

"Wisdom from the Bench" Report

On Monday, November 18th, from 5:30 to 8:30 PM, we hosted an event titled "Wisdom from the Bench" at UNT Dallas College of Law. The event took place in Room 240 and featured a distinguished panel of judges and attorneys who shared their expertise, career advice, and practical insights with law students. The panel discussion provided a unique opportunity for students to learn directly from those serving on the bench and gain valuable perspectives on legal advocacy, professionalism, and courtroom practice. The event aimed to bridge the gap between law students and the judiciary, fostering mentorship and encouraging better preparation for future legal careers.

The panel included:

- Justice Pederson
- Judge Moorehead
- Judge Garza

The guest attorneys included:

- Mark Lassiter
- Ashley Moore
- Jarrett Mendoza

The Honorable Judge Irma Ramirez also made a special appearance and provided insight during the evening's Q&A and live demonstration portions.

The evening consisted of opening remarks, a moderated panel discussion, an engaging audience Q&A session, a live demonstration of opening statements, and breakout sessions.

Primer on Persuasive Arguments

Essential Elements For Persuasive Argument

The panelists emphasized that persuasive arguments require focus, preparation, and authenticity. As an appellate or trial attorney, a litigator has to be able to captivate their audience.

Motivating the Fact Finder

Justice Pederson stressed that the goal of an argument is to persuade the fact finder—whether a judge or jury—to reach the outcome your client desires. He advised students to focus their presentation on the ultimate question and tailor their arguments to achieve the answer they seek. While you cannot force a jury to like you, you can control your message. According to Justice Pederson, successful advocacy is about guiding the decision-maker with a clear call to action and aligning their perspective with the interests of justice.

Preparation is Key

Both Judge Moorehead and Judge Garza emphasized preparation as the foundation of persuasive advocacy. Judge Moorehead explained that knowing your case better than anyone else allows you to confidently communicate your arguments, which builds trust with the fact finder. Preparation means anticipating arguments for and against your side and being ready to address them effectively. Judge Garza added that preparation requires internalizing your argument so that

it becomes your own, and supporting it with facts. Genuine belief in your position strengthens your delivery and enables you to connect authentically with your audience.

Balancing Logical Reasoning with Emotional Appeal

The judges discussed the importance of tailoring arguments to the intended audience—whether judge or jury. Judge Garza and Judge Moorehead noted that jurors respond differently than judges. Jurors expect to see authentic emotions, especially because most trials involve the worst day of someone’s life. However, they can detect insincerity or “crocodile tears,” which can damage credibility. On the other hand, judges expect attorneys to present solid legal reasoning backed by case law. Printing out and referring to relevant case law demonstrates preparedness and shows respect for the court. Justice Pederson reminded students that while jurors value emotional engagement, it must be organic. Trials are serious matters, and respect for the jury’s role is paramount. Judges and juries alike respond to advocates who are genuine, professional, and respectful of the process.

Least Persuasive Aspects in Argument

The panelists identified common mistakes that undermine persuasive advocacy and shared advice on avoiding them. Judge Garza observed that frequent pauses to look at notes can disrupt an argument’s flow and weaken the connection with the fact finder. He encouraged students to practice extensively so they could deliver arguments confidently without relying on written material. The focus should always be on substance rather than filling time. Judge Moorehead emphasized the importance of thorough preparation and attention to detail. Judges can tell when an attorney has not personally written their brief or does not know the case facts well. Success requires deep familiarity with both the client and the law. Justice Pederson stressed the importance of being yourself in court. He advised students to explain their case in the same way they would to a classmate in an elevator: the message should be simple, clear, and authentic. Excessive formality or phony behavior can alienate a jury and damage credibility. Judge Garza cautioned against straying from the core issues in a case. Advocates should be specific and intentional in their arguments, focusing on the facts and legal questions at hand. For example, if the case centers on the defendant saying it wasn’t him who did the crime, discussing self-defense would be irrelevant and weaken the argument.

Practical Tips for Advocacy

The Roadmap. Judge Moorehead stressed the value of creating a clear and structured roadmap for arguments. This was later reinforced by Justice Pederson, who shared how having a presentation or a visual helps fact-finders follow your reasoning and reinforces your key points. Having a roadmap demonstrates preparation and enhances the advocate’s credibility.

Uncertainty in Court. Justice Pederson advised students to be honest when faced with a question they cannot answer. Responding with “I don’t know” is better than guessing or providing incorrect information. He explained that credibility is built on honesty, and judges appreciate attorneys who acknowledge uncertainty and request additional time when needed. Mistakes are inevitable, but the ability to address them transparently sets strong advocates apart.

“Keep It Simple, Stupid.” Judge Garza encouraged students to adopt the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) method when addressing juries. Jurors rely on attorneys to guide them through complex

issues, so advocates must communicate clearly, without unnecessary clutter. Providing a straightforward explanation like, “This person is guilty because of A, B, and C,” helps jurors understand and remember key arguments.

Teach the Jury. Justice Pederson likened trial advocacy to teaching. He advised students to prepare jurors for the verdict by familiarizing them with the language of the jury charge. By framing arguments around the questions jurors will answer, advocates can help them feel confident in their decision-making process.

Reflections & Impact

Benefits for Students

The "Wisdom from the Bench" event provided an invaluable opportunity for law students to gain insight into effective written and oral advocacy while networking with judges and attorneys in the DFW area.

Key takeaways included:

- The importance of preparation and authenticity in building credibility in the courtroom.
- Strategies for balancing logical reasoning with emotional appeal.
- Practical tips for simplifying legal concepts and structuring persuasive arguments.

Personal Reflection

As the organizer, this event strengthened my skills in event coordination, networking, and leadership. Coordinating with judges, attorneys, and law students required careful planning and effective communication with extreme time management. Seeing students actively engage with the panelists and gain practical insights reaffirmed the value of events like these in bridging the gap between the classroom and brilliant legal minds around us.

Recommendations for Future Events

To build on this event's success, I recommend keeping interactive elements such as live demonstrations or breakout workshops where students can practice advocacy skills under the judges' guidance. Additionally, providing visual resources summarizing key takeaways could help students apply the panelists' advice in future written and oral advocacy endeavors.