

Goal 2.6(b) of The Strategic Plan for the Federal Judiciary states that several of its primary goals should facilitate public outreach and civics education efforts, programs held in courtrooms, as well as collaborating with public education to “be responsive to the need for public education and to benefit from locally developed ideas.”

For the past three years, the Federal District Courthouse in Newark has collaborated with the Political Science department at Rutgers University – New Brunswick to facilitate two programs that meet this criteria. Both programs are run by Douglas Cantor, an Assistant Teaching Professor in the department, and by different members of the court. The first is a large-scale court visitation program that sends upwards of 250 students per semester to the Newark Courthouse. Since the Fall 2023 semester, we have sent approximately 1,300 students through the doors of the Newark courthouse for meetings with judges and other court members, as well as to witness court proceedings. The second program is an immersive seminar run in partnership with the Honorable Judge Julian Neals, which sends 15-17 students to Newark every other week of the semester to study the relationships between law and politics and to hear Judge Neals lecture directly from his courtroom. Judge Neals also speaks to groups of the large-scale program regularly as well.

This report details the learning objectives, practices, and results of both programs. First, we explain the logistics of the larger program and display sample survey results demonstrating its effectiveness in civics education and career-oriented achievement. Second, we detail the smaller seminar, which is the newer program between the two, and explain our hopes for it going forward.

Rutgers University and Professor Cantor would like to extend a thank you and acknowledge several staff members who have worked hard to make both of these programs happen for the last 3 school years. Notably Alain Senatus, Phillip Selecky, Melissa Connoly, Maureen Gary, and members of Judge Neals’ office, especially Arvelise Gonzalez-Murrel.

The Law & Politics Court Visitation Program

One of the largest courses the Political Science department offers, Law & Politics (POLS 106) is an introductory class that provides a broad overview of the United States judicial system, with a focus on the interplay of law and politics in areas such as judicial selection and the interpretation of law. Part of the curriculum includes highlighting and assessing the differences among legal systems and judicial politics across the United States government. This includes, but is not limited to, demonstrating the differences between state and federal court systems, appellate processes, jurisdiction, and judicial selection. Traditionally, these lessons are taught through textbooks and lectures, unpacked by the students in recitation sections, and assessed through written assignments and examinations during midterm and final examination periods. The goal of this program was to completely change this system of teaching and assessment through community engagement and applied assessment of courts and legal processes by having students be physically present in different court systems throughout New Jersey.

The first round of court attendance at the Newark District Federal Courthouse occurs during the first half of the course, when students discuss federal court systems and processes. The second round of court attendance is during the second half of the course when the students learn about the differences between state court systems, and concludes with the students attending court at the Middlesex County Courthouse, located in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and also within walking distance to the College Avenue Campus at Rutgers.

The program has run for 3 straight years now with great success. While surveys on program satisfaction were run for court visits during the 2023/2024 school year, we amended the surveys for the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 school years to analyze enrollment and student assessment on both

experiential satisfaction with respect to career preparation and representation with respect to race, ethnicity, and gender.

Process and Planning

Federal and state courts were contacted in the Spring and Summer of 2023. Ombudspersons and public relations departments assisted with scheduling, and the decision was made to divide days into groups of 50, as Law & Politics has anywhere from 150 to 300 students during any given semester. The court program reached a level of popularity that, in the Fall 2024 semester, led almost 319 students to enroll by the first day of classes.

During the first 2 weeks of the semester, students are provided with a packet of information about the program that includes a program introduction video,¹ beginning instructions steps, requirements for court etiquette, a consent form for surveys, and forms for financial assistance and/or disability assistance. Along the way, students complete journal assignments predicting how their experiences would go and later reflections about the day that were relevant to the course material. Figure 1 displays a timeline of visits and coursework throughout a 16-week semester.

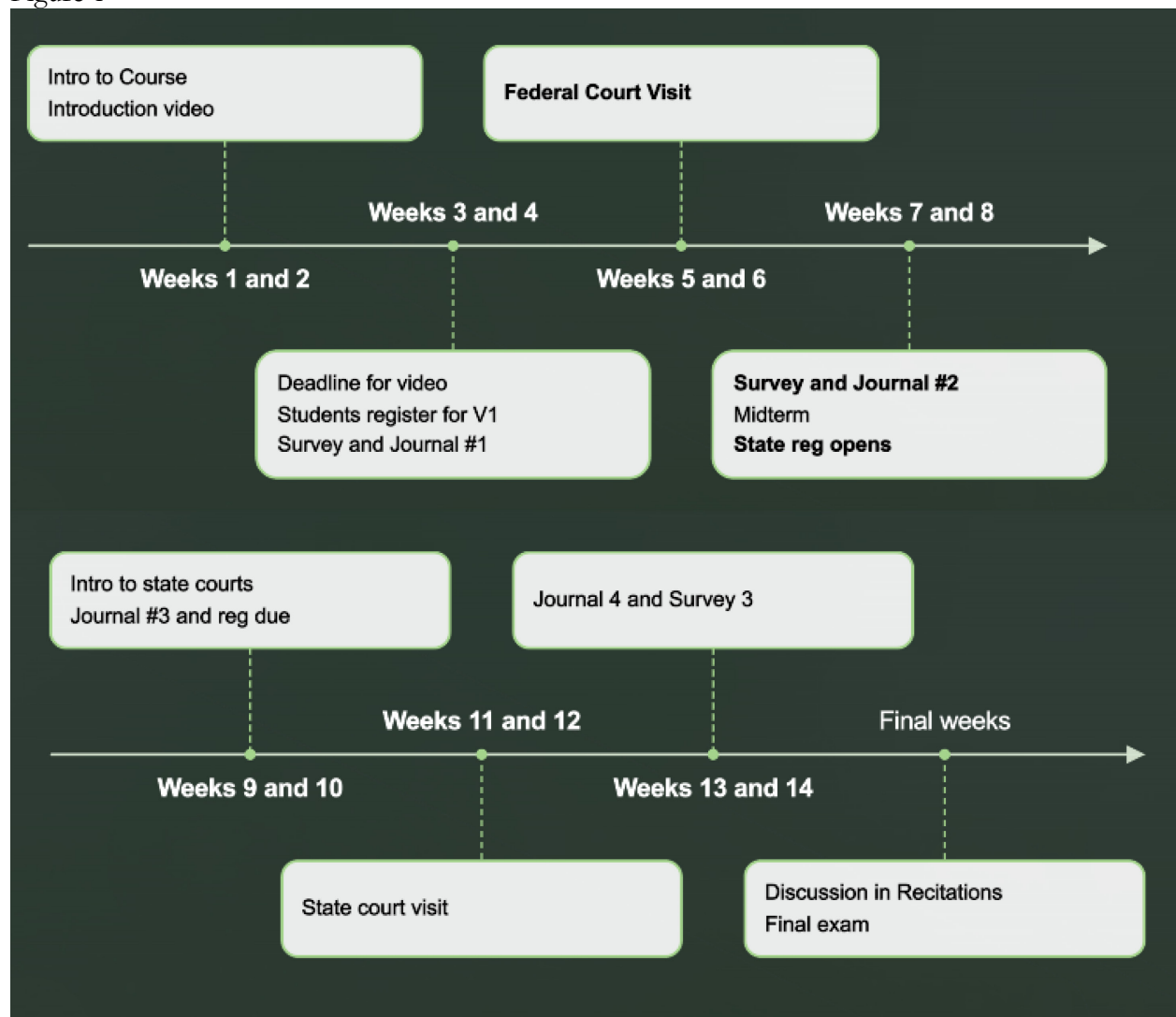
Days at both courts consist of 1-2 hours, during which the students are ushered into the courthouse to meet with judges, prosecutors, public defenders, clerks, and sometimes interpreters. They are then transferred to a courtroom to witness ongoing proceedings.

At the Federal level, most students witness sentencing hearings, particularly in drug and immigration cases, many are also lucky enough to witness trials, hearings, and sometimes civil matters. However, the proceedings varied greatly across state courthouses, as the students witnessed the diverse and chaotic scenes of criminal, civil, and family courts. Several judges in the courthouse

¹ We provide a 20–25-minute introductory video for students to view because of a 2-week add/drop period that exists for class registration at the beginning of every semester. Rather than going over the visits at the beginning of class for 2 straight weeks, the video provides students that enroll late into the class an introduction into the main component of the course so they can best understand the commitments for it.

including, but not limited to, Judge Claire Cecchi, Judge Evelyn Padin, Judge Susan Wigenton, Judge Stacey Adams, Judge Andre Espinoza, and Judge Neals, have spoken to our students every semester for the last 3 years.

Figure 1



Survey Data and Results

For the past 2 years, another professor (Professor Stacey Greene) and I have been surveying Law & Politics students on the program's effectiveness through the lens of experiential learning and its impact on the desire to pursue legal careers. We survey factors such as prior interest in law, the

effects on the identity of the judges on historically underrepresented communities in law, and the effects on enrollment in the court itself.

While Professor Greene and I are still aggregating all the data across all semesters, I have included several results from our most recent run of visits, the Spring 2026 semester, which enrolled 250 students and generated 175-200 responses per survey. Every semester has its fluctuations in results, but the results have been fairly consistent, and we estimate that the final project will show similar results across all years to those of Spring 2026.

Figure 2 illustrates the career oriented angle of general enrollment in POLS 106. Being an introductory course, the majority of students enrolled are first and second-year students exploring if careers related to law might be of interest to them. Survey results indicate semester year that roughly 75-85% (75.5% in Spring 2026) of students enrolled are considering pursuing a legal-related future.

Figure 2

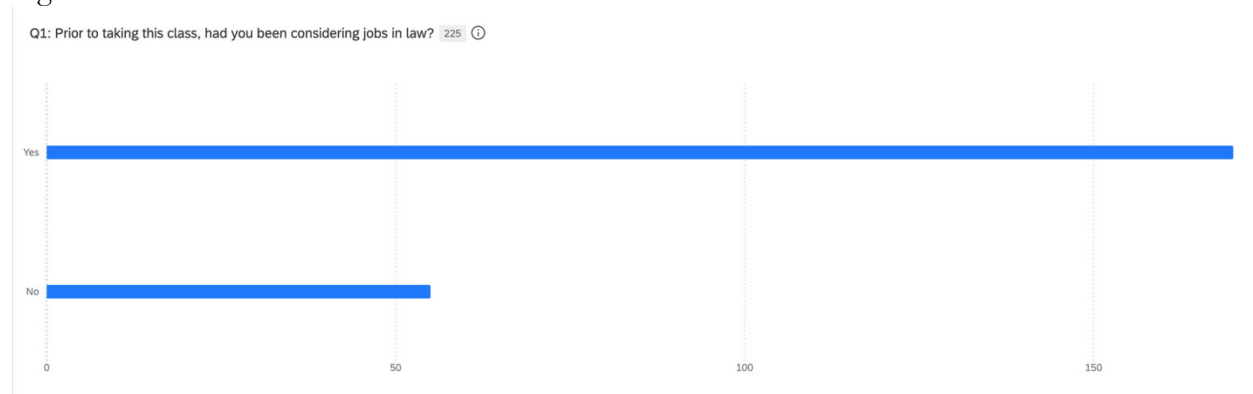


Figure 3 illustrated the familiarity of students with Federal courthouses. While students are eager to discuss law, the majority of them, (81.7% in the Spring of 2026) have not been in a Federal courthouse. The majority of them have also not witnessed practices in state courthouses, but we regularly see slight upticks in those responding yes every semester between 5-10%.

Figure 3

Q6: Have you ever visited and observed courtroom practices in a FEDERAL court? 225 ⓘ

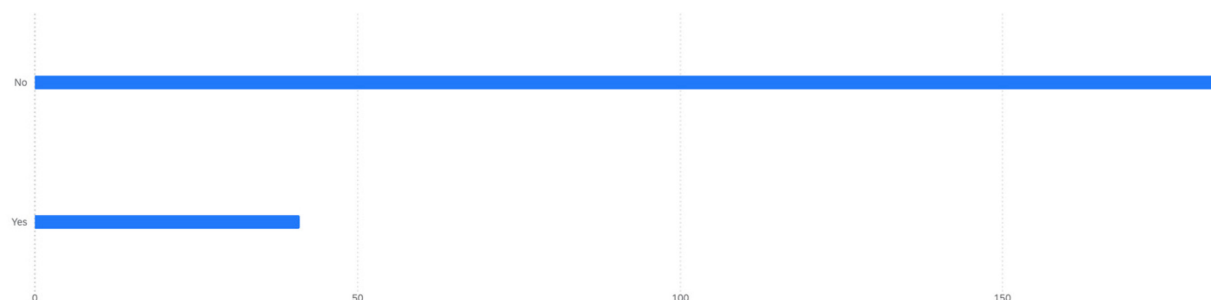
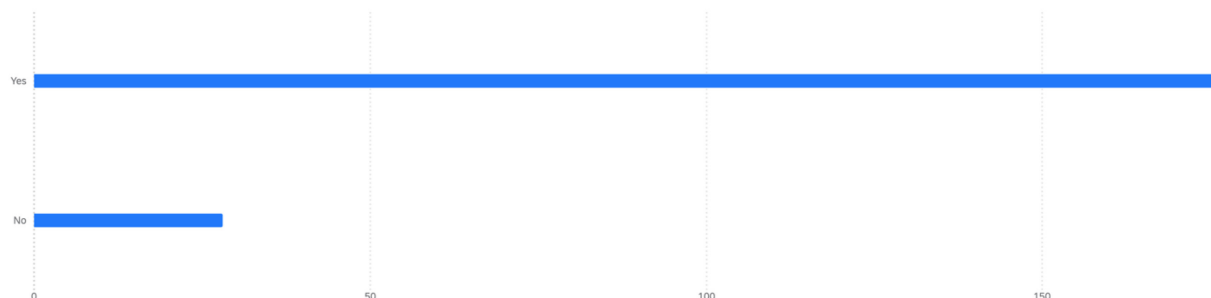


Figure 4 illustrates the comparisons the students make after completing both visits. Students note that witnessing both NJ and Federal judges helps them understand that not all judges handle the same caseloads nor deal with the same level of procedure, discourse, and formality.

Figure 4

Q4: Did you notice differences between the judges at FEDERAL court verses the judges at STATE court? 205 ⓘ



Figures 5, 6, and 7 illustrate one of our preliminary questions on historically underrepresented groups in law during their first survey. Regarding gender representation in the courts, we have stratified some of this preliminary data and found strong relationships between students who identify as female and students who witness and communicate with female members of the court, notably judges and attorneys. Figure 6 addresses the same question and presents the same findings on race. Figure 7 shows increases in interest in legal careers resulting from this program. Notably,

and while not included as a graphic in this report, we find our strongest relationships between an increase in motivation to pursue legal-oriented careers among black and Hispanic women due to the program. When prompted in open-ended questions to elaborate, students often discuss how seeing judges and attorneys who look like them helps them realize that being a judge or prosecutor is an attainable objective despite barriers they have previously experienced in the educational and professional worlds.

Figure 5

Q7: Please respond to the following statement: Seeing women in legal careers motivates me to pursue those careers. 204 ⓘ

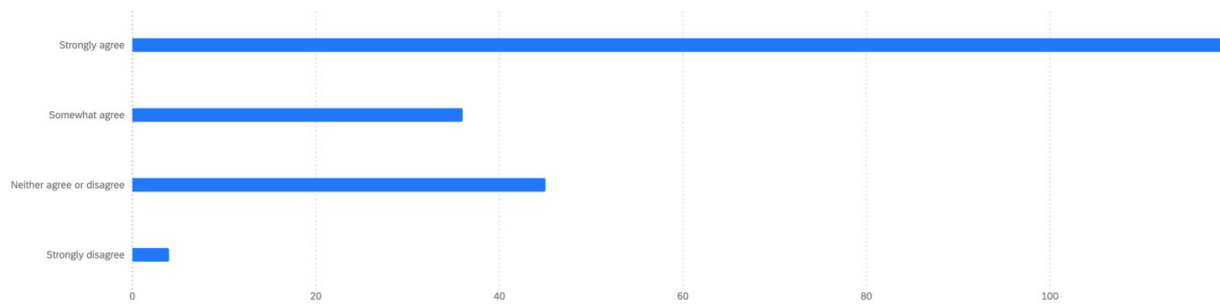


Figure 6

Q8: Please respond to the following statement: Seeing someone of the same race as me in legal careers motivates me to pursue those careers. 204 ⓘ

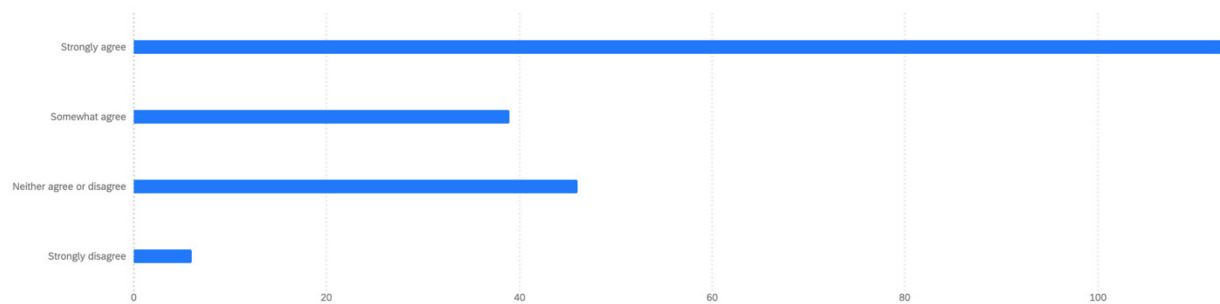


Figure 7

Q9: If you were considering jobs in law prior to this program, has this program increased or decreased your interest in jobs in law? 204 ①

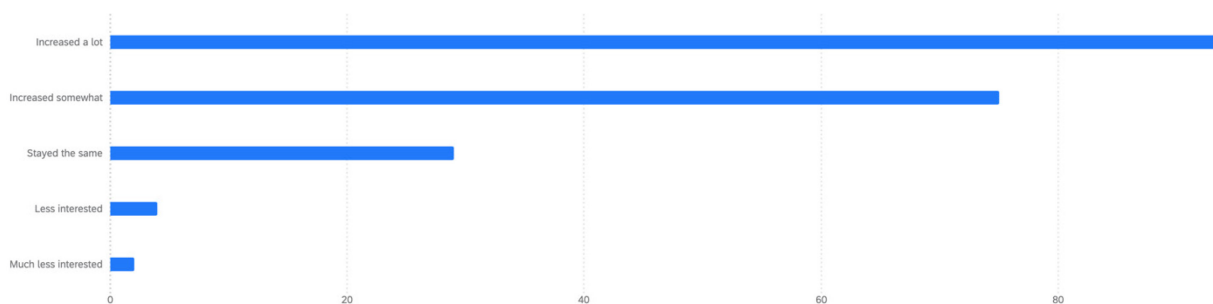
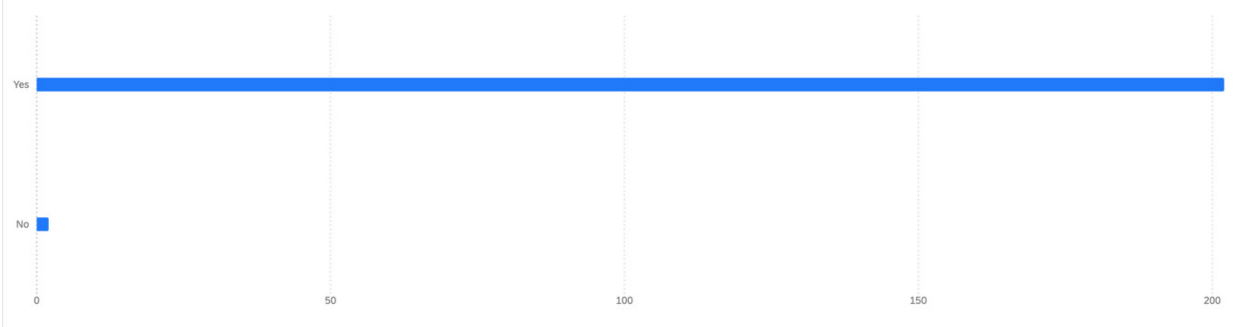


Figure 8 displays positive assessment towards student word-of-mouth on enrolling in the course. As of the Spring 2026 semester, Fall courses have experienced roughly an 8% increase in enrollment, and this past Spring saw a 30% increase in enrollment. While we cannot conclude that these increases in enrollment are directly due to the court program, anecdotally we have heard from dozens of students over the years that they enrolled in, or stayed enrolled in the course due to the program itself.

Figure 8

Q10: Based on the Court Visitation Program, would you recommend this class to other students? 204 ①



Overall, we have determined this program to be a resounding success. It has resulted in university and department-wide news blurbs, which I have attached below as screenshots. It has also resulted in several judges making appearances at Rutgers due to the networking that evolved from the program. Notably, the Honorable Judge Patty Schwartz speaking during a teach-in week at the

Rutgers Honors College in the Fall of 2024, and the Honorable Judge Julien Neals being our keynote speaker for the Political Science Department's annual Careers in Law panel in the Spring of 2025. We expect this relationship to continue with other judges of the Newark courthouse to continue making appearances at Rutgers.

Finally, it is worth noting that the popularity of this program in Newark has resulted in increases in campus resources to get students from New Brunswick to Newark. In POLS 106, we have received grants from the Provost's office and other areas of administration, such as the Tyler Clementi Center, to offer low-income assistance to students who may be concerned about increased course costs to participate in the program. We view this as directly in the spirit of the prior survey data, as the program not only seeks to provide civics and career-minded knowledge to students, but also to provide opportunities of upward mobility to communities that have been historically underrepresented in Federal courthouses.

Appendix A displays photos from the program, featuring some of the 1,300 students who have attended since 2023, along with several sample news blurbs the program has achieved over the last 3 years.

The Courtroom Scholars Program

After several years of successful implementation and administration of the large-scale court program, the Honorable Judge Julien Neals proposed a follow-up program that would provide a deeper, more immersive program for students who displayed exemplary performance in POLS 106. The Spring 2026 seminar was the pilot edition of what will become a new and annual course offering in the Political Science program. We centered the class on a series of 5 experiential learning exercises at the courthouse itself. From a learning outcomes perspective, the goal is to use the

courtrooms as classrooms, something that we don't believe has ever been done before. Overall, we found the first edition to be a resounding success, and we plan to run it every Spring going forward.

After several preliminary meetings held with Judge Neals and his staff, we proposed a new experiential course to the Provost's office, to be run in conjunction with the Federal District Court in Newark, which centered on a series of 5 experiential learning exercises done in the courthouse itself. Our relationship with Judge Neals began through the larger court visitation program in POLS 106. A group of 15-17 students would travel to the courthouse regularly, witnessing proceedings, working with the court, and spending considerable time with judges to study the dynamics between law and politics.

These visits are more intimate in scale and are regularly conducted throughout the Spring 2026 semester. All visits would be conducted in coordination with the course material, centering on the politics of lower courts in the federal court system. However, the politics of the other branches function as the backdrop for how the judiciary functions on a regular basis. Given that politics are regularly changing, the course topics change as well. For the Spring 2026 cohort, we focused much of our efforts on topical lectures on the role of U.S. Attorneys, given that the Newark courthouse was one of the epicenters of political contestation between the executive and judicial branches in early 2026. Judge Neals also paid several in-person and virtual visits to our class in New Brunswick, lecturing to the students and conducting in-class activities with them.

Every year, the topic selection is meant to expand on several issues we explore in Political Science 106, Law & Politics. The relationship that adjudication of law has to the politics of law, and the positions that judges get placed in when navigating the terrain of the criminal and civil justice systems. Along the way, we evaluate our topics through the lens of the real world, apply cases and events in United States courthouses, and unpack our observations within the classroom at

Rutgers in between visits.

Along with the program's success, the Rutgers Foundation also got wind of the new seminar and reached out to alumni to secure donations for funding the students for all their travel for next year's cohort, which we will select in the Fall of 2026.

Appendix B displays photos from our first cohort this past year, as well as the grant announcement.

Appendix A





UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM IN POLITICAL SCIENCE >>>

The undergraduate program continues to chug along. We've got 1100 students pursuing a major or minor under our supervision, with many thinking they're heading to law school, others considering careers in the national intelligence world, and even others heading to Capitol Hill, Trenton, or the international NGO sector, all, to make real their vision for how to make the world a better place.

Two of our faculty, Doug Cantor and Jo-Leo Carney-Waterton, brought our students into much closer interaction with the legal system. Prof. Cantor sent his students in Law and Politics to observe the Federal Courthouse in Newark and to interact with the judges and legal staff there. Prof. Jo-Leo Carney-Waterton brought the judge to campus and had a closer conversation about how the legal system in its reality differs from what one sees on TV. Most of the students report themselves even more interested in law school as a result!

Outside of the legal world, Prof. Field held several information sessions to help students understand career options. We had presentations from students currently in law school or launching careers having just graduated. We had presentations from students in MA-level or PhD-level studies to explain what and why these degrees might be useful. We had presentations from alumni in DC who have moved into legislative or executive branch positions. Still to come are presentations from alumni in the corporate world and in the NGO world, but that's for spring.

The program in Critical Intelligence Studies continues to be the envy of the nation. Prof. Majlesi is regularly called to DC to explain to other schools how to run this program. 23 of her students were hired into the national intelligence community last summer and others are busy researching state- and national-level threats to our well-being. The program focuses on questions of national security but balances them with a strong emphasis on privacy and other constitutional protections. This is, in fact, the abiding question: how do we as a free country balance security and liberty? With help from our faculty, we expect our students to keep that balance in mind wherever they go.

We know our alumni are doing great things. Many staff legislative positions in Trenton and Washington. Many others have moved through law school to careers in public service, in "Big Law", and in private practice. Many of our alumni have already joined our alumni network and are getting to work advising our current students on the ups and downs of the many career directions they've taken. We are hard at building that alumni network and would love to add you to our collection of mentors.



Photos of the 2023 Law and Politics classes observing the Federal Courthouse

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Teaching Spotlight: Law & Politics Course Heads to the Courts

October 26, 2024 | [Teaching Spotlights](#)



What can court proceedings look like at the state and federal levels? Ask the students in Professor Douglas Cantor's undergraduate Law and Politics classes, among the highest enrollment courses offered ... [Read More](#)

The Middlesex Vicinage hosted Professor Douglas Cantor and his students from Rutgers University for a court observation yesterday. The visit started with a roundtable discussion with a judge, a court staff member, and an assistant prosecutor.



12:30 PM · Mar 27, 2024 · 306 Views

The Courtroom Scholars Program  Summarize



Constance Graham

To:  Beth Leech;  Douglas Cantor

  Reply  Reply all  Forward   

Mon 3/9/2026 3:00 PM

 You forwarded this message on Mon 3/9/2026 6:10 PM

Good Afternoon, Beth & Doug,

I hope you had a great weekend.

I'm reaching out because I spoke with an alumna today, and she is willing to support the Courtroom Scholars Program with a \$3k gift to cover transportation costs. Since this program does not yet have its own fund number. What fund in your department should we direct her giving to?

I hope that this is the first of a few gifts that can help this program.

Constance Graham

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