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Learning While They Work: The Use of Student Assistants in Two Academic Law Libraries

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At the University of New Mexico School of Law Library (UNM), we are effectively using student assistants to help with the completion of faculty research projects. We find that the volume of faculty research that our library is able to complete is far greater due to the effective use of student assistants. During the calendar year 2005, our library completed over 500 research requests for the law school faculty. With only seven professional librarians, without student help, that volume of faculty research would probably not have been feasible.

We have formed what we call our library research pool here at UNM. Each semester, the research pool employs approximately six law student researchers. These law students are interviewed, selected, and trained by a professional law librarian. Students working in the research pool are required to sign in and out, and to work on faculty research projects in a designated research pool office housed within the law library. Their work is thus closely monitored.

Several benefits flow from using student assistants in this manner. Law school faculty members find that using the library research pool eliminates the stress and hassle of their having to hire, train, and supervise their own research assistants. They merely submit research projects to the library research pool, and wait for the results. Additionally, our law school faculty has found that they are getting higher quality research

from the library research pool. We attribute this increased quality to the fact that a professional law librarian is responsible for quality control.

From the student perspective, working for the library research pool has benefits as well. Library student assistants can avoid stressful interactions with faculty who are working under publishing deadlines, or other types of time pressure. Their only interactions are with friendly, laid-back, law librarians. Students don't have to be embarrassed about their lack of legal research knowledge or skill either. All student work is monitored by a professional law librarian who helps them with research strategy, source selection, and end-product evaluation.

The hidden benefit of using student assistants in the law library is the training that students receive. This training factor is directly congruent to the law school's educational mission. Students in the UNM library research pool work closely with a librarian who works with them throughout every step of the research process. A librarian meets with students before any research begins to discuss the goals of the project, to outline a possible plan of action or research strategy, and to answer any of the student's questions. Once the research is complete, it is reviewed by a librarian for quality and completeness. If additional work is needed, the librarian meets with the student to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the students work. The student is then given the opportunity to enhance the research project. By working within the library research pool's structured process, students receive real world, hands-on, research training. Many of our research pool alumni have commented that their work in the library research pool has helped them in their

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later employment endeavors. Our research pool students use this employment experience on their resumes as proof of their legal research prowess and experience.

The one negative effect of using student assistants in the library is the time it takes to supervise them effectively. Here at UNM, we have one full-time law librarian whose primary responsibility is the supervision of our library research pool. She spends incredible amounts of time organizing, explaining, training, and evaluating student researchers. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, we find that using student research assistants is will worth the time and effort.

Stephanie Davidson

At the University of Illinois, we have two groups of graduate student assistants: upper-class J.D. students and M.L.S. students from the University's Graduate School of Library and Information Science who already possess their J.D. degree. While the former function primarily as faculty researchers, the latter group forms a significant backup for our reference staff as well as in technical services. We're using both groups effectively to provide more services for our faculty, while also trying to create an educational experience for the students.

Our JD student workers form a research assistant pool that functions much like what Ron describes at UNM. We hire a small group of students, provide an initial library orientation and some introductory training on library databases and services, and then make the students available for faculty to hire with their research funds to work on projects as needed. We attend the first meeting between the student and faculty member, and stay in contact with the student throughout the project. If the student needs training or

support, we provide it, but most of their communication is with the faculty member. Our administration time is somewhat reduced by handling it this way, though we do spend additional time following up with faculty after the project is completed.

The Graduate Assistantship program at the University of Illinois was developed to provide additional support for library services; having Graduate Assistants (GAs) helps us immensely in getting our daily work done, so that we can continue to expand our services. In the Law Library, we hire GAs who already have their J.D. and are planning a future in law librarianship. They are an invaluable addition to our reference desk team, working with one of our five library faculty at the desk initially, and later sitting at reference on their own, albeit with backup available. They spend approximately half their time in Public Services at reference and working on projects, and the other half in Technical Services.

The Assistantship provides our GAs with opportunities to learn from the specific questions that come to the desk, and they have ample time to talk with our library faculty about law librarianship. But we struggle somewhat with the balance between providing the training necessary for them to be helpful to us in the library on the one hand, and helping them to become successful members of our profession on the other. We're building the training and educational component to address both issues. One of our newer library faculty members is responsible for coordinating the schedule of sessions and arranging topics, but the entire library faculty participates in offering sessions. Initial sessions included tax publications and reference sources; another covered ready-

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reference sources for foreign law; another explored the most essential resources for the reference desk. In the second semester, we will continue with reference sessions, but also add topics such as applying for jobs, what to expect when you interview, and getting started in the profession.

While it's taken some time out of our schedules to build this program, we believe it's worth it for us as well as our GAs. The students welcomed the law library-specific instruction that will aid them in their interview process, and we believe that they're better prepared to handle questions at the reference desk. Finally, we feel a sense of pride in helping to develop future law librarians - our newest colleagues - while they help us keep the library running.

Teaching Day: Team Teaching First Year Legal Research

Helane Davis, Associate Director & Head of Public Services, University of Kentucky Law Library

The day begins at 7:30, when I rush into my office to print another copy of my lecture notes. Class starts at 8, and the last minute changes I made the night before have rendered the notes I printed yesterday obsolete. A student stops by before class to ask a question about the last assignment. A cart full of books for a modified show-and-tell - the one all of the librarians are doing - waits outside my door. The printer churns as the student and I talk. The question answered, I grab my notes and handouts folder and head out of my office. A minute later, I round the corner of the stacks adjacent to the reading room where class is held, cart in hand.

Class begins with this week's homework being passed forward as I pass out last week's homework. I'm about to lose another 5 - 6 minutes of class time as returned assignments are read,

grumbles float into the air, and currently due assignments are unearthed. I take a few minutes to address any trends that were spotted on the homework. Most did fine, but at least one question seemed to confuse everyone. I also remind them that questions on the homework grades need to be directed to the librarian who graded that week's assignment. I'll be grading next week's homework, and I'm sure this rotation won't seem like such a good idea when I'm grappling with assignments from not only my 2 sections, but all 12 sections. But this week, it's a plus not to have any responsibilities outside of delivering lectures. And the questions, of course, but I'd get those anyway.

The housekeeping out of the way, I turn to the day's lecture. We're three weeks into the six-week course, and this week we're talking about researching federal statutes. As topics go, there is a lot to convey in my remaining 35 minutes. (I'll need to leave 5 minutes at the end to talk about the next assignment.)

I begin with a brief overview of the federal legislative process, do a drive-by explanation of what legislative history is, and then launch into an explanation of session laws and codes. It's early, and this group has always been on the quieter side, so it's hard to tell if they're following me or just silently craving more caffeine.

When we turn to the handouts for researching in the federal codes, I look down to a set of handouts that I'm not all that familiar with. This is one of the aspects of team-teaching this class. Those of us who've taught it before have handouts from earlier years, and in our weekly what's-up-what-do-we-cover-who-has-handouts meeting, the old handouts were suggested. One advantage to team-teaching is the ability to draw on the resources of five brains. But there's also a drawback, and it's just become clear to me.

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