Courses in Criminal Law

Professor Lisa Griffin

For students who have a particular interest in practicing criminal law, there are some core courses beyond the first year Criminal Law class to consider. The two Criminal Procedure courses survey the rules governing investigations and adjudication that come from the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments to the Constitution. Evidence is a prerequisite to Trial Practice and an important foundation for work as a litigator. In addition to Trial Practice, Appellate Practice and Negotiation both teach skills that will be very helpful to you. You also have a rich array of clinical opportunities, such as Wrongful Convictions, and Duke supports externships in both prosecuting offices and the defense community.

You should give some thought to the type of criminal law that interests you and how other parts of the curriculum could expand your knowledge and credentials. International Law and related courses would provide some useful background if you might do work involving human rights or international criminal law. The corporate law offerings, including Business Associations and Securities Regulation, would be relevant to future work in corporate compliance or white collar defense or prosecution. Federal Courts would be invaluable to a death penalty practice.

And don’t overlook the many smaller courses and seminars like Federal Criminal Law, Criminal Justice Policy, and Prosecutorial Ethics. Specialized classes inform you about different areas of practice and also give you an opportunity to interact with faculty and visitors who can offer insights from their own experiences.

With all of that said, I believe you could have a successful and satisfying career in criminal law even if you focused all of your course selection on intellectual rather than professional goals. You will learn what you need to know to pass the bar in the weeks before the bar, and you will acquire the specialized skills and knowledge you need to do your job while on the job. Law school is probably your last and best chance to dive into a new field or read deeply in a particular topic just because it moves you. You will enjoy law school more, and build a more impressive record as well, if you’re motivated by intellectual curiosity and personal growth.

You should also find some room in your course planning for research and writing. Keep a file of ideas that occur to you as you’re learning doctrine and reading for your courses, and try to turn at least one of those insights into a sustained project. It will provide you with an excellent writing sample, preserve the option of future academic pursuits, and help you identify the kind of work you would find worth doing.