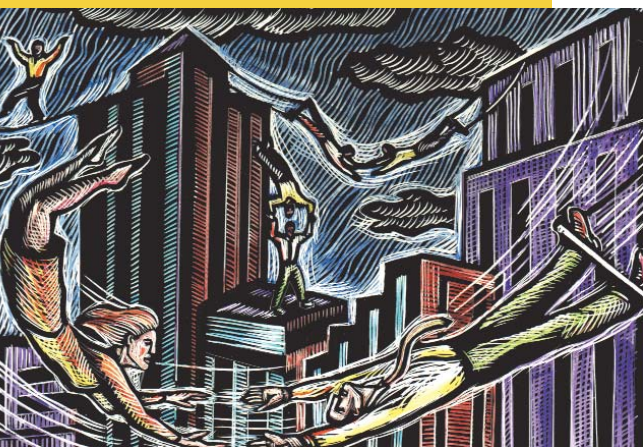


# SCCBP Law Libraries Address Challenges



by Carol Billings

AALL's first president, A.J. Small, worked in one of them, and so did 10 of the next 11 presidents who succeeded him. They range in size from the mammoth Los Angeles County Law Library with over 700,000 volumes to small sisters like the Connecticut Judicial Branch Law Library at Litchfield, Conn., with 10,000 volumes. Although the law librarians who manage them constitute the smallest of the three major divisions within the profession, they bear the responsibility for satisfying the information needs of the largest, most varied constituency. Everyone from the chief justice of the United States to the senior partner in New York's most prestigious law firm to the solo criminal defense lawyer in a small town in Mississippi to the mentally disturbed Vietnam veteran living on the street in Kansas City may call upon their resources and expertise. Some limit their services to the judiciary and bar, but most welcome the general public to partake of their riches as well. The AALL Special Interest Section that their employees belong to designates them as "state, court and county" law libraries, but bar and public libraries are also prominent among them. In the interest of simplicity, this article will sometimes refer to these libraries collectively as SCCBP.

State, court and bar libraries are among the oldest in America. Many were founded by the middle of the 19th century. Long runs of primary sources, such as session laws, statutes and official reporters on their shelves, provide evidence of the cooperative exchanges that were carried

on by the early librarians. Their libraries have become the storehouses of the nation's legal heritage and the preservers of printed materials that newer law schools and most law firms have been unable to acquire or maintain. Traditionally it was the role of these institutions to acquire, organize and update comprehensive collections that would satisfy the legal community's needs. What they offered was unique in its quantity and quality, and the legal community came. That anyone could doubt the long-term continuing viability of these venerable institutions has seemed incomprehensible — until recently, that is.

## The Survey Says ...

Staff members of SCCBP libraries have warily begun asking each other questions about their traditional users' habits: "Have you experienced a change in the number of attorneys coming to your library?" "What about your pro se patrons?" In late January, Colorado's Supreme Court librarian, Lois Calvert, took the bull by the horns and posted a survey on the SCCLL SIS listserv. Calvert recognized an excellent opportunity after Justice Gregory Hobbs attended last summer's AALL Annual Meeting in Philadelphia as a VIP guest of the Colorado Chapter. Justice Hobbs returned home with enthusiastic interest in law library issues and an awareness that other SCCBP librarians were talking about the same challenges that faced his court's library. He and Lois Calvert agreed that it would be good to form a committee to consider the role of their library in the 21st century. The committee that Justice Hobbs now chairs includes the court's clerk, the state judicial administrator, court fiscal and technology officials, and librarians from the Denver public library and several nearby law schools. They have studied the responses to the Calvert survey and will soon prepare a report.

Fortunately a number of the librarians who contributed to Lois Calvert's survey posted their responses for all on the listserv to read. A total of 25 libraries representing all parts of the country answered her questions, and many included lengthy comments. After tabulating the results, Calvert reported them to listserv participants. Twelve of the 25 respondents are state and/or supreme court libraries, 11 are county or trial court libraries, one is a U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals library, and one a large urban bar library. They were queried about changes in usage by

bar members and pro se or public patrons as well as trends in hours, staffing and budgets. Another line of questioning explored the extent to which librarians are switching from print to online, CD-ROM or micro formats. Calvert asked how are pro se patrons made aware of library services and what help is extended to them? Are training classes offered, and who teaches them? Finally, the survey inquired about what changes librarians were planning to make in the future.

Essentially Calvert focused upon the major issues that all SCCBP libraries are being forced by circumstances to tackle: attracting and satisfying our clientele, continuing to provide convenient and cost-effective access to both traditional and current legal information resources, assuring that our personnel are well-prepared and appropriately assigned to facilitate our clientele's research capability, and taking advantage of opportunities to reach more people more effectively through cooperative and public-relations efforts. We can no longer assume that "if we build it, they will come." If we are to continue making legal information available to all who need it, we must improve traditional services, develop new services and then promote them aggressively to inform people about how these services can benefit them.

## The Electronic Revolution Affects Users, Librarians

Clearly the electronic information revolution has seriously affected the research habits of traditional law-library users. The Colorado survey confirmed our observations that not only lawyers in large firms but also solo and small-firm practitioners, who were our bread-and-butter patrons, are increasingly relying upon online and CD-ROM products in their offices and homes. Fierce competition among suppliers of these research services has resulted in affordable rates for lawyers whose limited budgets formerly sent them to bar and public law libraries. Court networks have made it easy for law clerks and court-administrative personnel to remain at their desks rather than walk to the law library down the hall. For reasons of space, efficiency and the research habits of newer law graduates, large law firms whose librarians once made regular trips to SCCBP institutions now consider themselves electronically self-sufficient for much of their routine work. Members of the general public and pro se patrons have begun coming to many of our libraries in greater numbers. Half the libraries in the Calvert survey reported increases, while

only a few experienced decreases. It appears that the man on the street tends to be more aware of legal matters and more willing to attempt to solve his legal problems himself. Public-service librarians know that these patrons can be very challenging to assist — both because of their unfamiliarity with the legal system and the substantive law and their frequently difficult personal circumstances. Being led to an intimidating computer is not what they have in mind when they walk in seeking help. The librarian must assume the role of a patient teacher — of course without giving legal advice.

It has been difficult for SCCBP libraries to know whether to welcome or curse the electronic revolution. Our budgets and space are controlled by influential judges, court administrators, bar members and legislators who often think that “everything is on the Internet.” The acquisitions process is fraught with difficult choices about what to keep in hard copy and what to access electronically. None of the libraries surveyed by Calvert have increased their reliance on hard-copy resources. Online access has become the most popular replacement, with CD-ROM products and fiche following as alternatives. Purchasing electronic resources demands time and expertise. The legalese and fine print of licenses must be studied carefully, and stressful negotiations with publishers must be endured. Every purchasing decision has implications for staffing, user acceptance and space. Our patrons can no longer be expected to walk in, help themselves to the books, and find what they need by using indexes and digests. We are forced to become advocates for the access rights of our patrons by doing our best to negotiate flat-rate contracts that will not require them to pay to read material that we formerly could have handed them in a book. We may need to allocate more of our budgets to subsidized access for patrons to electronic resources that the library will pay for by the transaction. It rubs many of us the wrong way to accept the concept of “renting information” for a limited time and risk being left with nothing if a budget cut comes along the following year.

Good law librarians have always needed to be Renaissance men and women, but now our staffs must remain in a perpetual education process, as both learners and instructors. As soon as a reference librarian has learned how to use a new search engine, very likely she will need to teach a patron — who may be a brilliant law clerk or a high school drop-out who has been unfairly dismissed from his job —

how to use it. A fair number of SCCBP libraries are making research classes a regular part of their activities. San Diego County is a model to be emulated, offering two sold-out classes each month where students learn all the basics in two hours. Not only is this a necessity to enable our patrons to conduct hands-on research, but we feel the need to make ourselves more visible in order to survive. Presentations to judicial, bar and public groups on various aspects of legal information are one of the best ways to make our library’s services known in our communities. Our staff members are becoming Webmasters, intranet administrators and desktop publishers. Yet half the libraries surveyed by Calvert have not increased their staffs, and four have lost positions. Most budgets have either remained the same or have risen only enough to keep up with inflation. Most SCCBP librarians must learn more skills and offer more services without commensurate salary increases or more staff help.

### *SCCBPs Devise Strategies*

Undaunted by the changing environment that constantly places new demands upon them, SCCBP librarians seem determined to “beaver on,” as our British colleagues would say. These librarians are very committed to serving the legal community and the public, and they take pride in trying out new strategies to revitalize their libraries. Reaching out to other types of libraries and community institutions to create partnerships and cooperative programs is an approach that shows great promise. Public and university librarians are eager to develop relationships with neighboring public law libraries that can teach them and their patrons about legal resources and research. They offer an entree to potential law-library users who may not have been aware of what we can do for them. Judges and court administrators are very concerned these days about their public image and are seeking ways to bring information about the law to the citizenry, who in many states elect the judges. To the extent that public law libraries can help them carry out that mission by creating and maintaining excellent Web sites and educating the public about legal information and legal services, they should appreciate our value.

Another area where cooperative efforts are absolutely essential is assuring accessibility to older materials that are not available electronically. Many large law firms that once maintained historical materials have jettisoned them for lack of space. Because they have always relied upon bar and

public libraries for old, seldom-used books, serials and documents, they assume that we will always have them. Now our libraries are being squeezed for space as other government departments with greater political clout lay claim to our territory. Particularly when courts move to new quarters, their libraries all too often end up with a smaller piece of the pie than they occupied before. We must lobby as forcefully as possible to preserve the resources that no one else in our vicinity can provide. It is our responsibility to coordinate both our preservation efforts and our acquisitions and licensing arrangements with neighboring law, public and academic libraries to assure that reasonably convenient access continues for those who rely upon us. This may mean forming consortia to buy microforms or negotiate licenses for electronic archives cooperatively. It may mean that we will need to maintain off-site storage facilities cooperatively and jointly fund messenger services to deliver the materials when they are needed. We should explore the possibility of financial support from bar foundations and the law firms that will now rely upon us to acquire and preserve what they cannot afford to keep.

Fortunately SCCBP libraries have become aware that no matter how well-prepared we are to maintain our libraries and perform our jobs, it all goes for naught if people don’t know about what we have to offer. Promotion and public relations must be top priorities if we are to survive and carry out our primary mission to provide the full-range of legal information resources to the widest possible audience in a democratic society. We must interject ourselves into teaching CLE and judicial college classes and present programs and exhibits at bar association conventions. We must offer to speak to the League of Women Voters, the Parent Teachers Association and the American Association of Retired Persons about our libraries and the legal information issues that affect them. We must distribute eye-catching information brochures and packets of research guides. We must maintain outstanding Web sites and publish both print and electronic newsletters. We must write articles for the newsletters and magazines that judges and lawyers read. We must stick out our necks and sail into uncharted waters, and mix every metaphor that we can think of to get out our message. And we will all become Renaissance men and women in the process.

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