From the Editor: Who We Are and What We Do

It is normal, perhaps, for law librarians and other practicing professionals to go about their daily work, understanding the nature of that work and why they do it, secure in the knowledge that their work is recognized as important by the institutions they serve. Yet, we are reminded occasionally that the nature of a librarian's work is not necessarily obvious to others and that its importance may not be understood, even by those who benefit most directly.

I was reminded of this recently during a law school library committee meeting called to discuss the possibility of creating a higher law faculty status for staff members who participate in the instructional program of the school and have an established record of scholarship in law or legal research. In the course of this discussion, which focused on the usual questions involving matters of status (voting rights, what other benefits should accrue, etc.), a committee member asked how librarian teaching, research, and, implicitly, other professional development activities contributed to the mission of the law school. Should librarians be engaging in these sorts of activities when they might be doing other things more directly supporting faculty research and the curriculum?

The questions raised were troubling, perhaps particularly because they were raised within an institution where library services undoubtedly are appreciated, and under circumstances where appropriate recognition for those services was under discussion. At first, I was reminded of some of the things I dreaded most about library school—discussions of whether or not librarianship is a true profession and of the image librarians have in the eyes of their publics. But image is not really the issue; rather, it is what we do to communicate to others the nature of our work and an understanding that activities such as research and teaching are integral to a librarian’s work and to continued excellence in library services.

Users of law libraries, like users of other types of libraries, are less likely to think about librarians and the services they offer than to think of the library and its collection of books. Users understand that the library has within it people who help locate the books, answer questions, compile bibliographies, and, increasingly, locate information through a variety of

1. See, e.g., Divay, Ducas, & Michaud-Ostryk, Faculty Perceptions of Librarians at the University of Manitoba, 48 C. & Res. Libr. 27, 33 (1987).
sources using computers. Some of these people catalog books using a system comprehensible only to themselves; others open the mail and do things to the books prior to getting them on the shelves. But an appreciation of who does what, which tasks are more difficult, which tasks require special skills and training, and what it takes to maintain and develop those skills is lost on the observer who sees the library as a place. Unless they are told otherwise, our users will continue to hold conceptions of librarians that grow increasingly outdated, as problems of information organization and access become more complex and as more education and greater skills are required of librarians.

Library users form their ideas about librarians from what they see librarians do. Recent studies of how general academic librarians are seen by faculty and university administrators show that faculty know little about librarians' educational backgrounds and training and are ill-informed about the library's overall goals.\(^2\) The surveys show that faculty perceptions are strongly colored by what they actually observe librarians doing: providing reference service. One study indicates that fully 85 percent of responding faculty see the major function of librarians as service to faculty and students; only two percent even considered the importance of such activities as organization and management of information.\(^3\)

Because their conceptions are based on what they see librarians do, university faculty neither think of librarians as fellow members of the faculty, nor consider librarianship a field of study, or a discipline, like their own or like those of faculty members in other departments. And the concept of academic discipline is crucial to the way that faculty members think about matters of status and relationships within the university.\(^4\) How faculty members react when librarians talk about teaching, research, and other activities beyond those the faculty recognize as appropriate for librarians is colored by the ways they think about teaching and research within their own disciplines and what they understand of the teaching and research processes in other disciplines.

For the university professor, teaching is a formal, structured means for conveying knowledge of the discipline to students through courses that are closely related to faculty research interests and integrated into the overall departmental offerings. Developing courses and gaining approval to teach

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2. See generally id.; Cook, Rank, Status, and Contribution of Academic Librarians as Perceived by the Teaching Faculty at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 42 C. & Res. Libr. 214 (1981).

3. Cook, supra note 2, at 219.

4. See generally Kellogg, Faculty members and academic librarians: Distinctive differences, 48 C. & Res. Libr. News 602 (1987). Much of the following discussion is based on ideas explored by Kellogg.
them are difficult processes. Because teaching is considered a formal activity, the sort of instruction that is done while answering reference questions or in short bibliographic instruction sessions is unlikely to be understood as teaching by administrators and faculty. Similarly, when they think of research, faculty members think of a fundamental process aimed at advancing the body of knowledge within the discipline. They understand the process of research in their own field and know that something similar goes on in other disciplines, but they probably don’t know enough about librarianship to know that there are areas for debate and research within our field as well, and they are unaware of the implications of these differences for library services.

Based on what they observe of librarians and the little they know of librarianship, faculty are not prepared to think of librarianship as a discipline like their own. In large part, this is because they see librarians acting as practitioners of their profession. Within the university setting, as elsewhere, librarians are seen applying the knowledge of their profession, not performing research to advance that knowledge or teaching it to others.

Yet, academic librarians must be able to explain what they do and its importance in terms that are understandable and appreciated by faculty and administrators. Is librarianship a discipline? Former librarian, now university administrator, Rebecca Kellogg argues that it is, and that:

There is no reason why administrators should not understand that learning to catalog is learning not only a system of rules and the arrangements of those rules, but the appropriate application of them to a specific entry or descriptive end. Or that reference work is the choice and application of an identified methodology which results in a series of “yes/no” statements which delimit a field of sources or pieces of information down to a single result. Or that critical thinking is the natural byproduct of graduate work in librarianship, just as it is of graduate work in any field . . . .

As such activities indicate, librarianship is a discipline based in methodology. Yet, as Kellogg points out, the concept of academic discipline is not one that librarians usually use to explain to others what they do.

As long as library users see librarianship only as an applied or practicing profession and do not appreciate its basis as a field of study like their own, acceptance and understanding of a librarian’s research, teaching, and other efforts beyond direct service depends on whether those

5. Id. at 605.
6. Id.
efforts are perceived as supporting the users’ own research or teaching. The academic law librarian’s research on the implications of the paperless library for management of law library services and collection building might be less readily appreciated than a guide to sources in securities law compiled for classroom distribution. Yet, both projects are appropriate research concerns for practicing law librarians.

Can law librarianship stand on its own as a field of study? Clearly, law librarianship is similar to the academic disciplines in that its practitioners have always recognized the importance of teaching and research. What explains our traditional involvement in such activities other than when they are directly supportive of someone else’s efforts?

Law librarians long have considered teaching to be an essential part of what we do. Morris Cohen has pointed out that we traditionally have been much more involved with the materials and methods of legal bibliography than have other librarians with the materials of their specialties, and that “we have assumed the role of being the experts on the literature of the law.” This expertise makes the law librarian “the natural teacher of legal bibliography and of the methods of legal research,” and carries with it the obligation to teach. It is true, of course, that practicing law librarians teach neither librarianship nor law in the way that law professors teach their subjects. The sorts of teaching we do are ongoing and require a variety of teaching formats and settings beyond those of the classroom, and call for a more expansive definition of teaching than that considered above. Perhaps it is up to law librarians to demonstrate that a definition of teaching which limits itself to formal course structure is outdated. In areas other than research instruction, legal educators will need to make use of more than the classroom to remain effective.

Gaining acceptance for alternative teaching methods may be less of a problem than convincing others that our subject itself should be taken seriously. I have suggested in previous columns that we have done too little to establish legal research as an accepted specialty in the study of law deserving of research and the development of a knowledge base like other specialties in the study of law, and that we have attempted too little study of actual research processes. Study of these questions is appropriate for law librarians, as is research into the effects of the changing mixture of legal information forms on the organization of law libraries, on the practices of

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7. See Cohen, President’s Page: Towards a Philosophy of Law Librarianship, 64 LAW LIBR. J. 1 (1971).
8. Id. at 2.
9. Id.
10. Id. at 4.
those who use legal information in their work, and on those who supply that information and train others in its retrieval. In a field like law, where so much of the information product is published in largely duplicative, value-added packages, it is important to study the appropriateness of various forms for their purported tasks. Who is better suited for this than the legal information specialist? Who other than the law librarian can compare techniques and methodologies to determine their effectiveness and efficiencies and to help ensure that approaches to research taught in law school are what is needed for research in practice?

Kellogg argues that librarianship is itself a discipline based in methodology. The basis for considering law librarianship as a discipline is in the methodology of research and its application to problems of legal research. Its study requires subject expertise and understanding of technique and approach. Research in law librarianship is necessary to develop and expand subject expertise, to understand the organization and management of legal information and services, and to know better how to apply and teach the techniques of legal research. Research and teaching both are essential activities for law librarians, along with service to library users, because effective service to users demands the continued development of knowledge within the discipline and instruction in its techniques.

Does this approach apply to law librarians outside academic settings? The nature of the work of librarians in private law libraries, court libraries, and other settings differs from that of academic law librarians, just as the work of practicing attorneys and judges differs from that of law professors. Yet, our field is the same, just as law is the primary concern of lawyers in practice or teaching. Private law librarians are directly involved in teaching and training and are intimately involved in the practice of legal research as well as in the use and evaluation of tools and techniques. While time for research in the field may be more difficult to find in the nonacademic setting, it is an appropriate activity and should be encouraged in the same ways that practicing attorneys are encouraged to research and write for publication.

In part, the holding of outdated conceptions about the law library and the role of its staff may be because, until recently, the profession of law generally has changed less rapidly than that of the legal information specialist. The curriculum at most law schools still consists in great part of

11. See id. at 2. ("This teaching obligation is not limited to formal instruction in legal bibliography in law schools. Rather, it applies to every type of law librarian and in many different settings . . . .").

12. An argument for more comprehensive and accurate job descriptions that acknowledge such activities (and a sample description) is found in Job Description and the ALA, PLL News., Fall 1987, at 6.
lectures to large classes, and the business of courts is conducted substantially as in the past. Although law firms have moved forward more rapidly in automating their internal processes, developments there have trailed developments in the library. Attorneys, as well as law professors and judges, still practice their professions much as they did before the information explosion and the availability of information in new forms. Law librarians in all types of law libraries definitely do not. More than ever, the successful practice of our profession requires a commitment to the field that includes exploration of its subject matter through research and the development of effective approaches to teaching. Service to users may remain the most visible role we perform, but it will be done effectively only with an understanding that the profession is based in a discipline requiring attention to research and teaching.

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