

Building Bridges Where None Existed

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A few months ago, I sat in a crowded theatre at the University of the Cumberlands (UC) watching the Kentucky Supreme Court hear oral arguments just a few feet away from students who had never even stepped inside a courtroom before. You could feel the unique energy in the room. Some people were seeing the legal system up close for the very first time. These moments carry a different sort of weight for folks.

Williamsburg, Kentucky sits in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky. It is a small Appalachian town where everybody knows everybody. But it is also a place geographically separated from many of the opportunities students in larger areas may take for granted. There are no law schools in Eastern Kentucky. Very few exist across Appalachia outside major cities. For students interested in becoming attorneys, judges, or public servants, the path can feel incredibly distant. Not impossible by any means, just distant.

That distance is not only physical, it is cultural too. Many students here are first-generation college students. Many come from working-class families. Some have never met a lawyer personally before arriving on campus. Others may not even realize law school is something they could realistically pursue. That is why Professor Catherine Ball matters so much to students like me.

Professor Ball is an assistant professor at the University of the Cumberlands. At the same time, she works full-time within the court system. Even with those responsibilities, she still goes far beyond what is expected of her for students. This year, she spearheaded the creation of the university's first-ever Phi Alpha Delta Pre-Law Honor Society chapter. Before that, there had never really been a space for aspiring law students at UC to connect with one another.

When I first became interested in law school, I honestly did not know where to begin. I come from a family with no lawyers and no background in the legal profession. I was a business student, not someone already plugged into political science or history circles. The legal world felt pretty unfamiliar to me. But Professor Ball never allowed that to get in the way.

The first time I asked about the LSAT, she immediately began including me in conversations and opportunities. She recognized something important that many university professors tend to overlook: future law students do not all come from the same mold. She understood that students needed a place where they could simply ask questions and learn from one another without feeling out of place. That is what relational leadership looks like. Truly helping students feel seen before they even fully believe in themselves yet.

And students trust her because she is real with us. People can usually tell pretty quickly whether someone genuinely cares. In Appalachian communities especially, trust is earned through consistency and honesty. You cannot fake investment in people. Professor Ball does not sugarcoat things. She expects hard work. She tells students the truth about the challenges ahead. But at the same time, she makes us rural students believe we belong in these spaces too.

I have watched plenty of peers become more confident simply because someone took their ambitions seriously. I have watched friends stop seeing their background as a disadvantage and start seeing it as a strength. When students feel known, they begin carrying themselves differently and they pursue opportunities they once thought were out of reach. At that point, they can really begin imagining their future.

And the truth is, this issue is much bigger than one campus. Around 20 percent of the United States population lives in rural areas, yet only about 2 percent of small law practices exist there (Legal Services Corporation). Researchers studying “legal deserts” have found that rural communities often face major shortages in legal access.

That reality shows up in communities across Appalachia. Many rural students are underestimated before they even enter the room. There is often an assumption that because someone comes from a small town or a regional university, they are somehow less prepared. But I have met some of the smartest and hardest working people of my life here in

Eastern Kentucky. The issue has never been raw talent, it is exposure and connection.

That is why I also think organizations like Shaping Our Appalachian Region matter deeply. Through free entrepreneurship and leadership programs, SOAR has worked to help young people across Eastern Kentucky see opportunity within their own communities instead of believing success only exists somewhere else. I have participated in entrepreneurship development initiatives through SOAR myself alongside many other students from rural backgrounds. What stood out most was that the organization genuinely wanted to promote our people as our biggest strength.

That connects directly back to what Professor Ball is doing. Both are amazing examples of weavers. People building trust and helping rural students believe they matter and belong.

Professor Ball constantly encourages students to consider bringing their skills back home afterward. That message matters. There is often pressure to leave and never come back if you want to “make it.” But what happens if students return? What happens if future professionals choose to reinvest in the places that raised them? I think that is the bigger question underneath all of this.

Young people need weavers because the world feels increasingly disconnected. We need people who help us stay grounded in who we are while also helping us dream bigger about where we can go. We need leaders who make students feel seen before assumptions define them. And maybe most importantly, we need people who help rural students understand that their communities are places worth investing in too.