



Just What Is It Those Darned Law School Library Directors Do?

by Betsy McKenzie



They don't check out books — at least not regularly. Many don't do any reference, and most don't do it regularly. They don't shelve and order books, check in serials, or catalog. If they are gone, the library continues running smoothly for days, weeks or even months! So what is it that those darned directors do? Law school library directors carry out a wide range of substantive and administrative duties that keep their libraries thriving.

Law school libraries, and its directors, are particularly fundamental to law schools than one might envision. Directors prove to be integral in implementing the law school's mission, according to *Law Librarianship: A Handbook* by Roy Mersky, director at the University of Texas law library in Austin. Directors interpret the mission statement and integrate it into the structure and regulations of the law library. They use those primary objectives to design secondary goals for library services, collection guidelines and lending rules. That then sets the tone for the library, including setting standards of behavior for staff, faculty and library patrons.

"It is essential that the library director have a clear and articulable understanding of where the library fits in among the law school," says Jim Milles, law library director at State University of New York at Buffalo.

Because law school libraries are just one component of the university community, law school library directors retain a larger university perspective when representing their libraries needs and requests. For example, a director who asks for more library space and funding must remember that the dean will take into consideration other pending university-wide issues and requests. Thus directors must establish priorities that are important to their libraries, essentially "choosing which battles the library is willing to fight," Milles explains. But the director still "speaks as the sole voice protective of a historical research and curricular mission with the centrality of the library as a support institution," says Roger Jacobs, director of the law library at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

Understanding both official and unofficial university policies is necessary for directors to effectively promote their libraries and its needs. So Mersky recommends that law school library directors become members of the law school faculty. "Faculty status ... ensures that the head law librarian will have access to information that is vital if he or she is to be able to properly carry out the



role of administering a library that really supports the needs of the students and faculty," Mersky says. "[Access to faculty information is necessary] to ensure that needs are identified and reflected in the development and administration of the law library," he says.

Directors are ultimately responsible for making certain patrons receive their information in a timely manner. To ensure that their staff can fulfill patrons' needs, directors inevitably become enmeshed in a microcosm of administrative matters. "The library director must provide resources and support to enable the rest of the staff to do their jobs," Milles says.

The directors' administrative responsibilities include managing budgets; hiring and supervising personnel; addressing complaints and suggestions; verifying equipment is functioning; overseeing book selection, reference and research services; and obtaining licenses and supplies. They also ensure that their libraries meet the standards of the American Bar Association, the Association of American Law Schools and other accrediting agencies.

In 1959 Frances Farmer, coined the term "librating" in a humorous piece she wrote for *Law Library Journal* that described the duties of law librarians—and can apply to law library school directors today. Farmer stressed in her article that law librarianship entailed more than just shelving and cataloging books. In 1959 the effective law librarian tactfully retrieved books from professors, including the chair of the library committee, and left them in good humor nevertheless. Farmer's article detailed how law librarians assuaged faculty members that didn't understand the logic in the library's

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organization and demanded all the books dealing with their courses be placed in one location. It was also not uncommon for law librarians in the 1950s to locate books hidden by students; tackle physical-plant disasters in plumbing and electrical systems; find ways to remove or prevent blue mold on books; trap and identify vermin in books to help the exterminator; undergo sudden budget cuts or reductions; and select the best books with limited funds. Not much has changed in 2001—many law school library directors today have experienced similar situations.

From budgetary matters to enhancing the libraries' collections, much of what law library directors do is behind the scenes. The duties of directors vary among institutions, but their goals remain the same: to cultivate law libraries that fulfill the needs of patrons, staff and employing institutions. "[A director wants] a library that welcomes users and provides services above and beyond their expectations. A library in which employees are challenged to do their best and supported so that they may. A library which functions as an integral part of the larger institution," says Margaret Leary, director of the University of Michigan's law library. "By my actions and decisions and behavior, I help to achieve that."

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