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AALL Research Agenda: Focus on Technical Services

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RESEARCH & PUBLICATIONS

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I hope you are planning to attend the Research Roundtable in Seattle. It is scheduled for Sunday, July 13 from 11:45 a.m.-1:15 p.m. It will be a time to learn about projects that some of your colleagues are working on or contemplating, as well as a chance to share your own ambitions or accomplishments. Hopefully enough sparks will fly (in a good way) that one will kindle your imagination!

We will also hear a report from Susan Goldner on the progress of the *TSLL* indexing project that she and Virginia

Bryant are working on. This project, by the way, received an OBS/TS Joint Research Grant. Yes, even in these lean times there is research funding out there! You can learn more about how to apply for the JRG at: <http://www.aallnet.org/sis/obssis/research/researchinfo.htm>.

Ellen McGrath has graciously contributed the following guest column on technical services aspects of the AALL Research Agenda, which we will also discuss at the Research Roundtable. In this same vein, if you have attended a research-oriented

conference program or even just read a great article or book on research, let me extend an open invitation to you to be a guest columnist as well.

AALL Research Agenda: Focus on Technical Services

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I confess—I hadn't really given a lot of thought to the AALL Research Agenda. I read it when the Association

announced it in its current version a while ago (September 2000). And I remember being impressed with it. In my opinion, an awful lot of information was presented concisely, but in a broad enough way that left plenty of room for interpretation. Then last year, I was appointed to the AALL Research Committee and so the Agenda reappeared on my radar, with a whole new emphasis.

First, let me say just a little about the Research Committee. Here is its charge: This committee reviews and proposes changes to the Association's Research Agenda, works within the Association and with other library associations to encourage research, and administers the Association's research grant program by reviewing applications, making awards and monitoring research activities.

At present, Kumar Percy is Chair of the Research Committee. Its other members are: Scott Childs, Kevin Gray, Edwin Greenlee, Paul Healey, Ellen McGrath, Grace Mills, and James Duggan (AALL Executive Board liaison). Its website is at: <http://www.aallnet.org/committee/research/>.

I was honored to be appointed to the Research Committee, but also a bit overwhelmed. After all, its charge is pretty huge and sort of two-pronged: (1) monitoring the Research Agenda and encouraging research, and (2) reviewing research grant applications, deciding who to give the grants to, and making sure the activities funded actually take place on schedule. The second group of activities is more straightforward than the first. And it's great to be able to assist in the process of actually giving out money!

By contrast, monitoring the Research Agenda and encouraging research are less tangible tasks and therefore difficult in a different way. But they are essential building blocks from a

very practical point of view, in order to make sure that there are applications for the Committee to review. Funding these research grants after all, is one of the major methods of accomplishing the Research Agenda. As to the encouragement of research, the OBS and TS SISs have been strong, long-term contributors to that effort on a number of fronts: by sponsoring the OBS/TS Research Roundtable each year at the AALL Annual Meeting, by establishing the OBS/TS Joint Research Grant Committee and awarding grants, and by running this "Research & Publications" column in *TSL*.

Since OBS and TS are doing such an excellent job of emphasizing the



importance of research and have worked it into the very fabric of their organizations, I will simply applaud those efforts and urge them to keep it up! My goal in this article is to focus more specifically on the AALL Research Agenda as it relates to technical services. My hope is that some of the topics will grab your attention and then you will decide to research and publish in those areas. And if that does happen, don't forget that the AALL research grants and the OBS/TS joint research grants exist to help fund your work.

AALL Research Agenda <<http://www.aallnet.org/committee/research/agenda.asp>>

The Agenda is quite wide-ranging and it covers seven pages when printed out. It is divided into six major categories:

- ◆ The profession of law librarianship
- ◆ Law library patrons
- ◆ Law library services
- ◆ Legal research and bibliography
- ◆ Legal information resources
- ◆ Law library facilities

Technical services is an integral part of the law library, so it is true that everything in the AALL Research Agenda ultimately affects and/or is affected by technical services. But technical services librarians have specific skills and knowledge that they could bring to bear on certain parts of the Agenda that are most directly related to, and could actually affect the manner in which they perform their daily work. I realize that the line between "traditional" technical vs.

public services functions is blurring all the time and that is a good thing. But I will focus rather specifically here on the following areas: acquisitions, cataloging, collection development, preservation, and serials. And I will try to highlight those portions of the Agenda, as best I can. I'll even underline some terms

to show why I included the points I did.

The Profession of Law Librarianship

This entire section obviously directly affects technical services librarians, since we are all members of the profession. So I won't record each point separately here. This section is quite detailed and covers a lot of ground: decision-making climate, job descriptions, evaluations, motivation, principles, mentoring, culture, leadership, education, training, status, advancement, professional organizations, salaries, etc. These are all important areas that affect all types of law librarians, including technical services librarians. If research into these areas was undertaken, some of the results might be somewhat different for technical services librarians vs. other types of librarians, but much of it would be the same. I encourage everyone to read this section carefully.

The challenge that occurred to me when reading it was how to design an effective research approach to these rather abstract topics.

Law Library Services

Many of the points in this section generally refer to methods of measuring and evaluating the needs of our users and then adjusting our services appropriately to meet those needs. This is of course a major challenge in any area of a law library. But this section also contains some specific points that encompass technical services issues.

◆ Can legal resources on the Internet be adequately *classified* and *cataloged*? Should they be?

◆ How can the full range of resources available electronically, including audio, video, graphics, animation, text, etc., be incorporated into and described in a single *cataloging record*? How can adequate *access* and *retrieval* mechanisms be built into the cataloging record? Will cataloging records need to change from text to a more graphical representation? What are the implications of this kind of change? What happens to unindexed/uncataloged materials?

◆ Can *standards* for *description*, *access*, *encoding* and transmission of digital resources be developed that would allow for uniform comparisons and knowledgeable selection? How can law librarians or AALL persuade legal information producers to adopt open, non-proprietary standards?

◆ What is the potential impact of direct *publisher*-end user relationships on law libraries?

Legal Information Resources

◆ How can consortium agreements be forged between public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit libraries, to maximize leverage in buying/

acquiring information resources? How can the individual members of the consortium retain sufficient independence while benefiting from the consortial agreements?

◆ What is a “legal document” in the electronic age? How does this new genre impact publishing, *access*, *control*, *preservation* and the use of the document in a legal proceeding?

◆ How can we best communicate with *information producers* to ensure that they provide legal information in the best appropriate *format* for end users, rather than in the most cost-effective format for production or the “format of the moment”? What are we doing as a profession to influence



information resource research and development?

◆ What *standards* and guidelines should be developed for the *organization* and delivery of information and services in an evolving print and electronic environment? Can these standards and guidelines apply to a purely electronic collection (whether virtual or not), or must there be differing standards to recognize the different formats and organizational models?

◆ How do *cancellations* of materials affect library service in law libraries? What are the long-term impacts of *write-for-order programs* and cancellations of materials produced by targeted publishers? What are the long-term implications of canceling print copies of publications because the information is available online? Are there different considerations if

the information is available for free on the Internet or only available through commercial providers?

Law Library Facilities

◆ How does the *arrangement* of the library and its *collection* of resources influence the patron’s choice of resource? How does it influence the librarian’s choice of resources?

◆ Would it be feasible to unify all the law *library catalogs*, either in the U.S., in North America, or worldwide? Can databases and websites be incorporated into this unified law library catalog?

As you can see, the Research Agenda contains a number of questions relevant to technical services librarians. Now that we know this, we need to turn these questions into specific research projects that will yield some answers. This process will not be easy by any means. And there will need to be interim steps, where portions of these questions are fleshed out into a whole series of even more specific questions, which will then result in focused research problems to be investigated, documented, and shared.

My intent in presenting this information was not to provide answers to the interesting and challenging questions posed in the AALL Research Agenda, for that is a huge task that can only be tackled through the efforts and input of many law librarians. I simply hoped to help technical services librarians focus in on these questions and perhaps to open up a dialog about them. Fortunately, OBS, TS, and AALL already have mechanisms in place that make undertaking such a process of communication and research relatively easy, namely this column, the OBS/TS Research Roundtable, and the OBS/TS and AALL research grants. In making use of these opportunities, we can help each other to find the answers to these questions, as well as to determine new questions, since the Research Agenda is always evolving.