No Difficulty Holding Both Logic and Feeling: Can the Barbie Movie Help with Women's Professional Identity Education?

Debra Moss Vollweiler Professor of Law, Shepard Broad College of Law Nova Southeastern University AALS Annual Meeting **Women in Legal Education**, *Friday January 5, 2024*

THE PREMISE: IRRECONCILABLE CONFLICT?

According to the Holloran Center, professional identity education "should involve an intentional exploration of the values, guiding principles, and well-being practices considered foundational to successful legal practice."

This requires an accurate self-understanding of who law students are.

BUT...

The exploration of professional identity for women lawyers, has historically hit a roadblock.

 For many women law students their system of values and principles that are connected to their gender and self-expression of that gender historically are downplayed.

SOME RESULTS OF THIS CONFLICT

- At the ABA National Summit on Achieving Long-Term Careers for Women in Law, Professor Iris Bohnet indicated that some women leave [their jobs] because of a work culture that forces them to minimize important parts of their lives.
- She noted that women who leave often ask themselves,
 "Can I bring my whole self to work?"



SOME RESULTS OF THIS CONFLICT: QUESTIONS OF SUCCESS IN THE PROFESSION

- Our identities are like icebergs. The large bulk of them lies invisible to us below the surface of consciousness..."The non-conscious bulk of identity is called "habitus."
- When one's habitus is in *dissonance with the professional identity of one's chosen profession*, this leads in most cases to difficulty having success in the profession or added physical stress—and often both.
- The formation of a professional identity should be most significantly informed by and consonant with one's personal identity—including one's lived experience as a person of, among other things, a particular race, gender, or socioeconomic class.

David I.C. Thomson, "Teaching" Formation of Professional Identity (2015)

Harmony Decosimo, A Taxonomy of Professional Identity (2022)



THE GOAL

"I have no difficulty holding both logic and feeling at the same time and that does not diminish my powers; it expands them!" Imagine! Emotion as power! A world where we allowed our full humanity into spaces of collective decision making!"

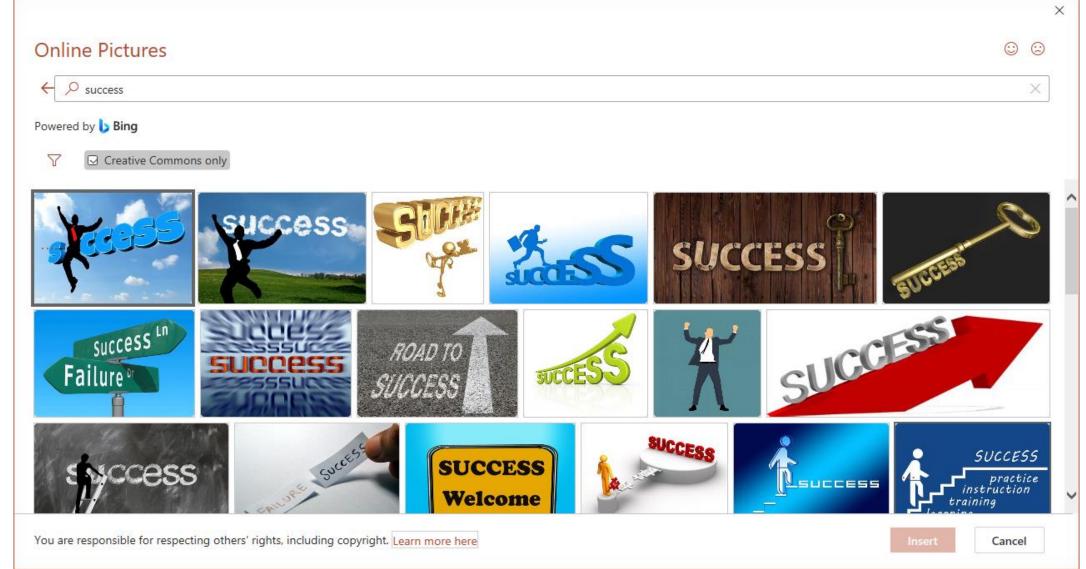


AWAKENING-THANKS TO MOVIES?

That moment when Warner said Elle wasn't smart enough for law school was one of those experiences that women lawyers can relate to: being seen as less competent, intelligent or being judged solely on appearances. "It's incredible. ... You can be unapologetically feminine but also smart and driven." Since the announcement of *Barbie*, we've witnessed the rise of unapologetic hyper-femme codes intertwined in mainstream culture.

IS IT EASIER TO TALK ABOUT BEING A **WOMAN** IN THE PROFESSION? CAN WE **MAKE IT EASIER**?

SUCCESS AS GENDER ISSUE?



CAN WE MAKE IT EASIER? POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS



- Understanding that students may experience imposter syndrome because of gender, maledominated work environments, and a lack of diversity in leadership roles within the profession.
- Don't be afraid to include gender identity and how it impacts your view of the world. Ask the question: When was the last time you showed up PROFESSIONALLY... as yourself?
- Have students ask themselves—what does it mean to be a lawyer TO YOU? And have them answer it with all their perspectives on life.
- Pairing professional identity with cultural competence can help all students understand these issues (pairing 303(b) and (c))

Thank you! Questions?

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