



Robert Oakley (standing) of the Georgetown University Law Center addresses the opening session of the conference.

# Georgetown Conference Outlines Preservation Agenda

by Paul D. Healey

Robert Oakley worries that legal materials are beginning to slip through law librarians' fingers — literally. The ravages of time and deterioration are destroying legal materials on library shelves at an alarming rate, he says, but the law library profession does not yet have a coordinated response.

"The library profession has made preservation a top priority, even referring to it as a national crisis," says Oakley, director of the law library and professor of law at the Georgetown University Law Center. "Despite such attention, law librarians have seemingly found it difficult to develop a preservation agenda."

To address this preservation dilemma plaguing law libraries, the Edward Bennett Williams Law Library of the Georgetown University Law Center and the American Association of Law Libraries co-sponsored a conference March 6–8 at the Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C. A select group of about 40 experts and leaders in the law library profession examined preservation issues and began defining a preservation agenda at the conference, titled "Preserving Legal Information for the 21st Century: Toward a National Agenda."

Oakley had high hopes that the conference would result in concrete action on preservation issues. "I hope that we'll see a consortial project of law libraries working with or without grant support to preserve both paper-based and digital legal information into the future," he says. "Such information is the foundation of our society, and we are its custodians. Preservation of the information deserves nothing less than our full commitment and support."

## Preserving Both Paper and Electronic Resources

The conference concentrated on two broad preservation issues: the deterioration of paper materials and the disappearance or obsolescence of electronic information. Participants emphasized that any national preservation agenda had to address both concerns in order to be effective.

The opening session of the conference set the foundation for creating a preservation

agenda. Participants talked about the inherent, basic problems in preserving paper materials due to acidification, poor binding, misuse, abuse, and general wear and tear. They also addressed how "born digital" materials are threatened by their very ephemeral nature and by obsolescence as technology changes the way digital information is accessed. The conference examined how other disciplines and other library groups have preserved paper products and how vendors have set about creating permanent, accessible versions of electronic records.

Following the opening session, participants broke into small groups to begin forming a preservation agenda for law libraries. The groups generated ideas for the



Claire Germain of the Cornell University Law Library talks about the differences in preserving U.S. and international legal information.

agenda's mission, content, infrastructure, standards, communication and sustainability. After the breakout sessions, each group shared its work with the others. Over the course of the conference, breakout sessions alternated with informational sessions as the group worked toward a final consensus. The informational sessions covered such topics as preservation efforts by the national archives, technology and standards, the role of commercial publishers, and moving forward on a national plan.

By the final session of the conference, each of the various groups had honed its area of concern to assemble a final set of proposals. In the end, the proposals stated the purpose and content of a national agenda for preservation of legal materials, and also addressed such issues as infrastructure, standards, collaboration and communication, and sustainability. The reports of each breakout group were

forwarded to the new steering committee on preservation, which will supervise the creation of a final draft.

To finalize and push the agenda forward, conference participants created a steering committee called the Legal Information Preservation Alliance. With Oakley as convener, the final committee consisted of Margaret Maes Axtmann of the University of St. Thomas Law Library, Carol Billings of the Law Library of Louisiana, Tom Careson of the OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., Claire Germain of Cornell University Law Library, Bernard Reilly of the Center for Research Libraries and Judith Wright of the University of Chicago D'Angelo Law Library.

The steering committee will work toward producing a final agenda document while also pursuing several other goals:

- Producing a white paper on preservation of legal materials;
- Setting deadlines for action;
- Conducting a national survey on preservation; and
- Searching for a staff person to effectuate the work of the agenda and alliance.

### Next Steps Plot a Clear Course

Oakley was pleased with the conference outcome. "The group decided on a series of 'next steps' to keep things moving, including the appointment of a steering committee, the distribution of the group



Conference participants listen to speakers discuss the problems involved in preserving paper and born digital materials.

reports and the possible hiring of a part-time coordinator to help get the program off the ground," he says.

"In addition, many of the libraries involved in the conference indicated a willingness to contribute significant resources to the effort," Oakley says. "That kind of commitment is what it will take to make this happen."

The conference was only the beginning. Creating a preservation agenda and carrying it out are only the initial steps to preserving law library materials, according to Oakley.

"My biggest concern is the need for follow through," Oakley says. "There's a lot of work to be done, and it will take resources to do it. Some of those resources might come from grants, but it's up to us as law librarians to commit the initial and continuing resources needed to get it going. Fortunately, many of the libraries involved seem strongly committed to the effort, so I think it has a good chance of success."

Other conference participants considered the work completed at the conference as a real chance for progress on the preservation front.

"The conference was a great success, because it brought together a large number of people to discuss an important problem and to chart a direction for the future," Oakley says. "In that, I think we succeeded very well indeed."

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Members of a breakout session group discuss their proposals for the preservation plan.