The Criminal Justice Clinic Experience

The Criminal Justice Clinic operates in collaboration with the St. Louis County office of the Missouri State Public Defender System, which is the second largest criminal defense office in the state. The Criminal Justice Clinic exposes students to real life lawyering skills within the framework of the criminal justice system for adults charged with misdemeanor or felony offenses. The clinic office space is in the St. Louis County Public Defender Office, which is located approximately 1.5 miles from the law school in the St. Louis County Justice Center in Clayton. Each student is assigned a work station with a computer, phone, and networked printer. Each student works closely with Professor Peter Joy as well as with various attorneys in the Public Defender Office.

The Criminal Justice Clinic is designed to give the student a qualitatively different learning experience than non-clinical courses. The clinic involves the application of the theory and skills acquired in substantive and simulation courses to real criminal cases in adult court.

The major objective of the clinic is to assist the student in the transition to the role of a practitioner of the law, with student attorneys serving as lead counsel on preliminary hearings and bond hearings four days a week, as well as assisting with Circuit Court Dockets and probation revocation hearings.

Clinic students work under the state’s student practice rule, Rule 13, and are certified to represent clients in all aspects of their cases. As Rule 13 interns, students in the Criminal Justice Clinic perform all of the tasks of providing competent representation to clients, and are exposed to the legal and ethical problems that criminal defense lawyers face in practice. Students confront these problems in the lawyer’s role, identify and work to solve their clients’ legal problems as well as any ethical issues, and receive feedback on their lawyering skills. By partnering with the Public Defender Office, this clinical program fully immerses students in the workings of this typical public defender office while still providing students with excellent faculty supervision and adequate time and opportunities to reflect on their work and the work of the lawyers around them.

Typical Activities

- Conduct initial court appearances and assist with Associate and Circuit Court Dockets
- Represent clients in preliminary hearings for felony cases
- Conduct bond negotiations with prosecutors and litigate bond hearings in court
- Represent clients in probation revocation hearings
- Conduct plea negotiations with prosecutors
- Interview and counsel clients
- Research and draft briefs, motions, and other legal writing
- Engage in strategic case planning and brainstorming
- Whenever possible, sit second chair in a major felony case and/or participate in a misdemeanor trial

Criminal Justice students get the chance to present their case in court.
Student Perspectives

“The Criminal Justice Clinic has been a highlight of my law school experience. I feel a great debt to everyone for taking the time to help me improve as a law student and future lawyer.”

“The experience has broadened my perspective with respect to the community around me and has also taught me that I am tougher than I ever imagined myself to be.”

“I am really glad that I participated in the clinic. I have always been a very hands-on practical learner and I think that this experience really fits my skill set.”

“During the clinic, I noticed that I have become a far more tolerant person, but at the same time more critical. I don’t take things at face value anymore.”

“The clinic emphasizes not taking any shortcuts. I learned that you have to think through every issue. To look at it from all perspectives. That way, when you come up with an answer, you know it is the right one.”

“This clinical experience is absolutely the most valuable experience I have had in law school. I had the opportunity to gain real courtroom exposure, speak with multiple clients of all kinds of backgrounds, speak with other attorneys, create relationships with those attorneys, as well as other members of the court staff, the bailiffs, clerks, and various other members of the support staff.”

“In the Criminal Justice Clinic, I learned that the real reward in practicing law is to be able to look into the eyes of a client who is afraid or confused and explain how the system works. The reward comes in the interaction with people who need you to do good for them.”

For more information, contact:
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Requirements

Students develop an individual schedule of the days and times they will be at the Public Defender Office. Students should reserve at least two mornings a week between Monday and Thursday to be able to assist with the preliminary hearing docket (typically from 8:45 a.m.—12:30 p.m.). However, the best schedule is one that allows the student to be in the office three or more mornings and to complete the rest of the scheduled hours in the afternoons. Open only to students who are able to be Rule 13 certified.

To receive 6 credits, students will devote an average of 21 hours per week to clinic work, including a 2-hour seminar from 3:30-5:30 p.m. on Tuesdays at the Public Defender Office in Clayton. Students who register for 7 or 8 credits will devote more time to clinic work.

Prerequisites

There are no prerequisite courses for taking the Criminal Justice Clinic; however, preference will be given to students who have completed Evidence, Pretrial, Trial, a course from the Ethics curriculum, CJA I, and/or CJA II.

The Bottom Line

• Enrollment is limited to 6 students per semester, and each student must be Rule 13 certified.

• The course is graded on a modified pass/fail basis.

• This course can be taken for 6, 7 or 8 credits (requiring from 21 to 28 hours of clinic work per week per semester, respectively).

• There is no textbook or course materials to purchase.

• There is no final exam.

• The professors will set specific requirements for receiving credit.

• The Public Defender Office is accessible via Metrolink or is approximately a 10-12 minute (.6 mile) walk from the West Campus Parking Lot. Students wishing to drive and to park closer to the office are responsible for their own parking expenses. There is also a bike rack close to the Public Defender Office.

Criminal Justice Clinic Faculty
Professor Peter Joy