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### Law Librarians as Educators and Role Models: The University at Buffalo's JD/MLS Program in Law Librarianship

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*Reference Librarian Joseph Gerken backs up practicum student Kathleen Wilko at the University at Buffalo Law Library's reference desk.*

# Law Librarians as Educators and Role Models

## *The University at Buffalo's JD/MLS Program in Law Librarianship*

*by James Milles*

Law librarians have expressed a growing concern in recent years about the need to recruit new law librarians into the profession. Statisticians and trend watchers foresee the continued graying of the profession, as large numbers of baby boomer librarians retire during the next 10 years. And with the legal information environment becoming ever more complex, many predict that the need for law librarians will grow. Where will those skilled professionals come from? It sometimes seems as though, to paraphrase Mark Twain, everybody talks about recruiting, but nobody does anything about it.

Fortunately, the situation is not quite that dire. The Web site of the Conference of Law Library Educators (COLLE) (<http://students.washington.edu/jnl3/>) lists 36 ALA-accredited library programs offering at least one course in law librarianship; several offer two, three, or more. A number of these library programs are at universities that also have law schools, but only eight law schools offer joint JD/MLS programs; three are in partnership with library programs at other institutions (see "Law Schools that Offer JD/MLS Programs" on page 21).

The University at Buffalo has long had both a law school and a library program, but it was not until 2001 that it began to develop a formal collaborative, or dual-degree, program in law librarianship. Not long after I had settled in as law library director, I began to have informal discussions with some of the law librarians

to gauge interest in supporting a law librarianship program. After determining that there was interest—or at least no serious objection to the new director's proceeding with his newfound hobby—I discussed my ideas with the dean of the law school and the chair of the Department of Library and Information Studies (DLIS) in spring 2001. Both welcomed the plan and worked with me to determine program requirements and clarify the logistics of cross-listing courses, accepting course credits from one program into the other, and so on. Within a few short months, we were ready to go.

### **In the Beginning**

The program already had a firm basis on which to build. James R. Sahlem, principal law librarian at the New York State Supreme Court (8th Judicial District) Library in downtown Buffalo, was already teaching a library school course on legal bibliography. Sahlem has since expanded that course into two classes: Primary Law Resources and Materials of Legal Practice. Other UB law librarians, including Susan Dow and Terrence McCormack, have also taught in the library school from time to time.

I spent part of the first year preparing a new course, Law Library Administration, which is now offered each spring and cross-listed in both law and DLIS. Law Library Administration introduces students to management issues in law libraries, as well as to broader topics facing law librarianship as a profession. The course makes extensive use of role-playing and simulations to immerse the students in the life of the law library professional.

A major component of the course is a group strategic planning project. The students form the staff of a hypothetical law library, and each individual is assigned a specific role or job description. The students hold a series of planning meetings throughout the semester and finally produce a complete strategic plan for the model library. In addition, each student writes a research paper on a contemporary issue in law librarianship and presents the paper in class; UB law librarians are invited to attend the presentations.

Law Library Administration was offered for the first time in spring 2003; it attracted 11 students. The second time, in spring 2004, eight students enrolled—a mix of contemporaneous dual-degree students, students with a JD pursuing the MLS (or vice versa), and MLS students

planning to apply to law school. (The syllabus for the course is available at <http://briefcase.yahoo.com/jmilles>, in the folder "LawLibAdmin.")

### A Surprise Hit

I originally estimated that the program would be a success if it grew to five or six students. Currently there are 12 to 14 students at various stages in the program. Students have come to the program in different ways. Several of them, looking for an alternative to the traditional practice of law, chose to pursue the MLS during their second semester of law school. Others have come back to library school after completing their law degrees or even practicing for a few years. A few are starting to apply to UB Law School specifically to pursue the law librarianship program.

Once students come to realize that law librarianship is a career option, many of them find it a very attractive one. Ann Davey, a second-year law student and first-year library student, heard about the program toward the end of her first year in law school. "Before that, it hadn't even occurred to me that one could have a career as a law librarian," Davey said. "I was so relieved to hear that my majors (modern languages and creative writing), in combination with my technology experience, could actually make me quite marketable for something. And of course it's nice to think that I would be able to use the skills I developed as an undergrad. By that time I was already dreading 80-hour workweeks, no vacation, no time for family, having to beg for unpaid internships, dealing with the constant life-or-death situations of clients, billable hours, and stiff competition every step of the way. In short, law librarianship was a revelation—it came to me at exactly the right time in exactly the right way."

Jennifer Behrens, a first-year law student who finished her MLS at UB last year, was interested in law librarianship before she even started library school. "I had worked in a public library since the age of 16, so I felt comfortable in the 'library world' and always felt like it was something that I would enjoy doing," she said. "But law school had always been an option that intrigued me, too. During my junior year of college, after researching a bit on librarianship as a career, it finally dawned on me that I could just combine the two fields. So I'm happy to have a future in the library field, and mom's happy that she can brag about having a daughter in law school."

The law school has been very supportive of the program. Dean Nils Olsen, when presenting the proposal for the program at a spring 2001 law school faculty meeting, noted that one of the appealing aspects of the program was the opportunity to attract more students who would be seriously interested in the academic study of law.

The JD/MLS program, like other dual-degree programs at the school, is also promoted by the Admissions Office. I regularly participate in law student open houses and career days to talk with students who might be interested in a career in law librarianship. We are also working to integrate the program more closely into the curriculum of the Department of Library and Information Studies.

### A Challenging Program

One of our goals is to do more than train law librarianship students in the skills of legal research; we also challenge them by giving them the intellectual foundation to handle changes in legal information and prepare our graduates for whatever roles into which law libraries of the future might evolve. This is why the interdisciplinary tradition of UB Law School is an important part of our program.

We encourage students to pursue a wide variety of course work, including current trends in empirical legal scholarship, and think of law as not limited to what is found in the books or online. "I love the challenge," Behrens said. "I love the intricacies of legal research. I love that there are no 'right answers' in law. Sure, there's precedent, but it still changes constantly. It's so unpredictable, it drives me insane; but that's why I love it."

Davey is interested in emerging trends. "Most of the other students I know have set their sights squarely on reference, but so far I am very intrigued by the technology that fuels libraries and digital information systems," she said.

Another crucial component of the UB law librarianship program is providing practical experience. DLIS students are required to complete a practicum, and many have done their practicums in the law library. In 2003 the law school approved a law library internship program, which allows law students in the JD/MLS program to earn three hours of law school credit for practical work in a law library—either at UB or at a court or law firm library.

### Law Schools that Offer JD/MLS Programs

- **Brooklyn Law School and Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science**  
[www.brooklaw.edu/academic/joint/jointprograms.php#mslibrary](http://www.brooklaw.edu/academic/joint/jointprograms.php#mslibrary)  
[www.pratt.edu/sils/program.html#Anchor-M.S-44867](http://www.pratt.edu/sils/program.html#Anchor-M.S-44867)
- **Indiana University**  
[www.slis.indiana.edu/degrees/joint/law.html](http://www.slis.indiana.edu/degrees/joint/law.html)
- **North Carolina Central University**  
[www.nccuslis.org/programs/law.htm](http://www.nccuslis.org/programs/law.htm)
- **Syracuse University**  
[www.law.syr.edu/academics/academics.asp?what=interdisciplinary\\_study](http://www.law.syr.edu/academics/academics.asp?what=interdisciplinary_study)
- **University at Buffalo, The State University of New York**  
<http://informatics.buffalo.edu/programs/mls/>
- **University of Connecticut School of Law and Southern Connecticut State University Department of Library and Information Science**  
[www.law.uconn.edu/academics/dual-degree.htm#mls](http://www.law.uconn.edu/academics/dual-degree.htm#mls)  
[www.southernct.edu/departments/ils/masterlib.htm](http://www.southernct.edu/departments/ils/masterlib.htm)
- **University of Iowa**  
[www.uiowa.edu/~libsci/programs.html#jointdegrees](http://www.uiowa.edu/~libsci/programs.html#jointdegrees)
- **Widener University School of Law and Clarion University of Pennsylvania**  
[www.law.widener.edu/PROSPECTIVE/ADMISSIONS/programs\\_dual.shtml](http://www.law.widener.edu/PROSPECTIVE/ADMISSIONS/programs_dual.shtml)  
[www.clarion.edu/edu-humn/newlibsci/grad.htm#Juris Doctor](http://www.clarion.edu/edu-humn/newlibsci/grad.htm#Juris Doctor)

In the past two years, two students have done law school internships, and two others have done library school practicums. The practicums and internships not only give the students solid, practical experience; they also allow the students to work closely with the excellent law librarians in each of the host institutions.

Kathleen Wilko is a JD graduate of William and Mary currently finishing a practicum at the UB Law Library. "As a group, the law librarians at the University at Buffalo's Law Library have welcomed me into the profession with open arms," she said. "Their commitment to, and enthusiasm for, the law librarianship profession is infectious, and it is here that my desire to become a law librarian was solidified."

Our latest development in the area of practical experience is the hiring of Davey as our first half-time graduate assistant in reference, beginning in fall 2004.

Yet another practical component of the law librarianship program is encouragement of professional development. Donor support has enabled us to offer several travel grants to attend the 2004 AALL Annual Meeting in Boston. In March we initiated our first "mock interview." One of our graduating students, with the participation of the UB Law Library staff, submitted to a day-long mock interview for an academic law library position, including a formal presentation on research instruction.

### Cooperation is Key

Bridging the cultures between the law school and DLIS does present difficulties, especially for the students. Here the dedicated involvement of the law librarians is invaluable. "Having a foot in two different programs can be confusing and frustrating without the proper administrative support," Davey said. "The best aspect of the program at UB is without a doubt the network of law librarians. They are all interested in the students and the program. They attend student presentations and are always willing to give students their insights about the profession. Their support makes this program remarkable."

Wilko agrees. "The greatest strength of the program at UB is the people involved in it," she said. "The willingness of the law librarians to share their experiences and knowledge with students, in both formal and informal settings, creates an atmosphere ripe for learning."

Some of the students have also begun to discuss forming a student caucus within AALL. They hope to schedule a meeting of interested parties, both students and experienced librarians, during the Annual Meeting in Boston.

As the program continues to grow, we would like to do more to develop a habit of scholarship in our students. The librarians at the University at Buffalo are all tenured or tenure-track faculty, so

research and scholarship are part of their responsibilities. We hope to build on this by identifying research needs within the field of law librarianship, such as those described in the *AALL Research Agenda* ([www.aallnet.org/committee/research/agenda.asp](http://www.aallnet.org/committee/research/agenda.asp)), and generating original empirical scholarship in conjunction with the law librarianship program. We require the completion of a publishable-quality research paper as a component of the new graduate assistant in reference position. A further step in this direction is a new course, Research Methods in Legal Informatics, which I will offer next year. This course gives a selected student the opportunity to work closely with one of the law librarians as a research assistant on an empirical research project conducted by the librarian. Students wishing to pursue their own scholarly projects also have the option of individual directed research courses.

**“ ... discussing issues with JD/MLS students yields a way of looking at the issue that I had not considered. ”**

—Joseph Gerken, reference librarian

There remain significant areas needing improvement, particularly for the student experience within the program. "Within the law school, it seems like the traditional law students perceive librarianship as sort of a weird reason to pursue a JD," Behrens said. "There's not a big support system in place for people who are interested in alternative legal careers, which is totally understandable, but it can still be frustrating at times."

Wilko experienced similar attitudes from the library school. "At the moment, there does not seem to be much support of the program from the DLIS side," she said. "There are no full-time faculty in the department to advise students or to garner interest in the field. In my application to the program I stated my field of interest was law librarianship, and I was never told about the existence of the program or referred to those involved with the program."

### Program Benefits Veterans, Too

On the other hand, the benefits of the law librarianship program have been even

greater than we expected. Teaching Law Library Administration each year forces me to review and reexamine my own practices. And for those of us in the UB Law Library, the exposure to bright, young student librarians is invigorating. "I've found on more than one occasion that discussing issues with JD/MLS students yields a way of looking at the issue that I had not considered," said Joseph Gerken, reference librarian at UB Law Library. "Students can look at the issue in a very objective, non-partisan and—yes—idealistic fashion, and sometimes that is a good perspective for older, more jaded individuals like myself. Having JD/MLS students at the reference desk also benefits the reference staff, as the students often ask why we took one approach as opposed to other possible ones in responding to a patron query. This type of informal critical self-examination (being compelled to articulate the logic behind a particular research approach) helps keep us 'on our toes' and, I assume, sharpens our reference skills."

Working with the JD/MLS students also gives the law librarians valuable insights into the concerns of law students. "The close relationship the librarians have with the JD/MLS students gives us a tighter shot with which to focus on different aspects of library and legal education today," said Nina Cascio, international law librarian. "It is instructive for us to have a more intimate familiarity with the day-to-day happenings in library school and law school, and the content of their education—an opportunity we might not take the time for if we weren't working so closely with our JD/MLS students."

For all law librarians, the chance to help shape the future of the profession by developing future professionals is a source of both pride and responsibility. "We have an obligation to train the next generation of law librarians by providing the 'laboratory' for students to gain a holistic concept of a law library," said Marcia Zubrow, head of information services at UB Law Library. I encourage all law librarians to seek out opportunities to help teach future law librarians.

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