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Too much information?



No, says new Law Library director – it's all in how you access it

Elizabeth Adelman

As the newly appointed director of the Charles B. Sears Law Library, Elizabeth Adelman knows that law libraries – at universities, law firms and corporations alike – are at a crossroads.

Library and information science, like a lot of disciplines, is riding the digital wave, and searchable databases like LexisNexis and Westlaw promise at-your-fingertips access to every legal resource imaginable. At the same time, the paper resources – those volumes of statutes, for one, that look so professional lined up on a bookshelf – can work better than digital in some circumstances.

With each new class of law students who have grown up thumbing text messages and immersing themselves in social media, Adelman now sees opportunities to teach them both kinds of legal research, and bring them up to speed on the next-generation legal databases that will offer “one-box searching,” as simple as a Google query.

“Legal education anticipates what students will need when they graduate,” says Adelman, who was named director in June, succeeding Professor James Wooten. “We need to prepare students for any practice environment. We want law students to use critical thinking skills when they decide what resources to use and in which form.”

Those skills develop partly in UB Law’s newly expanded Legal Analysis, Writing and Research curriculum. “Historically, there have been very strong ties between our reference librarians and the writing instructors here,” Adelman says. So, for example, each research and writing instructor works with a reference librarian, developing exercises such as one that asks students to research an issue in paper resources as well as electronically, then write about which worked better in this instance, and why.

In addition to imparting those critical thinking and research skills, “We’re headed in the direction of taking a more active role in teaching at the Law School,” Adelman says. As an example, she cites international law librarian Nina Cascio’s course in international legal research in the spring semester – in time to train students who want to participate in the regional Jessup and Faskin international law moot court competitions.

Adelman emphasizes that the Law Library, which has a 17-member staff, runs as a team effort, much of which is unseen to its many users. “Librarians are trained to efficiently and effectively organize information, navigate the information overload and, most important in the electronic age, make the informa-

tion accessible,” she says. “What goes on in the public areas of the library appears to be very clear-cut, but what goes on in the back rooms is what makes the information available. Without the librarians who work in the back rooms, there would be no organization or accessibility to our purchased print and licensed online resources.”

Adelman, a native of Western New York, came to UB from the Georgia State University College of Law Library. She earned her law degree from Albany Law School and a master’s in library science and a bachelor’s degree in history, both from UB.

At the Charles B. Sears Law Library, Adelman previously served as head of collection management, a role in which she coped with severe budget cuts. “It prepared me to lead in the age of budget reductions,” she says. “The great challenge will be a long-range plan carried out successfully despite the budget crisis. Success under these circumstances will be a symbol of the collective talent of the Law Library staff.”

Adelman is also active in the larger community of law librarians, and serves on the editorial board of the Center for Computer-Assisted Legal Instruction, which promotes the use of technology in legal education. (Law students use its “CALI Lessons” as an effective study tool; Adelman has authored several.) Adelman was elected and served as the 2009/10 chair of the Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section of the American Association of Law Libraries. She has written two books on legal research and, with co-author Theodora Belniak, the Law Library’s current head of collection management, is revising her book *New York Legal Research*, scheduled to be out in January.

Her service was recognized this year when she was awarded the SUNY Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Librarianship. The award honors “skill in librarianship; service to the campus, the university and to the field; scholarship and professional growth; and major professional achievements.” Adelman was among seven UB faculty members, four professional staff and three classified staff members who received 2011 Chancellor’s Awards.