

The Accidental Profession

Work Experience, Education Prove Vital in Training Law Librarians

by Maya Norris

Let's face it. Most law librarians end up in the profession by accident. Either they attended library school and happened to land jobs in law libraries, or they went to law school and decided that they really wanted to do something else with their legal education.

Under such fortuitous circumstances, what is the best way to train and educate future law librarians who don't even know they need to prepare for a career in the profession? Through specialized courses, residency programs and on-the-job experience, students and paraprofessionals are gaining the skills necessary to excel in law librarianship.

In addition to a master's degree in library science, most law library employers are seeking entry-level librarians who have previously worked in law libraries and are experienced and proficient with computer-assisted legal research and nonlegal databases.

Because law librarianship requires such specialized knowledge, **students who are certain that they want to work in law libraries** before entering library school **should attend schools with fully developed law librarianship programs**, such as the University of Washington, the Catholic University of America and the Pratt Institute. Like all M.L.S. programs, these schools provide a solid foundation in librarianship, but they also offer law librarianship courses that focus on the legal system, legal research methods, literature of the law, law library management, and the legal and ethical requirements of the profession.

J.D.s Aren't Always the Answer

Some of the programs mentioned even offer dual J.D./M.L.S. degrees. Such accelerated programs allow students to earn their law and library degrees simultaneously in about four years.

Although a librarian armed with both a J.D. and M.L.S. will be qualified for more law library positions, only 20 percent of law librarianship jobs require both degrees — and most of those are in academic law libraries. Many law libraries in private law firms and government institutions prefer that their law librarians have work experience in law libraries or training in technology and administration rather than a law degree.

"It depends on where you want to wind up. If your goal is to be an academic law librarian who is expected to teach evidence or admiralty, sure, then you will

I don't think a dual degree is necessary to work in a county library."

Because private law firm librarians conduct more business reference and research than legal research, **law librarians in private firms really don't need law degrees to be successful**, said Susan Siebers, director of the law library at Katten Muchin and Zavis in Chicago. "Some library schools offer joint M.L.S./M.B.A. degrees, and I think that might be even more useful for someone hoping to become a nonacademic law firm director," Siebers said. "An M.L.S. with a focus on information technology or a joint



Many law librarians consider networking an important part of preparing for a career in law librarianship. From left: Law librarians Linda Davis, Jane Walsh, Janice Anderson and K. Matthew Dames networking at the 2001 AALL Annual Meeting and Conference in Minneapolis.

need a law degree," said Regina Smith, director of the Jenkins County Law Library in Philadelphia. "But if you have no desire to go to law school and are willing to learn about the law and what the patron group that you serve needs, plus have a good instructor in the classroom and/or on the job, you can be quite successful and do well as a law librarian.

"I have often found that some of my librarians who do not have law degrees are better reference librarians than those who hold the dual degree and are fresh out of school," Smith explained. "This is because they have more experience.

degree with IT is another combination that would be good background for many other law library positions."

"Certainly most academic law librarian positions require both degrees, and that is the market we are aiming for," said Jim Milles, associate professor of law at the State University of New York at Buffalo's J.D./M.L.S. program. "In addition, we feel that a solid education in both librarianship and law will be increasingly important in a variety of different fields outside the traditional practice of librarianship. Commercial publishers, information vendors, courts, legislatures, law firms,

corporate law departments and multidisciplinary practice firms will need more sophisticated information professionals in the generation, distribution and location of legal information."



Kathy Adams (left), senior cataloging technician at Georgetown University's law library, explains some of the cataloging rules to K. Matthew Dames, the library's resident librarian.

Where Are All the Library Courses?

Yet most library schools still offer few or no courses in law librarianship due to a lack of qualified law librarianship faculty, little student interest, and rigid curricula that offer limited electives. For example, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign only offers one course in law librarianship.

"[The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign] offers the legal resources course at least every other year," said Linda Smith, interim dean of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's library school. "Since many of our students complete their degrees over a two-year period, this means they have the opportunity to take the course as an elective part of their program of study. If we anticipated higher demand and could find an available instructor, we would offer the course more often."

"Law librarianship or legal research is usually an elective course, and many times students want to use those electives for courses they think will have a broader application, like database design or Web site development," said K. Matthew Dames, resident librarian at Georgetown University's Edward Bennett Williams Law Library. "An M.L.S. candidate usually has 36 credits to earn for a degree. If 12 or 15 of those credits are required courses, most people are going to try to take electives they feel will make them more marketable, especially if they haven't decided on a specialty."

Maureen Dunnigan is a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles library school, which only offers

one course in law librarianship. Although she knew that she would be pursuing a career in law librarianship before applying to library schools, she decided to attend UCLA's program in order to take advantage of the lower in-state tuition rate. To make up for the lack of specialized coursework in law librarianship, she takes related courses, such as government information and cyberspace law and policy. In addition, she works at the Hugh & Hazel Darling Law Library at UCLA.

"It's probably not realistic for every school to offer classes in every specialization of librarianship. So it's not realistic to expect every institution to offer classes in law librarianship," Dunnigan said. "This is unfortunate for those who cannot pack up and move to a school that does offer these classes, but internships at law libraries willing to train students in legal research may be a solution. Students could also consider classes in a local paralegal program, which may be more in depth than a day-long continuing education course."

If a student must attend a library school with no or little specialized coursework in law librarianship, a combination of **work experience** in a law library and **independent study** may give the student what is needed to be competitive in the job market. That's how Mary Whisner, assistant librarian for reference services at

in New Orleans to test whether law librarianship was for her.

"It happened that Stella [Chiang, the director of the law library,] was planning to hire someone for a few months to help coordinate her library's move to a new location. And she took a chance on me. This job proved to be an excellent introduction to law librarianship," Whisner said. "I worked with librarians and staff members throughout the library, and I got to know and enjoy them. I learned about different parts of the collection, how they were used, and how they were likely to grow. After the move, they kept me on for several months, working in reference and updating library guides. My sense that I would like law librarianship was confirmed, and I entered library school at Louisiana State University."

Although LSU did not offer any courses in law librarianship, she made a concerted effort to learn as much as she could about the world of law libraries during her tenure as a library student. Whisner worked at LSU's law library as a graduate assistant. She read journals geared toward law librarians. She joined AALL and the New Orleans Association of Law Libraries. Whisner also took classes and wrote papers related to the profession, such as government documents, academic libraries and special libraries. "For a class in



From left: Library students Nory Loeung, Maureen Dunnigan, Jeff Sundquist, RuthAnn Garcia and Todd Honma at the University of California at Los Angeles collaborate on how to find federal statutes during their legal information resources class.

the University of Washington law library, got her start.

Whisner became interested in law librarianship after practicing law for two years. She quit her job as an attorney to work at Loyola University's law library

library automation, I wrote a paper comparing two automation systems that were popular in academic law libraries," she explained.

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"I had very good on-the-job training at both Loyola and LSU," Whisner said. "The librarians and staff at both law libraries were very supportive of a newcomer to the field. Without that, it would have been hard to prepare for a career in law librarianship."

Internships Pay Off

Earning a master's degree in library and information science in a residency program these days is not for the fiscally faint of heart. For example, in-state tuition at the University of Washington Information School is now more than \$7,000 for the four-quarter program; out-of-state students will pay over \$17,000. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign charges about \$9,000 for its 12-month program for in-state residents and more than \$20,000 for out-of-state students. The M.L.I.S. at the Catholic University of America can be earned in a 12-month period at a cost of about \$20,000. Add in the possible relocation



Mary Whisner, assistant librarian for reference services at the University of Washington law library, attended Louisiana State University's library school, which does not have law library courses. But to prepare for her career as a law librarian, she worked at LSU's law library and took courses related to law librarianship, such as government documents.

costs for attending a school away from home and it is no wonder that students are looking for more inexpensive ways to get an M.L.S. When new law librarians see entry-level salaries posted at \$40,000 and under, it is understandable that students wonder how they will be able to pay their bills.

To provide students with valuable work experience and financial assistance as well as to recruit more people into the profession, some library schools offer paid

internship programs for students pursuing their master's degrees in library science. The intern programs help the students integrate their coursework with the practical experience of working in law libraries. The University of North Carolina and the University of Texas at Austin have provided fellowships, including tuition remission and work experience, for students earning their master's degrees. Indiana University at Bloomington, the University of Washington, the University of Illinois and King County Law Library in Seattle regularly coordinate internship programs for M.L.S. students.

Jim Heller, director of the law library at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., recently created the Law Librarianship Fellow program, which will begin in the fall of 2002. The program is designed to help the law library provide significant legal information services and attract highly qualified people to law librarianship. To qualify for the program, students must have master's degrees in library science and be enrolled in the College of William & Mary's law school. Those selected as Law Library Fellows will work part time in the law library during their three years as a student at the law school. Each Fellow will also receive an out-of-state tuition waiver, which amounted to more than \$9,000 in the 2001-02 academic year, and an annual stipend of \$4,000.

"We want the Fellows to have a diverse experience during their three years here — one that helps achieve library needs and goals; provides superior service to faculty, students and other library users; and prepares them for a career in law librarianship," Heller said. "Law Librarianship Fellows will work in all three library departments, including reference and providing research support to faculty and students. The library staff will do everything we can to ensure that the program is a success. While the Fellows will help us provide important library services, we also want to ensure that they have an enjoyable and valuable experience during their three years in Williamsburg."

Georgetown University's law library started its Library Resident program in 1999 to recruit new law librarians from under-represented backgrounds. This two-year residency gives M.L.S. graduates the opportunity to work in the law library departments they are interested in and to be mentored by committed professionals.

Residents also design and carry out significant research, instructional, or service-based projects in the second year. In addition to a full-time salary for the resident, the program pays for the resident's participation in national and/or regional library associations. (For more information about Georgetown's Library Resident program, please visit <http://www.ll.georgetown.edu/lb/resident.html>.)

"Our primary goal is to help the resident develop as much as possible," said Janice Anderson, a member of the program's oversight committee. "That way we can contribute both to his or her personal development as well as to the profession. We select someone with an M.L.S. who might not have been working as a law librarian before and start him or her off on the law librarianship path. We provide the opportunity to work with a rich collection, to sharpen reference and teaching skills, to learn from a variety of experienced librarians, and to begin professional networking."

K. Matthew Dames, Georgetown's current resident librarian, was accepted into the program after completing his M.L.S. from Syracuse University in New York. He seriously considered law librarianship as a career while he was pursuing his law degree at Northeastern School of Law in Boston and working at the school's law library. "I decided to apply to the residency fellowship because I figured I had nothing to lose but paper and postage," Dames explained. "As I looked at the program closer, though, it seemed like the perfect first library job. I completed my M.L.S. pretty quickly, and I knew I was lacking some core skills. I figured the Georgetown residency would allow me to cross-train and sharpen my skills in a way that few other situations would."

Dames began his residency in July 2001 working in the reference department. In January, he embarked on a six-month assignment in cataloging. While the future direction of his residency is still open, he and the library plan to further his interest in Web development and information architecture issues, as well as the core competencies of law librarianship.

"There is definitely a need for more of these fellowships [in other law libraries] because application is everything," Dames said. "Good instruction can take you far, but there's really nothing like applying skills in a live environment while having

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a chance to gain a knowledge base and experience. I have always described this residency as the library equivalent of a judicial clerkship. Almost all former clerks will say their clerkship was an invaluable personal and professional experience. I feel the same way about this residency.”

According to many law librarians, the ideal way to prepare for the profession is to take specialized courses in law librarianship, intern or work at a law library, and network with other law librarians. But in reality, most law librarians stumble into their careers without having taken many or any courses in law librarianship. So work experience at a law library and mastery of library skills become vital to law librarianship training.

“Law librarianship can be learned through work experience and continuing education, particularly if a person is working in an academic law library. Having a law degree helps a firm librarian because the education gives the librarian a broader litigation context. My law degree also comes in handy at Georgetown when I get clinical or practical questions,”

Dames said. “But the library skills are paramount: You use the library skills to develop answers and alternatives that the patron may not have even thought about. A librarian can’t provide answers or help the customer unless he or she has a firm library foundation — like how to do a good reference interview.”

Librarianship Comes First

“It’s important to emphasize that whenever we fill any librarian position, we’re looking for a librarian first who knows about the law and legal research,” Anderson said. “We’re not looking for someone trained in the law who sees being a librarian as just another way to earn a paycheck. We really want a well-rounded librarian who’s interested in the big issues, in growing as a librarian, and in contributing to the law library profession.”

Thus, to thrive in law librarianship, one must be a talented librarian, first and foremost. Don’t underestimate intelligence and the ability to interact with patrons as prerequisites for positions in law libraries.

“We first look for someone who is flexible, a team player and who has a great sense

of humor,” Smith said. “I have always told my classes that I do not necessarily hire the top person with straight A’s, but rather the person who understands how the law works, who knows the appropriate resource to use to answer a question, and who is able to think on his or her feet. Common sense is necessary to work at Jenkins County Law Library.”

“When we hire librarians at the College of William & Mary, I look for someone who is smart, enthusiastic and motivated,” Heller said. “You can’t beat that winning combination.”

Until library schools develop a model curriculum for law librarianship, the route to a successful law library career can take many twists and turns. However, the combination of law library work experience, coursework and continuing education, as well as resourcefulness and the will to succeed, has proved to be the formula for success.

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