Course Syllabus

The Death Penalty: Human Biology, Law and Policy

Human Biology 171

Spring Quarter 2012

Professor William F. Abrams

The sciences of human biology play a critical role in determining the guilt or innocence of a person accused of a capital crime, and whether there are mitigating circumstances against imposing the death penalty on a guilty defendant. These sciences are also central to policy arguments both in favor and against the death penalty. This course will examine the history, policy and application of the death penalty in the United States, particularly with respect to the impact of science and forensic investigation on how capital punishment is applied, contemporary views on the death penalty, and how policy is made. We will use several real cases on which I have served as counsel to consider the process and policy of the death penalty in America, and will also consider perspectives, scholarly research, and legal precedent in our analysis.

Students will be asked to examine and challenge the various sides of the issues involved in the death penalty. Students should gain from the course the ability to intellectually dissect an emotional and polarizing issue, appreciate the different competing viewpoints, and arrive at their own well-reasoned conclusions – whatever those conclusions may be. The course will not be taught from any preconceived belief or with any political or philosophical agenda, except to involve students in a rigorous intellectual challenge of policy and philosophy.

The requirements for the course are:

- Completion of assigned reading;
- Group projects on a death penalty issue, to be presented in class on Monday, May 21, 2012 (25% of grade);
- Take-home final examination distributed on Wednesday, June 6 and due Saturday, June 9, 2012 at 10 p.m. (35% of grade);
- An original paper of 12-14 pages analyzing a capital punishment issue of your choice, due Saturday, June 2, 2012 at 6 p.m. (40% of grade);
- Active class participation (10% of grade).

The percentages above add up to more than 100%. Class participation is expected and will be evaluated with the other criteria.
Expectations and details on the paper and class project will be provided separately.

**Spring Quarter Reading List**

We will use the following books, available at The Bookstore or other sources like Amazon, during the course. I will issue separately a weekly schedule of readings. You are expected to do the readings and be prepared to discuss in class.

- Debating the Death Penalty, Hugo Bedau and Paul Cassell, 2004 (paperback version)

In addition, you are expected to check CourseWork daily for additional readings and course information. Events happen rapidly pertaining to the death penalty, and I will post articles and other materials on breaking news that I expect you to read and be prepared to discuss in class.

**Contact Information and Office Hours**

William F. Abrams  
[wabrams@stanford.edu](mailto:wabrams@stanford.edu)  
Office: Bldg. 20, Room 22J  
650-725-9546 (Stanford office)  
650-849-4880 (Bingham McCutchen LLP law office)  
Office hours: Sunday, 4-5:30 p.m.  
Monday and Wednesday, 6:00 to 6:45 p.m.  
And by appointment

Peter Broderick, TA  
[peterjb@stanford.edu](mailto:peterjb@stanford.edu)

I will add Office Hours as the quarter approaches the last few weeks of the term.

**Weekly Schedule**

I will issue separately a weekly schedule of readings.
Our last class is on Monday, June 4. The class will be an in-depth review for the final examination. We will have sections every other week beginning the week of April 9. The scheduling will be determined by the number of students enrolling in the course and will be announced on April 9 on CourseWork.