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Best schools for moot court

For the top moot court programs, winning is just a happy side effect. Preparing students to practice law and argue in court is what moot court is really all about. **BY TYLER ROBERTS**

Jonathan Peña was nervous. He didn't know what to expect from opposing counsel or if the judges would be especially demanding in their questions. But when Peña walked up to the podium at the National Latina/o Law Student Association (NLLSA) Moot Court Competition and uttered the words "May it please the court," his nerves melted away.

Despite the fact that it was Peña's first national moot court competition, he and teammate Cesar Escalante, both third-year students at South Texas College of Law Houston, took first place.

Their victory marked the law school's 127th national advocacy championship win. No other school comes close to that record.

Every year, South Texas College of Law reinforces its position as one of the nation's top law schools for advocacy. In the 2016-17 academic year, it was ranked first by University of Houston Law Center's Blakely Advocacy Institute. The institute uses a scoring system that assesses the quality of the competitions a school participated in, the size of the competitions and the school's performance in those competitions to determine the top 16 programs in the nation.

South Texas College of Law links its success in moot court to a strong legal research and writing program, but much credit is also given to the students and coaches.

Escalante and Peña said preparation was the key to their success. They met with their coach, Ryan Cantu, four to five times a week, practicing their arguments, fixing gaps in their knowledge of the law and fine-tuning their presentation.

After each practice, Escalante said, he would listen to a recording of his argument during his drive home. Peña would watch a video of his argument from earlier in the day before going to sleep at night. Both students noted and corrected every mistake, hesitation and personal quirk. When the next practice came, they were ready to prog-



UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA'S team placed second in regional rounds of the National Moot Court Competition, securing a spot in the national rounds in New York City.

ress forward.

"Once I got to the tournament, it felt like just another practice to me," Peña said.

The level of dedication that Escalante and Peña exhibited for the NLLSA competition is expected from all South Texas College of Law moot court competitors. Team members are reminded of this each time they receive an email from Robert Galloway, assistant director of advocacy, who always signs off with the message, "Remember, hard work wins championships!"

"I love the thrill of the competitions," said Escalante, who won Best Advocate in the final round of the NLLSA competition. "It is the closest thing to competitive sports in law school."

For the uninitiated, moot court is an extracurricular activity that simulates appellate court proceedings. Students are tasked with researching legal issues related to the fact pattern, writing briefs to persuade the

appellate court, and presenting oral arguments to defend their positions.

Most law schools hold intramural moot court competitions, often as an extension of their legal research and writing programs. This gives students an opportunity to practice the lawyering skills they study in the classroom and receive feedback on their performances.

For Sophia George, a third-year student at San Antonio, Texas-based St. Mary's University School of Law, moot court was a turning point in her legal career. Before moot court, George said, the idea of arguing before judges was terrifying. But her experience was not what she expected. Much to her surprise, standing before judges and answering questions about the law was fun.

"It kind of turned me into an adrenaline junkie," George said. "It is always a challenge, and I can't get enough of it."

With encouragement from her class-

mates and professors, George tried out and joined St. Mary's University's moot court team, which was ranked third in the nation by the Blakely Advocacy Institute for the 2016-17 academic year. In the spring of 2017, George and teammates Billy Calve and Devin deBruyn successfully defended St. Mary's University's championship title at the ABA Law Student Division National Appellate Advocacy Competition.

"Moot court changed the way I think," George said. "These skills helped me in law school final exams where I have to analyze

a law and break it down and apply it to a specific fact pattern."

Winning moot court competitions gives students another feather in their caps. But the primary goal of moot court is to prepare students for the practice of law, said Connie Smothermon, director of competitions at University of Oklahoma College of Law. Winning is secondary.

"Of course, we are excited about any success we have, but the reason we participate and spend time, effort and money to participate in these competitions is for the



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very fact that it builds skills in law students that are necessary to their success as lawyers," Smothermon said.

The moot court program at University of Oklahoma was ranked second in the nation by the Blakely Advocacy Institute. The school sees it as an additional teaching tool designed to accompany lessons taught in legal research and writing courses. Smothermon said the program prepares students to approach complex legal issues by providing a solid foundation of basic advocacy skills. Additional skill-building workshops in research, writing and oral advocacy are available to members of the law school's moot court team.

Chicago-Kent College of Law at Illinois Institute of Technology has been ranked in the top 10 for several years. Its Ilana Diamond Rovner Program in Appellate Advocacy is designed to coach moot court team members on the basics of advocacy. Selected students join the team after their first year of law school and undergo training during the first semester of their second year. Chicago-Kent College of Law students compete for two semesters before "retiring" to mentor and coach the next wave of team members.

"The design of the moot court program is to train lawyers with an appreciation for how complex legal issues merge with the practical needs of their clients," said Kent Streseman, director of the advocacy program.

Caitlin Ajax was a member for Streseman's team. In the spring of 2016,

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School Name	Total Points	Rank
South Texas College of Law Houston	107	1
University of Oklahoma College of Law	75	2
St. Mary's University School of Law	74	3
Stetson University College of Law	70.5	4
Georgetown University Law Center	67	5
SMU Dedman School of Law	64	6
Chicago-Kent College of Law	56	7
Texas Tech University School of Law	54	8
Michigan State University College of Law	53	9
University of California Hastings College of Law	52	10
Pepperdine University School of Law	51	11
Wake Forest University School of Law	45	12
University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law	45	13
The Ohio State University or Moritz College of Law	43	14
Mississippi College of Law	41.5	15
University of Mississippi School of Law	40	16
Baylor University School of Law	39	17
The University of Kansas School of Law	39	18
Loyola University Chicago School of Law	39	19
Florida Coastal School of Law	37	20
Wayne State University Law School	37	21
Barry University Dwayne O. Andreas School of Law	36	22
Charleston School of Law	35	23
University of California Davis School of Law	33.5	24
The George Washington University Law School	33	25

when Ajax was a second-year student, she was named National Best Advocate in the national finals of the ABA's competition. Now a practicing attorney, she attributes her professional development to her participation in the school's moot court program and the mentoring she received.

"You are learning what kind of lawyer you want to be," Ajax said. "You are learning how to handle difficult adversarial situations. You are learning how to be a humble winner and a gracious loser. That is something that will transcend competition boundaries and be an asset in the real world when you are serving clients and interacting with opposing counsel."

The nation's top moot court programs all have several things in common: They are stacked with competitive and driven students; they are led by dedicated volunteer coaches and faculty members; and they are focused on teaching transferrable skills. Perhaps most important, however, is that training students for the practice of law is their top priority. Winning championships is a just a happy side effect.