

All Roads Lead to the Library: An Academic Law Library Departmental Outreach Program

Danyahel Norris

Associate Director, Thurgood Marshall School of Law Library, Texas Southern University

I. Introduction

Nearly half a century ago, we entered the Information Age, where information has become easier and easier to access. This age has led to the rise of computers, the internet, and a variety of other digital tools that have provided numerous conveniences to our everyday lives. However, this age of convenience has caused many to ask what role the library, our traditional source of information, will play in this new digital landscape. Ironically, in the Information Age, the role and even the continued need for information professionals have come into question. This has played out both in the academic setting and public sectors, where libraries have continued to fight the tendency of administrations who have made cuts at their expense. In the legal field, cycles of low application and enrollment in the academic arena, as well as an ever-increasing number of pro se litigants in the public arena, have exacerbated these issues.

It would be naïve to think that these issues will get any better as time goes on. As such, it will be up to libraries to establish their value to both their governing institutions, as well as the public at large. There is a critical need for libraries to focus on outreach to ensure that their governing institutions are effectively utilizing the many resources they provide. This essay will give an example on how that can be done in the academic law library setting by partnering with the other departments in the law school.

II. Basic Concept and Starting Points for Creating an Outreach Program

While there are a variety of ways to do outreach, it should be noted that this essay focuses on the law library partnering up with other departments in the law school and collaborating on projects between the departments. This does not mean that many of the traditional methods of outreach, which many law libraries already subscribe to, like annual reports, social media, blogs, exhibits, etc. should be discontinued. It would be best to continue those outreach efforts and pair them with the ones discussed here, when possible.

When creating an outreach program, the goal is “making people aware of what [you] can do for them, in a language they can understand”¹ and to “connect with users in a meaningful manner that encourages future interactions with the library.”² This connection is “generally done with a specific cause in mind”³ and “typically elicit personal responses from people.”⁴

With this as our backdrop, it’s a good thing to keep a couple of other things in mind. First, it’s a good thing to remember that most people already have a positive view of libraries. According to a 2016 report by the Pew Research Center, “most Americans believe libraries do a decent job of serving the education and learning needs of their communities.”⁵ However, the same study showed most people are unfamiliar with the services provided by those libraries.⁶ With these two things in mind, we should be assured that our clientele is likely to be favorable to

¹ ALL-SIS Task Force on Library Marketing and Outreach, *Marketing and Outreach in Law Libraries: A White Paper*, 105 L. Lib. J. 525 (2013), quoting NED POTTER, THE LIBRARY MARKETING TOOLKIT, at xiv-xv (2012).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Lee Rainie, *Libraries and Learning*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER, Apr. 7, 2016, at 2, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/04/07/libraries-and-learning/>.

⁶ *See Id.*

the services provided by the library. It will just be up to the librarians to make sure that those services are effectively marketed to ensure that they are fully taken advantage of.

While effective marketing is key; an adequate budget to fund those marketing efforts can be a challenge. Particularly, since in recent years, many library budgets took major cuts, which resulted in less programming and use by the public.⁷ Such cuts tend to put libraries in a very difficult cycle to get out of, where they need an increase in budget to ensure the continued use of their resources, but have a difficult time convincing their governing entities to increase their budgets because of the declining use.

Another thing to keep in mind is that among all the resources offered by the library, the biggest resource are the librarians, who are typically well versed in both the technology and the needs of the clientele. According to the American Association of Law Librarians, law librarians are “technology experts, and take the lead with the purchase, implementation, operation, and overall management of research databases in their organizations.”⁸ This technological expertise is a critical selling point, as legal platforms tend to change on a regular basis, and many times law students, law school faculty, and lawyers at law firms do not keep up with these changes in a manner to use those platforms efficiently.

a. Using Other Library Outreach Programs as a Guideline

When creating an outreach program, it’s also good to keep in mind that many libraries already have some sort of outreach program that they can reference to make more robust efforts

⁷ See Robinson Meyer, *Fewer Americans Are Using Local Libraries – and Technology Isn’t to Blame: Only One Trend is Closely Associated with Their Use*, ATLANTIC, Apr. 14, 2016.

⁸ American Association of Law Librarians, *AALL State of the Profession 2019 Snapshot: From the American Association of Law Librarians* (Apr. 2019), pg. 2, <https://www.aallnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/AALL-State-of-the-Profession-2019-Snapshot.pdf>.

to do so. One of the outreach programs we began at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law Library was our Faculty Liaison Program. The objective of this program is “to ensure a more regular and higher quality of service...by pairing each faculty member with a designated librarian, who is responsible for contacting them to assess their research needs at least once a semester.”⁹ This approach of assigning a librarian a segment of the faculty would become a fundamental principle of the departmental outreach program.

b. Consider the Specific Strengths of the Library Staff

Another critical principle of the outreach program was to consider the strengths of each librarian based on their job duties as well as their personalities. There are some librarian positions whose job duties pair well with certain outreach initiatives. For example, the Faculty Librarian at your library is likely to be highly involved with any initiative that involves the faculty at a law school. However, it is also worth keeping in mind the personalities of a library staff can also be useful in certain initiatives. For instance, a librarian with a very outgoing personality, who interacts regularly with the students, should be considered to become involved with an initiative that involves students, regardless of whether the duties of their position specify such a relationship to this group.

III. Program Roadmap

Now that the basic guidelines have been discussed, it's time to discuss the details of the outreach program. This model was determined as the best fit for Thurgood Marshall School of Law Library, but as with every other model or program, other libraries can fit it to the needs and

⁹ Thurgood Marshall School of Law Library, *Thurgood Marshall School of Law Faculty Liaison Program*, http://www.tsulaw.edu/library/faculty_services/Faculty%20Liaison%20Program%20Guide.pdf.

strengths of their institutions. It should also be noted that this program is just being rolled out at Thurgood Marshall School of Law this semester. Therefore, at this point it is more of a roadmap that we are just setting out for ourselves than a tried and tested program.

a. Departmental Partnerships

The crux of a departmental outreach program is its very intentional outreach to the different departments of the law school. This concept came about after previous collaborations between the law library and other departments around the law school led to fruitful results, which benefited both departments. Also, after realizing that some departments seemed to have better luck securing funding from the administration for certain resources than the law library, who at times had previously requested similar or at times the same resources, developing departmental partnerships gave the law library a much higher likelihood of succeeding in future asks from the administration, because there were now multiple departments making the requests.

Now, we will discuss how these partnerships work with the individual departments. While your law school may have different departments, or call them different names, the principles discussed below should still be applicable in some manner. It should also be noted that the law librarians involved in these partnerships in this program are supported by their respective clerks and other support staff.

i. Academic Support and Assessment Departments

Like many other academic law libraries, several of the staff at our law library serve in, what some call, “staffulty” capacity. For those unfamiliar with the term staffulty, it is an

abbreviation for the combination of the words staff and faculty,¹⁰ since many law librarians serve in both capacities in the academic setting. In their faculty role, the librarians teach the Legal Research courses to the first-year law students. Since every first-year law student is required to take Legal Research at our institution during their first semester, the entire first-year class comes through the law library through those serving in a staffulty capacity. Furthermore, unlike many other law courses, which only has one or two exams all semester, the Legal Research gives several assignments over the course of the first semester. As such, our law library is in a unique position to point out very early on which students seem to struggle academically throughout the first-year class.

Typically, students that struggle in Legal Research struggle in other law school courses. As such, the partnership between the law library and the academic support department benefits the institution, giving librarians the ability to refer students that seem to need more support early on to the academic support team. To determine which students need more support, the law library will partner with the assessment department to ensure that it has the proper assessment tools to identify students to recommend to the academic support department.

The proposed annual project would be to compile and submit a list of names of students that appear to need more assistance to the Academic Support department by the midterm of the first semester, so they can receive assistance to ensure that they are getting extra support that they need to succeed. This is of particular importance to our law school, since we take more at-risk students than many other law schools. It helps support students during their foundational first year, which helps ensure that the students are prepared for the rest of their coursework. It

¹⁰ See Larry Biddle, *Transforming Staffulty*, SEEN MAGAZINE, Apr. 11, 2014 (Defines staffulty as a word for faculty and staff. This typically refers to 2 different groups of people, but many law librarians serve in both capacities.).

also helps foster stronger study habits at the beginning of their time in law school. Our Learning Resources Librarian is designated to head this effort, primarily because it is a teaching position. This librarian is also familiar with the resources available for the law students and will use this information to create other programs that cater to the specific needs of the students.

ii. Admissions and LLM Programs

As with every law school, every semester there are a group of new students, who have begun their law school career at your institution. Whether they come as first year law students, transfer students, or a part of an LLM program offered by your institution, in order to have access to the resources offered by your library, they must be input into the system. As such, we paired the Circulation Librarian with the Admissions Department to know who the new law students are, so they can be placed into our law library's catalog system. This collaboration is to take place at the beginning of each semester to ensure that each new student is accounted for.

iii. Alumni and Community Affairs Departments

Alumni and community organizations are important for the continued success of every law school and law library. Thus, keeping the alumni and broader community engaged in the success of the law library is an important to its future. As such, we paired the Electronic Resources Librarian with the departments dedicated to the alumni and broader community to ensure that these groups are aware of what library resources are available for them and are updated regularly when new resources are available to them.

iv. Career Services and Professional Development

The Career Services and Professional Development Department is a critical part of our law school, and the idea of the departmental outreach originated from a project between our

departments. For the last fourteen years, our law library has done a half-day crash course to prepare law students for their upcoming clerkship during the summer. Last year, we decided to formally partner with the career services office by advertising the crash course to the students through both departments and surveying the employers of how the students performed over the summer in the areas of professionalism and research. This feedback from the employers helped both departments determine what could be done to improve their programs. The feedback also gave concrete feedback on how students that attended the crash course and career service department events performed over the students that did not attend. The Learning Resources Librarian coordinates the Crash Course, and as a result is designated to head this collaboration.

v. Clinics and Institutes

Clinical work, law school institutes, and other real-life application of the law has become more and more of a focus of the American Bar Association (ABA) in recent years.¹¹ As such, partnering with the clinical and clinical type departments are beneficial for both departments involved, as well as for helping with accreditation issues with the ABA. We assigned the Reference Librarian to head this effort, because they are familiar with the collection to facilitate supplying these clinics with the resources that would be most beneficial to them each semester.

vi. Communications and Student Affairs Departments

If you're wondering why the communications and student affairs departments were paired together, the short answer is that at our institution, both rely heavily on what is going on in the lives of the students. Our communication department tends to rely heavily on stories that

¹¹ See *The Standardization of Law School Clinics: How Law School Accreditation Standards Help Shape Clinical Legal Education*, PRACTICE, Jan./Feb. 2020, <https://thepractice.law.harvard.edu/article/the-standardization-of-law-school-clinics/>.

involve student accomplishments. Additionally, the student affairs department, headed by the Dean of Students, also is intricately involved with the lives of the students. As such, we decided to pair this department with a librarian that was most familiar with the lives of the students, which in our case was the Government Documents Librarian. This decision was largely personality-driven and the fact that our school's Government Documents Librarian works a later shift. This allowed him to learn more about the students that use the library in the evening, when they are more likely to confide in the staff on duty.

vii. Faculty Services and Scholarship

Collaborating with the faculty is one of the law library's most important functions. It ensures the faculty's needs for their classes and scholarship are being met, as well as ensures that they direct students to the librarians when they engage on legal research projects. "Students turn to instructors rather than librarians for assistance because instructors are seen as experts in the field and they grade the assignments."¹² As you might guess, our Faculty Services Librarian was assigned to head the effort to address this department, primarily through our Faculty Liaison Program mentioned earlier.

viii. Main Campus Library

If you're at a university, there is likely a university library on campus which caters to the entire university population, not just those in the law school. There are many occasions where students and faculty need resources from the main campus library when conducting their research. As such, having a working relationship with this department is important to ensure that the law library knows when its students and faculty are better suited, using the main campus

¹² ALL-SIS Task Force on Library Marketing and Outreach, *supra* note 1, at 526-27.

library. Additionally, the main campus library and law library are also able to share the best systems for cataloging the material, or what electronic and print resources should be acquired to ensure that between both libraries, the university faculty and students are best served. We designated the Technical Services librarian to head this collaboration, because they are the ones most familiar with the cataloging system.

ix. Office of Administration and Dean's Office

Last, but not least, keeping a healthy relationship with the law school administration is an important relationship that is necessary for the continued success of academic law libraries. The administration is paired with the Director and Associate Director, because it is their job to remain in contact with the administration for both short- and long-term goals of the law library, as well as ensuring that there are adequate resources to achieve these goals.

b. Measuring Success

Now that this essay has discussed how our library has decided to partner with the other departments in the law school, the question arises of how you measure the success of these partnerships. We measure success of these partnerships through the goals and objectives laid out by each collaboration. To be effective, these goals and objectives should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound, or S.M.A.R.T.¹³ In other words, there should be concrete goals set out by the departments with each collaboration, which have a specific deadline and can be measured at the conclusion.

Most of the collaborations with each department happen from once a semester to once a year, depending on the nature of the collaboration, but final measurement is to be tallied on an annual

¹³ *Id.* at 530.

basis. These measurements can be discussed in things like annual reports, where the data associated with each collaboration can be shown. There can also be a discussion of how the data lines up with the goals and objectives set out for that year, and mention what lessons were learned that will be applied in the future. These reports should be shared with the law school faculty, administration, and posted on the website to further promote the achievements of the law library.

IV. Public Law Libraries Adaptation of the Outreach Program

While this essay discusses how our library collaborated with other departments in our law school, these collaborative principles can apply to the public law libraries as well. Public law libraries can partner with other public institutions in their area, especially the courts, in a similar manner of the collaborations discussed above in the law school environment. Since the public law library serves as the resource for the legal community in the area, it should first and foremost determine the legal needs for the area. One way to determine that is by finding out from the needs that arise from the local court systems, especially among the pro se litigants.

Whether it be local, state, or federal systems, find out the major challenges for litigants and see what capacity the law library could serve both the courts systems and the law libraries favorably. Providing tools like research guides, as well as helpful links to legal information that litigants needs, should be promoted both by the law library and the corresponding courts. Ideally, the law library would let the local judiciary know what resources they have available, so they can direct anyone in need to them. Such collaborations not only help court dockets, by helping the efficiency of the litigants, but build relationships between the law libraries and the courts. These relationships could prove helpful when the law libraries look to expand its services and needs

more funding from the local government. Having a partner to advocate jointly with the law libraries in a similar manner discussed above in the academic sector could be helpful.

V. Conclusion

If law libraries want to continue to effectively serve their institutions, they will have to advocate for themselves to those institutions and the constituencies they serve. This advocacy will require being proactive and reaching out to the different departments or divisions of their institution to ensure they are aware of the full list of benefits they offer. Partnering with them to achieve their goals would benefit the institution overall. This outreach can help them properly reposition themselves as the information experts that can lead their institutions forward as we continue to go deeper into the Information Age.