

**Debra Austin, JD, PhD**  
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## Capsule Summary

**Narrative:** Dr. Austin is a lawyer well-being scholar and advocate. Her scholarship is focused on how neuroscience and psychology research can help law students, lawyers, and judges 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, Advanced Legal Research and Writing, and Professionalism and Well-being Skills for the Effective Lawyer. She is Chair of the AALS Balance in Legal Education Section and 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 2018-19. 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 positive psychology of stress, performance, and well-being; and legal education reform.

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

## Articles

*Windmills of Your Mind: Understanding the Neurobiology of Emotion*, Wake Forest Law Review, forthcoming

*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)

### **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**

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 22<sup>nd</sup> 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**

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).