

Charge to the Class

June 17, 2023

Jenny S. Martinez, Richard E. Lang Professor of Law and Dean of Stanford Law School

Our ceremony is almost concluded, and you will soon be released to celebrate with your families, friends and classmates. But before you go, it is traditional here at Stanford Law School, as it is at many universities, for the Dean to conclude with a “charge to the graduating class” – a last piece of guidance from the school as you set out into the world as our alumni.

The purpose of a charge is not just to give you advice, but instead to entrust you with a duty or responsibility. So here is my charge to you: **lead with your humanity.**

You are embarking on careers which will undoubtedly face marked challenges in coming years. Society is in a period of conflict, uncertainty, and disruption. At the same time, in a world where our interactions are increasing mediated by technology, it can be easy to lose sight of our common humanity and the respect for human dignity that we owe one another.

Advances in technology, indeed some of the new tools created around us in the Bay Area and on this very campus, are poised to transform the legal profession and society itself in profound ways. When ChatGPT was released to the public last fall, many of us for the first time really understood how rapidly artificial intelligence may change the way we work. As AI advances and improves, it will enhance various aspects of legal practice while simultaneously presenting new considerations and challenges for society and government.

In your first years practicing law, AI-powered algorithms may significantly change the way you as junior attorneys will perform research and review documents and contracts. Within a year or two, you may be able to rely on these tools to identify relevant law, statutes and precedents and draft documents, minimizing the time you spend on the traditionally most tedious and labor-intensive tasks that all lawyers must do at some point in their careers. Do make sure to double-check that the AI isn't making up imaginary cases, as news reports suggest one lawyer in New York recently learned the hard way. Technology is already advancing to assist in case strategy by analyzing patterns and predicting outcomes. You will need to be flexible and continually open to learning how to use these tools in ways that comply with your obligations as counsel and members of the bar.

However promising and exciting these coming changes may be, there is a crucial aspect of legal practice that can never be supplanted by technology. As areas of your practice become more efficient, freeing you up to focus on developing other skills, I urge you to focus on bringing your human judgment, empathy, and critical thinking to your work. You have spent the past three years learning how these aspects of your humanity can inform both how you approach case analysis and your decision-making about what areas of law in which you want to specialize. This is what will set you apart as practitioners and leaders in your respective fields.

As practicing lawyers, you will be at the forefront as rules and regulations surrounding the use of AI in every aspect of life, not just the practice of law, are developed and implemented. It will be your job, and require exercise of your ethics and moral values, to establish frameworks that ensure that technology is used responsibly and in alignment with our values as a society. Your ethical reasoning is what will guide how AI is applied to the practice of law.

Likewise, it is your ability to understand the unique needs of individuals, the nuances of cultural contexts, and the essence of human emotion that all play a part in how you will determine the best way to represent your clients and advocate for them. Your empathy and understanding of your clients' needs and circumstances, your experience as an individual and a professional will enable you to assess the implications of a particular case, weigh alternatives and exercise discretion—all crucial aspects of the practice of law that technology cannot address.

And do not forget that much of the practice of law comes down to what happens in a particular room on a particular day. You will need to connect, in person, with judges, juries, experts and opposing counsel. Your insights as to how to read a person, or a room, and tailor your advocacy in a way that you judge to be most effective in the moment, is something that cannot be replaced.

Moreover, if you have learned anything in your time at SLS, in classes and seminars, clinics and policy labs, pro bono projects and summer jobs, I hope you have internalized that legal rules are not mere abstractions or logic puzzles, but systems that have profound implications for individual human beings, families, and communities. Cases, and laws, are ultimately about people.

I therefore charge you, the graduates of the Stanford Law School class of 2023, to bring your humanity to the practice of law.