

Promoting Services and Celebrating

Working together to provide access to legal information and justice

By Mari Cheney, Jennifer Dalglish, and Susan Mecklem

THREE LAW LIBRARIANS WALK INTO A BAR . . . OR RATHER, THREE LAW LIBRARIANS WRITE A FEW BLOG POSTS. MARI CHENEY, JENNIFER DALGLISH, AND SUSAN MECKLEM AUTHORED THREE SEPARATE "WEEK IN THE LIFE" BLOG POSTS FOR THE OREGON CHAPTER OF THE SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION. THE BLOG POSTS WERE THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS ARTICLE ON EXPLORING THE DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES OF OREGON LAW LIBRARIES, ALONG WITH THE POSSIBILITIES THAT COME FROM WORKING TOGETHER.

Law librarians have a few universal traits in common: expert knowledge of legal research and legal materials, both in print and online; great listening skills and the ability to redirect a patron who might get lost in his or her question; the ability to multitask; teaching skills, whether to a large audience or one-on-one; and flexibility. That patron who always needs something at 4:53 on a Friday afternoon is both our nemesis and what gets us excited about our work.

We all agree that the number one thing all law libraries have in common is that our patrons come first. Regardless of the type of law library—academic, public, or law firm—a patron's question or request is first priority. A big difference, though, is the types of patrons the library serves.

Patron Differences

The public county law library provides the same level of service to every patron who walks in the door (or calls or emails). It doesn't matter if the patron is an attorney, judge, or self-represented litigant. The law librarian spends as little or as much time as is needed to assist the patron. A short reference interaction might include referring the patron to another resource, like a legal clinic, teaching the patron to conduct basic legal research, or providing easy online assistance. A long reference interaction

might include walking the patron through more advanced legal research, providing additional resource referrals, or offering more time-consuming online assistance.

On the other hand, the law firm's patrons are exclusively that law firm's attorneys and staff, though occasionally a law firm librarian might work directly with a client on a project. The law firm librarian gets to know his or her patrons' working styles and communication preferences, which allows tailoring of responses to reference questions and research projects for each individual attorney.

The academic law library is often a middle ground of service. While some academic law libraries restrict access to students, faculty, and staff, others allow public patrons to use limited services. Even public law school libraries limit the types of services public patrons can use.

At Lewis & Clark Law School's Boley Law Library, public patrons can check out books after paying for a library card, use reserve material in exchange for their ID, and use a public-access Westlaw terminal or one of the other public computer terminals for research. At the Clackamas County Law Library, public patrons are welcome to use all materials and resources, but only attorneys are allowed to check out designated materials.

What else do we all have in common? We do not give any of our patrons legal advice in accordance with state law. Though both Jennifer and Mari earned J.D.s, they do not practice as attorneys.

Job Duties

While another commonality among law libraries is that the staff all have expert knowledge of legal research, legal materials, and legal databases, law librarians' duties and responsibilities vary by library type.

At the county law library, pretty much all staff members end up doing a little bit of everything. One minute the law librarian might be down on the floor checking computer wire connections, and the next minute she might be standing in front of a body of power



advocating to continue helping to provide equal access to justice through funding public law libraries. From acquisitions to cataloging to processing payroll to logging patrons into legal research databases online, there is never a shortage of things to do.

When it comes down to it, everything that happens at a public law library, from maintaining the physical space to negotiating online legal research subscription database contracts, is ultimately all about helping the individual patrons. Even though librarians may wear many hats while working in the public law library, the heart of public law librarianship lies in the assistance that is provided to all citizens, regardless of who they are or what their legal request may be.

The law firm library is similar to the county law library in that a single librarian is tasked with many areas of expertise. At large firms, there may be librarians with specific duties (budgeting, cataloging), but most librarians do reference work as well. Besides answering legal reference questions that include preparing legislative histories and retrieving cases and statutes, a law firm librarian does nontraditional library tasks, such as knowledge management, company research, and competitive intelligence. As with other law libraries, the firm library will request materials from other libraries, track database subscriptions, and manage myriad passwords. Business and client development projects often make up more of a firm librarian's day than traditional legal research.

Even a small law school library is quite different from the other two types of law libraries just described. While there might not be separate departments, cataloging and reference are likely



brating Differences

disparate tasks without overlap. At a medium-sized law school like Lewis & Clark, the library staff is large enough to have separate departments: circulation, electronic services, reference, and technical services. The circulation staff covers interlibrary loans, checking books in and out, and attorney services (document delivery). Electronic services covers database support, managing Westlaw and LexisNexis passwords, instructional technology, and updating and maintaining the library's website and online catalogue. The technical services department includes acquisitions, cataloging, serials management, and loose-leaf filing.

Academic reference librarians do other things besides work at the reference desk: they teach, specialize in government documents and foreign and international law, write research guides, and much, much more. An academic law librarian typically works a few shifts per week at the reference desk and spends the rest of his or her time working on a variety of projects: research guides, in-depth reference requests from students and faculty, updating the library's social media presence, and peripheral tasks like testing new databases, writing book reviews, and working on professional association activities.

Practical Information

Of course, besides the work librarians do, there are similarities and differences in the practical aspects of managing a law library and its resources.

The public law library and law firm library are more likely to have a smaller staff than the academic law library. Both the public law library and law firm library may have only one person on staff. The law firm library is unique because it may be run out of a central office, with a librarian staffing multiple locations, or there may be a librarian in every office; there are many law firm models. The academic law library typically has the most staff and many behind-the-scenes people who patrons never meet.

Similarly, the academic law library always subscribes to the most online legal databases. The public law library subscribes to the fewest, and some public law libraries subscribe to none. The law firm is somewhere in the middle.

The type of teaching varies. In an academic law library, the situation might be more formal, with librarians teaching their own classes, whether they are introductory or advanced. The public law librarian might teach classes to court

employees or public librarians as an outreach tool or host classes within the law library for the legal community and the public. The law firm librarian teaches summer and first-year associates the basics of legal research and is available to teach advanced classes. A commonality is that all librarians teach one-on-one in an informal way every day.

Regarding the budget, all law libraries' budgets are decreasing. All of us have to make do with less money (and possibly fewer employees) to provide more services.

The management structure of law libraries varies greatly. In a public law library, no organizational structure is the same, but most report to a board, director, or both, and almost all are under the greater authority of their Board of County Commissioners. In a law firm, depending on the library's size, the law firm library will have a director with a few staff members while reporting to the managing partner or chief information officer. In an academic library with a larger staff, separate departments have department managers who report to the director. The director then reports to the law school dean.

Working Together

Despite the fact that law libraries can vary greatly, it is important to work together, and there are a number of ways we can come together to promote access to legal information and justice.

If law librarians working in each type of law library have knowledge of the resources and types of services the other law libraries provide, they can make better referrals. At a law school, it is common to get questions from pro se patrons about court forms and free legal services. The public law librarian has better knowledge of these types of sources and can make better referrals. Additionally, if the law firm librarian has knowledge of the resources available at the academic law library, he or she can borrow items and make requests through a document delivery or interlibrary program. This knowledge of what other libraries collect can cut down on costs. Another alternative is partnering with other types of law libraries to create a consortium to collectively buy resources and share them or collectively negotiate with vendors.

This sharing of information can continue with the development of web pages—the academic law library can list the public law library's resources on a pro se or free sources for attorneys resource page. The law firm library can list the law school library's resources on an intranet page with information about how to request print material or journal articles. The public law libraries can provide links to the academic law library's resources that are freely available to the public on their websites.

The law firm librarian has the daunting task of teaching incoming associates how to do cost-effective legal research. But this task doesn't

fall solely on his or her shoulders. The academic law librarian should know what methodology the firm librarian employs and what databases he or she subscribes to so that in introductory and advanced legal research classes, the academic librarian can also focus his or her teaching. Law students should also learn

about the public law library so that in the more-than-likely event they have to strike out on their own, they will be aware of the free law librarian assistance, materials, and resources available to them.

Networking is another thing all law librarians can do to share information. In Portland, an informal group of mostly firm librarians meets once a month for a brown bag lunch. It would be worthwhile to make an effort to include academic and government librarians, as well, and perhaps take turns hosting brown bag lunches at our respective libraries.

Do you have ideas about how law libraries should work together to promote library services? We'd love to hear them! ■

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