Purpose of the assignment

One of the goals of this course is to understand how the American legal system has evolved to address complex social issues. The purpose of this research assignment is to give students the opportunity to explore in some depth a selected issue and to communicate this information through both an oral presentation and a written paper. Students will use the following skills specified by the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education by:

1. Using library reference sources to gather basic and scholarly information.
2. Using research databases to find articles in scholarly publications.
3. Using the Internet to find high quality web sites.
4. Developing a research paper on the information gathered.
5. Using information ethically by properly citing sources.

This assignment is worth a total of 30 percent of your semester grade: 20 percent for the research paper and 10 percent for the group presentation. I advise that you get started early on this project and perform it in parts. Below you will find my suggestions for how to break this project up into parts. Each part should build upon the previous part and should allow you to spread the tasks across the semester.

Part 1: Overview of the assignment

On the third day of class, you will each be assigned a broad legal topic to research. Your group presentations will consist of groups of 4-5 students. You will want to begin your research immediately in order to prepare for the group presentations to follow. Please look at the syllabus for the date on which you will be required to present. When you get started, you will probably want to begin your search fairly broadly and then narrow your search by finding and using more scholarly sources. After the group presentation, you should continue to conduct research in order to write your research paper. The writing of the research paper is a task which you must perform on your own, although the group presentations later allow you to work together and share each other’s findings in order to prepared the best group presentation possible.

Part 2: Research Instruction by Library Staff

During a class lecture early in the semester, a librarian from the Pace Library will give you a brief overview on how to conduct scholarly research. The librarian will go into detail on how to get started on your projects. The librarian will also explain to you the differences between reliable and unreliable research sources, and will give you some valuable tips for locating scholarly articles for your projects.
Part 3: Get Started on your Research

Using Google, Yahoo, or Lexis-Nexis find newspaper or other general media articles (like Dateline stories or articles in online news sources) on your topic. This is an important step in your research quest, but you should remember the tips from the librarian regarding how you evaluate the reliability of your sources. This step can help you gain a broad overview of the topic, and may help you understand the current public discourse about your issue.

After taking this first step, you should then use the research databases listed below to locate at least 3 scholarly articles and at least 2 primary legal authorities for your topic. Examples of scholarly materials include articles from Law Reviews and articles from scholarly journals of other disciplines. Examples of primary legal authorities include statutes and case law.

Research databases you may use include (the Library will provide assistance):
Westlaw Campus
Lexis-Nexis Academic
Legal Periodicals Index
(Consult Legal Librarian for Others)

Part 4: Research Paper – Check Syllabus for Due Date - 20% of your final grade

You are required to write a research paper on your topic which is typed, double-spaced, in proper APA and Bluebook format, in not smaller than 12 point font, and which is 5-7 pages long. This is NOT a group project. You must write this by yourself. This paper should contain at least 2 primary authorities (see above) and at least 3 scholarly articles on your topic. This paper should include the following at a minimum:

1. An overview or history of the topic or issue

2. A discussion of the current state of the law on the topic (primary authority)

3. A discussion about how the social issue and the law interrelate

4. An examination regarding whether the law has evolved or changed over time regarding this issue. If there has been change, explain how and why the change has occurred.

Annotated Bibliography

You should also submit an annotated bibliography with your research paper. This bibliography does not count towards the paper page limit. An annotated bibliography should include the following:

1. List the sources you have used in your paper. These sources must be listed in proper APA or Bluebook form. Remember the minimum number and type of sources listed above (2 primary sources and 3 scholarly articles)
2. Give a brief summary (2-3 sentences) of each source, without plagiarizing the original material

3. Indicate where you located the source (e.g. using Lexis-Nexis from the UWF library website).

Part 5: Group Presentations - 10% of your final grade

For the Group Presentation, you and your fellow group members should meet early on and decide who will perform which parts of the presentation. Each of you should be involved in planning, researching, and preparing the presentation. Your presentations should last from 30 minutes minimum to 45 minutes maximum. Each Group Presentation should include the following:

1. Give an overview of the topic. Make sure your classmates understand the issue you have researched. Explain the current state of the issue (Is it in danger of being overturned? Are the courts examining the issue? Will there be a referendum? What are the pros and cons – the primary debate on the issue?) Give the historical context. Explain how the law has evolved or changed regarding the issue, and explain why.

2. Provide the legal basis for the issue you are researching. For instance, if you were presenting on abortion rights, you should include the primary legal authorities which control the issue, including the U.S. Constitutional provisions implicated, case law (like Roe v. Wade), and state statutory provisions. Be specific so that students could locate the law on this topic if they need to do so for their reaction papers. You could even provide a list of citations for your classmates if you wish to do so.

3. Give both sides of the issue. At least one of you should take the pro side (provide compelling arguments for the issue), at least one of you should take the con side (provide compelling arguments against the issue), and one of you should be the moderator. You must present both sides of the issue. If you are using a very creative format for the presentation, be sure that you have presented both sides of the issue in some manner during your presentation. The group is not required to, but may choose to present a majority opinion as well, if it wishes, with a minority opinion or opinions encouraged and permitted in that event, as in courts.

4. Prepare an effective presentation which is interesting and informative. You may decide on the delivery method for your presentation. You can be as creative as you would like to be in your presentations. You could use a PowerPoint presentation, a slide show, a video, a lecture with handouts, a debate, a play, a mock trial, a poetry reading, etc. Keep in mind that any of these methods (or other methods) will be acceptable as long as you convey the information effectively. Make it interesting!

5. Be prepared for questions and answers from me and your classmates at the end of the presentation. Each group should be prepared to answer questions from the class at
the conclusion of the presentation. I will allow up to 10 minutes at the end of your presentation for your classmates to ask questions and to discuss the issue you have presented. You should also be prepared to provide a list of authorities to your classmates who would like to conduct further research on the issue. Part of your grade will consist of how prepared you are to discuss your topic. Each group member must be prepared to answer these questions:

1. An examination of the main arguments for and against the issue

2. A conclusion on what should be done or could be done to address the social issue