Introduction to Law and Legal Systems

Course Description:

This course offers an overview of the functioning of the legal system, focusing in particular on the role of trial courts. We will review topics ranging from the meaning of law to the role of lawyers to the details of criminal trials. Two primary themes will run through all of the readings and discussions. The first is the intersection of law and politics. Courts and judges are inherently political, but often in ways unique to the legal system. The second theme considers how to evaluate the successes and failures of the judicial system. How can we tell if courts are functioning properly or if reform is necessary? By what criteria can we make these conclusions?

Learning Objectives:

By the end of the course, you should:

1. Have a working familiarity with the structure of state and federal courts, the processes in legal disputes, and a clear picture of the political nature of courts in the United States;

2. Be able to distinguish generally what sorts of issues would be resolved before various judicial bodies and what the potential outcomes of any dispute are;

3. Be capable of reading judicial decisions and understanding and explaining the logical process used to arrive at the decision and the scope of the impacts of any rulings contained therein;

4. Understand how legal issues permeate so much of what happens in everyday lives and the influences that shape the determination of those issues.

Required Texts:


Reason in Law, Eighth Edition, by Leif Carter and Thomas Burke (other additions acceptable)

*Note that this course fulfills one of the core requirements for the Minor in Law & Legal Studies