

## From the Editor: Supporting Professional Research

The AALL Strategic Plan for 1991-94 was finalized by the Executive Board in November 1990 and set in motion by the 1991-92 operating plan that the Board approved in July 1991. The Strategic Plan includes an objective and several strategies for supporting and promoting research in law librarianship.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, the Association has provided support and encouragement for research through *Law Library Journal* and other publications, special projects grants, the Call for Papers program, and other means. Is research important enough to the profession and to the daily work of law librarians that additional programs should be developed and additional AALL resources devoted to research activities? What should the Association do to encourage the research activities of its members and to improve the quality and usefulness of the research that law librarians carry out?

### Why Is Research Important?

In considering whether research is important to the profession of law librarianship, it is necessary to move beyond the idea that research in librarianship is done only by academic librarians to develop a record for tenure. Such ideas start from the assumption that research in library and information science is an activity so scholarly or academic in nature that it is divorced from the day-to-day realities of life as a law librarian and makes no contribution to the body of knowledge and understanding that the members of the profession need in order to practice.

The purpose of research in any profession or discipline is to develop and maintain a vital body of knowledge to support the needs of all segments of the profession. All types and forms of research should have at least potential *practical* value. As a recent writer on research in library and information science put it, "[T]he issue of library/information science research . . . [is] the issue of how [our] field of endeavor learns—how it accumulates knowledge about the phenomena of interest."<sup>2</sup> How can a

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1. See *The Strategic Plan 1990-94 of the American Association of Law Libraries*, 22 AALL NEWSL. 201, 209 (1990) (Objective IV.D. "Support research in law librarianship" and following strategies).

2. Zweizig, *The Secret Science: The Role of Consulting and LIS Research*, in LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE RESEARCH 204, 205 (1991).

profession remain vital unless it continues to develop its body of knowledge?

Because it is largely carried out by practicing professionals, most research in law librarianship, as in library and information science generally, will be either "applied research"—designed to test, confirm, or revise existing theory—or "action research"—the investigation of a problem to aid in local decision making.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of what form the research takes (analytical, conceptual, empirical, historical, bibliographical, or technological), most library and information science research addresses issues related to acquiring, managing, and using information—the work of the profession. Therefore, it should have practical implications.

### Topics for Research in Law Librarianship

What sorts of research should we be carrying out? To begin, prospective researchers in law librarianship could more often consider adapting and applying general library and information science research questions to law library issues. One way to respond to the idea that law librarians are outside the mainstream of the profession<sup>4</sup> is by establishing linkages between our own research efforts and those of librarians, information scientists, and others in related fields.

There are a variety of places to look to find out about current areas of inquiry in library and information science. The publications of other specialties are an obvious place to start. It is worth bearing in mind, too, that other professional library associations have been more active than AALL in promoting research. As examples, both SLA and ACRL have published research agendas setting forth priority areas for research.<sup>5</sup> SLA also sponsors a research grants program to fund research projects within the concerns of the SLA research agenda. The published research agendas of other organizations can provide ideas for research in law librarianship.

Anyone interested in library and information science research should also look at the 1988 Department of Education report, *Rethinking the Library in the Information Age*. The three-volume report is the result of a study sponsored by the Office of Library Programs designed to identify

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3. McClure, *Communicating Applied Library/Information Science Research to Decision Makers: Some Methodological Considerations*, in *id.* at 253, 254. See generally Herson, *The Elusive Nature of Research in LIS*, in *id.* at 3, 5-6.

4. See, e.g., R. Millican & D. Wallace, *Research Needs in Academic Law Libraries* 4 (unpublished ms., forthcoming in *Law Library Journal*).

5. See *SLA Research Agenda*, *SPECIALIST*, Feb. 1990, at 4; *ACRL Research Agenda*, 51 *C. & RES. LIBR. NEWS* 317 (1990).

researchable issues to "help libraries attain—or maintain—a position of leadership in the information society."<sup>6</sup> Volume one of the report sets forth research issues identified by participants in a "Setting a Research Agenda" study; the second volume presents papers discussing those issues.

It is also important in thinking about research areas for law librarianship to consider the perspectives of those outside the field. In the last issue of *LLJ*, Professor Peter Martin of the Cornell Law School presented his thoughts on the effects of changing delivery systems for legal information on our profession.<sup>7</sup> Professor Martin's article reminds us that law librarianship exists as a profession because lawyers need law libraries, not the other way around. What will happen to the profession if legal information needs can be met electronically by end users without law libraries or law librarian intermediaries?

Martin lists several potential roles or "opportunities" for law librarians, some of which can be seen as research-based. Among them:

Systematic and critical evaluation of new legal information systems—"consumer reports" written for users by someone other than the vendors.<sup>8</sup>

Devising ways to bring order to electronic libraries by bringing in organizing, cross-referencing, and other features.

Developing new citation standards for non-book materials.

Finding ways to meet the information needs of law firms with offices spread throughout the country and across the globe.

Other areas for research in law librarianship have been identified in a recent study by Rita Millican of the LSU Law Library and Danny Wallace of the LSU Graduate School of Library and Information Science. Millican and Wallace conducted a research project to identify and rank research needs in law librarianship as perceived by academic law library directors. The full results of the study will be published in a future issue of *Law Library Journal*. The study showed that law library directors felt the following areas were deserving of immediate, major research:

Determining how access to legal information can be measured and expressed in ways other than volume count.

Developing guidelines for substituting electronic and other non-print legal information products for paper copies.

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6. 1 RETHINKING THE LIBRARY IN THE INFORMATION AGE: A SUMMARY OF ISSUES IN LIBRARY RESEARCH 3 (1988).

7. Martin, *The Future of Law Librarians in Changing Institutions, or the Hazards and Opportunities of New Information Technology*, 83 *LAW LIBR. J.* 419 (1991).

8. See also Leiter, *Law Library Hi-Tech*, 22 *AALL NEWSL.* 444, 445 (1991) (asking why commercial entities, rather than law librarians, have conducted studies comparing manual and computer-assisted research).

Determining how lawyers actually perform research in order to improve library services and research instruction.<sup>9</sup>

Another fruitful area for law librarian research is information policy. The introduction to volume 3 of *Rethinking the Library in the Information Age* notes that, despite changing formats and information delivery systems, librarians are "still largely responsible for the design, operation, and provision of information services."<sup>10</sup> These changes, however, have made information a concern of national and international policymakers and created research problems with "economic, political and social [dimensions] merit[ing] systematic scholarly and professional attention."<sup>11</sup> These are not simple research problems. The diversity and complexity of information policy issues (economic, intellectual property, dissemination) cut across disciplinary lines, and the issues are "seemingly not amenable to analysis by the conventional methods of the traditional disciplines."<sup>12</sup>

Who better to conduct interdisciplinary research on information policy issues than librarians? Who is better positioned on these issues than the law librarian?

There are, therefore, many sources from which to get ideas for research topics in law librarianship or other areas of library and information science. One essay in a recent book on research in library and information science notes: "[T]here is no shortage of topics. What is in short supply is the management of research policy."<sup>13</sup> What can be done to coordinate research efforts in our field and to improve the quality of the research that is being done?

### Improving Research in Law Librarianship

To improve the usefulness of their research, law librarians must act to ensure that research is being performed in the areas where it is most needed and that funding is available for projects of value to the profession. There must be mechanisms to let individual researchers know about projects already underway by colleagues, programs to ensure that prospective researchers are trained in proper research techniques, and opportunities for

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9. R. Millican & D. Wallace, *supra* note 4, at 7-9.

10. Hayes, *Overview of Position Papers and Discussion*, in 3 *RETHINKING THE LIBRARY IN THE INFORMATION AGE: BUILDING AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR LIBRARY RESEARCH* 1, 1 (1989).

11. T. GALVIN, *RESEARCH ISSUES IN INFORMATION AND PUBLIC POLICY* 3 (1989) (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Library and Information Science Occasional Paper 2).

12. *Id.*

13. Curran, *Impact of "National Research Agendas" on LIS Research*, in *LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE RESEARCH*, *supra* note 2, at 31, 42.

younger researchers to consult and work with more experienced members of the profession. What can AALL do to provide this kind of support? What can our own institutions do to promote research activities?

AALL's current efforts have been cited above: the publications program provides a forum for publishing research results; the annual meeting, institutes, and workshops provide opportunities to present research results; the Call for Papers program encourages writing projects;<sup>14</sup> special projects grants can be obtained for research projects.<sup>15</sup> How much research have these efforts actually fostered? How much have they done to stimulate interest in researching questions of interest and importance to the profession?

Other library associations and organizations in other professions have supported and encouraged the research efforts of their members by establishing special or ongoing committees on research needs, creating research agendas for the profession, coordinating efforts to obtain outside funding for research projects, and participating in efforts to create national research agendas. These efforts were undertaken to meet member needs and because members of those associations believe that support for research is in their professional interest. AALL has not taken so active a role, although the Association has the opportunity through the Strategic Plan and its research objectives to create new programs to support research. This will not be done, however, unless research is an area of high enough priority for the membership.

What can we do in our own libraries? I have argued above that research in library and information science should have practical implications. We need to remember that we all conduct research in our own institutions in order to improve local decision making. We conduct users' surveys within our libraries and telephone other librarians to see how they are dealing with problems and issues similar to those arising in our own libraries. Such activities can suggest larger research projects or become the basis for them.

The information-gathering and decision-making processes we engage in to solve local problems are similar to the processes of conducting research.<sup>16</sup> Local decision makers and researchers both begin by identifying a problem, putting it in perspective, and deciding what questions to ask. They then design procedures to answer those questions, collect and analyze

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14. No awards were given in 1991, however, despite an announced prize of \$250 per paper.

15. Twenty thousand dollars was available for special projects in the 1990-91 AALL annual budget; five thousand is available in 1991-92.

16. The research process described here is borrowed from Herson, *supra* note 3, at 4.

data, and finally present their findings and recommendations.

To improve the quality of local decision making and add to the body of professional knowledge, we need to recognize these similarities and put them into operation in our daily work. How do we do this in our local institutions? One thing that library administrators can do is to integrate staff research activities into the operation of the library as a means for improving library services. Specifically, library administrators can:

Require that staff-produced local planning documents show an acquaintance with relevant published literature in order to provide context, avoid reinventing the wheel, and suggest gaps in research that might be filled locally and then shared.

Require that all local users' surveys and other efforts to gather information on how to deal with local issues be conducted with an understanding of the literature on how other libraries have resolved the issues.

Require that staff members conducting surveys, etc., learn how to construct surveys and questionnaires that will elicit meaningful results.

Make sure the staff responds to other librarians' surveys and questionnaires to learn other libraries' areas of current concern, to gain insight into potential problems for the local library, and to critique outside surveys as models for local research projects.

Look at operational decisions as "field experiments" and monitor how policy changes or new services work out, in order to determine the validity of the decision and to share the results with others.<sup>17</sup>

It is necessary to look consciously at how we go about gathering information to meet local needs and how we go about communicating that information to decision makers and others in the field who may be facing the same problems. In supporting local decision making, researchers need to bear in mind the importance of applicability and usability of results beyond the local situation. Librarians should be more conscious of the value of sharing and communicating the results of the "action research" carried out in their own libraries.

One result of local research projects is the much-maligned "how we do it good in our library" article. But what is wrong with those articles if the research is conducted with an understanding of previous work on the topic and with proper methodology and data-gathering techniques, and the article is well-written and well-presented? Applied research and action research each test assumptions and theories and help us determine whether

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17. Most of these ideas are taken from Hewitt, *The Role of the Library Administrator in Improving LIS Research*, in *LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE RESEARCH*, *supra* note 2, at 163, 166-70.

the common wisdom is correct, while developing a body of data upon which new assumptions can be based.<sup>18</sup>

In summary, it is important to recognize that, to remain vital, any profession requires the continued development of its body of knowledge and expertise. Research activities are directly related to those developments and should not be viewed as something apart from the daily realities of law library life. Particularly in a time when the needs of users of legal information are changing, along with the sources of supply, we need to understand what it is we are doing and should be doing to meet those needs. An understanding of the importance of research and its practical implications is essential to the continued vitality and viability of law librarianship, as it is for any profession.

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18. Cf. Biggs, *The Role of Research in the Development of a Profession or a Discipline*, in *LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE RESEARCH*, *supra* note 2, at 72, 79 (“[I]f practical knowledge grows most usefully *through* practice, then anecdotal information from other practitioners, communicated through articles, conference programs, and hallway chitchat, quite properly takes priority.”).

