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April/May 2009

2009

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4-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Liberty University, "An Appeal with Purpose" (2009). *April/May 2009*. 3.  
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## An appeal with purpose

April 01, 2009 | Teresa Dunham

A courtroom is the ultimate playing field for Liberty University's Moot Court teams.

"It's the [competitive] equivalent of the football player putting on his helmet for every Saturday afternoon game. ... There's just a huge satisfaction from walking away from an oral argument knowing that you've done absolutely the best that you could do," said Professor Scott Thompson, head of the School of Law's Moot Court Program.

In Moot Court tournaments, two-student teams argue different sides of a case — coming up with the best defense, articulating that position based on findings from past cases, and standing firm as judges pepper them with questions. Their goal is to think on their feet and out-perform other teams to advance through several rounds.

"It's a daunting challenge," Thompson said.

Students put in hours studying different court decisions related to their case. For national competition, they usually end up writing a brief summarizing the case over Christmas, preparing an oral argument on their own and with a teammate, and then attending an additional 10 practices in front of faculty members serving as practice judges in the weeks leading up to the tournament.

Bringing home six oralist awards in their first three years of national competition — including three first place awards — LU's law students are considered formidable opponents. A team also won Third-Best Brief in the American Bar Association regional competition last year.

“For a program that’s only in its fourth year of existence, we’ve done very well,” Thompson said.

LU holds an internal tournament required for all first-year students each spring, and voluntary internal tournaments are held in the fall for upperclassmen. Those who excel can move on to several regional and even national competitions.

“Our judges have uniformly said that the arguments they hear in the final rounds are as good as many of the attorneys that practice before them on a daily basis,” said Thompson, emphasizing that LU brings in top judges from the federal, state appeals, supreme court and state circuit court levels.

One student even ended up clerking for a well-respected judge because of the impression he made on her during a competition, he said.

In Thompson’s view, Moot Court is one of the best ways for future litigators to prepare for their real-world career.

“I love working with students who are willing to make that investment and that commitment to hone their skills and become excellent oral advocates,” he said.

## **Starting them young**

Liberty University starts sharpening its future lawyers early.

Law students are required to compete in Moot Court tournaments — but undergraduates from all majors can get a taste of the competition, too.

“If they come to law school having had Moot Court experience, they’re just that much farther ahead,” said Law Professor Scott Thompson.

Thompson sees the undergraduate program as a feeder for students who may compete for the School of Law someday — though dreams of a law degree aren’t a requirement for participation.

“It’s for absolutely any student who wants to participate,” said Law Professor and undergraduate Moot Court coach Grant Rost. “You just have to be good. You’ve got to be a hard worker; you have to be intelligent; you have to be a good speaker, think well on your feet.”

Moot Court mimics the argument a lawyer would make in front of an appellate court. This year, the American Collegiate Moot Court Association’s fictional topic centered around the First Amendment rights of a college student engaging in political protest on campus.

LU sent four teams to Savannah, Ga., for regional competition in November, and two of those

teams qualified to attend the American Collegiate Moot Court National Championships in Orange, Calif., in January. One team made it to a round of 32 teams, out of 64 total teams, and LU also brought home a second-place trophy in brief writing.

Now in their fourth year on campus, LU's undergraduate teams have made it to national competition three times. LU climbed to the round of 16 teams to tie for ninth place twice in previous years, and a speaker was recognized as the 17th best out of 128.

"The preparation was pretty intense," said junior pre-law student Chandler Smith.

LU students were up for the challenge, though. Soon as senior government student, Mark Hicks, made the team, he went to the library and printed off all 27 cases — over 500 pages — related to the topic, read all of them over the summer, wrote briefs on them and geared up for the team's four-hour practices on Friday nights when school was back in session. For Hicks and others, it was time well-spent.

"It's great to know that we will be ahead of the game in law school," said senior government and communications major Grace Woodson.

Tryouts for undergraduate Moot Court are held each spring. Email [grost@liberty.edu](mailto:grost@liberty.edu) for more information.