

Plan Your Own Path

CRIMINAL LAW



OVERVIEW

Students interested in a career in criminal law may focus on criminal litigation or criminal justice policy.

Students who pursue criminal litigation practice may become prosecutors, defense lawyers, or judges in courts that handle criminal cases. Prosecutors enforce state and local laws as assistant district attorneys or city prosecutors. They may also work for the federal government in the Department of Justice, for example as Assistant U.S. Attorneys. Criminal defense attorneys may work as solo practitioners, as members of a law firm, or in a public defender's office. Some criminal law attorneys specialize, focusing on capital defense, juvenile, appellate or, white-collar practices. Others may prosecute, defend, or judge crimes in international courts.

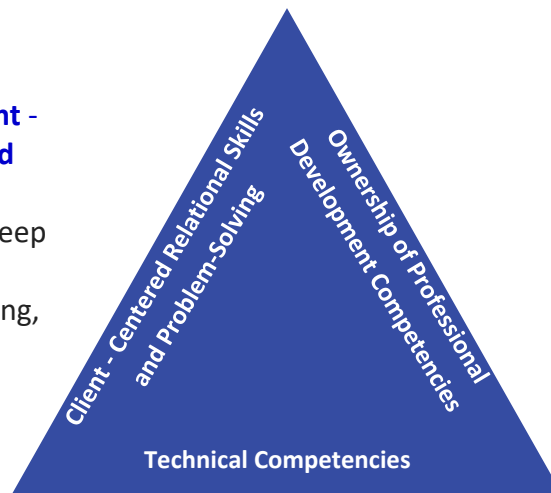
Criminal justice policy attorneys assess current laws, study best practices, and work to change law and practice at the municipal, county, state, and federal levels. They may work in local, state or federal government, nonprofit advocacy organizations, or state monitoring agencies.

For any of these jobs, it is essential that students have a strong understanding of substantive criminal law and constitutional criminal procedure.

of the substantive criminal law as well as constitutional criminal procedure is essential.

This handout helps you plan your path to a criminal law career, covering essential competencies for clients and legal employers. As you plan, ensure you incorporate all three sides of this triangle.¹

The left side emphasizes **Client - Centered Relational Skills and Problem-Solving**. This entails responsiveness to clients, a deep understanding of the client's needs, creative problem solving, and client-centered communication.



The right side centers on **Ownership of Professional Development Competencies**. Employers and clients require teamwork, a strong work ethic, an entrepreneurial mindset, determination, attention to detail, integrity, and effective project management skills.

The base comprises fundamental **Technical Competencies**, including knowledge of the law, legal analysis, legal research, communication in the legal context, and legal judgment.

¹ See Neil W. Hamilton, *The Gap Between the Foundational Competencies Clients and Legal Employers Need and the Learning Outcomes Law Schools Are Adopting*, 89 UMKC L. Rev. 559 (2021).

This guide tracks the three sides of the triangle.

TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES

Enroll in foundational courses during your first and second year, such as:

- Criminal Law
- Constitutional Criminal Procedure: Investigation
- Constitutional Criminal Procedure: Adjudication
- Texas Criminal Procedure (if practicing in Texas)
- Trial Advocacy or Trial Techniques I
- Evidence

Recommended Courses – Criminal Law Electives:

- Advanced Criminal Law
- Circumstantial Evidence in Murder Trials
- Comparative Law II: Criminal Procedure
- Criminal Justice Policy Practicum
- Criminal Plea Negotiations
- Criminal Procedure in the Digital Age
- Criminal Tax Fraud
- Death Penalty Project
- Domestic Violence: Law, Policy, and Practice
- Police Misconduct Litigation
- Sentencing and the Death Penalty
- White Collar Crime
- Juvenile Justice

Related Courses:

- Data Privacy and Cybersecurity
- Immigration Law
- Internal Investigations
- International Human Rights
- Law & Science
- Legislation
- Negotiations
- Professional Responsibility
- Trial Advocacy

Upper-Level Writing Requirements: In your third year, choose a criminal law-related Edited Writing course or Directed Research paper topic (with Faculty pre-approval) to improve and showcase your research, writing, and analytical competencies.

- Advanced Criminal Law: Eighth Amendment Law (EW)
- Advanced Criminal Law: Reforming the Criminal Jury (EW)

- International Criminal Law (EW)
- International Humanitarian Law (EW)
- Law and Social Science (EW)
- Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism (EW)
- Second Amendment and Weapons Regulation (EW)

CLIENT-CENTERED RELATIONAL SKILLS AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Experiential opportunities are excellent ways to cultivate client-centered representation, innovative problem-solving, and effective communication skills.

- **Externships:** The following externships are offered through the Government and Public Interest Externship Program (includes classroom component)
 - Central Intelligence Agency Office of General Counsel
 - Collin County District Attorney's Office
 - Dallas County District Attorney's Office
 - Dallas County Public Defender's Office
 - Denton County District Attorney's Office
 - Department of Defense Office of General Counsel
 - Department of Justice Counterterrorism Section
 - Federal Bureau of Investigation
 - Federal Public Defender
 - Harris County District Attorney's Office
 - International Law Externships (International Criminal Court and Tribunal Externships)
 - Lone Star Justice Alliance
 - Plano City Attorney's Office
 - Rockwall County District Attorney's Office
 - Tarrant County District Attorney's Office
 - U.S. Attorney's Office (N.D. Tex.-- Dallas)
 - U.S. Attorney's Office (E.D. Tex – Plano)
 - US Department of Homeland Security – ICE
 - US Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration

Many of the judicial externships involve courts that hear both criminal and civil cases.

- **Clinics:**
 - Criminal Clinic
 - Child Advocacy Clinic
 - Crimes Against Women Clinic
 - Innocence Clinic

Be sure to work closely with your Office of Career Services advisors to obtain additional experiences (internships, judicial clerkships, public service opportunities) to grow your knowledge and skills in this area.

OWNERSHIP OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMPETENCIES

Experiences beyond the classroom are vital to your professional growth. Aim to acquire experiences that closely replicate the work lawyers do in criminal law space.

- **Student Organizations:** Commit yourself to relevant, on-campus organizations and actively pursue leadership, project management, and teamwork opportunities within the organization.
 - Criminal Law Association
- **Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center:** The [Deason Center](#) is a nonpartisan center for research and advocacy that combines data-driven research and compelling stories to advocate for innovative criminal justice reforms. The Center is uniquely positioned as an interdisciplinary innovator, with a staff that includes lawyers, social scientists, and communication specialists. The Center has obtained millions of dollars in research funding for its unparalleled expertise in indigent defense, prosecutorial charging discretion, and the operation of STAR (small, tribal, and rural) criminal legal systems. Locally, the Center has strong research and practice partnerships with the Texas Indigent Defense Commission and the Dallas County District Attorney's Office.

To take advantage of the Deason Center's resources for law students:

- Work with Deason Center faculty and staff to learn more about criminal law careers. Center staff have experience as prosecutors, public defenders, civil rights lawyers, and statewide public defense practice managers. Students are encouraged to meet with [staff](#) to discuss criminal justice career trajectories.
- Attend the Deason Center's in-person and virtual [events](#), which offer cutting-edge legal discussions as well as networking opportunities with state and national criminal justice practitioners and non-profit organizations. Subscribe to the Center's newsletter [here](#).
- Apply to be a Deason Policy Scholar: every spring, the Center offers law students the opportunity to serve as Deason Policy Scholars. Through this one-year paid internship program, law students conduct legal and policy research, attend criminal justice reform events, and interact with the nation's leading criminal law reformers. The Center also helps its Policy Scholars develop criminal justice careers. Alumni of the Deason Scholars program now serve as prosecutors, public defenders, and criminal justice policy attorneys in Texas and beyond.

- **Public Service Opportunities:** These pre-approved placements at 501(c)(3) organizations and government offices may provide you with additional perspectives that are valuable to your career development.
 - Bexar County District Attorney's Office
 - City of Fort Worth
 - Collin County District Attorney's Office
 - Plano City Attorney's Office
 - Dallas County District Attorney's Office
 - Dallas County Public Defender's Office
 - Decarceration Collective
 - Denton County District Attorney's Office
 - Federal Bureau of Investigation
 - Harris County District Attorney's Office
 - Innocence Project of Texas
 - Lone Star Justice Alliance
 - Montgomery County District Attorney's Office
 - North Richland Hills City Attorney's Office
 - Pima County Attorney's Office
 - Rockwall County District Attorney's Office
 - SMU Deason Center
 - Tarrant County District Attorney's Office
 - Texas Civil Rights Project
 - Texas Fair Defense Project
 - Texas Indigent Defense Commission
 - Texas RioGrande Legal Aid
 - Texas State Counsel for Offenders
 - U.S. Attorney's Office, EDTX
 - U.S. Attorney's Office, NDTX
 - U.S. Department of Homeland Security – Immigration and Customs Enforcement
 - U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration
 - U.S. Federal Public Defender, NDTX

- **Board of Advocates:**

- **Law Journals:**
 - Author a note or comment on a criminal law topic and seek to have it published in one of our journals or elsewhere

- **Dallas Bar Association Sections:** Explore your interests and immerse yourself in the legal profession by becoming part of these Dallas Bar Association sections.
 - Criminal Law

Faculty: Start building a connection with a professor who is familiar with your work and can write you a letter of recommendation or serve as a reference. Here are some of the full-time faculty members who teach in this field.

Hillel Bavli (evidence)
Jeff Kahn (counter-terrorism)
Pamela Metzger (right to counsel)
Natalie Nanasi (domestic violence)

Anna Offit
Eric Ruben
Meghan Ryan
Jenia Turner (domestic and international)

Cultivate Your Personal Network: Reach out to criminal law practitioners attorneys to arrange informational interviews through the Mustang Exchange or connections you establish during your law school journey. You should also ask your Career Services advisor to help you identify graduates and law firms in this space in the location(s) where you want to work.

Full-time and adjunct professors who teach criminal law courses may have strong networks. Ask them for assistance making these connections.

Attend programs featuring criminal law attorneys sponsored by the Office of Career Services or student organizations. These programs are great opportunities to learn more about entry-level careers and connect with speakers who are often alumni and more willing to assist you.