

Debra Austin, JD, PhD
Professor of the Practice
University of Denver Sturm College of Law
2255 E. Evans Ave.
Denver, CO 80028
daustin@law.du.edu
[Faculty Page](#) - [SSRN Page](#) - [Website](#)

Capsule Summary

Narrative: Dr. Austin is a nationally recognized expert and scholar in lawyer well-being. Her scholarship is focused on how neuroscience and psychology research can help law students, lawyers, judges, and other professionals to improve their performance and well-being. Her seminal work, *Killing Them Softly*, shines a bright light on lawyer depression, substance abuse, and suicide, and its application of neuroscience to the chronic stresses of law school and law practice depict how law students and lawyers suffer cognitive damage that impairs them from doing precisely what their studies and practices require. *Drink Like a Lawyer* demonstrates how self-medication with substances like alcohol, marijuana, and study drugs impairs law student and lawyer thinking. *Food for Thought* explores using nutrition to fuel optimal cognitive performance. *Positive Legal Education* explores how neuroscience, positive psychology, and positive education research can improve legal education to enhance law student well-being and achievement, proposes a new field of inquiry and a new method of training lawyer leaders, and it offers research-based guidance on how law schools can address the recommendations in the ABA National Task Force on Lawyer Well-being Report. *Windmills of Your Mind* challenges law students, legal educators, and lawyers to improve their understanding of the impact emotion and stress have on performance, and how building mental strength can empower their professional and personal lives. Dr. Austin teaches Lawyering Process and Professionalism and Well-being Skills for the Effective Lawyer. She is a member of the AALS Balance in Legal Education Executive Committee (Chair 2019) and served as Co-Chair of the Law School Working Group on the Colorado Supreme Court Lawyer Well-being Task Force. Dr. Austin is the recipient of the university-wide University of Denver Distinguished Teaching Award for 2019. She is a Top 10% of Authors on SSRN by all-time downloads every month since August of 2017. SSRN is a worldwide collaborative devoted to the rapid dissemination of research.

Areas of Specialization: Legal analysis, research, and writing; the neuroscience and psychology of lawyer stress, performance, and well-being; and legal education innovation and reform.

Academic Positions

Professor of the Practice, University of Denver Sturm College of Law (2016-present)
Associate Professor of the Practice, University of Denver Sturm College of Law (2008-2016)
Library Instruction Coordinator, University of Denver Sturm College of Law (1997-2008)

Education

Ph.D. in Education, University of Denver Morgridge College of Education (2004)
J.D., University of San Francisco School of Law (1989)
B.M.E. in Music Education, University of Colorado at Boulder (1982)

Certificates

Animals and Human Health Certificate, Institute for Human-Animal Connection, University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work, Jan. 29, 2021.

Articles

Leadership Lapse: Laundering Systemic Bias Through Student Evaluations, 65 VILL. L. REV. 995 (2021)

Unsafe at Any Campus: Don't Let Colleges Become the Next Cruise Ships, Nursing Homes, and Food Processing Plants, (with Peter H. Huang, University of Colorado), 96 Ind. L.J. Supp. 25 (2020)

Windmills of Your Mind: Understanding the Neurobiology of Emotion, 54 Wake Forest L. Rev. 931 (2019)

Positive Legal Education: Flourishing Law Students and Thriving Law Schools, 77 Md. L. Rev. 649 (2018)

Food for Thought: The Neuroscience of Nutrition to Fuel Cognitive Performance, 95 Or. L. Rev. 425 (2017)

Mindfulness for Lawyers: Decrease your Stress and Improve your Performance, COLAP Wellness Corner, The Docket, the Denver Bar Association Magazine and Blog, August 1, 2017

Emotion Regulation for Lawyers: A Mind is a Challenging Thing to Tame (with Rob Durr, Northwestern University), 16 WYO. L. REV. 387 (2016)

Got Stress? You may be Harming your Brain, The Coffee House 6, a Publication of the Wyoming Trial Lawyers Association, Spring 2015

Drink Like a Lawyer: The Neuroscience of Substance Use and its Impact on Cognitive Wellness, 15 NEV. L.J. 826 (2015)

Killing Them Softly: Neuroscience Reveals how Brain Cells Die from Law School Stress and How Neural Self-Hacking can Optimize Cognitive Performance, 59 LOY. L. REV. 791 (2013)

Newsletter

The Lawyer Well-being Newsletter, published weekly since January 2020 at <https://debraaustin.com/>.

Task Force Report

The Path to Lawyer Well-being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change, American Bar Association National Task Force on Lawyer Well-being Report (contributing author), American Bar Association, August, 14, 2017.

Book Chapter

Positive Institutions: Organizations, Laws, and Policies, by Peter H. Huang, Anne M. Brafford, Debra S. Austin, and Martha Knudson, in *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 3rd Edition, Edited by C.R. Snyder, Shane J. Lopez, Lisa M. Edwards, and Susana C. Marques. Jan, 2018.

Book Forward

Forward: Law, Enlightenment, and Other States of Mind. E-Book. Colorado Bar Association (2014).

Guest Blog Posts

Substance Misuse in the Legal Profession at the Law School Wellness Project at Stanford Law School. March 11, 2017.

Selected Presentations

Hacking Your Brain: The Neuroscience of Attorney Well-being, Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office, April 15, 2021.

Building Resilience Skills, Santa Clara University School of Law, April 12, 2021.

Hacking Your Brain: The Neuroscience of Well-being, Pima County Attorney's Office, March 18, 2021.

Self-Care and the Science of Resilience, Lawyer's Club of San Diego Women's Conference, March 13, 2021.

Hacking the Lawyer Brain for Resilience, Montana Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and Federal Defenders of Montana 2021 Virtual-Annual Conference, March 11, 2021.

Attorney Wellness, 2021 Capital Case Defense Seminar, February 14, 2021.

Hacking the Lawyer Brain for Resilience, Federal Public Defenders, Northern District of California, November 6, 2020.

You Can't Pour From an Empty Cup; Taking Care of Yourself First, Grit: A Workshop to Energize, Elevate and Educate Women in Public Defense, October 19, 2020.

Attorney Wellness During the Pandemic, Nevada Federal Criminal Defense Webinar, September 9, 2020.

Empowering your Well-being, Western Region of the National Black Law Students Association Webinar, August 31, 2020.

Ideas to Prepare Your Pedagogy for Remote Learning, University of Denver Sturm College of Law, Faculty Development Series, June 29, 2020.

Addressing Emotions from COVID-19, Racial Inequity, and Civil Unrest: Chronic Stress, Leadership, and Loneliness, with Peter Huang, Olivia Ash, and Stephanie Johnson, ABA Section of Dispute Resolution Webinar, June 18, 2020.

Attorney Wellness During the Pandemic, Federal Criminal Defense Webinar, Defender Services Office Training Division, May 5 and May 7, 2020.

Optimizing the Lawyer's Brain: Improve Well-being and Enhance Ethical Performance, Byron White Inn of Court, Loveland, CO, January 16, 2020.

Positive Legal Education: Training the Next Generation of Lawyer Leaders to Thrive, as part of a panel entitled Global Perspectives: Creating a Law School Culture that Promotes Student Well-being (with Cara Cunningham Warren, Detroit Mercy Law; Jill Morrison and Amy Uelmen, Georgetown University Law Center, and Sandra Simpson, Gonzaga University School of Law), The Association of American Law Schools Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, January 3, 2020.

Optimizing the Lawyer's Brain: Improve Well-being and Enhance Ethical Performance Plenary, Winning Strategies Seminar I, Mindful Advocacy: Learning, Litigating and Leading on Mental Health Issues, Federal Criminal Defense Seminar, Defender Services Office Training Division, Austin, TX, December 5, 2019.

Hacking the Law Student Brain, University of Wyoming College of Law, Lunch Keynote for World Mental Health Day Webinar, October 10, 2019.

Lawyer Well-being: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, Wyoming State Bar Association 2019 Annual Meeting & Judicial Conference, Moran, WY, October 4, 2019.

Engage Me: the GPS of Hybrid Module Development for YouTube-Instagram Students, Online & Hybrid Learning Pedagogy: Toward Defining Best Practices in Legal Education, University of Denver Sturm College of Law, Denver, CO, September 27, 2019.

Hacking the Law Student Brain, Lunch Keynote, University of Dayton Law School, Dayton, OH, September 20, 2019.

Well-being Skills for the Effective Lawyer Three-Hour Workshop, Dayton Bar Association, Dayton, OH, September 19, 2019.

Optimizing the Lawyer's Brain: Improve Well-being and Enhance Ethical Performance Plenary, Multi-track Federal Criminal Defense Seminar, Defender Services Office Training Division, Hilton Denver City Center, Denver, CO, August 17, 2019.

Legal Education Reimagined: Applying Neuroscience and Positive Psychology Research to Transform Legal Education and Develop Socially-Responsible Leaders, as part of the panel on The Science of Transformative Legal Education with Victor Quintanilla, Swethaa Ballakrishen, and Jennifer Robbennolt, Law & Society, Washington D.C., June 1, 2019.

Optimizing the Lawyer Brain: Improve Well-being and Enhance Performance, American Bar Association Career Development Series, Online Webinar, April 12, 2019.

Key Strategies for Implementing Mindfulness Programs and Measuring Impact, with Leslie Wallis, JD, Shareholder, Ogletree Deakins & Michelle Wimes, JD, Chief Diversity & Professional Development Officer, Ogletree Deakins, National Association for Law Placement (NALP) Annual Education Conference, San Diego, CA, April 10, 2019

Addressing Lawyer and Law Student Well-being, Colorado Supreme Court Lawyer Well-being Task Force, Colorado Supreme Court, Denver, CO, March 27, 2019.

Leveraging the Professional Brain, Women in Leadership Professional Development Presentation, TTEC, at the invitation of Nancy Merrill, VP & Chief Counsel, Global Operations, Engelwood, CO, February 27, 2019.

Optimizing the Lawyer Brain: Improve Well-being and Enhance Performance, Young Lawyers Conference of the Virginia State Bar Association, Online Webinar, February 26, 2019.

The Neurobiology of Emotion and Strengthening the Mind, Wake Forest Law Review Cognitive Emotion and the Law Symposium, Wake Forest University School of Law, Winston-Salem, NC, February 22, 2019.

Addressing Law Student and Lawyer Well-being, The Legal Revolution Monthly Meeting, Denver, CO, February 20, 2019.

Optimizing the Lawyer Brain: Improve Well-being and Enhance Performance, Colorado Trial Lawyers Association Blockbuster Seminar, DoubleTree by Hilton, Denver, CO, January 24, 2019.

Optimizing the Lawyer Brain: Improve Well-being and Enhance Performance, Senior Women's Corporate Counsel Conference, The Westin Riverfront Resort and Spa, Avon, CO, November 3, 2018.

Teaching Professionalism and Well-being Skills for the Effective Lawyer, Western Legal Writing Regional Conference, University of California, Irvine School of Law, Irvine, CA, September 29, 2018.

Stress and Performance: Optimizing Cognitive Function and Effectiveness, DepoSpan Conference, Hilton City Center, Denver, CO, September 14, 2018.

New Year, New Goal for Faculty and Students: Zealously Guard Your Wellbeing for Peak Performance, Legal Writing Institute, Marquette University Law School, Milwaukee, WI, July 12, 2018.

Optimizing the Lawyer Brain: Improve Well-being and Enhance Ethical Performance, Criminal Law Symposium sponsored by the University of Illinois College of Law and the Federal Defenders Office for the Central District of Illinois, University of Illinois College of Law, Champaign, IL, April 19, 2018.

Could Improving Lawyer Wellbeing Promote Social Progress?, Rocky Mountain Legal Writing Conference, University of Denver, Denver, CO, March, 23, 2018.

Three Tips to Enhance Mental Strength: Mindfulness, Meditation & Gratitude, ALWD Innovative Teaching Workshop, University of Denver, Denver, CO, March 23, 2018.

Applying Positive Psychology and Strengths-Oriented Approaches in Teaching Panel, with Heidi K. Brown, Brooklyn Law School, R. Lisle Baker, Suffolk University Law School, and James McGrath, Texas A & M University School of Law, 2018 American Association of Law Schools Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA, January 6, 2018.

Well-being and the Lawyer Brain, American Bar Association Health Law Section Council Committee on Health and Well-being. December 12, 2017.

Hacking your Brain: Empower your Learning and Optimize your Performance, Universidad Pontificia Comillas ICADE School of Law, Madrid, Spain, October 18, 2017.

How the Lawyer Wellbeing Crisis Thwarts Social Progress, 7th International Conference on Health, Wellness & Society, University of Denver, Denver, CO, October 6, 2017.

Connecting Law Student Wellbeing to Enhanced Performance, Western Regional Legal Writing Conference, Seattle University School of Law, August 26, 2017.

Hacking the Law Student Brain, Legal Writing I Course, Seattle University School of Law. August 25, 2017.

Mindfulness and Lawyering: Working on Your Inner Game, Wyoming Trial Lawyers Association Conference via Skype. June 23, 2017.

Job Performance: Optimize Cognitive Function and Performance, National Association of Appellate Court Attorneys Conference. Denver, CO. June 13, 2017.

Developing Leaders with Positive Legal Education, Positive Lawyering, Mindfulness, and Humane Games Conference, University of Colorado School of Law. June 2, 2017.

Developing the Next Generation of Policy-Makers, Business Leaders, and Social Change Agents with Positive Legal Education, Empire Legal Writing Conference, New York Law School, New York, NY. May 19, 2017.

Hacking the Law Student Brain, Sustaining Practices for the Legal Profession Course, University of Dayton School of Law, via Skype. May 15, 2017.

Blurred Lines and Policy of Truth: Transforming Lawyer Leadership Education, Rocky Mountain Legal Writing Conference, Arizona State University Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, Phoenix, AZ. March 10, 2017.

Mindfulness and Lawyering: Working on your Inner Game, Rhone Brackett Inn of Court, Denver (Feb 2017)

Optimize Cognitive Fitness: The Connection Between Lawyer Wellbeing and Performance, American Bankruptcy Institute 22nd Annual Rocky Mountain Bankruptcy Conference, Denver (Jan 2017)

Maximize Competence: Enhancing the Attorney Mind and Brain, Ben S. Wendelken Inn of Court, Colorado Springs (Oct 2016)

The Intersection of Wellbeing and Performance: Using Neuroscience Research to Optimize Law Student Personal and Professional Development, National Institute for Teaching Ethics and Professionalism Fall Workshop, Mercer University School of Law, Macon (Oct 2016)

Job Performance: Steps for Optimizing Cognitive Performance & Effectiveness, Tenth Circuit Bench & Bar Conference, Colorado Springs (Sept 2016)

Teaching (Law) Students to Optimize Cognition via Neuroscience and Positive Psychology, with Peter Huang, CU Law, International Positive Education Network's Festival of Positive Education, Dallas (July 2016)

Craving Comfort Food and Cocktails? The Neuroscience of Nutrition for Optimal Brain Health and Agile Aging, Legal Writing Institute Conference, Portland (July 2016)

Judicial Wellness, 2016 Kansas Judicial Conference, Wichita (June 2016)

Reinvigorate your Brain with Neuroscience-Inspired Rating, Rocky Mountain Legal Writing Conference, University of Arizona, Tucson (Mar 2016)

Brain-Boosting Nutrition, Southeastern Legal Writing Conference, University of Miami, Miami (Feb 2016)

Brain Power: the Neuroscience of Cognition, Stress, Self-Medication, and Brain Health, Wyoming Trial Lawyers Association Convention, Cody (2015)

Don't Forget the Brain: Using Neuroscience Developments to Humanize Legal Education, Association of Legal Writing Directors, University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law. Memphis (2015)

Zen and the Artistry of the Emotionally Regulated Advocate, Psychology of Persuasion Conference, University of Wyoming, Laramie, with Rob Durr, PhD, Northwestern University School of Law (2015)

Wellness for 1Ls: The Neuroscience of Happy Hour & Alternatives to Self-Medication, Rocky Mountain Legal Writing Conference, University of New Mexico School of Law, Albuquerque (2015)

Cognitive Wellness: The Impact of Stress on the Brain, Ways to Mitigate it, and Development of Individual Cognitive Wellness Plans, Association of Reporters of Judicial Decisions Annual Conference, Denver (2014)

Judicial Job Performance: Steps for Maximizing Cognitive Function & Effectiveness, Kansas Judicial Conference, Topeka (2014)

The Neuroscience of Optimizing Lawyer Cognitive Fitness, Mountain West Clinical Conference, University of Denver Sturm College of Law, Denver (2014)

This is your Brain on Stress: Help your Students Improve Resilience & Maximize Cognition, Legal Writing Institute, Philadelphia with Corie Rosen Felder, University of Colorado (2014)

Neural Self-Hacking and the Neuroscience of Cognitive Wellness, Psychology and Lawyering: Coalescing the Field Conference, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas (2014)

The Impact of Military Stress on the Learning Environment, U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs (2013)

Use Neural Self-Hacking to Develop a Plan for Cognitive Wellness, Rhone Brackett Inn of Court, Denver (2013)

Self-Directed Neuroplasticity: The Neuroscience of Cognitive Wellness, Kansas Judicial Center, Topeka (2013)

Stress and Cognition: The Neuroscience Behind Stress, Memory & Learning, Central States Legal Writing Conference, University of Kansas. Lawrence (2013)

Neural Self-Hacking: The Neuroscience of Cognition and Brain Health, Implications of Tiger Parenting for Legal Education Conference, Boulder (2013)

Awards

University of Denver Distinguished Teaching Award. Recipient of the university-wide Distinguished Teaching Award for 2018-19. University of Denver, June 10, 2019.

Faculty Career Champion, nominated by student Christine Kuglin, Career & Professional Development, University of Denver, September 14, 2018.

Top 10% of Authors on SSRN by all-time downloads every month since August of 2017. SSRN is a worldwide collaborative devoted to the rapid dissemination of research.

Selected as a Fellow at the National Institute for Teaching Ethics and Professionalism Fall Workshop, National Institute for Teaching Ethics and Professionalism (NIFTEP), October 6, 2016.

William T. Driscoll Master Educator Award. University of Denver, May, 2001.

Grants

ALWD Teaching Grant. \$2,500. May 2021. Prosocial Leadership: Creating a Culture of Stewardship. Funding for Humane Education Practitioner Certificate.

Hughes Research and Development Mini-Grant. \$3,000. April 2021. Prescription K9: Can a Therapy Dog in the Law School Classroom Lower Stress and Improve Learning? Funding for pilot study.

Hughes Research and Development Pilot Grant. \$3,500. April 2020. Prescription K9: Can a Therapy Dog in the Law School Classroom Lower Stress and Improve Learning? Funding for Animals & Human Health Certificate to develop therapy dog study for legal education.

Hughes-Ruud Research and Development Pilot Grant, to test hypothesis about impact of legal education on well-being. \$3,000. September 10, 2018. Collaborating with Matthew S. Thiese, PhD, MSPH, Rocky Mountain Center of Occupational and Environmental Health, Department of Family and Preventive Medicine, University of Utah and Martha Knudson, Executive Director, Utah Well-Being Committee for the Legal Profession.

Hughes-Ruud Research and Development Fund grant to attend 2014 Neuroscience Boot Camp at the University of Pennsylvania. \$3,000. May, 2014.

Legal Writing Institute-Association of Legal Writing Directors-LexisNexis 2012 Legal Writing Scholarship Grant. Research project working title: Carnegie, Hidden Curriculum, and Culture Clash: What Neuroscience can Teach us about the Impact of Stress on Learning. \$5,000. April, 2012.

Morgridge Family Foundation. SmartBoard and Student Response Systems for Integration in Legal Skills Courses. \$5,883. August, 2009.

National Science Foundation: ITEST Program. Pixels, Programming, Play and Pedagogy. \$1.2 million. September, 2006. (with S. Leutenegger - PI, R. Fajardo, and A. Andrews).

Dorr Foundation. DU Game Camp Curriculum Support. \$15,000. June, 2006. (with S. Leutenegger and R. Fajardo).

Center for Teaching and Learning. University of Denver. Preparing Colorado's Teachers for Technological Literacy. \$17,266. January, 2004. (with B. Uhrmacher).

Service and Organizations

AALS Balance in Legal Education Section – Elected Executive Committee Member since 2014; Elected Section Chair 2019.

CO Supreme Court Colorado Task Force on Lawyer Well-being – Appointed Member – Appointed Co-Chair, along with Patty Powell, of the Law School Working Group.

Rhone Brackett Inn of Court – Member.

Prior Employment

Westlaw Representative, West Publishing, Denver, CO (1990-1997)

Law Clerk, Wendel, Rosen, Black, Dean & Levitan, Oakland, CA (1985-1989)

Teacher, North Arvada Jr. High, Arvada, CO (1982-1985)