

The Courtroom as Classroom: Integrating Civic Engagement in Public Law Courses

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Abstract

In this article I discuss logistics (course design and implementation) as well as course outcomes (the effects on what students learned about the judiciary as well as the results of the civically engaged classroom) related to the Courtroom Observation Research Paper Assignment in *Introduction to Law and Politics*. The assignment required students to visit a variety of federal and state courthouses and to observe criminal and civil cases at the trial and appellate levels. In their research, students were asked to integrate what they learned during courtroom observation with what we were covering

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Courtroom Observation

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observation." In *Introduction to Law and Politics*, undergraduate students used this

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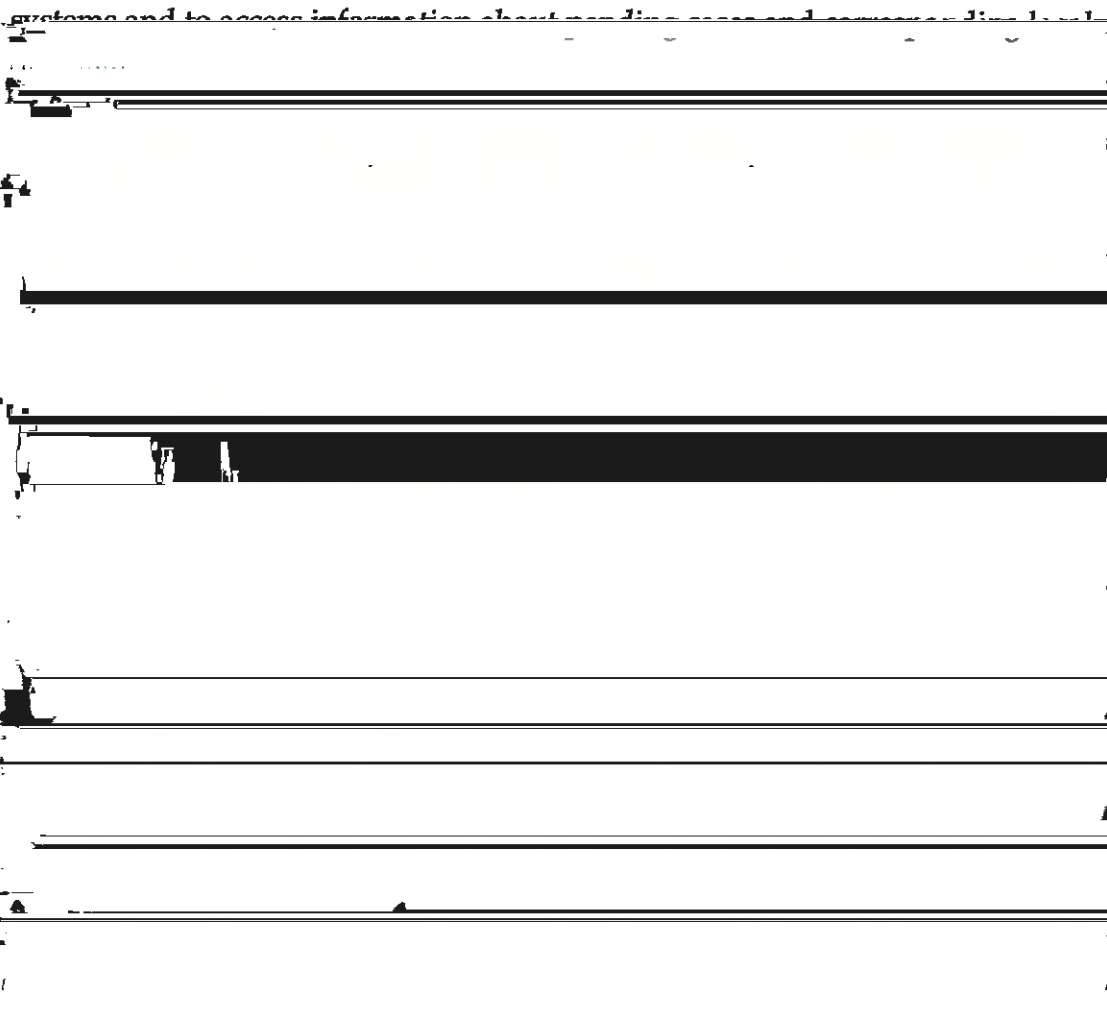
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The Course

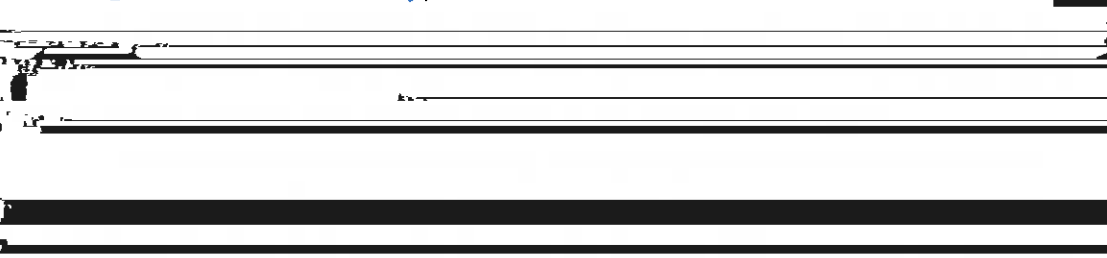
Survey, Summer 2008). Students no longer have to rely on the media to learn about high profile cases (e.g., the students observed the cases involving Terri Schiavo and Casey Anthony). This knowledge about how to access our local courts serves students well in their quest to become citizen scholars.

litigants, and interest groups affect agenda-setting and judicial decision-making in the courts; discuss internal and external limits on judicial power as well as issues related to the implementation and impact of court decisions; and, after a series of courtroom visits, to be able to navigate the state and federal court

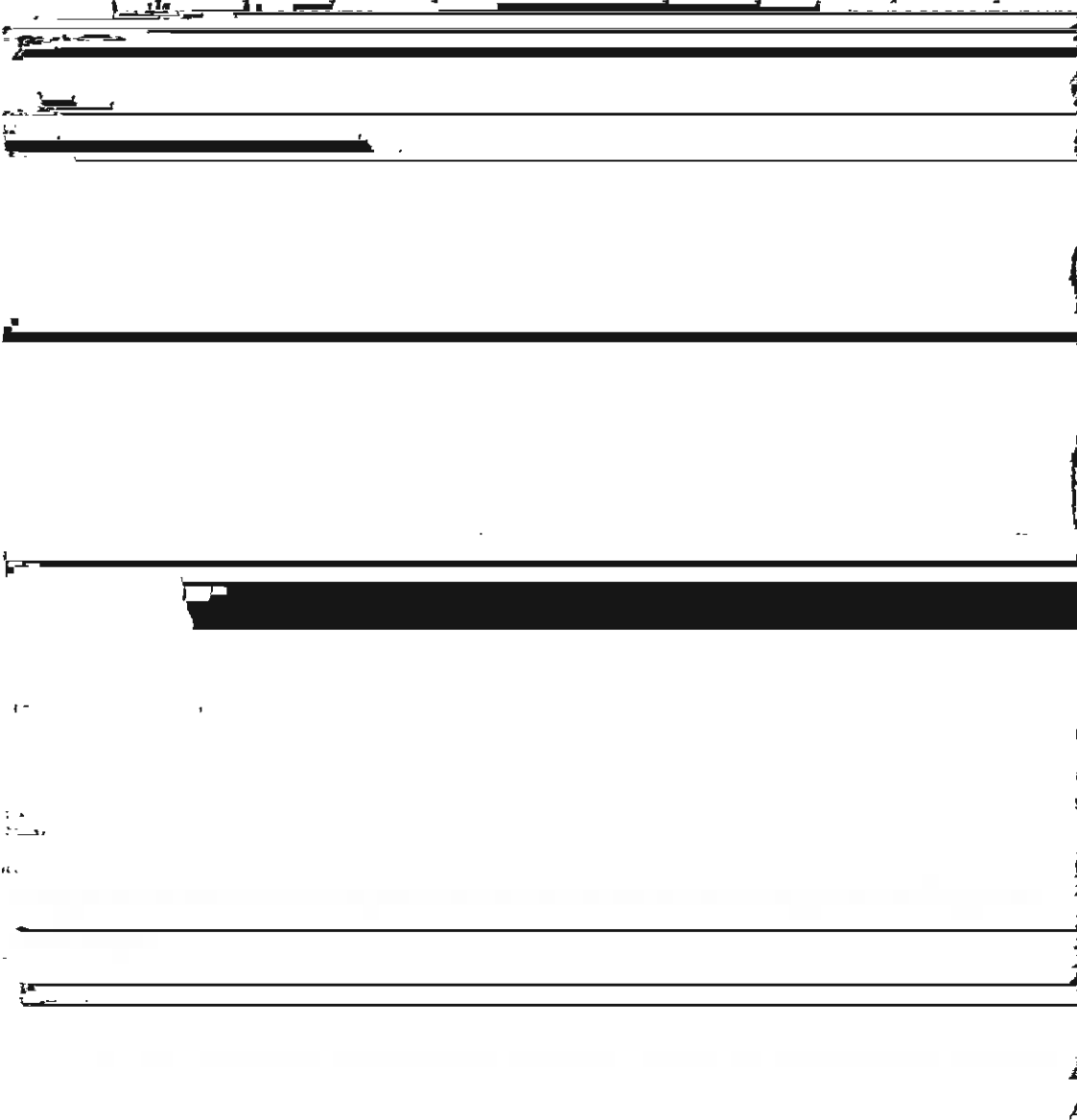


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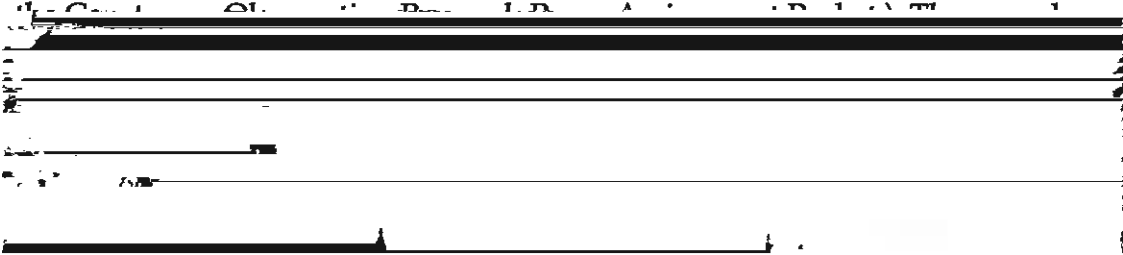
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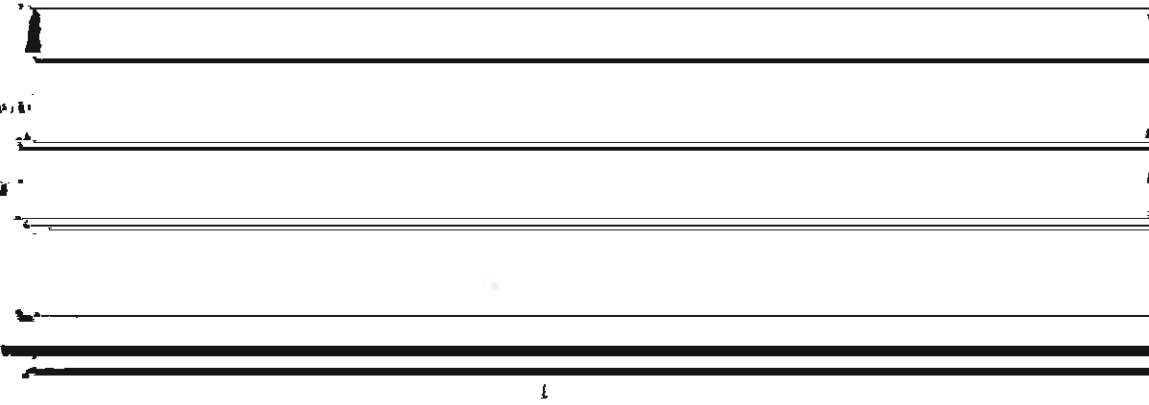
D.C., as well as other Florida regions, such as Orlando and Sarasota, during Spring Break.



are expected to keep a log of the cases they attend. (A Log Form is included in

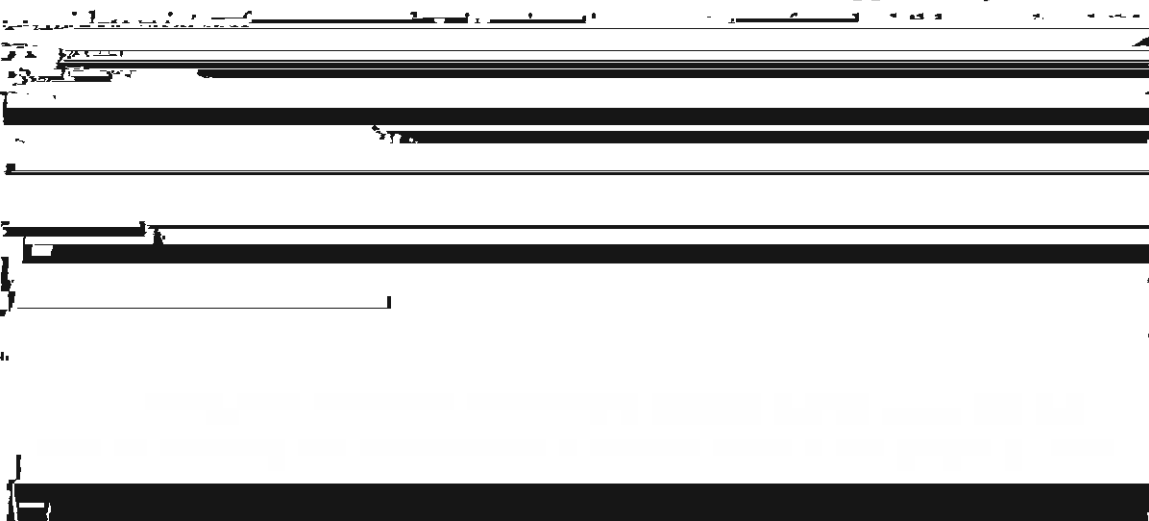


Most students who enroll in *Law and Politics* identify themselves as “pre-law,” and, while they are enthusiastic about the opportunity to observe actual court proceedings, they are also intimidated by the prospect of figuring out how and where and when to visit court. In the end, students find their perseverance rewarded. Not only did students feel more comfortable making their way around the courthouses but also they became familiar with the legal jargon and



terminology used during court proceedings. As one student explained, “The first few observations were overwhelming. It was difficult to follow everything that was being said and done with the speed with which it was handled. . . . The more I observed the easier it became to understand what was happening” (Chaney, Spring 2009). Another said, “The more time I spent in the courtroom, the more I felt that I understood what was going on. I learned about most of the things that went on in court in class, but it really took the experience of being there to understand what goes on in a trial and how much work goes into each case” (Jansen, Spring 2005).

After learning their way around, students have the opportunity to view a



Students describe in their journals how they sat next to a victim's family or next

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have seen the anguish of mother as her child was taken away and the pain of a victim's family as they re-live tragic events during testimony.

In a carjacking case, one student noted that after the defendant in was sentenced to fifteen years in prison "his family started crying very loudly -- they were destroyed" (Schneider, Spring 2005). In another case, when describing a reaction to a jury verdict, a student noted that "Candice Basso's family all broke

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Students observed all phases of the judicial process, from jury selection to sentencing and there was ample opportunity for the students to interact

material from the assigned readings into their descriptions of their courtroom observations. In the research papers the students demonstrated that they were

questions about the judicial process and even about law school. During the height of the controversy, one of my students was able to meet with the federal

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Spring 2005). These interviews and informal interactions with court participants further enhance the courtroom observation research assignment.

wanted to be sure this was the right career path before I commit the necessary time, energy, and money. The experiences were interesting and enlightening to say the least, but, much to my surprise, I was not further inspired to dedicate my life to seeking justice for the people, as I had believed for so long (Chedid, Spring 2005).

The observation assignment was doubly important not only because of sheer curiosity, but also because I had misgivings about applying to law school. After every observation, my interest piqued and I learned something new about the mechanics of law and the

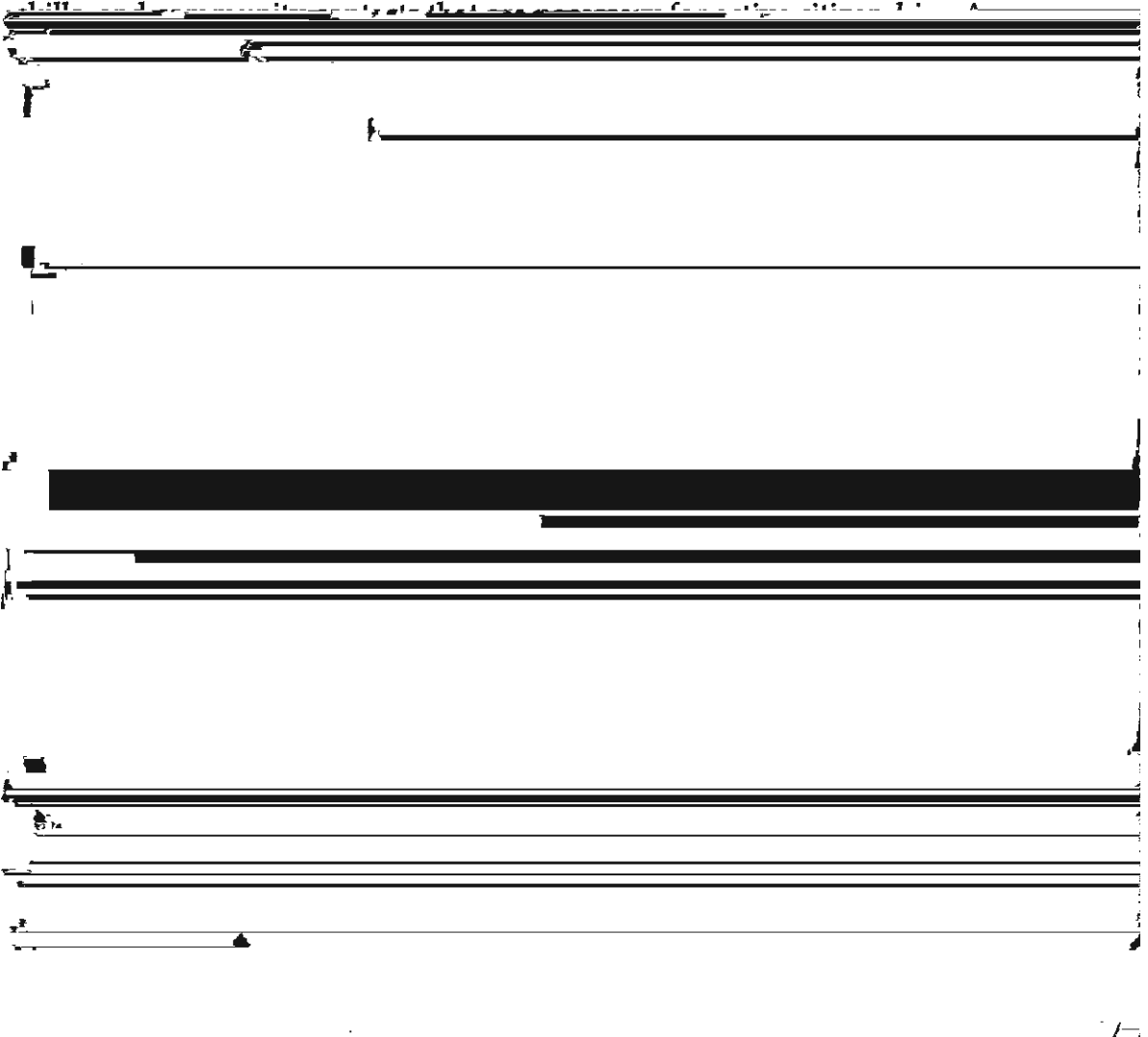
social implications of our legal system . . . now I can move forward in my plans to enter law school both knowing and understanding

Indeed, several students responded on the Post-Test Surveys that the most important thing that they learned as a result of the courtroom visits was the sense that they would make a more informed decision about whether to go to law school. One student wrote in response to the question "What was the most

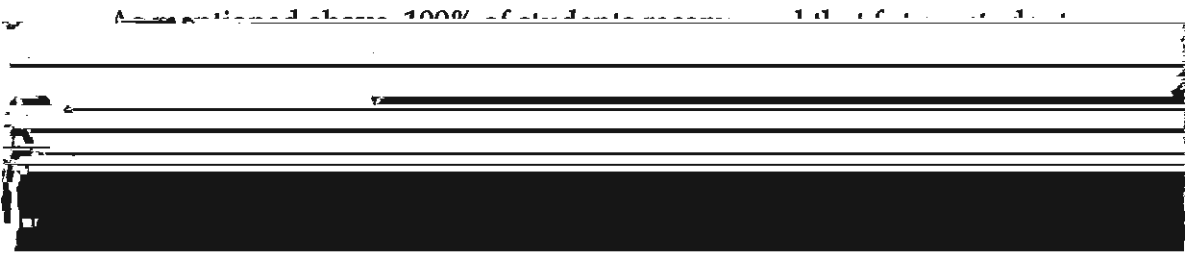
did not know that I would be forming relationships with

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there, the types of cases I would have the chance to observe or that I would be physically less than five feet away from people on trial for murder and drug charges. . . . I also had no clue the emotions that would go into observing these courtroom procedures. I can now admit that when I first walked into the courtroom I was expecting to be bored and to just write down everything I saw, but once I was there . . . I became engulfed in the cases. During one particular murder trial . . . I got so involved that I followed the case closely throughout the whole phase of the trial and returned for



described throughout this article, despite the passive-sounding title of courtroom "observation," by its very nature, this assignment requires significant interaction and engagement with court personnel to be completed successfully.



<http://www.wearethehope.org/>

the courts in Pinellas County. Nearly 75-80% of the caseload in the 6th Judicial Circuit is related to prescription pain pill abuse. Pinellas County is the leading county in the state of Florida for prescription pill related deaths and has the largest number of children being removed from their homes by the Department

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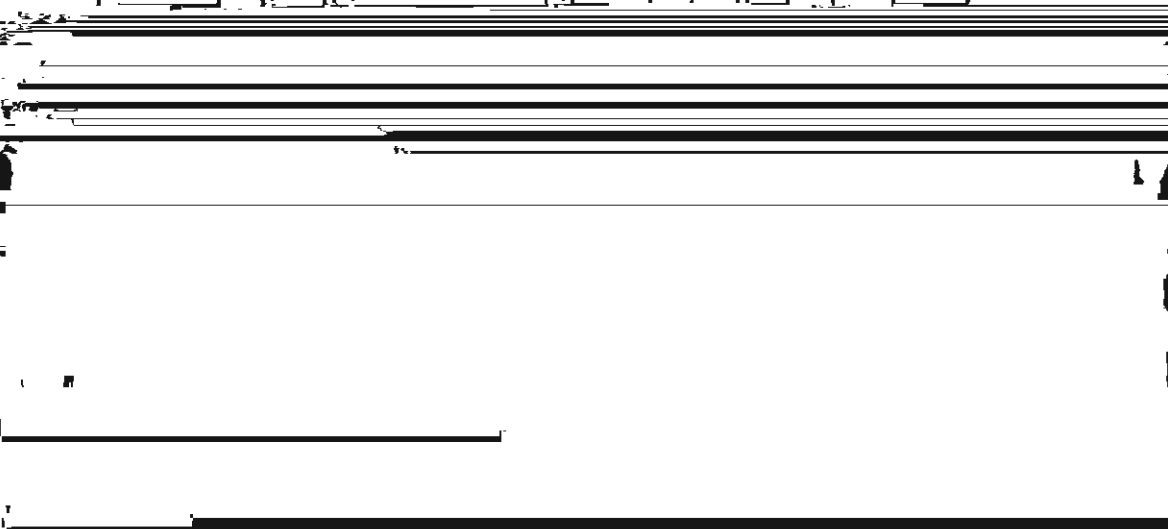
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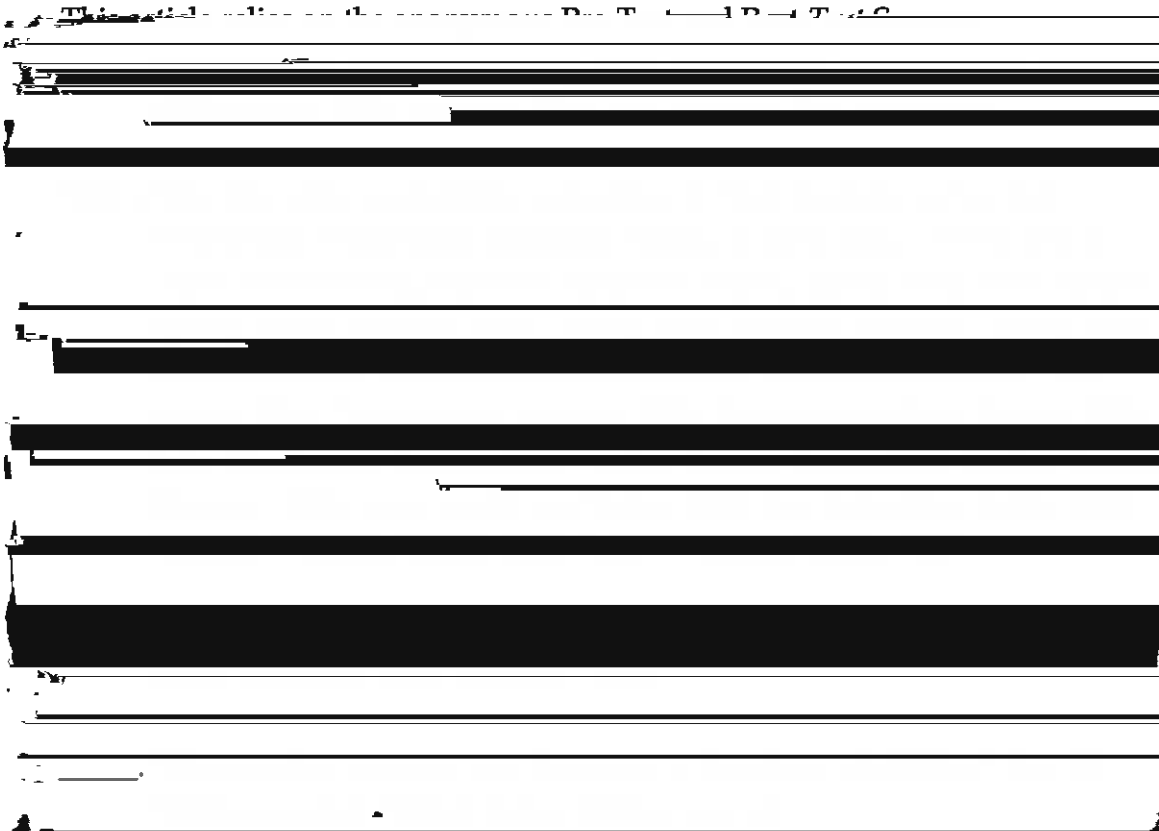
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Americans have confidence in the jury system; however, courts are reporting low response rates to jury summons. (<http://www.abanow.org/2005/05/op-ed-jury-service-its-a-privilege/>) Students claim to leave the course with a greater appreciation for and interest in the judiciary – and a greater likelihood to respond affirmatively to the call for jury service. One student claimed, “While I am not interested in a career in law or political science, I will happily serve on any jury I am called for” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011).

As a result of the courtroom observation assignment, students demonstrated that they had a better understanding of and interest in the material we covered in class, that they had greater insight into their career goals, and, in many cases, their contacts with attorneys and judges led to internship opportunities that will extend their learning experience into subsequent semesters. In students’ words:



References



administered during the Spring 2005, Spring 2006, Summer 2007, Summer 2008, Spring 2009, Summer 2010, and Summer 2011 semesters.

This article also relies on students' reflections in their journals and in their Courtroom Observation Research Papers. In particular, I would like to thank the following students: Elizabeth Austin, Spring 2006; Jules Bishara, Spring 2009; Christina Boltin, Spring 2005; Brandon Borstein, Spring 2009; Naomi Chaney, Spring 2009; Jamila Chedid, Spring 2005; Ashley Cole, Spring 2006; Thomas Gay, Summer 2008; Katherine Heffner, Spring 2009; Sally Henderson, Spring 2006; Cynthia Jansen, Spring 2005; Evelyn Peters, Summer 2008; Anna Lee Rowe, Spring 2006; Ana Schneider, Spring 2005; Michael Svoboda, Spring 2006; April Swetland, Spring 2009

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2006.

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