

# The Librarian's Place in the Life of the Summer Associate

*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 Susan Siebers at 312/902-5675 or susan.siebers@kmz.com.*

All of us toiling in firm libraries who have anything to do with summer associates have encountered it: the law student who doesn't know what the *Federal Reporter* is or some other stunningly simple aspect of legal research. "Don't those law schools teach them anything," we complain. Well actually, I don't complain, because besides being a law firm librarian, I also teach first-year legal bibliography. I know what excellent research training those law schools provide. The students just can't remember any of it when they get a job.

Librarians are not the only ones who notice that students seem to lack good research skills. Partners complain that students don't know the basics, that they can't analyze, that they don't know how to distinguish the facts of the firm's case from cases that go the wrong way, that they think research means jumping online and throwing in some words and spending too much time coming up with bad cases, while missing landmarks. They have a point. Professor Kevin Clermont of Cornell Law School speaks for them when he says, "Electronic research is at most a supplement to the traditional means . . . print is generally preferable—a surer, more systematic, more creative way to do legal research . . . electronic legal research is more unthinking legal research." (quoted in Charlotte Bynum & Claire Germain, *Legal Research in the Internet Age*, [www.lawschool.cornell.edu/lawlibrary/What\\_is\\_New/internetage.htm](http://www.lawschool.cornell.edu/lawlibrary/What_is_New/internetage.htm)).

Many who have taught legal research to first-year law students will tell you that there is no real understanding of the subject until the student has an actual research project to complete. The projects the school assigns are not really the same as those assigned by partners in a law firm, and school assignments are often only required during the student's first year. Most law students simply do not have enough practice doing legal research to be any good at it, and many become painfully aware of their lack of skills once they start working.

Over the years, many eminent law librarians have proposed that the law schools integrate writing assignments throughout the curriculum to give students the practice they need to become good researchers. I wholly support their efforts, but until that happens, my best shot at teaching law students what they need to succeed is in the law firm, where the impetus of panic and desperation wonderfully concentrates the student researcher's mind. I also have the advantage of supervising the assignment of all summer associate research projects for the firm and orienting and guiding a much smaller group for a concentrated period than do my law school librarian colleagues. Although not every firm may be prepared to put their summer associates in the librarian's charge and certainly not every firm librarian has the time or inclination to take on this responsibility, I think many aspects of the program in my firm can be used by other firm and government librarians to enhance students' skills and give the librarian the influence she or he needs to improve the current situation.

## How Our Program Works

Before the summer associates arrive in June, I meet with the program committee to go over the summer calendar and to schedule online training, library orientation, and research instruction. I also meet with the Human Resources Director to help with hiring the summer secretaries. Soliciting research projects from partners is also part of my job. Once they start coming in, I look them over to see how they can be used to enhance my initial research lecture.

While waiting for the students, I review their résumés to get an idea of their backgrounds, particularly previous jobs and courses taken. I meet with them as a group on their first day to explain the research project assignment system and the resources available to them, both print and online. At this point, I also begin describing online costs, a subject that will occupy us

throughout the summer.

I then introduce them to the library staff, explain library procedures, and give them a library tour, emphasizing print resources and how central they are to effective research. At the end of this first meeting, I pass out the students' initial research assignments and arrange individual meetings with them to go over strategy.

During the rest of the summer, I continue to assign new projects, aiming for variety. I maintain records of assignments, look over the completed work, and make sure no one is falling behind or getting stuck in one practice group. Because I know when projects are assigned, I can see if it is taking too long and intervene. If it's a research problem holding the student up, I can usually put him or her back on track.

Weekly summer associate lunches provide a forum for dispensing focused research tips and advice on online use. I meet regularly with the summer associate committee to go over the students' progress and, at the end of the summer, with the hiring committee to give them my perspective on each summer associate's abilities.

Although you may think our firm's program sounds like a lot of work for librarians, who already have plenty to do, once set up, it runs very smoothly. In many ways, our program helps the library staff better manage all the questions that summer associates ask, because we can anticipate them. We can also head off students going astray and clarify difficult research requests with the partner before the summer associate ever sees them. I do hire additional clerical help in the summer to take care of most of the paperwork. While holding a law degree may make some aspects of working with summer associate easier, it is not a necessity. My two predecessors managed beautifully without one.

I must also confess that I enjoy working so closely with summer associates. They are enthusiastic and eager to learn. Their energy

# A Desktop Learning Opportunity

and high spirits are infectious, and I love seeing how quickly most of them pick up the skills they need to succeed. The entire library staff considers summer associate time the best time of the year. Of course, it being summer may be the real reason.

## Options for Others

*Meet with your summer associate committee or coordinator before the students start.*

The more you know about your firm's program and how you fit into it, the better you will be able to plan for the onslaught. At minimum you will need a calendar of events with time reserved for online training, library tours and research lectures. You should have a list of the summer associates and copies of their resumes. You will be better able to help the committee if you have some insight into how summer associates are evaluated, what skills and qualities are deemed indispensable and what mistakes have proven catastrophic.

*Read the résumés.* Learn the summer associates' names and where they go to law school. Note their previous employers, their work experiences, the courses they've taken, and the writing opportunities they've had. Undergraduate majors and other academic degrees also give you some insight into the students' interests and skills.

*Meet with the summer associates as a group on their first day or, if their arrivals are staggered, have more than one group meeting.* Typically this is your chance to explain everything about the library: the firm's research strengths, interlibrary loan, circulation, the automated catalog, the responsibilities of the staff, and where everything is. You must start explaining online costs from the first day and never give up. Use a typical online search as an example and ask them how much they think it costs. Show them the search and the standard prices that accompany it. When they've begun searching online themselves, show them those searches and accompanying costs. Explain the workings of your flat fee arrangements with illustrations of printing and citation check charges. Show the difference between transactional and hourly charges and how to choose between them. Show them the actual bills that clients receive

and how excessive write-offs can affect the firm's profitability. Along with training schedules for LEXIS and WESTLAW, provide opportunities to learn about low-cost alternatives. Hand out written guidelines for online use that include tips for efficient computer research. Make them memorize the vendors' help line phone numbers.

*Train summer associates to use the firm's work product database.* Much of the work summer associates are assigned is similar to previous work handled by the firm's attorneys and it is immensely useful for the students to have a place to begin. Examples of the kind of work partners and senior associates are producing make it much easier for students to comport their own work to firm standards.

If your firm does not do so automatically, *make an e-mail group for your summer associates* and use it to communicate with them regularly. Remind them of training sessions, answer commonly asked questions, and address other issues that you may not want to share with the entire firm.

*Meet with each student individually if at all possible.* Some firms have so many summer associates that it would be too much for one person to handle, but perhaps the rest of the library staff could be recruited to meet individually with a portion of the group. These meetings are a perfect opportunity to learn how much legal research the student has performed in the past and how much online training he or she has received.

*Find out what questions summer associates are asking the library staff.* If everyone is having trouble with the state digest or the C.F.R., it's time for a short group tutorial. When only one or two students are floundering, use the specific research project as a departure point to craft an individual training session. While pathfinders printed or posted on the firm's intranet are wonderful tools, the best way to teach legal research is to take the researcher around the library and together use the books and computers to find the answer to a specific question.

*Look over the summer associates' work product.* Note spelling and grammar errors, citation form mistakes, and a failure to follow the firm's style manual.

## Resources

Berring, Robert C. "Brutal Choices in Curricular Design: A Sort of Response: Brutal Non-Choices," *4 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research and Writing* 81 (No.3, Spring 1996)

Berring, Robert C. & Vanden Heuvel, Kathleen. "Legal Research: Should Students Learn It or Wing It?," *81 Law Library Journal* 431 (1989)

DeGeorges, Patricia A. *Legal Research Skills of Summer Associates: Expectations Versus Reality—A Case Study*, Columbia University, 1992

Shapo, Helene S. & Kunz, Christina L. "Brutal Choices in Curricular Design: Teaching Research as Part of an Integrated LR & W Course," *4 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research and Writing* 78 (No.3, Spring 1996)

Staheli, Kory D. "Introducing Students to Legal Practice Materials: Helping Fill a Law School Void," *16 Legal Reference Services Quarterly* 23 (1998)

Whisner, Mary. "Managing a Research Assignment," *9 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research and Writing* 9 (No. 1, Fall 2000)

Whisner, Mary & Vaughn, Lea. "Teaching Legal Research and Writing in Upper-Division Courses: A Retrospective from Two Perspectives," *4 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research and Writing* 72 (No.3, Spring 1996)

Wren, Christopher G. & Wren, Jill Robinson. "The Teaching of Legal Research," *80 Law Library Journal* 7 (1988)

While you usually cannot turn a bad writer into a good one, you can help students avoid the careless mistakes that are often the only thing a partner will remember about a summer associate's work.

*Meet with the summer associate coordinator or committee on a regular basis all summer.* It is important that those managing the summer associates hear from you. Your day-to-day insights into how well the

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students research, how they interact with the library staff and others, how they use and conserve firm resources—particularly online—how productive they are, and how open they are to improving their skills contribute to a better assessment of how well a particular individual will fit into the firm.

*Take advantage of opportunities in your community to meet with academic law librarians and law students to make sure students know what research skills will be expected of them when they are hired for*

the summer. Academic librarians are making impressive efforts to bring home the importance of thorough research skills and they welcome the support firm and government librarians can provide.

Working with summer associates, besides being professionally satisfying, highlights the role librarians play in the education of the firm's lawyers. This role is often informal and thus unacknowledged so it is to the librarian's advantage to become an official member of the summer associate team. Summer associates who end up as

lawyers in the firm will not forget the support and training they received from the library staff and they will always be aware that someone is watching how much time they spend online.

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