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SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW ANNOUNCES NEW DEATH PENALTY RESEARCH AND STUDENT CLINIC INITIATIVES

ST. LOUIS, March 25, 2014 - Saint Louis University School of Law is pleased to announce the undertaking of a comprehensive research project on the administration of Missouri’s death penalty statute since its enactment in 1977. This project will be integrated into the school’s clinical training of law students.

Following a series of executions in the past several months, with potentially more in the near future, Missouri’s death penalty statute has reached the national spotlight. This wave of activity has precipitated a series of last-minute appeals and legal challenges to the executions, proposed legislation to place a moratorium on executions in order to evaluate the surrounding legal process, and requests for reprieve from the United States Supreme Court. The newly founded Missouri Capital-Sentencing Research Program, hosted at the School of Law, is partnering with renowned criminologist and statistician Raymond Paternoster to examine the administration of Missouri’s modern era death penalty in relation to the mandates of Missouri and federal law.

Beginning in the Fall 2014 term, the program will incorporate students from SLU LAW’s criminal defense clinic, overseen by Professor Susan McGraugh. The Missouri Capital-Sentencing Research Program will present unique opportunities for SLU LAW students to contribute to the groundbreaking research of the Missouri death penalty. Clinic students will investigate cases on file with the Missouri Supreme Court to gather needed data for the research as well as receive training through hands-on experience working with attorneys specializing in death penalty appeals. This new program is part of the school’s criminal defense clinic offering, which pairs supervised law students with social workers to represent and serve people who have come into contact with the criminal justice system as a result of serious mental illness.

“This new program presents an incredible opportunity for our law students,” said McGraugh. “The professors at SLU LAW pride ourselves on giving students a wide range of real world educational experiences, and this is a one of a kind opportunity in our region.”

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Since 1977, the Missouri Supreme Court has collected trial court reports from each judge presiding over a capitaly charged case. These files capture detailed information, including the facts of the crime, the types of incriminating evidence presented, the race of the defendant and victim, and the evidence presented by the defense, to determine if the punishment is proportionate to the circumstances of the case. The program has digitized the files to enable comprehensive data extraction for statistical analysis and form the foundation for a comprehensive, multi-year empirical research plan to analyze the actual application of the death penalty statute by Missouri’s courts.

“What results will be the most comprehensive and detailed study of capital sentencing since David Baldus’ landmark study of Georgia’s capital sentencing system in the 1980s,” said Paternoster, a professor at the University of Maryland who has designed the empirical research plan and explained the opportunity presented by the trial court reports and state-wide data. “The Missouri data will allow researchers to investigate the role of race and geography in capital charging and sentencing, as well as provide the foundation for a wide-ranging empirical proportionality review of all imposed death sentences.”

SLU LAW is participating in this program to help ensure that Missouri’s courts will ultimately gain the benefit of research held to the highest standards and carried out with the utmost scientific rigor. “The Supreme Court of Missouri has faithfully kept records of first-degree murder cases for nearly 40 years,” said Michael Wolff, dean of SLU LAW and former chief justice of the Court. “It is important that courts have the valid statistical evidence to support their sentencing decisions.”

The research will analyze the data with reference to the Supreme Court’s actual practice, thereby comparing the statistical findings with the court’s results.

About Saint Louis University School of Law

Saint Louis University School of Law was founded in 1843 and is the oldest law school west of the Mississippi River. The strength of the faculty, breadth of course offerings and extensive clinical and professional skills experience provide students with a well-rounded legal education. The School of Law’s rich history consists of strong connections to the community and a long tradition of public service. SLU LAW’s location in the heart of downtown St. Louis offers students unparalleled access to leading law firms, courthouses, corporations, government agencies and non-profit organizations — and a unique opportunity to see the law in action. For more information, visit http://law.slu.edu/.