

Trends

IN LAW LIBRARY MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

Edited by Philip C. Berwick ♦ For academic, firm, corporate, and government law librarians

The Empirical Research Law Librarian Part 2: Developing the Role

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For several years, the Reference Department of the Lillian Goldman Law Library at Yale Law School had witnessed a growing demand for empirical research support services. This increase mirrored broader trends in librarianship. Data and empirical specializations are on the rise, as reflected in the Library Journal's 2013 placements and salaries article, "The Emerging Databrarian." As the article explains, many libraries are creating stand-alone positions in these growth areas, and still more are folding "databrarian" skills into traditional job descriptions, such as reference librarian. That is, library directors are seeking individuals who can fill reference, technical service, or rare books roles while incorporating their knowledge of digital curation, e-learning, or social science statistics into their daily work. As described in Part I of this series, our law library followed this route when advertising for an empirical addition to the Reference & Instructional Services department. Data from that librarian's first year on the job illustrates this hybrid service model in action.

The Law Library Empiricist at Work: By the Numbers

In November 2012, roughly six weeks after joining the law library, the Empirical Research Librarian began tracking her work using Springshare’s LibAnalytics, CLIO’s Online Practice Management software, and Microsoft Excel. For five months, she recorded analytics for each email, reference exchange, writing project, etc., including the constituent, time spent, and work performed; data from more than 775 hours of library service was collected. Her early service statistics suggest who might be served by an empirical research librarian, what types of work that librarian might complete, and what sorts of support that new team member might need.

During roughly her first six months, the Empirical Research Librarian’s most frequent patrons were the law library and specific faculty members. Service to the law library included: staffing the reference desk, creating website content, selecting social science textbooks, contributing to library events (e.g., “Student Games Night”), attending meetings, delivering staff trainings, serving on a search committee, and overseeing upgrades of statistical software in the library’s computer lab. Faculty service ranged from secondary source research to dataset creation to research assistant training.

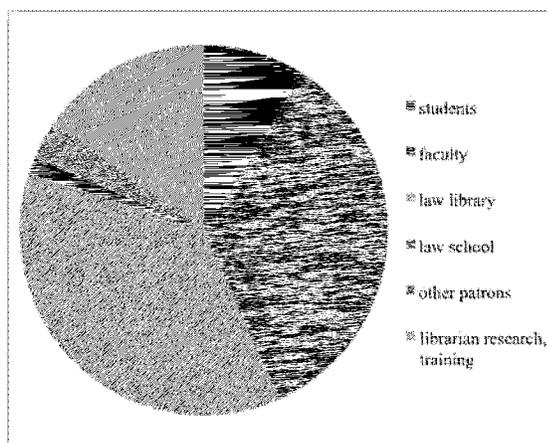


Chart: Time Spent per Constituency, November 2012–March 2013

Total time spent with 23 individual faculty members ranged from 30 minutes to 55 hours. The faculty member that received 55 hours of assistance engaged the Empirical Research Librarian in: brainstorming topics for ‘big data’ analysis,

pursuing data purchases with vendors, creating econometrics and Stata workshops to complement a 3-credit empirical law course, and creating handouts on statistical software licensing for students.

Student service was varied and ranged from providing assistance with Inter-library Loan requests to helping a JSD student design the empirical portions of his dissertation. Broader law school engagement included attending scholarly paper discussions and advising a staff member on SQL queries. Other constituents served included: librarians and professors from other Yale schools and law schools, public patrons, and members of the Connecticut Bar Association law librarianship committee.

The Law Library Empiricist at Work: Additional Professional Training

In addition to serving patrons, the Empirical Research Librarian completed scholarly publishing projects and attended more than 100 hours of professional training, including nearly a semester of Advanced Legal Research class and the Conference on Empirical Legal Studies (CELS). At CELS and other empirical workshops, the new librarian discovered best practices in research data management planning, newer resources for statistical analysis (e.g., RStudio, iGraph), and emerging trends in databrarianship (e.g., service models that span the data life-cycle). The librarian also visited the Harvard, New England, Quinnipiac, and Stanford law libraries, and spoke with their librarians about empirical research services. This helped her to understand how other law librarians triage empirical reference questions, manage longer-term data projects, and collaborate with university data services and IT professionals. Networking opportunities are but one source of support that a new empirical services librarian might need.

The Law Library Empiricist at Work: Support from the Law Library

Empirical legal research support is a small, emerging field. There are few examples to follow; there might never be a textbook on the subject. As a result, supervisors must assist empirical legal librarians in gaining the knowledge and perspective needed to effectively develop the new service area. At the Lillian Goldman Law Library, early support focused on three areas: legal research education, managing

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faculty and student capacities and expectations, and leveraging the resources of the larger university library system.

The new librarian needed to learn more about legal research. Because law schools offer few statistics courses and social science graduate programs offer few law courses, the most qualified empiricists might be light on legal research experience. Fortunately, most academic law libraries oversee instructional programs; instructors can invite or enroll the new librarian directly in their courses and workshops. Online tutorials, shadowing, and law library conferences can round out an empirical law librarian's early legal research training. In the future, the law library community might offer online "crash courses" via Coursera, edX, or another provider for the diverse cohort of non-J.D. librarians that joins the profession each year.

Second, empirical research librarians need help managing the unique faculty and student issues that attend empirical research, including skills gaps and far-flung expectations. Statistical research requires advanced numeracy and computational capabilities that some faculty and students lack. In certain instances, "patron education" is not appropriate or welcome. Senior librarians can help steer the new librarian toward tailored responses to capacity issues, such as: "I have heard how busy you are; can I help you to hire research assistants for this project?" or "There are a number of statistical approaches we could take. Perhaps we should ask some of your colleagues which methods are preferred in the law." At the other end of the spectrum, faculty members with advanced degrees in the social sciences can expect the new librarian to be conversant in the software packages they prefer and advanced statistical operations they perform. Most empirical legal research librarians will be fluent in a few empirical software packages; they will not have skills consonant to those of a tenured Economics or Psychology professor. At our library, supervisors helped to calibrate both patron and librarian expectations by supporting the new librarian in learning faculty members' communication styles and drawing clear service lines.

These service boundaries are meant to ensure broader coverage of the faculty and student body. Sometimes, the line of demarcation is as concrete as "troubleshoot basic Stata code issues, outsource long Stata dictionary writing." Most of the time, "drawing the line" involves consideration of who the patron is, what services s/he's requesting, how busy the librarian is, and what other supports are available.

Third, since most law schools are housed within a larger university community, they can take advantage of the empirical services provided to the larger com-

munity. At Yale, this includes a StatLab staffed with Ph.D. candidates, workshops on software ranging from ArcGIS to LaTeX to R, and access to colleagues with complementary empirical skills, such as network analysis or automated image analysis. Not only did these colleagues provide just-in-time assistance to the new Empirical Research Librarian, they supported her ongoing work and development. During her first few months at Yale, the new librarian joined the Data and eScience Group (DaEG). Through that group, she met diverse library and IT staff, contributed to the university's first "Day of Data," joined a campus-wide data management planning committee, attended talks and workshops, and participated in an article-discussion club. Those experiences bolstered her confidence and competence; they also fostered opportunities for other law librarians to participate in empirical events outside the law school.

In addition to these early supports, the Empirical Research Librarian has had ongoing training and mentorship in library operations and culture. In her second semester, she was invited to join the law library Space Planning committee; in her third semester, she joined the law library Strategic Planning committee. Each week, she has coffee with her supervisor to discuss library policies, history, management practices, and opportunities for advancement. These meetings inform her short-term, semester, and yearly goal-setting. They provide another window into why the law library operates the way it does. Operational and cultural information is particularly valuable for library specialists from non-legal fields.

Conclusion

As academic law libraries respond to changes in legal curricula and publishing, they might hire specialists to support the interdisciplinary empirical work of a new generation of legal scholars. As our experience demonstrates, employing an empirical specialist is a process that commences with a needs assessment and concludes when the new librarian has received the support needed to carve out a valued service area. For law libraries considering this move, we offer the following IO discussion questions:

1. Is the law faculty engaged in empirical research, or would they be if they had the support?
2. Is faculty interest substantial enough to justify the addition of an empirical research librarian on staff? Is there sufficient empirical support elsewhere on campus?

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3. Will law school administration support the addition of an empiricist on the library staff?
4. What skills are needed in the empirical research librarian to support the current and future work of the faculty?
5. What experience and qualifications (from a human resources/labor perspective) are required to hire an empirical research librarian?
6. How will the empirical research librarian be trained and supported?
7. What does the empirical research librarian need to know about faculty, students, staff, and others to serve them effectively?
8. How should the empirical librarian divide his or her time among constituencies?
9. What university, partner, or professional organizations might support the new librarian's work?
10. What sorts of lasting contributions (e.g., research guides, catalog additions) ought the empirical librarian make to the law library?

These questions should complement broader strategic discussions occurring in many academic law libraries. As legal education and scholarship continues to evolve, empirical legal specialists might have an important role to play. This small, emerging field intersects with broader trends in librarianship that signal a bright future for innovative libraries and library leaders.

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