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New Career Paths: From Computing Services to Library Director

by James Milles

A number of years ago, when I was close to completing law school and beginning to think about a move to another law library, I had an enlightening conversation with a colleague. Like many younger law librarians, and as one of the first law librarians working under the then-novel job title of "computer services librarian," I planned to move up in my career, thinking I might eventually want to be a library director. However, I soon realized that an image problem

lay ahead. My colleague sympathetically suggested that computer services librarians were generally not considered candidates for management positions because traditionally trained law librarians perceived librarians in computer services as working with "things, not people."

Some law librarians still say that computing services librarians lack the skills or expertise necessary to succeed as academic law library directors. The last research study on how law librarians prepared to become academic law library directors was Michael J. Slinger's 1988 article "The Career Paths and Education of Current Academic Law Library Directors" in *Law Library Journal*. It was published well before computing services departments had become as established as public services and technical services. For this reason, Slinger neither mentions computing services as a "route to a directorship" nor technology development as one of the duties of a law library director, which "include significant responsibilities in librarianship, budgeting, personnel management and teaching."

However, law library directors do not hire other law library directors; law faculty and deans do. Faculty and deans increasingly recognize the crucial role of information technology in law libraries. In many schools, the law library director is responsible for law school computing and investments in technology. So faculty and deans are looking for technological

expertise in their law library directors, along with the traditional skills of budgeting, personnel management and teaching. Most librarians learn about budget and personnel when they become associate directors. Computing services librarians, on the other hand, are already much more involved in these administrative areas than any other librarians, except the director.

I am probably the first academic library director to make the leap from computing services to library director. Future law library directors will be drawn more and more from the ranks of computing services because faculty and deans realize the breadth of knowledge and experience that computing services librarians have. They not only have technological expertise but also the solid background in information management and law librarianship that all law library directors need. However few law librarians recognize that working in electronic services is an excellent way to gain those fundamental skills in information management and law librarianship. With the increasingly integrated automation of most libraries, technology may be the most important connection between public and technical services — and computing services librarians often work equally with both areas. At the same time, the librarians who work most closely with technology are often in the best position to understand its limits and appreciate the appropriate roles of other forms of information media.

Computing services librarians are by necessity comfortable with change and often make effective change agents. My experience working with ever-changing technological tools — for example, transitioning from WordPerfect 5.1 to WordPerfect for Windows to Office 2000 — taught me to focus primarily on outcomes and goals and not to become attached to particular methods or techniques. In the same way, every policy within the law library should be subject to re-examination and questioning. If someone insists that a particular policy or practice is absolute and cannot be changed, that is often a sure indicator that the policy has not been examined and therefore needs to change.

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The transition to administration will not necessarily be easy. It means shifting away, to some extent, from front-line work. For computing services librarians, advancing to administration signals an end to hands-on work in technology in return for setting the direction and vision of the law library. More than that, though, becoming a director is in some ways a career change. For an excellent discussion of the challenges during the “taking-charge” period, see Lynn Wishart’s 1989 article, “Moving into Management from the Outside,” in *Law Library Journal*.

The administrative skills gained from managing technology and the knowledge of legal information that all law librarians must have may not be sufficient to earn tenure. The library director is a member of the law faculty, with all the requirements of research, publication and teaching. Figuring out exactly what those criteria are can be a challenge because most law schools do not often hire library directors. It may have been a long time since the faculty had to consider what sort of scholarship they expect from a

law librarian. In some schools, the law librarian is expected to publish substantive law journal articles; in other schools, the librarian is supposed to stick to librarianship and steer clear of writing on significant law topics. Trying to meet the unstated expectations of the law faculty can cause problems. These are matters that a new director should clarify as early as possible.

However there is no reason to believe that these challenges are any greater for a law librarian coming from a computing services background than for those from the more traditional career tracks. Computing services librarians often work closely with law faculty and may be able to transition from service provider to faculty colleague with relative ease. The growth of academic interest in all areas of technology and law and the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of much law scholarship provide a wide variety of models for research and publication.

A library director must provide resources and support to enable the rest of the staff to

fulfill their job responsibilities. Therefore he or she must have a clear and articulate understanding of how the library fits within the law school. By working closely with other law school administrators, he or she gains insight into the library’s role at the law school. Experience in managing law school technology support within the law library puts the computing services librarian in close working relationships with each of those departments and makes him or her more aware of the needs of other departments outside the library.

Computing services librarians have much to offer to law schools looking for direction in the information environment of the 21st century. While I may be the first to become director from a computing services background, I know that I will not be the last.

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