As Americans, much of what we know about our legal system comes from the television. We learn about criminal justice from shows like “Law and Order” and we learn about trials on shows like “Perry Mason” or “Boston Legal.” Indeed, one of the first reality shows on television was “The People’s Court,” and the real-life legal drama surrounding our most famous people (O.J., Kobe, and Michael, to name a few) continues to captivate the American public. In fact, some people have become famous just because of their involvement with the court system (Casey Anthony, George Zimmerman, Conrad Murray, etc.).

While some of the information we get from popular culture is grounded in fact, much of it is not. In order to gain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the role of courts in America, we will augment our popular perceptions with evidence from theoretical and empirical research. We will also be investigating the social and political impact of our justice system on different segments of society.

The main aim of this course is to systematically answer questions and dispel the myths surrounding the American legal system. We will begin with a basic introduction to the structure and function of our court system and judicial selection. We will discuss the role of judges and other court actors, both in terms of what they should do and what they actually do. We will examine the function of courts as they address matters of criminal law and civil law, focusing specifically on the consequences of various attributes of criminal and civil procedure. Next, we will study the appellate process. We will conclude the term with a look at how the courts fit in to the larger political landscape, and how they work to shape life and law in America.

**Course Objectives**

After completing this course, the successful student will:

1) Have a working knowledge of American court system structure, function, and procedures;
2) Understand the way that procedures and institutions impact the nature of justice that results;
3) Be able to analyze the merit of particular legal arguments and approaches, both from a socio-political and legal perspective;
4) Interpret the various outcomes of the court system in terms of the political, institutional and social characteristics of the American legal system;
5) Be able to contribute meaningfully to the current debate about judicial selection in the American states.
Required Readings

✓ Supplemental readings in the WebCampus modules.
✓ Dr. Gill’s Twitter Feed: @MsGSXR #PSC332

Course Requirements

Quizzes (40% of final grade)

Each module has specific has a specific set of readings. You should complete the readings before beginning the module. Each module consists of multimedia materials to help you make sense of the readings and they presuppose your familiarity with the facts and concepts from the readings. At the end of each module, there will be a short quiz. The quiz will contain elements from the module, but it will also include questions about information from the readings that wasn’t presented in the module. Your quiz grades make up 40% of the overall grade. They are not timed, but all of the quizzes must be completed by Friday at 5pm of the week for which they have been assigned. Missed quizzes cannot be made up. Please be aware, too, that you’ll have one quiz per module, which will be 7-8 short quizzes per week.

Participation (20% of final grade)

Because of the online format of the course, all of the participation will take place through WebCampus. The discussions will happen in groups, which will be assigned randomly in WebCampus on the first day of class. Each of the groups will consider the same weekly question; the group setting is intended to make the conversations more manageable and meaningful for students. On Monday of each week, a new conversation thread will open up in your group. The conversation starter will be a general topic, and it will be followed by several specific questions. By Wednesday at 5pm, each student in the group must answer a question that nobody else in the group has answered yet. By Sunday at 5pm, each student must respond to the posts of the other students in the group. Participation counts for 20% of the overall grade.

Final Exam (40% of final grade)

The final exam must be taken sometime on the last Friday of the course, 7/11. Students may begin the exam anytime that day before 10:00 pm, and they will be allotted two hours to complete the exam. The exam will cover information from the quizzes, but it will also include material from the readings, the modules, and the discussion boards. It is a cumulative exam, and it is intended to confirm that students have mastered the material. The course is open book, but rules against plagiarism and academic dishonesty apply. Collaboration is not allowed.
Schedule of Modules and Readings

I. Week 1 (June 9-13) – Introduction to the Court System
   1. What is law?
      • American Courts pp. 1-6
   2. What role do courts play in our government?
      • American Courts pp. 7-17
   3. Why does court organization matter?
      • American Courts pp. 19-24
   4. How is the federal court system organized?
      • American Courts pp. 25-37
   5. How are the state court systems organized?
      • American Courts pp. 38-49
   6. Why do we have lawyers?
      • American Courts pp. 52-85
   7. What is it like to be a judge?
      • American Courts pp. 123-135
   8. How do we assess whether judges are doing a good job?
      • American Courts pp. 135-146

II. Week 2 (June 16-20) – Judicial Selection
    1. How are federal judges selected?
       • American Courts pp. 92-100
    2. Is the process for picking federal judges too political?
       • New Directions Part I, Ch. 1-2
    3. Why don’t states use the federal system of judicial selection?
       • American Courts 101-119
    4. Doesn’t it seem wrong to make judges run for office?
       • In Defense of Judicial Elections Chapter 1
    5. Are citizens capable of picking good judges?
       • In Defense of Judicial Elections Chapter 2
    6. Is there too much money in judicial elections?
       • In Defense of Judicial Elections Chapter 3; New Directions Chapter 3
    7. Are non-partisan elections better than partisan elections?
       • In Defense of Judicial Elections Chapter 6
    8. How does the merit plan try to address these problems?
       • TBA

III. Week 3 (June 23-27) – Criminal & Civil Trials
     1. How is the criminal trial system supposed to work?
        • American Courts pp. 150-164
     2. Why do most cases never get to trial?
        • American Courts pp. 165-173
     3. What actually happens in a criminal trial?
        • American Courts pp. 174-180
     4. How does the judge decide on a sentence?
        • American Courts pp. 181-194
5. Does the death penalty unfairly target minorities?
   • New Directions Part II Chapter 4
6. How is a civil case different from a criminal case?
   • American Courts pp. 201-209; 226-238
7. Why do so many people in America sue each other?
   • American Courts pp. 211-217
8. Is there a way around going to court?
   • American Courts pp. 218-225

IV. Week 4 (June 30- July 4) – Appellate Courts
1. How do some businesses use the courts to advance long-term goals?
   • New Directions Chapter 5
2. How do litigants decide whether to appeal?
   • American Courts pp. 245-262
3. What considerations influence how judges make decisions?
   • American Courts pp. 268-283
4. How do intermediate appellate court judges make decisions?
   • New Directions Part III Chapter 7
5. Do state supreme courts differ very much in how they make decisions?
   • New Directions Chapter 6
6. How does the Supreme Court choose which cases to hear?
   • American Courts pp. 263-267; New Directions Chapter 8
7. Why is the Supreme Court such a big deal?
   • American Courts pp. 288-297

V. Week 5 (July 7-11) – Courts as Policy-making Institutions
1. Why are there so many references to other cases in Supreme Court opinions?
   • New Directions Chapter 9
2. How does a Supreme Court opinion get written?
   • New Directions Chapter 10
3. Does the Supreme Court care what the other branches think?
   • American Courts pp. 304-310; New Directions Part IV Chapter 11
4. Can interest groups really persuade Supreme Court justices?
   • New Directions Chapter 12
5. Is the Supreme Court responsive to public opinion?
   • New Directions Chapter 13
6. What happens after the Supreme Court makes a decision?
   • American Courts pp. 298-303; New Directions Part V Chapter 14
7. Is it possible for the Supreme Court to change the world for the better?
   • American Courts 311-318; New Directions Chapter 15
Religious Holidays Policy

Any student missing class quizzes, examinations, or any other class or lab work because of observance of religious holidays shall be given an opportunity during that semester to make up missed work. The make-up will apply to the religious holiday absence only. It shall be the responsibility of the student to notify the instructor no later than the end of the first two weeks of classes, January 31, of his or her intention to participate in religious holidays which do not fall on state holidays or periods of class recess. This policy shall not apply in the event that administering the test or examination at an alternate time would impose an undue hardship on the instructor or the university that could not have reasonably been avoided. For additional information, please visit: http://catalog.unlv.edu/content.php?catoid=6&navoid=531.

Incomplete Grades

The grade of I – Incomplete – can be granted when a student has satisfactorily completed all course work up to the withdrawal date of that semester/session but for reason(s) beyond the student’s control, and acceptable to the instructor, cannot complete the last part of the course, and the instructor believes that the student can finish the course without repeating it. A student who receives an I is responsible for making up whatever work was lacking at the end of the semester. If course requirements are not completed within the time indicated, a grade of F will be recorded and the GPA will be adjusted accordingly. Students who are fulfilling an Incomplete do not register for the course but make individual arrangements with the instructor who assigned the I grade.

Tutoring

The Academic Success Center (ASC) provides tutoring and academic assistance for all UNLV students taking UNLV courses. Students are encouraged to stop by the ASC to learn more about subjects offered, tutoring times and other academic resources. The ASC is located across from the Student Services Complex (SSC). Students may learn more about tutoring services by calling (702) 895-3177 or visiting the tutoring web site at: http://academicsuccess.unlv.edu/tutoring/.

UNLV Writing Center

One-on-one or small group assistance with writing is available free of charge to UNLV students at the Writing Center, located in CDC-3-301. Although walk-in consultations are sometimes available, students with appointments will receive priority assistance. Appointments may be made in person or by calling 895-3908. The student’s Rebel ID Card, a copy of the assignment (if possible), and two copies of any writing to be reviewed are requested for the consultation. More information can be found at: http://writingcenter.unlv.edu/

Rebelmail

By policy, faculty and staff should e-mail students’ Rebelmail accounts only. Rebelmail is UNLV’s official e-mail system for students. It is one of the primary ways students receive official university communication such as information about deadlines, major campus events, and announcements. All UNLV students receive a Rebelmail account after they have been admitted to the university. Students’ e-mail prefixes are listed on class rosters. The suffix is always @unlv.nevada.edu.

Final Examinations

The University requires that final exams given at the end of a course occur at the time and on the day specified in the final exam schedule. See the schedule at: http://www.unlv.edu/registrar/calendars.