Bridging the Abyss: Law librarians come together to prepare new attorneys

Mike VanderHeijden
Yale Law School

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This early morning session was billed as an open forum for law firm librarians and academic librarians to engage about the issue of new attorney preparation and training. We’ve all heard accounts of woefully unprepared first-year attorneys. In my experience as a law firm librarian, I’ve found that these accounts represent more of an exception than a rule. However, on numerous occasions I’ve also witnessed the rhetorical question, “What are they teaching them in law school?!” served to sympathetic colleagues with no shortage of indignant relish. So, as I roused myself from another vendor-induced slumber to sit in on this panel discussion, I hoped for a civil dialogue but prepared for a more partisan exchange.

Evaluating Ourselves First
Carolyn Santanella, serials and reference librarian at Smith Moore LLP in Greensboro, North Carolina, set the tone for the next 90 minutes by emphasizing the need to come together as members of the same profession to help prepare attorneys for successful practice. She joked that she almost named this session, “Bridging the Abyss.” She stressed the need to move beyond the last 20 years of knowing about the problem of ill preparedness; it would better serve both the profession and our patrons to evaluate ourselves and engage in practical solutions to the problem.

Restating the issue faced by law firm librarians, Chris Wolf, librarian at Nexsen Pruet Adams Kleemeier in Greensboro, North Carolina asked, “How is it that we have young people entering the workforce without understanding the basics of legal research?” Rather than reciting an anecdotal monologue to illustrate this issue, she peppered the discussion with highly entertaining video vignettes featuring high school drama students primed for their YouTube debuts.

The vignettes were based on responses elicited from the Private Law Libraries Special Interest Section members in an effort to obtain a representative sample of the surprising questions new attorneys ask law firm librarians. The vignettes included familiar scenarios involving digests (“What are those?”) and electronic databases (“You mean this costs money?”). The vignettes artfully infused a fair amount of levity to a portion of the discussion that in other...
hands might have entrenched the “us v. them” dichotomy that the organizers intended to avoid.

Survey Results
By summarizing results of a survey submitted to non-academic members of the Chicago Association of Law Libraries, Thomas Gaylord, reference librarian at Chicago-Kent College of Law Library, further framed the issue. When asked to choose from a list of pre-defined research skills, 89.3 percent of respondents chose “defining and narrowing issues with secondary sources” as a skill lacking among new attorneys. Further, 80.4 percent found that new attorneys have trouble “finding relevant sources efficiently.” At the top of their list of recommendations to law schools, 37.14 percent of respondents believed that students should receive more training on print materials.

In law firms, as new associate salaries have increased, so has the need to quickly recoup those costs. As a result, the customary apprenticeship period (during which the new attorney is trained and learns from his or her mistakes) has shortened—as has the tolerance for poor research skills.

In law schools, where legal education is typically theory-based, law school leadership can be reluctant to add the practical aspect to legal education, relying on clinics and librarians to fill the gap. Unfortunately, librarians and legal clinic directors are rarely tenured and often have less pull than tenured faculty to affect changes in the curriculum.

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New Plans for CRIV

As incoming chair of the Committee on Relations with Information Vendors (CRIV), I’m happy to have this opportunity to share with the AALL membership some of our plans for 2007-2008. First, I want to convey a word of thanks to Nina Platt, outgoing CRIV chair, for all of her efforts on behalf of the membership during the past year. My thanks also go to Ann Fessenden, AALL president, for her confidence in appointing me to serve in this capacity. I look forward to working with my talented committee members and our capable Executive Board.

The incoming CRIV had a lively meeting in New Orleans. I’m grateful to those members who were able to attend our 11th-hour meeting. We all had just enough time to change clothes and make it to the Closing Banquet!

This year’s committee members are Joanne R. Mosel Beal, Dayton Law Library Association; Jennifer A. Berman, McDermott Will & Emery LLP; Alicia Brillon, University of Colorado Law Library; Dina Dreifuerst, Bracewell & Giuliani LLP; Amy J. Eaton, Perkins Coie Library; Dina Dreifuerst, Bracewell & Giuliani LLP; Amy J. Eaton, Perkins Coie LLP; Joseph Hinger, St. John’s University Law School Library; JoAnn Hounshell, Chicago-Kent College of Law Library; Stephanie K. Marshall, Texas Wesleyan University School of Law; Robert R. Myers, Jr., Case Western Reserve University Law School Library; and Lucy Ann Rieger, Library Update Inc. Steven P. Anderson, of Maryland State Law Library, will serve as our board liaison.

New Ideas and Projects

We have some exciting ideas and projects for the coming year. As I write, the CRIV Education Subcommittee is working on four program proposals for the 2008 AALL Annual Meeting in Portland. We are also considering other continuing education opportunities following on the success of the licensing Webinar sponsored by CRIV on June 22. The program was funded by the AALL/BNA Continuing Education Grants Program (CEGP). For more information about the grants program, please visit www.aallnet.org/prodev. If you have continuing education program ideas for CRIV, please e-mail me at tracy.thompson@yale.edu or contact any CRIV member.

This year you’ll see a new feature from CRIV called CRIV Tips. These quick tips recommend tools and suggest ways you can work with your colleagues and with your vendors and publishers to enhance your relationships and become your library’s own best advocate. The first CRIV Tip was posted in September on the CRIV Page. Stay tuned for more tips.

CRIV has a number of other items on our plate for this year, including continuing to publish The CRIV Sheet (Amy Eaton, editor), New Product Awards (Joe Hinger, chair), vendor site visits (JoAnn Hounshell, chair), updating and maintaining the CRIV Page and CRIV Tools (Joanne Mosel Beal, chair), and continuing to assist with vendor/library communications in the event that unresolved problems arise (Tracy Thompson, chair). To request assistance from CRIV, simply visit the CRIV Page and click “Request Assistance.” Please be sure you have exhausted your self-help options before escalating an issue to CRIV.

CRIV works for the members, and we welcome your input and feedback. Please don’t hesitate to contact me or any other committee member during the year with your concerns or ideas. We look forward to a productive year ahead!

Tracy L. Thompson (tracy.thompson@yale.edu) is executive director of the New England Law Library Consortium, Inc., in Keene, New Hampshire.

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Seidenberg proposed three strategies for solving the ill preparedness dilemma.

- Adding a legal research component to the bar exam would help convince schools of the importance of these skills to professional success.
- Law librarians could also offer students a for-credit certification in legal research skills, separate from continuing legal education (CLE), which tend to pick up the slack left in training for practical legal skills.
- Law schools and law firms could partner to identify legal research skills and work together to make sure students and future associates receive the training they will need.

A Positive Discussion

The presenters did an excellent job to ensure that the discussion didn’t get bogged down in either frustrating anecdotes or counter-productive negativity. Wolf and Santanella illustrated the problem in a light, generalized, non-confrontational way. As an expression of experiences common to non-academic librarians, the data is helpful to all law librarians as they work to address the issue of ill preparedness. Likewise, Seidenberg’s presentation was valuable for the profession as it seeks to understand the causes of the problem and work towards a solution.

Gaylord wrapped up the session by advising us to remember that the students and new attorneys we now encounter seldom have the latent memory of card catalogs, periodicals indexes, and other finding aids that may have helped us conceptualize the research process. In a spin on the familiar aphorism, he said that in a sense, “we are teaching new dogs old tricks.” Not a bad sound bite to keep in mind as I returned to prepare for fall associate trainings.

This program did not include any handouts. Only one presenter used PowerPoint slides to summarize the survey results. And in an effort to cover the material without detracting from the discussion, the presenter skipped over most of the slides. As a result, someone listening to the audio recording should not feel like she or he missed out on anything. The only portions that a listener might miss are the three video vignettes. However, the audio would presumably pick these up as well, so the listener would still benefit from the added context the vignettes provide.

Mike VanderHeijden (mvan@crowell.com) is a reference librarian at Crowell & Moring LLP in Washington, D.C.