Help Wanted: Ensuring the Survival of Law Librarianship

By Penny A. Hazeltine

In her 37 years of leadership at the University of Washington School of Law Library, Marian Goeldt Gallagher (professor, law librarian, and one of the great contributors to our profession) looked for these characteristics in those pursuing law librarianship:

"Industrious, alert, charming, attaintive to detail, retentive, imaginative, unafraid of bending for a judge or getting dirty while moving books, dependable, receptive to taking and following orders, able to derive understandings to inspired heights, inseparable, securely interested, attractive, unmoved, cheerful, importance, diplomatic, and sumptuous."

The 80 law libraries seeking to fill 101 positions at the 1999 AALL Annual Meeting Placement Office were looking for something much simpler: an applicant pool from which to find even ONE candidate for each open position.

For the past two years, job openings have greatly outnumbered applicants at the AALL Annual Meeting, which is THE national job forum for law librarians. In 1999, only 63 resumes were submitted for 138 jobs at all levels, and only 26 potential candidates were available to fill 63 entry-level jobs. At the 1998 Annual Meeting Placement Office, only 23 entry-level applicants were available for 40 such jobs.

Perhaps more disturbing: preliminary study by AALL’s Task Force to Enhance Law Librarianship Education indicates this situation is likely to continue across our profession—unless we law librarians do something about it.

Realities is in the Numbers

Our own Association statistics, as well as experiences shared by law librarians and educators across the country, document the declining applicant pool in our profession. Consider the facts:

• Our profession is aging. In 1996, the AALL Demographic Survey found that 74 percent of law librarians were 16 years old or older—with 32 percent between ages 46 and 55, and 42 percent between 36 and 45. As the older group retires and the current mid-level managers take charge of our law libraries, who will staff them?

AALL 1999 Placement Office Snapshot

Job Openings/Requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Jobs</th>
<th>MLS only</th>
<th>MLS req/ID pref</th>
<th>MLS+JD</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry Level</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>16 (25%)</td>
<td>18 (28%)</td>
<td>21 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid/ Senior Level</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Applicants—Educational Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Applicants</th>
<th>MLS only</th>
<th>MLS+JD</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry Level</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid/ Senior Level</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>17 (31%)</td>
<td>34 (62%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Available by December 1999 for employment—4 applicants who submitted resumes were unavailable and left the line.

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Help Wanted

- Only 36 of the 49 accredited U.S. library schools offer any law librarianship courses—seven of these graduate schools offer two courses.
- Only three library/information science programs in the country offer three or more courses in law librarianship, and all three schools combined graduated fewer than 35 law librarianship students in 1999.
- Library school students, faculty, and leadership are underinformed about law librarianship. Its educational needs and career opportunities. A survey of library school deans by the AALL Task Force to Enhance Law Librarianship Education found that many thought law degrees were required for work in law librarianship, and often did not regularly see job postings for law librarianship positions.
- There are fewer people with library degrees now than 20 years ago—50% of people received masters or doctoral degrees in Library Science in 1975, compared to 10% in 1997. A figure no doubt affected by the closing of several major library graduate programs in the early 1980s.
- Limited numbers of applicants are available for law library jobs, particularly at the entry level. At the 1999 AALL Annual Meeting Placement Office, for example, job openings outnumbered applicant resumes nearly 2 to 1.
- The best library/information science graduates are taking high-paying jobs in business and high tech industries, rather than pursuing work in libraries, according to some graduate school deans and directors.

Formal, Competency-based Education

In addition to declining numbers of potential candidates from fewer library and information sciences graduate programs, there is concern that even MLS graduates may lack the specific skills and competencies required for law librarianship. Most law librarians agree that high quality applicants are those with law library experience and/or formal classes in legal research and law librarianship. With only 36 schools offering any law librarianship courses—and only three of these graduate schools with three or more courses—there are limited possibilities of finding entry-level staff who have been exposed to the legal system, the legal profession and its terminology, the literature of the law, the legal and ethical concerns of librarianship, and the legal profession.

Why Should We Care?

Working to encourage qualified graduates to pursue law librarianship careers is not just a nice thing to do—it is essential to the success of the law libraries we operate and the clientele we serve. As the current law library directors retire and are replaced by their middle management, the effectiveness of our libraries is inexorably linked to the quality of staff we are able to attract and hire. Library budgets, always limited, no matter what the type of law library, will be increasingly difficult to manage if we must spend staff time and training dollars to educate librarians in law librarianship rather than hire them with appropriate expertise.

Working Toward Solutions

Attention to core competencies and the national shortage of professionals were among the issues discussed by a group of information professionals at the 1999 Congress on Professional Education, sponsored by the American Library Association (AALA). These law librarians were among more than 100 librarians and information studies educators and professionals who met to gain consensus on the values and core competencies of the profession and to identify possible actions to address common issues and concerns.

The Congress Report recommended a number of areas in which library professionals from all specialties could work to enhance competencies and skills, and expand their profession. These include:
- fostering diversity,
- pursuing accreditation,
- expanding access to graduate professional education,
- coordination of continuing education programs,
- encouraging research,
- continuing the dialogue between educators and professionals,
- mentoring, and
- training educators.

Jonathan Franklin (Senior Reference Librarian, University of Michigan Law Library) was AALL’s representative to the Congress steering committee. Also attending the Congress were Roberta Shaffer (now Dean, University of Texas at Austin Graduate School of Library and Information Science) and AALL President Marjorie Astmann (Assistant Director for Collections and Technical Services, University of Minnesota Law Library). In a report presented to the AALL Executive Board, Franklin recommended that AALL investigate, or reexamine, efforts in a number of these areas.

AALL has addressed many of these issues over the years in the activities of various committees and task forces—identifying needs through research and addressing them with ongoing professional involvement. As the professional organization devoted exclusively to the interests of law librarians, it is important that AALL continue to look at ways to build awareness of law librarianship and the many professional rewards it can bring. However, it’s not just AALL’s problem—each law librarian must take personal responsibility for encouraging participation in our profession.

It’s Up to All of Us

It’s in every library’s best interest to care about this issue now—before it is too late. None of us want to be in the position of having jobs available with no one to fill them . . . feel forced to choose from less-than-qualified candidates . . . or to add the already challenging task of on-the-job training to the workload of already-strapped staffs and budgets.

Looking at the issue of recruiting and working toward increasing interest in law librarianship for the future, will only benefit all of us and the institutions and customers we serve. It will help ensure the continued quality of our law libraries’ resources and customer service. It also will contribute to instilling the mission of our profession—to serve our democratic society by making legal information available to all people.

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