

Law School Competition Teams: Practicing for Practice

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Aug 29, 2018 ⌚ 6 min read



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Traditional law school courses can be an effective way to learn legal doctrine, but they don't teach much about law practice. Joining a law school competition team can be a terrific way to learn those skills and have fun in the process.

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Why Join?

There are many good reasons to join competition teams. The first is the opportunity to learn law practice skills not taught in traditional law school courses. Many of these skills are essential to a successful law practice – skills such as how to conduct a client interview, how to write an appellate brief, how to cross-examine a witness, and how to

draft and deliver an effective opening and closing statement. Competition teams give students an opportunity to learn by doing in an environment where a mistake is not going to hurt a client or lead to a legal malpractice claim.

Second, competitions provide immediate feedback. In most law school classes, feedback comes in the form of a grade at the end of the semester, and by the time the grade arrives, it's too late to improve performance in the course. In competitions, participants usually receive feedback after each round and can use that feedback to perform better in the next round.

Third, competing fosters teamwork. A recent study of practicing attorneys ranked "working cooperatively with others as part of a team" among the top ten most important lawyering skills. Law school, however, can feel like a solitary journey. Competition teams give law students the opportunity to learn and work together.

Fourth, teams provide potent networking opportunities. Students on a team often form close personal and professional bonds that continue for a lifetime. Participating on a team also provides an opportunity to meet successful practicing attorneys. Students often receive interviews and job offers as a result of contacts they made with practitioners who coached their team, judged practice rounds, or judged competition rounds. Practitioners recruited by schools to serve as coaches and judges usually are among the cream of the practicing bar, and the opportunity to shine in front of them, in a law-practice setting, is invaluable.

Fifth, competing looks good on a resume, provides a discussion item in job interviews, and provides coaches with concrete items they can use in writing letters of recommendation. Many students complain that legal employers focus too much on grades, but that's because there often are few other job-related factors that meaningfully distinguish one law student from another. Competition teams give students with mediocre grades a different opportunity to shine and give students with stellar grades an opportunity to demonstrate that their skills go beyond the ability to excel on a timed doctrinal exam.

Finally, competing provides an opportunity to travel, meet law students from across the country and around the world, and observe advocacy techniques that might be different from the ones taught at your school.

Getting Involved

The first step in getting involved in a competition team is participating in intramural competitions. Most law schools offer a moot court competition exclusively for 1Ls, and some schools also allow 1Ls to participate in other intramural competitions. Participating in these competitions is a good way to get noticed by whoever at your law school is selecting students for competition teams.

The next step is finding out how the teams are selected. If they are selected by adjuncts or faculty members, find out who the coaches are (they might be faculty members or adjunct professors), and let them know of your interest. If teams are selected by student organizations such as a moot court board, client skills board, or dispute resolution board, get involved in those organizations.

At some law schools, it's up to students to form their own teams. If this is true at your school, find a group of students interested in forming a team and approach the faculty member whose classes seem most relevant to the competition you're interested in. Explain to the faculty member your interest, and demonstrate that you're willing to do the legwork required to register the team and prepare for the competition. Most faculty members will be thrilled about your interest in their area of subject expertise and happy to help.

Types of Competitions

Moot Court

Perhaps the most common type of law school competition is moot court. Moot court competitions simulate appellate advocacy. Competitors receive a problem ahead of time; this problem usually includes the facts of the underlying case and an opinion from a lower court that is being challenged. Competitors then must research and brief the issues and participate in oral argument. Competitors are scored and critiqued by a panel of competition judges playing the role of appellate judges. Moot court helps students develop skills in legal research, writing, and analysis; oral advocacy; and the ability to think on their feet.

Most law schools run one or more intramural moot court competitions. There also are myriad national and international moot court competitions. Some competitions, such as the ABA Law Student Division [National Appellate Advocacy Competition](#), change the subject every year. Other competitions are subject-specific, such as the [Robert F. Wagner National Labor & Employment Law Moot Court Competition](#) hosted every year by New York Law School.

Trial Team

Most law schools offer one or more trial advocacy courses and one or more trial teams. Trial team members often are chosen from among students in the trial advocacy courses, and may compete either locally or nationally.

Trial team competitions simulate lower court trials. Competitors receive a problem ahead of time; this problem may include character descriptions, deposition excerpts, documents, and the like. Competitors then prepare exhibits, opening and closing

arguments, and direct and cross-examination of witnesses. Competitors are scored and critiqued by a panel of competition judges who, in the competition, play the role of judge and jury. These competitions help students develop skills related to trying a civil or criminal case.

Client Counseling

A client counseling competition simulates a law office consultation in which competitors, acting as attorneys, are presented with a potential new client. Before the competition, the competitors receive a one-or-two-sentence description of the reason for the client's visit. At the competition, the competitors are given a much more extensive fact pattern. The competitors interview the client, counsel the client on the legal problem, and are scored and critiqued by a panel of judges. These competitions help students develop skills related to interviewing and counseling and learn the norms of professional responsibility.

The American Bar Association Law Student Division hosts several regional [client counseling competitions](#) each year. The winners of these competitions meet for a national competition. The winner of the national competition competes at the International Client Consulting Competition. The ABA makes available to law schools a problem set for intramural use; many law schools host internal client counseling competitions to determine who will represent the school at the regional competition.

Arbitration

An arbitration competition simulates an arbitration hearing. Like trial competitions, competitors in an arbitration competition receive the problem ahead of time. Competitors then prepare exhibits, opening and closing arguments, and direct and cross-examination of witnesses. Competitors are scored and critiqued by a panel of arbitrators. Arbitration competitions help students develop many of the same skills as a trial team, but in a less formal setting where the rules of procedure and evidence are not strictly applied.

The American Bar Association Law Student Division hosts [several regional arbitration competitions](#) each year. The winners of this competition [meet for a national competition](#). There is a separate international commercial arbitration competition, the [Willem C. Vis Moot](#), held annually in Vienna and Hong Kong. Competitors in the Vis Moot submit written memoranda and then participate in an arbitration hearing.

Negotiation

A negotiation competition simulates legal negotiations. Competitors are given a common set of facts known by all participants and confidential information known only

to the participants representing a particular side. Competitors, acting as lawyers, then negotiate a series of legal problems. All of the simulations deal with the same general topic, but the negotiation situation varies with each round and level of the competition. The competitors are scored and critiqued by a panel of judges.

The American Bar Association Law Student Division hosts several [regional negotiation competitions](#) each year. The winners of the regional competitions [meet for a national competition](#). The winner of the national competition competes in the [International Negotiation Competition](#). The ABA makes available to law schools a problem set for intramural use; many law schools host internal negotiation competitions to determine who will represent the school at the regional competition.

Find a competition team and get involved. Competing is terrific practice for law practice.

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