



LWI LIVES

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LWI Lives is a regular electronic publication of the “Faces of LWI” Committee, which explores and communicates the emerging identity of LWI and its members. We have in common the commitment to being the best legal writing professors that we can be. But we are multi-dimensional people with different strengths, interests, curiosities, and gifts. By profiling individuals in our community, we hope to expand and develop our understanding of who we are and what we aspire to be.

Joshua Aaron Jones: Writing His Own Story



By Tiffany Atkins

Joshua Aaron Jones has always been a writer, penning his first short story when he was in the second grade. And while Joshua initially didn’t recall writing much as a child, discovering his childhood zombie stories among his mother’s sheet music as an adult helped him recognize the power of his own words and lived experiences.

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Brian Larson: Legal Rhetoric, Argumentation, and Writing



By Stephanie Williams

Brian Larson is an Associate Professor of Law at Texas A&M University School of Law in Fort Worth, Texas. Like everyone I know at TAMU, Brian starts chats and emails with the greeting, “Howdy,” and his service to our profession shows how much he lives the ideas of respect and honor encapsulated by “Howdy.”

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Sylvia Lett: Fighting the Good Fight



By Adam Eckart

Harvard College. New York City. The Ninth Circuit. Tucson. Death Row. The United States Supreme Court. The ACLU. Sylvia Lett’s career has touched each of these places and things. When asked how she does it all, she simply stated that she has to “keep fighting the good fight.”

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Contributors to this Edition:

- Tiffany Atkins**
- Adam Eckart**
- Rebecca Rich**
- Stephanie Williams**

Joshua Jones

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The gay son of hard-working, deeply religious parents from Boaz, Alabama, Joshua's story has its share of twists and detours, but his story is one of discovery, courage, and creativity.

Boaz, Alabama, a small town near the northern border of the state, close to Chattanooga, Tennessee, was Joshua's home for seventeen years. Like much of the rest of Alabama, Boaz is deeply religious, plagued by racism and a history of intolerance toward people who are different or nontraditional. Joshua's grandfather was a Southern Baptist pastor at the First Baptist Church in Boaz, where Joshua's parents were faithful parishioners. And it was in this setting—one more likely to stifle one's individuality and difference, than encourage it—that Joshua discovered his own sexuality and knew that he was gay. Given his church's teaching on homosexuality, Joshua decided to keep this part of his story to himself. Then, exhausted by the bullying in high school and encouraged by an older cousin who had recently come out to his family and was ex-communicated from their church, young-Joshua decided it was time to live his truth and publicly embrace his sexuality.

At school, the revelation of Joshua's identity gained Joshua more acceptance with his peers and put an end to the bullying; at home, Joshua's coming out led to much "weeping and gnashing of teeth." His parents, confused and concerned for their son, whom they assumed had endured some trauma, forced Joshua to attend therapy. During the last session, the counselor met with his parents and explained that their teenaged son was wise beyond his years; Joshua wasn't abused, he had the maturity and assurance of who he was. The therapist recommended that Joshua's parents develop within themselves as they dealt with Joshua's sexuality. Following this final encounter with Joshua's therapist, his mother tried to understand and accept her son, but Joshua's father worried that living life as an openly gay man would ruin his chances for success. Joshua, determined to live life on his own terms and only within those limits he set for himself, set out to prove his father wrong and to become bigger than Boaz, Alabama.



Graduation photos and a carpentry tool that belonged to Joshua's grandfather



Joshua and Wes

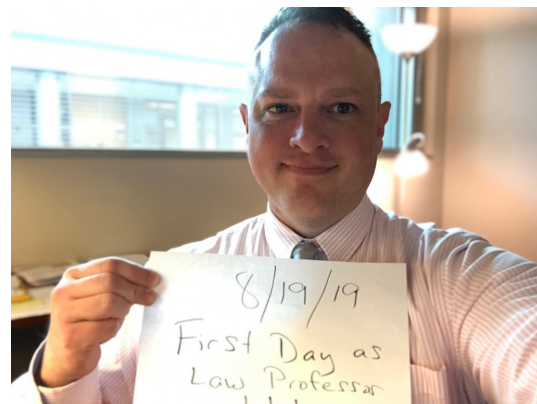
With this newfound-assurance, Joshua left Boaz to attend college at the University of Montavello, where he studied music education. Describing college as a "liberal, blue bubble," within Alabama, Joshua found acceptance among his classmates and met the love of his life, his husband of now twenty-five years, Wes. In college, Joshua wrote musicals which were produced at the college; he also wrote more short stories. In college, a music theory professor posted a new article about the high acceptance rate of music education majors to law school, and so entertainment law sparked his interest. He and Wes set off to New Hampshire for the next chapter in Joshua's story: law school.

Joshua Jones

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Joshua attended the University of New Hampshire Franklin Pierce School of Law, where he earned both a J.D. and a Master of Education Law. As a first-generation law student, Joshua couldn't look to his family for advice on the ins and outs of law school, but he found his stride, nonetheless, attributing his work ethic and attention to detail to his grandfather and father who were talented carpenters and craftsmen. His family owned one of the first saw mills in north east Alabama.

In law school, Joshua was a teaching and research assistant, and later became an adjunct law professor. "I always wanted to teach," Joshua recalled during our chat, but like many other "accidental law professors," his road to the legal academy was winding and circuitous. After law school, Joshua practiced for six years before earning an L.L.M. in government and policy from McGeorge School of Law where he was the Downey Brand Fellow for Public Service and Leadership. As Downey Fellow, Joshua worked on a K-12 pipeline project, which connected law students to children of working-class households in Sacramento. Law students met regularly with their mentees from grades 4-12, bringing them to campus for tours, meals, and otherwise introducing them to a collegiate atmosphere. After McGeorge, Joshua was a solo practitioner for eight years in Pensacola, Florida, where he worked with the ACLU on issues related to gay rights and taught part-time as an adjunct. When asked about his passion for teaching and why he always came back to it, Joshua says he really wanted to help nontraditional students—students who, like him, entered law school without connections, financial resources, or much family support—to remove barriers to their success in the profession.



Joshua in 2019,
on his first day as a law professor



Joshua and Wes's dog, Murphy

What's next in the story for Joshua? Full-time law teaching, children, and top sailing! Joshua and husband, Wes, who were married in 2001, 2012, and 2014 in a combination of civil ceremonies, domestic partnerships, and a marriage ceremony (they wanted to "cover all the bases," he jokes) now reside in San Diego, California. Joshua is a full-time faculty member at California Western School of Law, where he teaches legal writing, family law, and other subjects. Wes is a well-known social media influencer and star of Highfalutin' Low Carb, a popular YouTube series that tests keto and low carb recipes (he has a low carb pumpkin bread, y'all!). He and Wes are considering adding children to their family, and Joshua contemplates becoming certified for sailing future charters with his family and friends.

The moral of Joshua's story: barriers are meant to be broken; adversity and diversity are part of his lived experience as a gay man; and while being mislabeled and misunderstood is never easy, it helped him find himself. Joshua shares these lessons with his students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, who are navigating their own adversity and uncertainty. Helping students find their place is part of his role as their professor, one that he carries with PRIDE.

To get in touch with Joshua, you can email him at JJones@cwsl.edu.

Brian Larson

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I met Brian at the beginning of the pandemic, which seems so long ago now. Like many, I was open to learning new ways to use tech in our sudden move to online instruction, but I was also exhausted and looking for easy, simple solutions. Brian spent a great deal of time teaching several of us about Eli Review and other online peer review options. He patiently answered questions and walked us through sample assignments, making my transition from paper to online peer review seamless.

As the pandemic wore on, Brian and Kirsten Davis of Stetson Law started the Research Methods in Legal Communication reading group, hosting helpful sessions on rhetorical and empirical research. They are continuing the group with a “module” on quantitative methods over the winter break this year. They inspire new Legal Writing faculty and experienced instructors alike. I know many in our community are grateful for this generous guidance.

Given his service to our profession, I was excited to learn more about Brian’s writing and his daily work with students, as well as his love for words.

Brian’s family moved often when he was young: He lived in Minnesota (where he was born), Idaho, Colorado, Iowa, and Wisconsin before he graduated high school. He jokes that his parents must have been running from the law. Brian earned a Doctorate in Philosophy, focusing on Rhetoric and Scientific and Technical Communication, from the University of Minnesota, and his Juris Doctor from the William Mitchell College of Law (now Mitchell Hamline School of Law). He taught Legal Writing and other courses at University of Minnesota, and then moved to Georgia to teach Communication at Georgia Institute of Technology.

When we talked for *LWI Lives*, I asked Brian about the differences between growing up mostly in the Midwest, and then moving to Georgia and Texas. He explained the South is “interesting linguistically,” and he saw a “higher degree of formality from students than in Minnesota,” for example. In fact, Brian uses an exercise where the class alternates class days between “formal address” and “informal address” in an effort to teach students that formality in language use is context sensitive. He explained, “Getting students to call me ‘Dr. Larson’ or ‘Prof. Larson’ on Tuesdays is easy. But getting them to say ‘Brian’ on Thursdays is much harder in Texas than it was in Minnesota.”

Brian also loves regional variations in language. Southern expressions he “has adopted whole-heartedly as being very efficient” include “might could,” which in the North is the more cumbersome “might be able to,” and “y’all”—along with “all y’all,” and “y’all’s.” In our talk, we both used “all y’all,” demonstrating just how efficient, and fun, these phrases can be. Brian “was about as happy as could be” when a neighbor originally from New Orleans asked if he needed anything because she was “fixin’ to make groceries.” Brian explained: “Fixin’ to” replaces the clunkier “getting ready to” and the “fais” in French “Je fais des courses”—I’m shopping for groceries—also translates as “make” in English.

Brian studied theoretical linguistics as an undergraduate, and his bio explains he “was drawn to the law because it is the place where language becomes power.” He explained: “Thanks to a close college friend, who has since become a co-



Bob and Brian sitting on a ledge overlooking the South Atlantic during a hike up Table Mountain in Cape Town

Brian Larson

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author, I was interested in the First Amendment and free speech.” However, it seemed “obvious . . . that the only time words were ‘just words’ was when they were the examples in linguistic and philosophical texts. In real-life contexts, words are always *doing* something—affecting the emotions, beliefs, and goals of those who hear them.” Of course, as Brian notes, “in the law, speech acts form and change legal relations: Uttering ‘I accept’ in the right context forms a contract. The words we choose, even the punctuation, can change people’s lives.”

Brian uses these ideas of the power of words in his teaching. He shared this link on how he uses a personal experience from when he started law school to help teach his students how their work is always connected to real people’s lives: [What my 88-year-old aunt can help teach my law students](#). As an incoming 1L, Brian had an assignment to read a published opinion that mentioned almost in passing an accident that killed his uncle. Brian explained he was “not prepared for the shock” when he “reached the third paragraph” and saw a brief, cold recitation of his Uncle Merlyn’s truck crash. Brian uses this story to remind students “there are always human beings behind the court opinions we read” and to challenge students “to keep the richness and particularity” of human lives in mind as we use generic terms, like “decedent,” “trustee,” “plaintiff,” and “defendant,” in our analysis and writing.



Bob and Brian getting married outside at Lincoln Center in NYC

Brian loves teaching writing because he’s a “completely obsessed nerd about using language,” and “the students don’t seem to mind.” He enjoys “getting students excited” about the ways words change the world. Brian explained: “My interest in logic from formal linguistics combined with the realities of persuasion in legal training and practice is what got me interested in rhetorical theory and its relation to legal reasoning. I’m not sure my students are quite as motivated to understand that as I am, but I try.”

Pre-pandemic, I often cooked and baked for my students, telling them “food is love,” so it was fun to chat with Brian about how much we love eating and cooking. Brian said: “I don’t feel I’m a very good cook, but I feel really great while I’m doing it. I love to try out new, complicated things.” For example, for his birthday in 2020, Brian spent a whole weekend making shoyu ramen from scratch using [Adam Liaw’s recipes](#), including the [double soup](#) (pork stock and seafood broth), pickled soft-boiled eggs ([ajitama](#)), grilled pork belly ([chashu](#)), and [ramen noodles](#). The last item actually called for some chemistry skills, as the noodle recipe required an alkali substance, [baked baking soda](#). (Brian notes we should be sure to handle the resulting powder with care, as it is corrosive to some kitchen substances.) While “the results were really no better than what we get at my favorite ramen joint,” nonetheless “it was very soothing to have this project to occupy me for almost three days.”

Brian married his spouse, Bob, on a “cold January day” outside at Lincoln Center in New York City, on Friday, January 13. Their first date, 23 years earlier, was also a



Bob and Brian at the Patriarch pond in Moscow. Brian says, “Fans of Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* will appreciate the warning sign. We didn’t lose our heads.”

Brian Larson

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Friday the Thirteenth, so they consider the date lucky. Brian and Bob love to travel, and Brian shared some great photos of their travels.



During the pandemic, Brian and Bob were limited to a few family visits and a “great trip to Mexico City,” which had “strong COVID protocols” so they could enjoy beautiful hiking and the “great” city. They have planned a trip to Greece with friends for next summer, and they are hoping to spend three or four weeks in Valencia Spain soon.

Brian and Bob have loved all their journeys, but perhaps the most memorable was a flight back from Barcelona to Minneapolis, scheduled to stop in Amsterdam, on September 11, 2001. When their plane landed at Schiphol Airport, all the televisions showed images of the Twin Towers on fire. Bob, ever the pragmatist, immediately said, “We need to get a hotel room.” After a quick stop at an internet kiosk, they secured a place to stay, unlike many others who slept on Red Cross cots at the airport for days. “The most striking thing was how the Amsterdammers enfolded us with care and support while we were stuck there waiting to get home. We’ll always feel gratitude for that.”

Brian is a prolific writer. I asked him which writing was the most difficult for him and if he had a favorite piece. He shared: “Not my favorite piece, but the hardest, was my dissertation. It’s the ultimate ‘show your work’ genre, where your dissertation committee is looking for evidence that you understand the how and why of everything you did. I thought I had that handled when, late in the process, my advisor came to me and said she thought I could make a ‘richer theoretical contribution.’ Honestly, I had no idea what that meant at the time, but the result was a chapter that I’m pretty proud of and that I later adapted and had published in an edited collection.”

Finally, I asked Brian what excites him most about teaching now that we have learned so many pandemic lessons and are adjusting to our new “normal.” While Brian and I are both happy our students seem to feel comfortable sharing emotions and meeting individually on Zoom, his answer mirrored what so many of us feel. Brian explained: “I’m still not excited by the new normal. I miss seeing students’ faces close up in a classroom, doing classroom activities that get students up and moving around together in groups, and cooking for them when we have a major-project workshop.” Bob and Brian always hosted a year-end party for students, and they really miss being able to do that too. I’m sure Brian’s students agree, and we all hope for future parties, potlucks, and small group in-class chats.



Bob and Brian on Monserrate, overlooking Bogotá, Colombia

Many thanks to Brian for sharing with us and always supporting our community. You can reach Brian at blarson@tamu.edu.

Sylvia Lett

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Sylvia's story starts in upstate New York, where she grew up as the only child of an only child. Her parents separated by the time she was two and her father died in a tragic accident when she was eight, so Sylvia was raised largely by her maternal grandparents: her grandfather, a machinist in a meat packing plant, and her grandmother, a secretary for a state senator in Albany. Because of their hard-working blue collar background and their propensity to save, Sylvia was able to attend a good high school, although only a handful of students from the graduating class of approximately 400 were students of color.

Sylvia describes herself in those years as being a jack of all trades, master of none—but since Sylvia's next stop was Harvard College, we can assume Sylvia is just being humble.

While Harvard was an amazing opportunity that was filled with wonderful experiences and opportunities, Sylvia, the first in her family to go away to college, experienced what many first generation students experience; she lacked the skills and resources necessary to talk to professors, take advantage of opportunities, and avoid feeling lost. In fact, those challenges Sylvia experienced at Harvard are many of the reasons Sylvia loves teaching now. She can be that person to help pull a student back to safety—or at least throw the life preserver out.

Despite the challenges, Harvard fostered many passions that would resurface in one way or another later in Sylvia's career: she tutored at a medium security prison, studied psychology and anthropology, and became interested in the law and social justice. And on a personal level, Harvard was transformative: in her junior year, Sylvia met her future husband, Alejandro.



Alejandro and Sylvia on vacation in Hawaii



Sylvia's daughters, Allegra (15) and Esme (17)

Despite her success at Harvard and her interest in the law, Sylvia had some fears: after all, she didn't know many lawyers. Sylvia decided to accept a job as a paralegal to see if the profession was for her, and after that year, she knew that she could do the work. While she didn't love the bankruptcy work that she completed as a paralegal that year, she thought that the law presented an opportunity for a good career path, for stability and security. Maybe she was channeling her grandparents and their propensity to save.

Sylvia decided to attend NYU Law, where her experiences were overwhelmingly positive: participating in a civil litigation clinic, serving on Law Review, and summering at Anderson Kill. In addition to her good experiences, her timing was good too, as she graduated in the heyday of big firm hiring. After graduation, Sylvia went on to practice at Anderson Kill, mostly working on large insurance litigation matters, and doing lots of document review and depositions. While Sylvia loved living in New York, she hadn't yet found her passion, and her personal life began pulling her away.

Sylvia and Alejandro had stayed together throughout the moves and new jobs, and now Alejandro was working and living in Arizona. Sylvia

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decided to move to Phoenix and try something new. First, Sylvia served as a clerk to the Honorable Susan Ehrlich, a judge on the Arizona State Court of Appeals, who Sylvia credits as being the person who taught her most about legal writing. Sylvia and Judge Ehrlich would sit side-by-side and the Judge would perform a “live editing” critique of Sylvia’s work. Next, Sylvia worked at a mid-sized civil litigation firm in Phoenix, where she just couldn’t get excited about construction litigation. And finally, Sylvia took a sabbatical from the firm and clerked for the newly-appointed Honorable Barry Silverman on the Ninth Circuit. Sylvia loved being back in a clerkship and even considered becoming a career clerk.



Esme and Sylvia in their courtside seats cheering on the University of Arizona Women’s Basketball team

But personal changes were afoot. Sylvia and Alejandro got married, rescued their first golden retriever, and began considering a permanent move to Tucson, Alejandro’s hometown and a city Sylvia had grown to love. The Office of the Federal Public Defender for the District of Arizona was hiring an attorney in the Capital Habeas Unit and while Sylvia had little experience with habeas work, she thought that the work sounded fascinating. It stirred something that she hadn’t really thought about before and brought her full circle to the tutoring that she had done in prisons while at Harvard.

Sylvia spent the next twelve years in the Capital Habeas Unit, where she found one of her passions in law. She absolutely loved the work—including her ability to fight the good fight. With each case handed over to her, Sylvia was allowed to run with it: hire an investigator, bring in a range of experts, and investigate the case from the ground up. And harkening back to her days at Harvard, the work allowed Sylvia to talk with people, understand their stories, and help in ways that felt gratifying. One of Sylvia’s cases even made it to the U.S. Supreme Court, where former U.S. Solicitor General Donald Verrilli presented arguments on behalf of Sylvia’s client.

The nature of the work was challenging, no doubt: Sylvia had to create rapport with clients who were hesitant of lawyers, navigate through medical records and histories of client childhood abuse and trauma, and comfort clients sentenced to death row. While the work was gratifying in so many ways, some of the “wins” still seemed like losses since life in prison was the “win.” And while there were successes, Sylvia did witness some executions and many of Sylvia’s former clients are still on death row.

Despite the love for her work, the work was emotionally and physically draining. And Sylvia had a new job at home: mom to Esme (now 17) and Allegra (now 15). Although Sylvia was able to adjust her schedule in the Capital Habeas Unit to work just three days a week, her case load didn’t change and her demands remained significant.

Around the same time, Sylvia was looking to improve herself, including with respect to her skills as a public speaker. Despite her work for years as an attorney, she thought that serving as an adjunct legal writing professor might improve her public speaking, and when the opportunity arose at the University of Arizona, Sylvia took it.

Like her experiences clerking and with the Capital Habeas Unit, Sylvia loved the work. She loved the “aha” moments of students and took pride in teaching the students in a way that she wished she would have been taught. When Susie Salmon became head of the legal writing department and convinced the school to move away from the adjunct model, Sylvia left

Sylvia Lett

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the Capital Habeas Unit for academia—first at half time, and before she knew it, at full time.

Sylvia loves the classroom, her students, and her work in the law school. In addition, she enjoys the flexibility that she has with her family, allowing her to attend gigs played by the band that includes her husband and daughters, travel to places like Hawaii, and spend time reading. Sylvia has loved this family time, watching her daughters grow, develop, and conquer fears—even if she’s not quite sure where the years have gone.

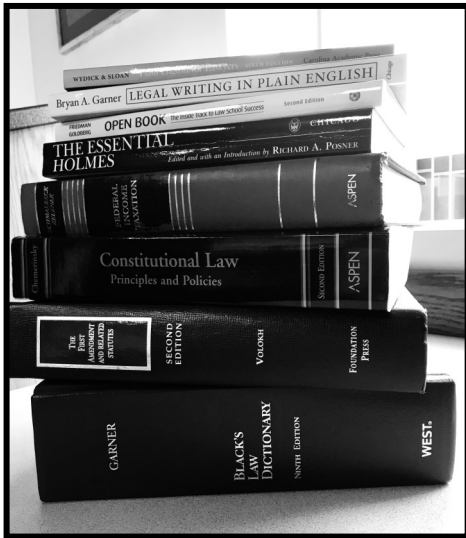
To be sure, however, this is not a period of slowing for Sylvia. She keeps her connection to her habeas work (with the Supreme Court hearing one of her cases this month); teaches criminal procedure in addition to her legal writing duties; co-teaches a law and humanities class; and developed a short story club for students, faculty and staff. In addition, Sylvia has developed and taught several online classes including Legal English for Global Students, Introduction to U.S. Law, and a version of that class for a special three-module course known as the “Foreign Diplomat Training Program” (for which Sylvia gets to travel to Mexico City to see students “graduate”). Sylvia also stays active in her community, serving as a Court Appointed Special Advocate for children in the foster care system, on the Board of the ACLU of Arizona, on the ACLU Legal Panel, and on the Community Advisory Board for the local NPR radio station and PBS public television station.

Anyone who has met Sylvia also knows that she is a wonderful person too: nice, happy to help, and a good colleague. She has accomplished more than many of us ever will and her work has quite literally changed (and saved) lives. Today she’s teaching a future generation to similarly make their mark on the world, to learn necessary skills and doctrine related to the law, and to keep fighting the good fight.

To get in touch with Sylvia, you can email her at slett@arizona.edu.



Sylvia's dogs, Rufus and Louie, dressed up for Halloween



LWI Lives Selection Process

The LWI Lives Committee is organized into three teams, and each team is responsible for selecting, proposing, and writing the three profiles in each issue. To ensure a diverse newsletter, teams propose individual names to the Co-Chairs, and the Co-Chairs review the suggestions to ensure a wide range of coverage over time.

If you have someone in mind who we should put on the list for a future newsletter, please feel free to email any of the committee members listed below. If you could include a note explaining why you think the individual's profile would be particularly interesting, it will help us in developing priorities.

Committee Members



Elizabeth Berenguer
Co-Chair, Stetson
eberenguer@law.stetson.edu



Rebecca Rich
Co-Chair, Duke
rich@law.duke.edu



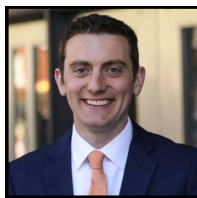
Brooke McDonough
Co-Chair, GW
bellinwood@law.gw.edu



Tiffany Atkins
Elon
tatkins2@elon.edu



Kathryn Campbell
Southwestern
kscampbell@swlaw.edu



Adam Eckart
Suffolk
aneckart@suffolk.edu



Whitney Heard
Houston
wwheard@central.uh.edu



Michael D.O. Russo
Southern
moeser@sulc.edu



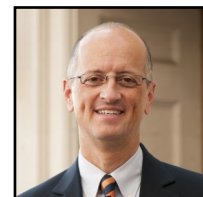
Abigail Perdue
Wake Forest
perduea@wfu.edu



Stephanie Williams
Pepperdine
stephanie.williams@pepperdine.edu



Desmond Wu
Wisconsin
desmond.wu@wisc.edu



Wayne Schiess
Texas
wschiess@law.utexas.edu