

What Can the Faculty Expect from the Library of the Twenty-first Century?*

Barbara Bintliff**

Professor Bintliff describes what law faculty can expect from their law school library in the twenty-first century, while also suggesting what librarians will expect in return from their faculty.

¶1 The expectations of users are important in shaping decisions related to the library; they, in turn, shape the future of the library itself. Thus, by discussing expectations, we can get a sense of how libraries may evolve and change their operations to support faculty research needs.

¶2 As reflecting about faculty expectations generally, I found myself thinking of the faculty at my own institution, the University of Colorado at Boulder, which divides neatly into two groups. We have faculty who are very library-intensive in their research and who request a lot of services and support. They want librarians to help them find information, consult with them to determine its relevancy, organize it, and send it to them as they prepare for classes, conduct research, and keep current on developments in their fields. I assumed their expectations for library services and operations would be high. On the other hand, we have faculty who find their own information on the Web and rarely feel the need to come to the library or speak to a librarian. These individuals are pretty self-sufficient and are not heavy consumers of library support. I assumed their expectations would be quite different from the first group and limited to issues surrounding the timely provision of resources. How, then, I asked myself, do I predict how the expectations of these diverse groups will evolve as we move further into the twenty-first century?

¶3 I hit upon a time-honored practice: polling the faculty. Specifically, I asked about a dozen of our newer and younger faculty members what they would expect from the library in the future, what new or different services they would need or would like to see, and how they thought things might change.

¶4 The responses I received fell into two categories. First, there were faculty members who wanted extensive involvement in, with, from, and by the library. Their expectations generally included the word “lots,” as in “lots of resources, lots

* © Barbara Bintliff, 2004. This article is a revised version of a speech made during a program titled “What Faculty and Directors Should Expect from a Twenty-First Century Law Library in Order to Support Legal Scholarship,” presented by the Section on Law Libraries at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Law Schools, Atlanta, Georgia, Jan. 5, 2004.

** Nicholas Rosenbaum Professor of Law and Director of the Law Library, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado.

of assistance, lots of instruction.” Then there were faculty members who work independently, using resources almost exclusively in their offices. Their expectations generally focused on the library ensuring that the resources they needed would be available quickly. These responses did not tell me much I didn’t already know, but they did give me free rein to speculate on my own. And with that background and introduction, here are my thoughts about what law faculty can expect from the library of the twenty-first century.

What the Faculty Can Expect from the Library

Constant Change

¶5 Faculty can expect constant change. This change will be most apparent in the amount, content, and format of library resources available for research and curricular support. Librarians will communicate frequently with faculty members, offering recommendations for new sources that might be of interest in their research and teaching. The sources will include databases, books, Internet sites, fiche collections, and other materials. Librarians will suggest new searching techniques for databases and electronic services. There will be much more consideration of fees and charges for accessing information, as subscription costs and usage fees for electronic resources increase, as more resource sharing like interlibrary loan and document delivery is necessary, and as cooperative collection development becomes a must.

¶6 The librarians will try to keep things calm on the exterior and not let the changes affect faculty, despite the fact that the library staff may be scrambling behind the scenes. Librarians will try to keep services transparent and seamless. Faculty can, however, expect changes in the format of favorite resources. What was once found only in a print format may now be available in multiple formats—print, print with electronic updates, and electronic, for example. Some may be accompanied by a CD or DVD, regardless of whether the main publication is print or electronic. Some resources may become purely electronic. New formats will be introduced into the mix. Finally, faculty can expect that libraries will reduce the purchase of print materials and continually rebalance the collection as availability of resources, space on the shelves, equipment demands, budgets, and human resources change frequently.

Customized Information

¶7 Faculty can expect more customized information coming from the library, more information that is tailored to support an individual’s specific scholarship and teaching. Faculty will find more information “pushed” at them even before they ask for it, as librarians use “faculty interest databases” to track and anticipate faculty requests. Librarians will capitalize on the ever-faster ability to receive, assemble, and disseminate information via electronic communications. In addition, librarians will work with faculty to compile an array of information and sources adapted to their specific needs. Perhaps this will take the shape of a custom database for a specific faculty member, consistent, of course, with applicable copyright laws and

licensing restrictions. Librarians may create portals for faculty members, enabling each professor to personalize the site with individual information and Web sites.

¶8 Library catalogs already have evolved beyond providing only call numbers and bibliographic information—they now link to full-text resources, provide linkable URLs for Web sites, and offer sound and video clips. Some law libraries already offer periodical indexes integrated with their catalogs; faculty can expect this trend toward a more robust catalog to continue and spread. Catalogs now offer access to a tremendous array of resources and will continue to expand their content to offer one-stop shopping for information resources.

Customized Collections

¶9 Faculty can expect customized library collections. The time is long past when most law libraries can aspire to comprehensiveness either in print or electronically. While the largest and best-supported collections—Harvard, Yale, Berkeley, Michigan, Minnesota, Texas, and others like them—will continue to provide broad and deep resource collections, most law school libraries will focus their acquisitions. Whether the emphasis is on acquiring items unique to the local environment, or on building an outstanding collection in a very limited range of subject areas, most academic law libraries will concentrate on collecting materials that will emphasize their uniqueness. The intent will be to create a collection that reflects the law school's mission and emphasis. This will help with faculty recruitment and will draw scholars to the law school.

¶10 The downside to a less comprehensive collection is that libraries will need to borrow more through interlibrary loan, with its attendant delays and rising costs. It also will mean that law libraries will lend more, as their specialized collections become more important nationally. The lending will come with costs, too, as expenses for photocopying, mailing, scanning, and faxing, as well as license fees, staff time, and the inaccessibility of materials on loan are factored into the cost. And it will mean that libraries will rely on electronic resources to support more parts of the curriculum, likely including even core subjects, as their tangible collections become more tightly focused.

¶11 Building a customized collection will necessarily mean a reduction in the purchase of print resources and the elimination of duplicate holdings as limited funds are allocated in a different manner. But faculty can also expect an emphasis, at least in some libraries, on maintaining archival collections for purposes of preservation, verification of electronic content, and backup use when the power goes out. This is an important role academic law libraries have assumed as the electronic information age progresses.

More Research Assistance

¶12 Faculty members can expect more research assistance from the library. Faculty will find it important to consult and collaborate with librarians as databases and the Internet increase in content and as the print collection continues to grow.

Finding almost any information has become complicated, and searching for information in electronic formats requires ever-increasing knowledge and sophistication. The commercialization of the Web means that resources previously free now come with fees for access and printing; working with a librarian experienced in electronic searching will result in cost savings and better information retrieval. Faculty can expect to see librarians specializing in research in a particular field or a particular database, as searching and resources become more sophisticated.

¶13 Similarly, as new technologies for accessing information arise, faculty can expect librarians to provide assistance in their use. We can already surf the Internet via PDAs, tablet PCs, and even cell phones. Wireless technology will improve and become ubiquitous, and new hardware and gadgets for accessing information will be developed. We will eventually see a viable personal e-book reader. Law libraries have long been in the forefront of law school technology. Faculty can expect that they will continue to experiment with and offer new ways to find information.

¶14 Law librarians will be called upon more frequently to instruct faculty and students in the effective use of these technologies, including offering specialized training to research assistants. Librarians will work even closer with the student body, teaching effective research skills on a wide range of resources and ensuring the adequate preparation of future attorneys. At the same time, less and less of this instruction will be face-to-face, as technologies develop to allow for communications between remote parties and at differing times.

Round-the-Clock Assistance

¶15 Faculty can expect round-the-clock reference and research assistance. However, they should not be surprised if their midnight reference questions are answered by someone on the other side of the world. Computer tech support has already moved overseas, pioneering the way for other services to follow. Why shouldn't libraries form worldwide consortia to provide 24/7 research assistance, for practical and for financial reasons? This could be a boon when you have a request in the wee hours of the morning that calls for a straightforward answer, such as the identification of the source of a quotation, but it could mean less quality or less precision in responses requiring more complex research. Nationwide library consortia are already experimenting with 24-hour reference services; there's no reason to believe they won't also look abroad in the near future.

Summary

¶16 In summary, while much will remain the same in terms of the level of service faculty expect and receive from their law school's library, much will change. Librarians will try to keep the behind-the-scene changes invisible to faculty and will continue to provide high levels of service. Law libraries have traditionally not only been autonomous but also quite independent in their operations. That will change. We are entering an age of heightened interlibrary cooperation. There will be compromises in collections and services. Future directions will depend on fac-

ulty input, and faculty members will find librarians asking more frequently for their views on pending decisions, as libraries try to maintain strong services in a changing information world.

Librarian Expectations of Faculty

¶17 In recognition that this discussion is a two-way street, however, there is another set of expectations regarding library service in the future that should be considered: the expectations librarians will have of law faculty.

Treatment As Valued Partners

¶18 As their involvement in the research and teaching enterprise expands, law school librarians increasingly will expect to be treated as valued partners, even if only junior or limited partners, in the academic enterprise. Librarians are researchers and teachers who work intensively with faculty, students, and the public. Librarians may contribute enough to a research project to be acknowledged individually in footnotes and may on occasion even deserve recognition as the co-author of an article. Their role in classroom instruction will become necessary, as resources in a given field proliferate and become more complex. The contributions of librarians to faculty research and scholarship and the law school's teaching mission are numerous and significant, and should be recognized appropriately.

Faculty Input

¶19 Librarians will expect, want, need, and require faculty input into library policies. Libraries support the law school, but they cannot do that without faculty assistance. The preferences and expectations of individual faculty members are important to libraries, guiding many policy decisions.

¶20 But librarians will expect faculty to respect their professional judgment as they manage the library through this period of change. Librarians may, for example, insist that both print and electronic formats of a particular resource are necessary, even if apparently duplicative, because of content differences and significant, conceptual differences in their use; because of questions surrounding the reliability and stability of the electronic publication; and because of the importance of preparing students for an employment situation that may not include electronic access. Such a decision is not reached lightly or in a knee-jerk fashion—it is based on years of experience and expertise in the field of librarianship. Librarians will not and cannot cancel print resource on the sole ground that the content is available elsewhere.

Better Pay and Faculty Status

¶21 Faculty can expect that many law librarians, and not just the directors, will ask for better pay and full faculty status. The academic contributions of librarians already are recognized with an award of faculty status at many universities. We

have seen law reference and research librarians' scholarly and intellectual contributions to faculty research and the law school's teaching mission increasing exponentially. Law librarians' need for academic freedom and the protections it ensures will become more evident as their work with classroom faculty on research projects and instructional programs takes on new importance.

Recognition of Library's Complex Roles

¶22 Librarians will expect recognition of the fact that the staff of every academic law library juggles complex and interrelated roles. The primary focus of law school libraries is to support their institution's faculty and students, but they also support legal education across the country and around the world through consortial activities, resource sharing, interlibrary loans, and other programs. Academic law libraries are essential to the preservation of primary and secondary print sources, a role the electronic resource providers have not yet adequately addressed. Big donor alumni law firms are able to cut back on their own print collections only because they can rely on law school libraries to satisfy their information needs. And academic law libraries serve the public and the correctional system, roles that become even more important as court, county, public, and prison law libraries are downsized.

Conclusion

¶23 The law school of the twenty-first century has been revolutionized by the advent of electronic resources; by legal education's—and the law's—increasing move to interdisciplinary studies; by the establishment of centers and institutes, and the increase in the number and size of clinical programs; by growth in faculty size; by changes in facilities; and by a host of other factors demographic, economic, social, and political in nature. The law library traditionally has responded well to these changes, often anticipating and sometimes leading the way. The dean and the faculty can expect that the library will remain a vital, innovative, and responsive force in legal education and the life of the law school.