

# Sharing Your Skills

*A survey and analysis of community-based legal research programs established and operated by AALL local chapters*

Teaching and conducting legal research is the *raison d'être* for most law librarians and an essential part of their jobs. Front line reference librarians are accustomed to addressing challenging legal research questions posed by lawyers, judges, professors, law students, and other professionals. Given the sophisticated clientele and the complexity of the subject matter, it is little wonder that the research expertise of law librarians within their institutions remains in constant demand.

What about those persons who are interested in learning about the law and legal research but are unfamiliar with how to navigate the disparate and oftentimes confusing resources used in legal research? How can librarians help this constituency learn the basics of legal research? How can they reach out effectively to this group outside of the work or office context?

Fortunately, many librarians have the opportunity to do this by participating in legal research programs sponsored by AALL local chapters. As past chairs of a successful

legal research program operated by the Greater Philadelphia Law Library Association (GPLLA), we were familiar with the professional, psychological, and remunerative benefits of operating a community-based legal research program.

Chapter-sponsored legal research programs provide tangible benefits to members, such as teaching opportunities, committee experience, recruiting forums, and increased revenues. They also help the targeted community by offering a high-quality, low-cost legal research course.



by Timothy C. Von Dulm and Ed Greenlee

However, we were only familiar with our immediate program, and we were interested in knowing if other local chapters maintain such programs, the details of these programs, and the specific benefits that others see in sponsoring these outreach efforts. The logistics, opportunities, and challenges associated with each of the chapter-sponsored legal research programs merited further investigation.

### Preliminary Investigation and Survey

To this end, we examined the Web sites of local AALL chapters to determine whether or not such research programs exist. As it turns out, a number of AALL local chapters successfully operate legal research programs designed specifically for members of their local communities. A preliminary search of chapter Web sites revealed that approximately 23 percent of local chapters indicated they hosted some form of community-based legal research program.

After collecting preliminary information, we designed a survey to answer basic questions about the legal research programs implemented by local chapters. The online survey consisted of 22 questions, which sought basic chapter information, such as the size of the chapter, when the chapter was established, and the chapter's primary constituency. The questions also asked for specifics associated with established legal research programs and whether chapters were interested in continuing or expanding existing programs or establishing these types of legal research programs if they did not already have such a program in place.

We then distributed the survey via e-mail to each of the chapter presidents or other members of the executive board during April and May 2007. The survey

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## 7 Tips for Starting a Legal Research Program

1. Chapter programs located in or near major metropolitan centers have an easier time finding the critical mass of participants.
2. Advertise the program early and often. This is especially true for programs just getting started.
3. The cost of the program has an effect on the turnout—lower priced programs typically attract larger numbers. At the same time, don't be afraid to charge a reasonable amount of money for the program.
4. Ask vendors for assistance when establishing such a program to help offset some of the costs.
5. Supplement lectures with hands-on exercises and additional homework exercises.
6. Evaluate your programs for valuable feedback on its effectiveness.
7. Have fun! All participants should leave with a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and opportunities to engage in professional and personal growth.

had a response rate of more than 60 percent, with 19 out of 31 chapters responding.

What were some of the basic characteristics of the chapters that responded to our survey? As a whole, the respondent chapters were well-established and had been operating on average for almost 35 years. The average date of establishment for the chapters was 1973. The mean was slightly later, with the average age of establishment at 1979. The chapters also varied greatly in size, from a low of 50 or fewer members to a high of more than 250 members. The median size of the respondent chapters was 101-150 members, with primary concentrations within the 51-100 and more-than-250 member ranges. Chapter respondents were located overwhelmingly in urban environments, with approximately 80 percent (15 out of 19) serving within this type of constituency, as opposed to rural, suburban, or other.

Interestingly, only 37 percent of the responding chapters had established any type of community-based legal research programs. This was somewhat lower than we expected. Nevertheless, when asked whether they might “be interested in establishing such a program,” approximately 90 percent of these same chapters, including those that had already established such programs, indicated that they were interested either in undertaking such an endeavor or in expanding their present programs.

### Characteristics of Local Chapter Legal Research Programs

Of the seven local chapters that had established community-based legal research programs, what did these programs look like? How many teaching sessions were involved in the program? How long were the sessions? Which topics were covered?

The responses to the survey answered these questions and more. First, chapters appear evenly split regarding the number of sessions associated with the program, with three programs electing to hold a single session, two programs holding two to three sessions, and two programs holding six or more sessions.

Programs also varied in terms of the length of each of the sessions, with two programs holding sessions up to an hour and a half, and four programs holding sessions from two hours to a full day. Not surprisingly, single session programs tended to be of longer length, while multiple session programs were shorter.

More than half of the programs were offered yearly, with one program offered biannually and two others offered on an as-needed and level-of-interest basis. Charlotte Henderson, Legal Research Institute chair for the Arizona Association of Law Libraries (AzALL), states that her chapter’s legal research program has at times focused “on newer or advanced levels of legal researchers, such as attorneys, paralegals, or librarians.” She adds that “we have also presented programs for public librarians.” In order to make legal research instruction available to more people in the future, AzALL may look to technology such as Webinars and other Web-based formats.

Topics of the classes offered by local chapters covered standard legal research areas, such as case law, statutes, and secondary sources. However, depending upon the interest of the constituency, specialized topics, such as bankruptcy, family law, administrative law, and cost effective legal research, were also included. Program instructors were predominantly librarians, although two of the programs also used vendor representatives to teach classes, and one program utilized a law school faculty member.

Costs of the programs also varied. Most programs were either free or cost up to \$50. Two of the programs, however, charged participants significantly more, with fees ranging up to \$225 per student. Notably, the two programs with the higher fees corresponded with the programs offering the highest number of sessions (six or more sessions). To offset the costs, six out of the seven chapters were able to successfully secure outside sponsorship for their legal research programs.

To generate interest in the program, chapters used a variety of advertising techniques. The most popular method was to advertise the program on the chapter’s online discussion list. However, this method of advertisement was invariably supplemented with promoting the program on the chapter Web site, distributing flyers, and promoting the program by word-of-mouth. Interestingly, only one chapter advertised the program in a local newspaper.

Program participants were drawn from a wide-array of backgrounds. Students, paralegals, and general members of the public were heavily represented in the courses. Somewhat surprisingly, however, a large number of participants were fellow librarians. These were most often librarians without legal backgrounds or experience, who were looking for employment as

librarians in a legal setting. One program indicated that attorneys also attended.

As for the average number of participants at each program, the median attendance was 16-20 participants, with a low of 6-10 participants and a high of 31 or more participants. Attendance does seem correlated to price—the higher-cost programs attracted fewer participants than their lower cost counterparts. Underscoring the wide range of participants served by legal research programs offered by local chapters, Joan Shear, a member of Law Librarians of New England (LLNE), states that class participants “come from a variety of backgrounds, but all need to know more about the nature of legal research for their jobs. The last time we offered the class we had librarians with many years of library experience [who were] new to law libraries, as was a person with many years of experience in a law firm who was brand new to libraries.”

### Perceptions and Evaluations

So how are these programs viewed and evaluated by the participants and interested stakeholders? Naturally, opinions vary from year to year depending upon the students participating in the course, as well as the instructors involved in the program. Nevertheless, most of these programs appear well established with a continuing demand for future classes, which speaks positively to their utility and acceptance.

On a more concrete level, participants involved with the GPLLA Introduction to Legal Research Program indicated, via course evaluations, that they were “very satisfied” with the course. Participants typically rated instructors highly, noting that they were “well-qualified, experienced, and professional.” While students were generally very satisfied with the program, the most common suggestions for improvement included having more hands-on exercises to supplement the lectures as well as additional homework assignments. Nevertheless, when asked whether they would recommend the course to future students interested in learning about legal research, students were overwhelmingly positive in their evaluation (an average score of 6.26 on a 7 point scale for the past two years) and felt that it was a “great course” and would be particularly helpful to those persons “just starting out and thrown into law.”

Stakeholders in the community were also generally impressed with the quality

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and value offered by the GPLLA Legal Research program and “know it’s a good course.” Mary S. Newman, library director of the Philadelphia office of Blank Rome LLP, consistently sends new law librarians and clerks to the program to brush up on their legal research skills and knowledge. A proud alumna of the GPLLA program, Newman believes that the “program truly offers something for everyone.”

Newman reflects back to her own experiences. “I have been a law librarian now for 20 years, and [the GPLLA Introduction to Legal Research program] was the single best course I ever took,” she says. “I honestly don’t think a legal bib class in library school would have been nearly as effective because it would have been too much information and not enough application. The information I learned in this program had real world, on-the-job impact and immediately helped me to be a better librarian.”

### Benefits of Legal Research Programs

Local chapters should strongly consider establishing a community-based legal research program, due to the tremendous opportunities and benefits associated with these programs—there is some benefit almost surely to satisfy many, if not most, needs of chapter members. More specifically, for those members interested in volunteer work, legal research programs provide volunteer opportunities for members interested in providing valuable services to members of the local community. Members interested in acquiring teaching experience will find wonderful opportunities within these programs to explore and expand their pedagogic talents.

For those who are simply interested in becoming more actively involved in their local chapters, establishing a legal research program provides abundant opportunities for committee experience and connecting with local members of the profession. For those concerned about the advancing age of many law librarians and interested in maintaining the vibrancy of the profession, establishing a legal research program provides a wonderful forum for recruiting talented new members with an interest in legal research into the field of law librarianship.

Finally, for those with an eye toward the fiscal health of their local chapters, legal research programs can prove lucrative and provide local chapters the financial flexibility to fund/pursue additional chapter-sponsored activities. Just to take one example, revenues generated from the GPPLA Legal Research program enabled the chapter to fully fund a newly established student scholarship, a scholarship that two Philadelphia-area library students were able to take advantage of this year.

Notwithstanding the benefits that accrue to local chapters, participants in legal research programs also enjoy significant advantages. First, they are able to access a high-quality, low-cost legal research program taught by experts who practice regularly in the field. Through the teacher/student relationship, participants also become acquainted with local members of the profession whom they may contact in the future with any law- or professionally-related questions. Finally, students will have acquired a new set of skills and an understanding of the legal research process that should enable them to become more effective researchers and, ultimately, enable them to better market themselves to potential employers.

Local chapter legal research courses also benefit the community by fulfilling a need not met by other organizations. While library schools and paralegal schools frequently offer legal research courses, these are often available only as part of a certificate or degree program. Local chapters make legal research classes available to a larger segment of the community on a single course basis and for a cost that is much less than that charged by colleges or universities.

### Considerations and Suggestions for Establishing a Program

So now you have decided to try to start your own chapter-sponsored legal research program. What are some major pointers you should keep in mind? First, chapter programs located in or near major metropolitan centers with a concentration of law firms probably have an easier time finding the critical mass of participants necessary to justify such a program. Paralegals, library assistants, and librarians new to the legal profession, all of whom

are found in large firm libraries, oftentimes make up large portions of these legal research courses.

Second, be sure to advertise the program early and often. This is especially true for programs just getting started. Library directors and firm administrators may need a few years to become aware of the legal research program, but once this awareness develops, these directors and administrators can become a reliable source of students.

Third, be aware that the cost of the program does have an effect on the turnout—lower priced programs typically attract a larger number of students. At the same time, however, don’t be afraid to charge a reasonable amount of money for the program. Most firm administrators will not mind paying a bit more for a legal research program provided that the content meets or exceeds their expectations. Moreover, the smaller class size typically associated with the more expensive programs enables a more personal experience between teacher and student.

Fourth, don’t hesitate to ask vendors for assistance when establishing such a program to help offset some of the costs. Vendors can be wonderful partners in helping to provide students with texts, as well as teaching specific portions of the course.

Fifth, you may want to consider supplementing lectures with hands-on exercises. Given their unfamiliarity with many of the sources covered, students consistently request practical experience to supplement lectures.

Sixth, evaluate your programs. Class evaluations offer valuable feedback on the effectiveness of your instructors and your course content.

Finally, have fun! After all, notwithstanding all the above-referenced benefits, local chapter research programs should provide all participants (at whatever level) a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and opportunities to engage in professional and personal growth. ■

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