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CRIMINOLOGIST EXAMINES MANY SIDES OF THE DEATH PENALTY IN ONLINE INTERSESSION CLASS

MANHATTAN -- Each year brings new discussions about one of the nation's most controversial topics: capital punishment. From lethal injection drugs to innocence and wrongful convictions, one Kansas State University intersession class examines these current, contentious issues.

L. Sue Williams, associate professor of sociology at K-State, will teach the online class, Death Penalty, SOCIO 500, during the upcoming May intersession, May 16 to June 3.

Williams is no stranger to controversial subjects. One of the popular undergraduate criminology classes she teaches is about serial murder.

"As a criminologist, I really yearn to know what the research says about controversial issues," Williams said. "Mundane things bore me; it's important not only to me but to students to have a professor that is passionate about what she does. That's me."

Ever conscious of the emotion and political ties to the death penalty issue, Williams offers a balanced approach to the subject matter.

"I always present the pro-death penalty argument, the anti-death penalty stance and the background and research on capital punishment," Williams said. "The third leg of this approach, background and research, really helps sort out myth from fact, how we have arrived at this current environment and where the future will possibly take us."

Williams says the most common debate is over the effectiveness of capital punishment. This general argument includes debates over cost, deterrence, moral dilemmas and constitutionality. She finds that students enjoy examining these arguments, joining in, becoming emotional, looking at rational reasoning, and then deciding for themselves where they stand on the continuum.

"One thing that I think students often take away, regardless of their personal opinion, is that the issue is not as black and white as they once thought," said Williams. "The general public remains fairly uninformed about such issues, and thus it's not surprising that our students are not always well informed either. That's my goal -- to inform and educate; then everyone gets to draw his or her own conclusion. Above all, the course reminds us all that death is different. It deserves careful and well-informed consideration."

A complete list of classes offered during the May and August 2011 intersessions can be viewed at <http://www.dce.k-state.edu/courses/intersession/students>.