

# Alum Creates *FantasySCOTUS*

In 2009 **Josh Blackman ('09)** turned a random comment about whether Vegas would take bets on the outcome of the *Citizens United* case into an online phenomenon and educational non-profit organization.

“It’s a very ‘George Mason’ kind of story,” Blackman says. “I was joking that there should be a fantasy league for the Supreme Court, then realized this actually might be good idea. I started work on a program to support the idea and built it in three weeks. It went viral overnight, and we got amazing media coverage. Immediately after *FantasySCOTUS* was launched, we had about 1,000 people signed up. I had thought we might get a couple hundred law students.”

Blackman’s efforts resulted in a Supreme Court Fantasy League with over 13,000 attorneys, law students, and other avid Supreme Court followers making predictions about all cases that the Supreme Court decides.

A conversation with fellow alum **Corey Carpenter ('12)** led to the development of another unique feature of *FantasySCOTUS*—a real-time prediction tracker. Carpenter, whose background is in econometrics, saw the potential in all of the data that was being collected from the players. Carpenter convinced Blackman they could create a prediction market by averaging player predictions. To do this, Carpenter utilized a real-time tracker that provides

Josh Blackman ('09), creator of *FantasySCOTUS*

predictive outcomes based on player predictions.

“There is no other source for the amount or type of data Josh was collecting in the *FantasySCOTUS* website. After the first year, we reviewed the data collected to determine how best to aggregate the choices people made for each justice as to whether they would affirm or reverse the decisions under review,” says Carpenter. “And we did so over time, so you can see how people’s predictions changed, for example, before and after oral arguments. The result is a way to see the wisdom of the crowd.” Carpenter, who is Director of Analysis, says, “The benefit to the predictive tracker is also the addition of more data. We think that the more data the better, and we make it openly available at the end of each term. We want to share it and let other people analyze it. It is interesting to see what other people with backgrounds in math or economics might make of the data.”

In the final analysis for the 2011–12 term, of the 76 cases decided, 59.2 percent were correctly predicted. And it turns out that people other than lawyers are interested in the game and the information it has produced. In fact, the most successful predictor is not a lawyer or a constitutional scholar, but an engineer.

“My favorite part of *FantasySCOTUS* is the educational component that has developed,” says Blackman. “With all the media coverage we got, we learned that quite a few teachers were using the game to teach their students about the Supreme Court and the Constitution. Several teachers contacted us and asked if there was a simpler or shorter version that they could use with students.”

To help meet this need, Blackman co-founded the non-profit Harlan Institute, named for Justice John Marshall Harlan. Blackman serves as the Institute’s president. To make the game more accessible to students, the Harlan Institute selects five cases of interest for students that are currently pending before the United States Supreme Court. Each case has an online lesson plan and a FantasyCast YouTube video describing the case—a plain English explanation of the parties involved, the question presented, the background of the case, the opinion of the lower court, and the competing arguments of the Petitioner and the Respondent. Based on the information supplied, teachers can provide students background information that allows them to discuss the constitutional provisions, statutes, precedents, and other relevant information needed to understand the cases pending before the Supreme Court. Students then make their own predictions about the cases and write blog posts. Students earn points and badges, which are awarded for topics such as freedom of religion, employees’ rights or the legislative process. Blackman notes that he is continually impressed by the quality of the blogs written by the high school students who play the game.

Mason Law 2012 alums **Cara Tucker, Laura Lieberman, and John Ure** are involved with the Harlan Institute, as is **Adam Aft ('10)**. Tucker, a member of the board of directors and Director of Educational Development, notes that “the Institute serves as a resource for educators trying to make civics relevant to their students. Civics should be part of a student’s education each and every year in public school, but sadly it’s

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Classmates ('12) and collaborators Cara Tucker (left) and Laura Lieberman (right) enjoy their responsibilities with the non-profit Harlan Institute in support of civics education.