

The Librarian's Risk of Irrelevance (in the Eyes of the Law School Dean)*

Robert H. Smith**

Dean Smith describes the forces that can lead a law school dean to see the law library director as irrelevant to the dean's priorities for the school, and offers suggestions on how to prevent this from happening.

¶1 What is the role for a director of the law library in relation to the law school's dean and the dean's priorities? How does a librarian avoid being seen as running an independent support function that is separate from the mainstream activities of the school and largely irrelevant to the dean's primary concerns?

¶2 A starting point in trying to answer these questions is to consider the dean's perspective on the *dean's* role. He¹ is responsible to, and must be responsive to, many different and competing constituencies—faculty, students, alumni, university administrators, trustees, visiting committee, organized bar, development officers, and directors of various administrative offices such as admissions, financial aid, and career services. The directors and representatives of these constituencies all want a piece of the dean's time, they “know” (and emphatically communicate) what the dean's agenda should be, and they continually lobby for more attention and more money.

¶3 One perspective that a dean can have of the law librarian is that she represents just one more of those constituencies. The director is responsible for managing the library budget, maintaining and building the collection, and directing staff. Since libraries are often physically isolated from other law school functions, there are likely to be fewer interactions between the dean and library professionals. (I imagine that I am not the only dean who, early in his tenure at a school, has been asked for his ID card when venturing into the library!)

¶4 It is not unusual for a dean to value highly the ability of a law librarian to insulate him from complaints. A dean doesn't want to hear students griping about outsiders using the law library and photocopiers breaking down, or faculty mem-

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** Dean and Professor of Law, Suffolk University Law School, Boston, Massachusetts. I appreciate the years of collaboration and observation I have enjoyed with Sharon Hamby O'Connor at Boston College Law School and Betsy McKenzie at Suffolk University Law School. My experiences with them provide the bases for most of my observations about the role of law librarians, and they each provided helpful comments on a draft of these remarks.

1. Since my experience has been working with two women as directors of the law libraries at Suffolk University Law School and Boston College Law School, throughout this article I use “he” in referring to the dean and “she” in referring to the law librarian.

bers lamenting that the library does not have the materials they need for their research.

¶5 My perception as a new dean coming from another law school was that the law library was functioning quite well, there weren't complaints from students or faculty, and so I would be able to focus on other, more pressing or problematic areas. This was, of course, a wonderful compliment to the law librarian, but adopting this approach meant that I wasn't as well educated as I should have been about the library and how it could help further the overall goals of the law school. There is a further risk that the dean will think of the library as a physical location, rather than as a provider of information services in a variety of formats and media. This could lead the dean to view the library as essentially a museum for rare collectibles that have been supplanted by electronic sources that can be accessed directly by faculty and students without ever setting foot in the library.

¶6 Given all this, there is a real risk that the law librarian and the law library will not be part of the dean's agenda.

¶7 In this article, I would like to address what a law librarian can do to avoid becoming irrelevant to the dean and to the dean's priorities for the school. Not to hide the ball, my conclusion, and my strong advice to law school library directors, is that you need to become part of the team of senior people who work closely with the dean in advancing the broad agendas of the school, and not be seen as the director of (and narrow advocate for) a relatively isolated, specialized function within the school.

Be a Member of the Dean's Senior Team

¶8 My comments about the relationship between the librarian and the dean draw upon my experience at two law schools: Suffolk University Law School, where I am now in my fourth year as dean, and Boston College Law School, where I was a professor, associate dean, acting dean, and cochair of the building committee that planned a new law library and classroom buildings. It is my good fortune to have worked with two excellent law librarians who serve as role models for avoiding the risk of irrelevance. Sharon Hamby O'Connor at Boston College and Betsy McKenzie at Suffolk are each key players within their law schools and are appreciated as such by their deans.

¶9 My perspective is also influenced by an excellent article, "Managing the Boss" by Janis L. Johnston.² It was written from the vantage point of a law librarian working with a law library director and with a law school dean, and draws on articles in corporate management by Peter Drucker³ and John Gabarro and John

2. Janis L. Johnston, *Managing the Boss*, 89 LAW LIBR. J. 21 (1997).

3. Peter F. Drucker, *Drucker on Management: How to Manage the Boss*, WALL ST. J., Aug. 1, 1986, at 16, quoted in Johnston, *supra* note 2, at 22.

Kotter in the 1980s.⁴ Johnston recognizes that traditional management theory would view the dean as managing subordinates and controlling the interaction with those who report to him. But, as she notes, that characterization is inadequate and misleading, because the relationship with the dean is one of “*mutual* creation and *mutual* dependence.”⁵

¶10 This concept of mutual dependence is key. Most new deans know very little about law libraries—usually just what they needed to know as a faculty member to support their research—and even less about how the librarian can contribute to the success of the dean. At the same time, it is very hard for the librarian to succeed if the dean doesn’t succeed.

¶11 Two of Johnston’s recommendations are particularly relevant to this discussion. First, the library director should take responsibility for building an effective relationship with the dean.⁶ You should not wait passively for the dean to take initiative—if he is not getting complaints about you or the library, you may never hear from him!

¶12 Second, the library director should learn what the dean’s “goals and objectives are and develop ways to support their achievement.”⁷ Think of the librarian and the dean as a team. I want to take this second point one step further. It’s not just the librarian and the dean who are a team—the librarian needs to think of herself and to establish herself as a member of a broad senior team, all working together to achieve the school’s and the dean’s goals. The librarian should not fall into the trap of thinking of herself as in competition with other administrators for the dean’s time and money.

¶13 To illustrate this approach, consider what a dean’s priorities might be for a typical law school:

- Increase the school’s national reputation and recognition for faculty scholarship and professional activities
- Build positive relationships with alumni
- Increase fund-raising
- Build international programming
- Deal with space constraints

These are not areas of responsibility that would appear in the usual job description of a law librarian, and a dean might well see the director as irrelevant to achieving these goals. In fact, a creative and resourceful librarian can be of tremendous help with all of them. Here is a sampling of ideas that come to mind about ways the librarian could contribute to the achievement of each of these priorities of the dean—I am sure that law librarians could add many others to the list.

4. John Gabarro & John P. Kotter, *Managing Your Boss*, 58 HARV. BUS. REV. 92 (1980), cited in Johnston, *supra* note 2, at 22.

5. Johnston, *supra* note 2, at 22.

6. *Id.* at 22–23.

7. *Id.* at 23.

Faculty Scholarship and Professional Activities

- Engage in your own scholarship and teaching, make academic and professional presentations, and take active roles in national and regional organizations
- Take a proactive role in support of faculty research by initiating discussions of current and future projects, attending faculty colloquia presentations, reviewing faculty proposals for summer research stipends, and assisting faculty in their placement of articles⁸
- Collect comprehensive information on faculty publications and activities in order to publicize internally and externally
- Host regional and national conferences for law librarians and collaborate with other administrators to host major academic and professional programs⁹
- Provide content that will attract users to the law school's Web site

Alumni

- Actively seek out ways to involve and serve alumni
- Maximize the availability and usefulness of the library to alumni users
- Make online resources accessible to alumni

Fund-Raising

- Develop resources and expertise in grantsmanship
- Cultivate donors with special interests in collections
- Cultivate archive donations
- Utilize library space as naming opportunities
- Locate donor recognition within library

International Programming

- Develop partnerships with foreign law schools or foreign libraries
- Create "virtual libraries" with online sharing of materials

Space

- Find multiple uses for existing library space; e.g., group study rooms, career services interviewing, work space for accommodating ADA students, offices for short-term faculty visitors
- Host activities that bring faculty and others into the library space; e.g., lounge, seminar rooms, special exhibits, online training rooms

Some Strategies to Develop a Broader Role

¶14 As to the general working relationship between the law librarian and dean, I heartily endorse the various techniques suggested by Johnston, including understanding the pressures the dean contends with and developing ways to minimize

8. See, e.g., LAW LIBRARY, SUFFOLK UNIV. LAW SCH., LAW REVIEW INFORMATION, at <http://www.law.suffolk.edu/library/lawrevs/index.html> (last modified Feb. 4, 2003) (including a section to assist faculty in choosing an appropriate journal for their scholarship).

9. At Suffolk, for example, Betsy McKenzie was a key organizer for our hosting two major conferences on law school facilities and technology: the ABA's "Bricks and Bytes" conference in March 2003, and the CALI annual program in summer 2001.

those pressures;¹⁰ learning the preferred work habits of your dean and adapting to them;¹¹ knowing his strengths and weaknesses and helping to compensate for the latter;¹² keeping your dean informed and minimizing surprises;¹³ managing the flow of information to your dean;¹⁴ and presenting issues in a way that will ensure quick and appropriate decisions.¹⁵ Of course, it is not hard for a dean to endorse these ideas, since they amount to an intelligent and strategic pattern of catering to the dean!

¶15 How can a librarian build on that good working relationship to play a key role in the mainstream of the dean's priorities? The answer to that undoubtedly will depend somewhat on the individual circumstances of a school and the style of a dean. Here are some examples taken from my own experience and from conversations with other deans that have proven successful in establishing a broader role for the law librarian.

¶16 **Meet regularly with the "inner circle" of advisors to the dean.** The ideal is to be a member of a group of associate deans that meet *regularly* with the dean. This allows you to know the activities and priorities on the dean's mind, and to influence how they are addressed. If you are not part of that group (or if there is no single such group), take initiative to meet with those closest advisors on your own to achieve the same purposes.

¶17 **Offer to take on projects that are not library-oriented but in which you can play a key role.** Identify projects that play to your administrative and organizational strengths and that will serve to broaden the dean's view of your ability to contribute to the success of the school. They can be totally unrelated to the library (e.g., building committee for a new classroom wing) or they can be outgrowths of library activities. For example, at Suffolk the donation of congressional papers to the library archives led the librarian to become involved in exhibits at a university gallery, a successful grant proposal to create an institute for related programming, and the hiring of part-time support staff.

¶18 **Collaborate with other administrative directors so that they appreciate how you can contribute to their success.** For example, if a development campaign is being planned, start talking to the development staff and dean early on, not only about needs of the library, but also about helping to identify prospects and attract support from alumni or foundations and corporations in ways that will enhance the school and serve as budget relief. The other directors should think of you as a partner in projects like Web site development, technology in teaching, public relations, and alumni relations.

10. Johnston, *supra* note 2, at 24.

11. *Id.* at 25–26.

12. *Id.* at 26–27.

13. *Id.* at 27–28.

14. *Id.* at 28.

15. *Id.* at 28–29.

¶19 **Prepare an annual report and meet with the dean to follow up on issues and proposals in your report.** In addition, if the dean prepares an annual report, review it closely to identify initiatives you can suggest in order to assist. If there is no single annual report, there should be plenty of material written by the dean (messages to alumni in newsletters and magazines, Web site messages, and admissions materials) that communicates his views of the school.

¶20 **Participate in committee work.** Yes, it can be tedious and time-consuming, but active service, and especially chairing a committee, can be one of the best ways to show your interest in and ability to contribute to a range of issues outside of the library. In my experience, librarians stand out for their organization and ability to move a committee agenda forward, and they receive rave reviews for their work on law school and university committees.¹⁶ If there is any one committee for you to aspire to, it is definitely a dean search committee. There is no clearer message about your standing within the law school, and you can guarantee that the dean will know your name and will return your phone calls during his first days and weeks in office!

¶21 **Nominate the dean to speak at an AALS panel for the Section on Law Libraries.** This is a novel idea that I would not have thought of on my own. I must credit Betsy McKenzie, the chair of the AALS Section on Law Libraries for this inspired strategy. It has the obvious benefits, of course, of stroking your dean's ego and contributing to the goals of national exposure and recognition for the school. But it achieved a much more subtle result as well. It led to several conversations that Betsy and I had about the role of the librarian and her working relationship with the dean. And, as the date of the presentation approached, I was especially appreciative of her help in thinking through these issues, and was once again impressed with the important role that the law librarian plays in the success of the dean and the success of the school!

¶22 Finally, the most important piece of advice. **Help make the job of the dean more fun.** Don't underestimate what a difference it can make if the dean looks forward to meetings with you rather than dreads them. There are times when it seems to a dean that people only come to him when they have problems or complaints. This really isn't the case, of course, but it certainly is a very helpful trait for a dean to always see the glass half full rather than half empty. Any ways in which the law librarian can help the dean appreciate the joys of leading the school will be greatly appreciated!

16. I have found that law librarians are extremely helpful on reaccreditation committee work, both for the law school and for the university. They can be excellent at bridging the worlds of academics and administrators. I would point to Sharon Hamby O'Connor's work at Boston College as the epitome of the librarian who develops considerable influence as a result of her committee work. Because of the credibility she established over the years within the university and the law school, she was chosen to chair several search committees for senior administrative positions (university librarian, associate dean for administration) and served as a member of three law school dean search committees.