

Ask a Librarian—We're at Your Service

by Esti Shay

Librarians often find themselves answering questions like “So, what exactly do you guys do?” or “What led you to this profession?” We law librarians receive our fair share of questions like these. In fact, a colleague of mine recently mentioned that, at least once a month, an attorney will ask her why she chose to be a librarian instead of a lawyer.

This article seeks to supply answers to questions librarians commonly receive regarding their chosen profession. In addition, it discusses how law librarians can help users improve their research and their practice, and provides helpful resources available to legal professionals through law libraries and public libraries.

Librarianship: A Diverse Profession

My *alma mater*—the Information School at the University of Washington—loves to brag about the diversity of its incoming “library school” students. One student was an ex-tugboat captain. Another was the thirteenth member of the secret team that created (or was it fixed?) HTML. Many people come to librarianship from other careers for a change of pace and later find themselves using their previous job skills in their new line of work. For example, the law librarian sitting before you at the reference desk may be a non-practicing lawyer who decided that practicing law was not the right career for him. Perhaps the librarian at your law library became fascinated with legal research in law school and redirected her focus after graduation. Then there are those librarians, like me, who decided to get a law degree after several years of working in law libraries.

One question library school students often are asked is, “You need a postgraduate degree to check in and shelve books?” Actually, we librarians have many wide-ranging responsibilities.

Among other things, librarians handle research questions; manage and train library staff; select and order books, journals, and databases; run the library’s website and online catalog; create research guides for the library’s website; teach research classes; write articles for professional publications; plan the library’s budget; and participate in long-term planning for the organization. These positions usually require a master’s degree in library science and/or information science.

In law libraries, librarians sometimes (but not always) have a law degree. In fact, according to the most recent survey by the American Association of Law Libraries, less than one-third of law librarians have a law degree.¹

With the variety of paths leading to librarianship, it could be useful to learn about the staff at your law library. Does someone specialize in tax research, or have several years’ experience practicing family or securities law? Is your librarian a former legal editor who knows *The Bluebook* inside and out? Does your library have a specialist on foreign, comparative, and international law resources?

The Lure of the Library

In general, librarians are curious people. They have selected a job where, on any given day and after any number of years in the profession, they may be confronted with questions to which they do not know the answer. Each year, Nancy Huling, head of reference at the University of Washington Libraries, tells new library students: “Every day, we are confronted with questions we’ve never had, on topics with which we are unfamiliar. It is important to work closely with the user to solve the information need.”² In fact, the guarantee of new challenges is one of the things that draws people to librarianship.



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This Department, published quarterly, is sponsored by the Colorado Association of Law Librarians (CoALL) to assist attorneys with common problems in legal research. Readers interested in submitting research questions may send them to: CoALL, Legal Research Corner, at www.aallnet.org/chapter/coall; or to: Legal Research Corner, c/o Leona Martínez, Managing Editor of *The Colorado Lawyer*, at leonamartinez@cobar.org.

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It is not uncommon for librarians to be asked what on earth possessed them to select such a “boring” career. This question might come from someone whose image of a librarian is closer to a petite woman with silver hair, glasses on a string, and a bun than perhaps a twenty-something woman with spiked pink hair and tattoos or a middle-aged man in a sharp suit and a power tie. Law librarians may be questioned by lawyers who cannot fathom using their law degree for anything other than to practice law. However, there are many people who realize that, although they are passionate about the law, practicing as an attorney is not what they want to do with their lives. Law librarianship is just one of the many paths available to these individuals.

Tracy Leming, a reference librarian at the Denver office of Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, published an article last year describing a survey of new law librarians on how they view their profession and why they chose it.³ Responses were revealing:

- “I was most attracted to law librarianship because what I like most about the law is conducting legal research (the thrill of the hunt if you will).”
- “I found I loved legal research and hated billing for it.”
- “I will never be bored in this field—there will always be something new to learn and do.”⁴

Some pursue librarianship in a small setting, such as a small law firm or company or branch library, because they like the variety of work available to solo librarians in these settings.⁵ A solo librarian

will handle collection development, reference, circulation, training, book processing, and setting up library collections at firms or businesses that are too small to have a dedicated librarian.

At Your Legal Service

Every librarian is a teacher. Librarians constantly educate—one-on-one, in classes, and in training sessions. The legal law librarian teaches both the basics and specialized tools of legal research.

Librarians keep up with new resources. They can find something cheaper, in another format, or in another state, and they can clarify which version is official. They conduct research on a variety of subjects. They can help with competitive intelligence; find authoritative medical, scientific, economic, and business-related resources; track down quotes; and help a new associate get started when researching a new and unfamiliar area of law and teach how to make that research more cost-effective.

They know where to find legislative histories in Colorado and other states. They find items at other facilities and arrange for interlibrary loans. Librarians monitor legal news and keep attorneys and professors advised of new books and articles in their areas of interest. They often create an abundance of research guides on the library’s websites to help jump-start your research. Solo practitioners cannot keep an in-house library big enough to cover every possible question. Their nearest library is an easy and fast route for finding answers, and librarians are there to lend a helping hand.⁶

Librarianship is a service-oriented profession. Librarians want to help you find the information you know you need, as well as the information you did not realize existed. If you’re looking for something that does not exist, they want to help you find the best substitute. Librarians want to help you find all of the options available to you.

A Library to Suit Your Every Need

There are many kinds of law libraries, including firm and academic, court and state, and specialized and public. In Colorado, there are six regional nonfirm law libraries open to attorneys and the public:

- Wise Law Library (University of Colorado–Boulder)⁷
- National Indian Law Library (Boulder)⁸
- El Paso County Bar Law Library (Colorado Springs)⁹
- Colorado Supreme Court Law Library (Denver)¹⁰

- Tenth Circuit U.S. Courts Library (Denver)¹¹
- Westminster Law Library (University of Denver).¹²

These libraries serve lawyers, judges, clerks, law students, business and social work students, and professors. They also serve the public—individuals filing *pro se*, landlords and tenants, people filing disability claims, and people planning to engage an insurance company in combat.

The law library is not the only avenue for legal research. Your local public library provides resources—free with your library card. Those in the Denver area can check out the Denver Public Library’s “Legal Tips & Forms” Web page,¹³ which includes Legal-Trac, an index to articles in major law reviews and journals, legal newspapers, federal and state cases, laws and regulations, and a forms database partially sponsored by the law firm of Greenberg Traurig. Public libraries also have databases on such topics as health (Medline); government (Congressional Universe); business (Morningstar and Mergent); and maps and geography.¹⁴

Want to set up your own practice? Public librarians often get questions from aspiring entrepreneurs and will know where to find information about starting your own business.

Conclusion

The job of a librarian is to help patrons find answers. Patrons often apologize for disturbing the librarian at the reference desk to ask a question, when actually, the librarian is there to answer your questions. Although some people perceive the profession as a solitary one, the real job of a librarian is to find information for patrons and make it more accessible and useful to them. Today’s librarian will use the Internet and online databases more frequently

in those pursuits than in the past, but the inherent tasks related to serving the public remain constant.

Notes

1. American Association of Law Libraries (AALL), “Respondent Background—All Respondents” (2007), available at www.aallnet.org/members/pub_salary07/background.pdf.
2. E-mail correspondence with Nancy Huling, Reference and Research Services Division, University of Washington Libraries (Oct. 28, 2008) (on file with author).
3. Leming, “Fresh Perspectives: Law librarianship as seen by the newest members of the profession,” 12 *AALL Spectrum* 14 (Dec. 2007).
4. *Id.*
5. A “solo librarian” is a librarian who runs an entire library without the assistance of paid staff, doing everything from budgeting to collection development to shelving. For more information, see the Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science “solo librarian” entry, available at lu.com/odlis/odlis_s.cfm.
6. For more information on the benefits of libraries for solo practitioners, see Whisner, “Eight Reasons Solo Lawyers Should Use Law Libraries” (June 6, 2006), available at www.llrx.com/extras/shorttakes12.htm.
7. See lawpac.colorado.edu.
8. See www.narf.org/nill/index.htm.
9. See www.ppld.org/AboutYourLibrary/Services/LawLibrary/default.asp.
10. See www.csl.state.co.us.
11. See at www.ca10.uscourts.gov/library/index.php.
12. See www.law.du.edu/index.php/library.
13. See www.denverlibrary.org/research/law/index.html.
14. See “Research Resources,” available at www.denverlibrary.org/research/index.html. ■