

Answering Faculty Research Requests

by Robert S. Payne

Professional Perspectives—Tools and Techniques of the Trade. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional, and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Carol Avery Nicholson at 919/962-1199 or carol_nicholson@unc.edu.

Introduction

As the newest Reference Librarian in the law library, I found my primary duty to be the supervision of our Faculty Research Request Services. In an academic law library serving a well-respected law school, this was a daunting task. In the past, each full-time librarian was assigned to answer the requests of at least three law faculty, with the Reference Department and its student employees, the Reference Assistants, covering many requests when the project was too large for a single librarian to accomplish among many other responsibilities, but things were changing.

The Process

At present, we are moving over to a newer system for centralized faculty support. Our current system entails a simple concept: one e-mail address for all requests, and one librarian supervising the completion of all projects. Here's how it works:

1. Law faculty ponders the law.
2. Law faculty submits the research request.
3. Reference Assistant informs Reference Assistant Supervisor.
4. Request is assigned and completed.
5. Law faculty is informed of project status.
6. Project is completed.

Looking at the steps listed above, the process is simple, and there is only one person ultimately responsible for answering the request. Below, we will go over each step in detail.

Law Faculty Ponders the Law

The author is not competent to comment on this portion of the process. It is interesting to note, however, that requests from law faculty range from a search of all antitrust periodicals in the past 20 years (for the federal government's policy towards vertical price fixing), to reserving a text on Malaysian tax law, to a search for articles on the health benefits of white wine over red wine.

Law Faculty Submits the Research Request

The e-mail system has one account named "Reference Assistant." This is the general e-mail account for the Reference Assistants, and in theory, all requests should be sent to this account. More complicated requests are often phoned in to the desk, and either the Reference Librarian or the Reference Assistant takes the call, writes down the project, and often goes up to the law faculty's office for a better description of what is required.

Often, however, the calls or e-mails come directly to the Reference Assistant Supervisor, who takes the project information. Also, some law faculty still operate under the "library liaison" or "pet librarian" concept and call their favorite librarians to fulfill the request. This approach has not caused any problems to date, and often the "pet librarian" will come to the Reference Assistants for further assistance. In the future, it will be necessary to better document these requests.

Reference Assistant Informs Reference Assistant Supervisor

Once the request has been received, the Reference Assistants inform the Reference Supervisor, and he reviews the request. If more information is necessary, he makes the call or knocks on the law faculty's door.

Informing the Reference Assistant Supervisor is the key to accountability in the law library. With one central person to answer and supervise all requests, there is one person responsible for completing the projects. Having accountability vested in (or cursed upon) one librarian gives the law faculty confidence that their research needs will be met and keeps the work organized so that projects do not disappear or become misplaced in the rush to complete other day-to-day duties at the law library. Answering Faculty Research Requests is the primary responsibility of the Reference Assistant Supervisor; other duties are pushed aside in order to answer the faculty requests.

Request Is Assigned and Completed

Now that the research request has been submitted, the Reference Assistant Supervisor considers the request, assigns the task to a Reference Assistant, completes the assignment by himself, forwards the request to the department primarily responsible for that type of request, or seeks support from other librarians to complete the project. In some cases, it is even the sad duty of the Reference Assistant Supervisor to inform the law faculty that a request cannot be met, but those occasions have been very rare.

Law Faculty Is Informed of Project Status

A simple e-mail or phone call responding to the law faculty is usually sufficient to reassure the law faculty that the request has been received, has gone through the proper channels, and is being completed.

Project Is Completed

The project is completed quickly and efficiently (or so we hope), and the Reference Assistants usually hand-deliver the completed work to the law faculty. The hand-delivery is important to remind law faculty that the law library is staffed with people, to demonstrate that the project was quickly and personally handled, and to ascertain that the completed work is actually what the law faculty originally requested.

Concerns with the Program

Upon first assuming my duties at the law library, the Reference Assistants became swamped with requests. Reflecting on the work load assigned and completed, I marvel at how much we accomplished. Three major concerns quickly arose: Reference Assistant training, record-keeping, and advertising.

How to Resolve the Concerns

Training. First, Research Assistants must be trained. It is too easy to ignore or misplace a request, or to complete a simple request without informing a

A Desktop Learning Opportunity

full-time Reference Librarian. We answered this concern with a training meeting for new Research Assistants, a training manual, and frequent (hourly) visits to the Reference Desk by the Reference Assistant Supervisor to ascertain whether new projects had come in and how the current projects were running. More than anything else, the frequent visits during actual work shifts trained the Reference Assistants more effectively than either meetings or manuals.

Record-Keeping. A second concern arises with keeping proper records. The concern is two-fold, one side dealing with accountability, and the other with budgeting. For accountability, it is often necessary to review projects to see what went wrong and what went right, and to determine who was responsible. For budgeting, it never hurts to have a solid chart of numbers when justifying the hiring and retention of student employees. A record of projects, time spent, employees involved, and even faculty requesting the work is a wonderful tool when justifying why employees must be hired, and why student support is essential.

The answer to the record-keeping problem has been in place for many years. First, the students log their time in a paper/hard-copy Faculty Requests and Projects Log, with simple notations regarding Date, Faculty Requesting/Completed By, Project Description and Research Performed, Time Spent (in minutes), LEXIS/WESTLAW/Manual, Copies, ILL, Document Delivery, and How Delivered. See Table 1. After being logged in the paper log, the numbers are compiled in a database set up in Microsoft

Access, appropriately named "Faculty Requests and Projects."

On an interesting aside, keep a copy of completed projects. When a law faculty calls down one month later with the same request, it is always impressive to copy the archived file, hand-deliver it to the requesting party, and demonstrate inhuman research speed.

Advertising. The biggest problem to date has been how to advertise this new policy to the law faculty. An original e-mail was sent out, and was apparently quickly deleted. Next, I attempted an office-by-office visit to each law faculty, conducting a faculty interview to ascertain current research projects, special needs, and to inform the faculty of our services. After five months of spotty effort, I have met with and interviewed only half of the full-time law faculty at the law school.

This shows the truth of a student survey conducted last year. One of the questions was, "What are you least likely to find in the professor's office?" The overwhelming majority of answers said, "The Professor."

For the new year, we will write a memo to each law faculty, detailing our services and requesting feedback on current research needs. As our services affect more law faculty, hopefully word of mouth will encourage a more careful reading of e-mails and memos from the Reference Assistant. If there is an all-powerful "How to Advertise" technique out there, please contact the author.

Conclusion

Overall, the new Faculty Research Requests Services Program has truly been a success. The Reference Assistant has

Resources

To learn more about this topic, compare the following faculty research support Web sites for various law libraries:

<http://www.lawlib.asu.edu/Services/Faculty/serv.html>

<http://www.colorado.edu/Law/lawlib/faculty/resteac.html>

<http://www.law.duke.edu/lib/library.htm>

http://law.gsu.edu/library/Lib/library_services.htm#FACULTY_SERVICES

<http://www.law.nyu.edu/library/faculty/facserv.html#liaison>

proved to be workable, and projects are handled in an orderly, centralized manner.

In the future, it may be prudent to have a staff of Reference Assistants assigned to the Reference Desk to answer reference questions and fulfill projects, with a larger pool of Reference Assistants to perform projects on an on-call basis. It will also be necessary to better contact each law faculty and better advertise our support services.

Overall law faculty comments have been positive, complimentary, and even flattering. The program works for our law library, and as more kinks are ironed out, it will become a powerful tool to support the law faculty, to form a bridge between law library and law school, and to raise the quality of both the law library and the school which we serve.

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Table 1
(with names changed to protect the innocent)

Faculty Request and Project Log
Hunter Law Library Reference Department

Date	Faculty Requesting/Completed By	Project Description and Research Performed	Time Spent (min.)	LEXIS/WESTLAW/Manual	Copies	ILL	Doc. Delivery	Delivered
12/1	Prof. X/Adam	Internet mining for attorney discipline info.	15	Internet				phone call
12/2	Prof. X/Kristen	Research on Duncan case—pull NPR transcript and other foreign news articles	45	L	198p			hand
12/3	Prof. X/Jeff	Locate Winston Churchill quote	120!!!	L + M				to box