

# THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES: Collection Development in the 21st Century

by Margaret Maes Axtmann

Ask a law librarian about current approaches to collection development, and you are likely to hear anything from a huge sigh to a cry of despair. The past decade has been volatile, with the consolidation of the legal publishing industry, skyrocketing prices, a proliferation of materials in new formats and new subject areas, and a technology-driven workplace. The introduction of the World Wide Web brought changes in legal education, scholarly research, the practice of law and user expectations. What impact have these changes had on law libraries?

Collection development, one of the intellectual underpinnings of library service, has become a reactive function in most libraries. Traditional theories of collection development dictated the need to know the user community and to build the collection methodically, according to the long- and short-term needs of the library's users. Today law librarians are just trying to keep their heads above water as they respond to budget reductions, price increases, multiple formats, competition from other sectors and new methods of information delivery.

Not surprisingly, current trends in collection development respond to these phenomenal changes. The trends fall into six major areas: the scope of the collection, methods of selection, staffing, budget, space and the collection development policy.

## The Law Library Collection

Although collections have always been built to serve the user community, libraries today have a renewed focus on the more immediate needs of their primary users. While institutional mission statements still provide the framework for collection development, only the largest law libraries have the luxury of acquiring a broad range of scholarly materials that might be needed in the future.

A major collection development focus in all types of libraries is the management of information in multiple formats and the need to balance print and electronic collections. The balancing act means choosing between formats or maintaining

the same information in multiple formats — print, microform, CD-ROM, DVD, online database or Web service. Many of the new databases and online services are excellent and provide added value over print resources, but libraries often can't afford them without reducing print subscriptions. Many electronic resources



also are available only for license rather than purchase, forcing libraries to choose access over ownership in some cases. And while many electronic resources are subscription-based, many others are freely available on the World Wide Web. Selection is not necessarily a decision to purchase but a decision to provide the means to access the content of the resource.

Law library patrons are consumers of legal information. In this customer service-centered economy, they expect information to be readily available, with minimal searching at little or no cost. This demand provides further incentive for libraries to deliver information cost-effectively and electronically.

Not only are there more nonprint materials, but the print materials are changing format — e.g., hard-bound treatise to looseleaf — so that more titles are supplemented. And supplementation is becoming more frequent. Changes in print formats, coupled with rising prices, mean that libraries are purchasing more serials and continuing services, while monograph purchases decline. Although law libraries have always had a higher ratio of serials

to monographs than other types of libraries, the percentage keeps shifting upward. Many law libraries are spending less than 10 percent of their resources on monograph purchases.

A final aspect of the great balancing act is the need to collect in emerging areas of law and interdisciplinary topics.

## Methods of Selection

Keeping up with new publications in all formats is a daunting task for law librarians. Traditional selection tools, such as bibliographies, catalogs and slips, are used less today because collection development is less systematic than it once was. Law librarians rely on publishers' promotional materials, vendor demonstrations and trial subscriptions to evaluate and select electronic resources. Most of the legal-information vendors work very cooperatively with librarians when promoting their materials in this way, but a few vendors have begun to

market their services directly to end users. This is an unfortunate trend that law librarians actively oppose.

Selection criteria have multiplied along with new formats and user demands. Traditional considerations such as content, user need, author's reputation, publisher, cost and quality still apply no matter what the format. But currency, authenticity, long-term availability, interface design, technical requirements, accessibility and functionality are important additional criteria for electronic resources. License terms and restrictions also influence or dictate decision-making.

Technical considerations include local hardware and software requirements, the network environment and the staffing needed for ongoing maintenance of the resource. Libraries need flexible options for accessing resources, ranging from single-user workstations to tightly controlled passwords to Internet Protocol address validation. The needs can vary by type of library as well as type of resource. A related issue is the vendor's ability to provide technical support, documentation, on-site training and a help center. Law libraries are requesting pricing structures and license terms that are tailored to their

specific infrastructure and user needs, and vendors are realizing that they must adapt their products to this environment.

All of these new considerations mean that libraries are prudently spending more time analyzing their collections. Collection analysis can be used in a variety of ways: to evaluate holdings in a topical area or by jurisdiction, to identify older titles that need updating, to compare duplicative sets, and to weed out materials that are no longer used.

### Staffing

The rapid proliferation of electronic resources places a burden on all traditional library functions and on technical-support departments that might be in or outside the library. A law librarian recently remarked that she could easily spend her entire day dealing with issues relating to electronic resources: learning about new databases and Web sites, monitoring changes in product content, interpreting pricing structures, reviewing and negotiating license agreements, and coordinating institution-wide decisions. It is not uncommon for libraries to have a full-time position devoted to electronic services. But in law libraries, that position is usually earmarked with more public-services functions than collection-development duties. In that regard, the responsibilities of an electronic services librarian could include the selection and ongoing evaluation of electronic resources. More typically, though, the librarian in that position develops and maintains Web pages, monitors and collects usage statistics, sets up access under the terms of the individual license agreements, and provides training, reference service and technical support.

Where once the law library director was responsible for all collection-development activities, those functions now are usually spread across the library. There is an increasing need for collection-development specialists who are knowledgeable about legal resources, publishing, budgets, pricing and licensing, but very few law libraries have devoted a full-time position to collection development. Most libraries prefer, instead, to rely on a committee approach or to assign selection responsibilities to several staff members, depending on their job duties or their subject expertise. Reference and acquisitions librarians frequently play

a strong role in building collections. As a result, no one has the oversight responsibility in many law libraries for forming and shaping the collection and for ensuring the adequacy of financial resources to support the collection in the future.

### Space

Downsizing is an overwhelming trend in all types of law libraries, but especially in law firm and corporate law libraries. Print collections take up too much expensive space, so they are being discarded in favor of electronic access to both primary and secondary materials. Reporters, digests, citators, statutes, encyclopedias and periodicals are being tossed in the dumpster because they can't be sold or given away. Libraries that must maintain basic print collections are discarding duplicate copies or actively weeding seldom-used materials. State and county law libraries, many with very strong historical collections and rare materials, are gaining space by converting print to microform and selling off their special collections. Firm and government libraries try to keep collection growth to a minimum.

Academic law libraries, however, even those that have space problems, are not eliminating major primary and secondary resources from their print collections. Law school libraries maintain certain materials in order to meet accreditation standards, and some look at overall collection size as a further measure of quality. Space for growth of print and microform materials is not always adequate and may come at the expense of computer workstations or labs within the physical library.

### Budget

Budgets are not keeping pace with price increases, and law libraries with flat budgets have experienced reduced purchasing power. Many law libraries also face budget reductions. The downsizing trend repeats itself here as one response to controlling costs.

The move to electronic resources described earlier puts enormous pressure on budgets, but some libraries are able to reduce expenditures by cancelling corresponding print subscriptions. Libraries have been forced to conduct a critical examination of continuations, to reduce duplicative coverage, to review subscriptions received in multiple formats, to look at

the subscription lists of specific publishers and to evaluate print subscriptions that have permanent online alternatives. More law libraries are moving away from automatic supplementation to control costs. Eventually there will be nothing left to

cancel to offset the ongoing demand for more electronic subscriptions, but for now, most libraries have been able to find the right balance.

Cooperative collection development is finally becoming a reality, as consortial purchasing makes it possible for libraries to

acquire major expensive resources at more realistic prices.

### Collection Development Policy

If this list were flowing in a logical order, this trend should be at the beginning. Libraries are writing or updating their collection development policies, but often they are doing it to reflect changes in practice rather than changes in policy or institutional mission. Instead of a document that guides and shapes the development of the collection, policy statements are becoming a justification for short-term, expedient decisions. There is a very real need to document decisions about format choices, consortial arrangements, retention policies and licensing provisions. Many libraries are doing just that while also writing new policies to address the balance between print and electronic resources.

### New Resources, New Promise

Law librarians have faced enormous challenges in the last decade and have entered the 21st century in a time of continuing upheaval in the publication and delivery of legal information. Are law library collections suffering from decline or neglect? In most instances, the answer is *no*. Law librarians excel at finding and evaluating accessible resources that meet the legal information needs of their users. The development of new resources and services, combined with rapid changes in technology and methods of delivery, make this new century one of promise and excitement for any law librarian interested in collection development.

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