


Getting Them Where We Live

Inspiring interest in the profession among law students

by Shannon Malcolm



As an aspiring law librarian, I've heard a lot about the "graying" of our profession. I've heard a lot about the profession's lopsided demographics—there are too few younger persons and a disproportionate amount of us reaching retirement age. I've heard a lot about the wonderful opportunities this phenomenon presents for those of us embarking on our careers. And I've heard a lot about the potential problems posed by a shortage of qualified, motivated people to meet the burgeoning needs of the so-called Information Age.



Author Shannon Malcolm believes law students are natural candidates to become tomorrow's law librarians. He offers advice to tackle the "graying" of the profession problem.

What I have not heard as much about are strategies for addressing these issues and ensuring that we continue to attract bright, enthusiastic people into the profession. Ask the head of any career services office about finding a job, and you'll inevitably hear some variation on the theme that a vast amount of positions are filled by word of mouth. This wisdom also applies to those who are selecting a new career; people often choose careers because they have learned about them through friends or acquaintances. For law librarians, one of the most obvious venues for fostering the synergy between established and neophyte scholars—and thus ensuring the continued vigor of our profession—is the law school.

When I was in law school, most of my colleagues would have responded less than enthusiastically to the prospect of becoming a law librarian. There is nothing especially surprising about this observation. After all, most people attend law school to become practicing attorneys. And the world needs attorneys. *We* need attorneys; they are, to a great extent, our bread and butter. What is interesting is the degree to which many law students view law librarianship not as a career they do not desire, but as a career that is intrinsically undesirable. Students who wish to practice traditional law view careers as lobbyists, politicians, and businesspersons as interesting career alternatives they themselves don't want to pursue. Unfortunately, they often view law librarianship as an *uninteresting* career alternative they don't want to pursue.

If you're reading this article in *AALL Spectrum*, you probably know better; you know that law librarianship is an exciting profession with myriad opportunities to pursue one's individual interests while providing valuable services to appreciative patrons. And you know that while becoming a law librarian isn't the fastest road to making piles of money, it isn't the road to the poorhouse either. This last point is especially salient for law students facing staggering student loan repayments upon graduation.

Why is it that potential law librarians in the ranks of law students don't know these things? Part of the problem is that, in many ways, the best librarians and the most

effective libraries are those that are not noticed.

The library is almost always a means to an end. It provides the information needed to write an article, prepare a brief, or confirm a citation. If an efficient interlibrary loan department quickly and cheaply obtains an obscure book, the requestor cares only that the request was fulfilled promptly and that he can meet his editor's deadline. If a savvy reference librarian's monitored referral introduces an attorney to an archival source, the attorney cares only that she has found the legislative history material she sought. If an online catalog incorporates helpful blind links, the student knows only that the search led to the desired record.

In all of these examples, the patron has no reason to know or care about all the hard work that goes on behind the scenes to make these things possible. Technical services are perhaps the most obvious example. It isn't intuitively obvious to many patrons that carefully chosen collections, catalogued and ready for circulation, do not arrive in weekly shipments like Athena springing forth fully-grown from Zeus' head. When tasks such as the collections development committee's difficult decisions, the acquisition librarian's negotiations with vendors, and the head of public services' implementation of fair and efficient circulation policies are done well, patrons' interactions with the library are smooth and uneventful from the patron's perspective. Because of this invisibility, students may perceive librarians' work as much less interesting than it actually is.

To counter this phenomenon, law librarians must work to increase student awareness of what we do and of how a law library functions. Consider the following ideas.

Give Behind-the-Scenes Tours

Nearly every law school offers tours of its library to new students; some even make such tours mandatory portions of orientation programs or legal research classes. But these tours are usually limited to public areas. Why not include the library's offices and workspaces in these tours? A brief detour into the workspaces of librarians and support staff may help

demystify the processing of materials that goes on in these areas and may motivate inquiries from curious students.

When the foreign, comparative, and international law librarian's office is pointed out, the one-L who asks, "Just what the heck does that person *do*?" may become interested in such a career herself. Including such areas in a student tour may cause some logistical inconveniences, but proper coordination and efficient scheduling can minimize these inconveniences and ensure that affected staffers know what to expect so that work disruption is avoided. Indeed, librarians and staffers, particularly those in technical services, may appreciate a moment to shine in the spotlight.

Make Class Stimulating

At many law schools, librarians instruct students in legal research. Librarians who teach should take advantage of this opportunity to cultivate interest in the profession. We must strive to eliminate the stereotype, unwarranted though it may be, of the standoffish librarian coming in to lecture begrudgingly about dry material. We must especially do so in the context of first-year legal research coursework.

It may be difficult to muster enthusiasm for explaining the difference between district and circuit courts or the relationship of the *Code of Federal Regulations* to the *Federal Register* for the umpteenth time. But we

Northwestern University School of Law students study in the Pritzker Legal Research Center. Increasing student awareness of what law librarians do and how law libraries function could help attract more people to the profession.



Photo by Elizabeth Farina.

These events, often called activity fairs or call-out days, primarily involve student organizations (e.g., the Federalist Society, the student environmental law association, and legal fraternities).

Consciously or not, many such organizations are a vehicle for exploring potential careers (as with the environmental law group mentioned above). Although it might not be possible to sustain an ongoing student group dedicated to law librarianship—although certainly if enough student interest exists that might be a great thing!—it may be worthwhile for a law librarian who is so inclined to set up a table or booth at these events to get the word out to students about careers in law librarianship.

Tout the Variety of the Profession

Don't forget colleagues in firm, court, state, and county libraries. Some students who might otherwise be interested in law librarianship may not be interested in working in an academic law library. Make sure they are aware of other opportunities and be willing to help get them in touch with colleagues in these other types of law libraries.

If there is sufficient interest, you might consider arranging a guest lecture and Q&A session with a firm, court, state, or county law librarian (or even a panel), perhaps in conjunction with your university's school of library and information science, especially if your college or university offers a joint degree program. (And, if there is no such program, consider implementing one.)

Enlist Student Recruiters

Many law schools, their career services offices, and/or law libraries produce newsletters. A short piece in these newsletters can be a good vehicle for promoting law librarianship as a possible career option. The informality and brevity of such pieces makes them easy to produce, and even busy students often have time to write them. I have seen such short pieces in newsletters at both of the academic law libraries in which I have worked, both written by students pursuing careers in law librarianship. Such student-written pieces add a degree of insider credibility because readers identify the author as a peer. If the piece inspires their interest, law students may also feel less intimidated and be less

must remember that for students in these courses, nothing is old hat. They are learning this material for the first time, and it is important that they learn it well. And although the topics covered in these classes tend to be fundamental—not necessarily exciting to us as librarians—we must remember we are laying a foundation. If the instructor does not engage students and the material bores them, they will be less receptive to later opportunities for instruction, either via advanced legal research courses or individual consultations at the reference desk.

Instead, librarians teaching legal research must strive to make their classes stimulating and interactive and cultivate personal rapport and accessibility with their students. We should also inform students about what we do. An hour-long lecture about careers in librarianship is neither necessary nor desirable; a brief explanation, mentioning law librarianship as a career that students might want to consider, and an invitation for students to follow up anytime they have questions about the profession should suffice.

It can sometimes be challenging for librarians to adequately cover even basic legal research in the limited class time they have with students, much less introduce more advanced issues that might better illustrate the diversity of rewarding opportunities in law librarianship. Innovative librarians can use technology to help them overcome the limited class time with students. For example, a course online discussion list or a course Web site with a chat forum can provide a venue for further discussion of materials for interested

students and a conduit for librarian-instructors to post interesting optional readings about developments in the fields of legal research and law librarianship. Above all, librarians who teach must view teaching as an integral part of their work, not as a peripheral task to be performed reluctantly.

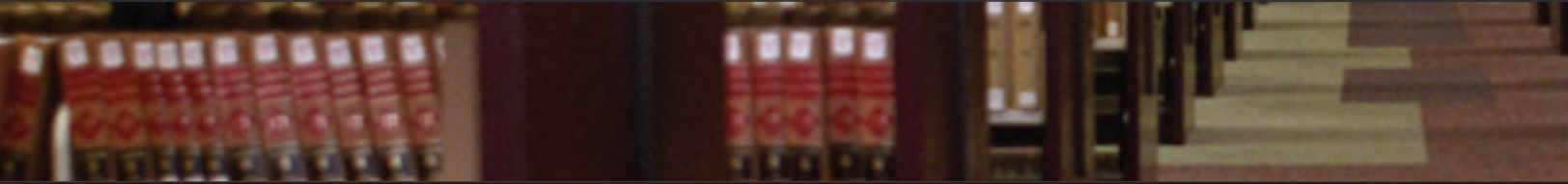
Collaborate with Career Services

When law students are unsure what sort of career they wish to pursue with their degrees, the natural and obvious place for them to turn is their schools' career services offices. Academic law librarians should consider cooperating with career services offices to ensure that the personnel are aware of the opportunities offered by a career in law librarianship, make that information available to students, and suggest the career possibility with students whose interests and skills indicate a potential proclivity for our profession.

It is important that we provide sufficient information to career services offices so that their exchanges with students can be meaningful, because career services personnel are less likely to be as knowledgeable about law librarianship than they are about more traditional legal careers. It might even be helpful to designate a law librarian to liaise with the career services office to keep them informed about law librarianship and to provide a point of contact to which career services can refer interested students.

Participate in Activity Fairs

Many law schools host events, often near the beginning of the academic year, where students are invited to visit with representatives of various legal organizations.



hesitant to approach the student author about law librarianship.

Hire Law Students as Part-Time Workers

Working in a law library is probably the best way to learn about the profession. If your library does not hire law students for part-time work, consider reevaluating your policy. Although some libraries cite relatively frequent turnaround, potential cronyism in student workers' interactions with patrons who are their classmates, and other concerns about hiring law students, I believe these are outweighed by the benefits law students can provide. If you employ part-time workers at all, particularly student workers, few are likely to be more familiar with law libraries than law students are.

Closing Thoughts

These are just a few ideas for generating

awareness and interest in law librarianship among law students. It is by no means an exhaustive list, as outreach in this area is limited only by the imagination and creativity of law librarians. Any one of these ideas may be more or less suited to a particular law school. The library's physical layout may affect the feasibility of tours. Schools in large metropolitan areas, or on campuses with schools of library and information science, may be better positioned to initiate networking and visits with law librarians in firm, court, state, and county libraries.

The law library's relationship with career services and law school administration can also be important. For instance, it was a law librarian friend of mine who brought the idea of hosting a table during activity fairs to my attention. Apparently, when the law library director suggested the idea, the administration reacted negatively, in part

because of a perception by administrators that students ought not to pursue a career in law librarianship because such careers were deemed insufficiently prestigious. Obviously, such problems must be addressed with tact and ingenuity.

Law librarianship is not for everybody. It is not even for most people enrolled in law school. But it remains important, especially with more and more baby boomers reaching retirement age and talk of the "graying" of the profession, that we maintain awareness of and interest in law librarianship. It is hoped that these ideas will help to make that easier to do among law students, who are natural candidates to become tomorrow's law librarians. ■

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