidence. Of course, most incoming lawyers benefit from these “reminders.” Injecting humor and specific examples of pitfalls helps keep everyone engaged.

### 5. Address Impostor Syndrome

Impostor syndrome can be especially acute during times of career transition. Reminding incoming lawyers that some stress and worry is normal should be a relief to everyone.



Encouraging associates and summer associates to get out of their comfort zones can help tame impostor syndrome. And providing formal training on building resilience, managing stress, and overcoming impostor syndrome gives all lawyers skills that will help them overcome challenges throughout their careers. For self-study or to supplement training, the American Bar Association has an array of [excellent resources on grit and resilience](#).

## Conclusion

The “recipe” for leveling the playing field for first-generation professionals includes tools to help them understand expectations, reduce anxiety, and build a supportive network. For first-generation professionals themselves, Dalton adds, “Give yourself some grace. You will get there.”+

*This article was submitted on behalf of the NALP Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Section.*



Grover Cleveland

**Grover Cleveland** ([Grover@lessonsforsharks.com](mailto:Grover@lessonsforsharks.com)) is a former law firm partner and the author of *Swimming Lessons for Baby Sharks*. As the founder of Lessons for Sharks LLC, he provides interactive programs to

support summer associate and associate success. Grover is the NALP liaison to the National LGBTQ+ Bar Association.



Jenny Li

**Jenny Li** ([JennyLi@mofo.com](mailto:JennyLi@mofo.com)) is the Senior Employer Branding Manager at Morrison Foerster. Jenny co-founded the First-Generation Professionals Affinity Group during her time with Baker Botts. She

currently serves as the Co-Chair of NALP's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Section, and was previously a member of NALP's Driving Inclusion in the Legal Industry Task Force.