Photo by Elizabeth Farina.

Amy Jordan (right) helps law student James Khoury at the Social Law Library in Boston. At the University of Maryland, a law librarian is assigned to each law school course to serve as a course liaison.

Librarians Bridge Information Gap in Law Courses

University of Maryland Law Library's Liaison Program Aids Student Research, Increases Awareness of Resources

by Barbara Gontrum

Google is the research method of choice for today's law students—or so it seems.

The electronic age and proliferation of information services has created significant challenges for academic libraries. As students who bypassed their college libraries in favor of Internet research arrive in law school, educating them about the role of librarians and the full array of library resources becomes ever more difficult. Also, electronic full-text databases consume an increasing percentage of library budgets, but often are underutilized when students are unaware of their existence.

With these trends in mind, librarians at the University of Maryland's Thurgood Marshall Law Library implemented an innovative course liaison program designed to increase student awareness of specialized library resources within the context of their coursework.

Librarians Assigned to Faculty, Students

Now in its fourth semester of operation, Maryland's course project is an extension of a traditional faculty liaison program. Each full-time faculty member is assigned a librarian who serves as a contact for library-related questions. In addition to responding to faculty requests, these library liaisons gain familiarity with the research interests of their assigned faculty members, maintain current awareness profiles in various databases for their faculty, and assist with collection development in related subject areas.

In 2002, the traditional program was expanded to include students taught by the particular faculty member in any given semester. As course liaisons, assigned librarians are identified to students as experts who can be contacted for research or other library-related questions. Liaisons are identified for every course, resulting in a system that provides individual students with several different library liaisons per semester. Not surprisingly, the majority of requests and the main benefit to students arise in courses that require a substantial amount of research and writing.

For courses that involve considerable research—especially seminars, clinics, and trial advocacy courses—the liaisons also routinely develop Web-based course research pages for student use. These pages follow a standard format and highlight print and electronic resources directly related to the subject matter of the course. Librarians request a course syllabus and suggestions from the faculty member prior to developing each page and include resources that reflect topics covered in class. Seventeen course research pages were developed and posted during the spring semester in 2002; 47 were posted in fall 2003.

Higher Workload is Manageable

Readers may wonder about the impact this project has on librarians' workloads, and it certainly is worth considering. Eight librarians served as liaisons to 130 courses during the fall 2003 semester, which works out to an average of 16 courses per librarian and a lot of students! Given that our librarians support a faculty that is actively engaged in scholarship, teach required first-year and advanced legal research courses, and deal with the same collection and service issues faced by all academic law libraries, one would reasonably ask whether this is a feasible undertaking. The answer is yes, for several reasons.

First, the heaviest workload is concentrated at the beginning of each semester when research pages are created for new courses and previously developed pages are updated. The goal (not always met) is to have pages available during the first week of each semester, because students begin using them almost immediately. At this stage, our project has evolved to a point where very few new pages are created. In fact, so many versions of previous course pages now exist that we developed a database to track them.

Second, questions come almost entirely from students in seminars, clinics, and trial practice courses—the same courses for which library liaisons develop research pages.

The librarians are already familiar with faculty members' interests and publications, may have helped the faculty member gather materials for the course, have seen the course syllabus, and often can answer questions simply by referring students to resources on the research page.

While the number of in-person consultations with students has increased, most questions arrive via e-mail and are spread throughout the semester. Contacts range from simple document retrieval questions to ongoing consultations throughout the semester about course projects. These are far from the types of blind encounters often found at a reference desk, as the librarians are well aware of the context in which the questions occur and may have been working with students taking the particular course for several semesters.

While the average number of assigned courses as noted above is approximately 16 per semester, per librarian, the actual number varies considerably with research librarians handling more than the average. Even if the workload has increased, one can easily argue that this is precisely the type of service that libraries should be providing. In fact, how much closer to the library's mission can you get?
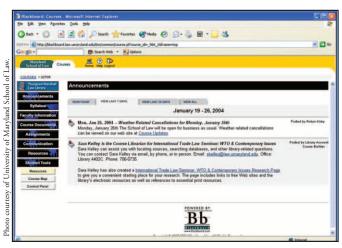
Web Links Courses, Librarians, and Students

From the practical standpoint, certain aspects of the program have been standardized to make things easier for students. The University of Maryland School of Law uses Blackboard as its course management platform, and pages are routinely set up for all courses. All course pages include a section of information about the library liaison for that course, including biographical data, a picture, and an e-mail link.

If a research page has been developed for the course, a link is provided on the course page. The complete list of research pages is also available on the library's Web page—we've learned that students appreciate having access to all the research pages, not just ones for courses in which they are currently enrolled.

Course pages follow a standard template that includes nine categories: primary law; agencies, associations, and NGOs; reports; subscription databases; electronic journals; CALI exercises; brief bibliography of print sources; link to the catalog; and Lexis and Westlaw topical databases. Pages for clinics and advocacy courses have additional categories for forms, procedural sources, and trial resources.

The program continues to increase in popularity within the school of law. Seminar students use the course research pages to explore possible paper topics, conduct research, and supplement class readings. While the pages carefully post a disclaimer that only selected resources are included and that the pages should be used only as starting points for research, students who limit themselves to the listed sources, in most cases, consult a broader range of materials than students have in the past. Seminar teachers report substantial improvement in the quality and depth of research by students that they attribute directly to the program. Also, librarians report not only more student contact but also more requests for presentations to be made in substantive classes. In one course,

Photo courtesy of University of Maryland School of Law.

The University of Maryland School of Law creates Web pages for all courses with a section of information about the library liaison for that course.

the library liaison participated in a virtual class discussion relating to the choice of paper topics and research strategies.

Responses Favorable

Librarians who participate in the program are enthusiastic about the results and see the greater integration of library services with the academic program as a positive development.

"As liaison for both Election Law and Race and the Law: the Maryland Experience, I have experienced how our use of the course pages has enhanced the library's visibility for our students," said Bill Sleeman, bibliographic control/documents librarian. "It has contributed to an overall growth in questions that I have received from students. This growth is especially noticeable to me since I don't have a teaching role and am not in front of students in the same way as some of the other librarians on staff.

"Currently I am assisting two students from the Election Law course develop their paper topics," Sleeman continued. "The issues that both students want to explore are ones that, as government documents librarian, I am able to effectively contribute to. Had it not been for our efforts to reach out via the course liaison program, I might have missed an opportunity to help our students."

While the program began with a focus on seminars, the recent addition of course pages for the various clinics has been especially popular with the clinic faculty. "The research page that was created for the students of the Criminal Defense Clinic proved to be the most valuable resource that they used this semester," said Jerome Deise, associate professor of law. "Students in our clinic represent clients in both the federal and state systems. The research page enabled them to gain access to statutes, rules, cases, treatises, and documents that were relevant to the separate jurisdictions. In addition, they had, literally at their fingertips, an entire library containing substantive law, procedure, rules of court, evidence, motions practice, as well as scores of resource materials devoted to pre-trial and trial advocacy—virtually everything they needed to prepare effectively for trial."

Increased Awareness of E-Databases

Another factor in our initial decision to develop course research pages was a sense that the use of our recently acquired electronic databases did not make up for the amount of money spent on them. While these resources are highlighted on our library's Web page and accessible through various methods, students and faculty were not aware of their value. Course research pages provide an opportunity to highlight databases on particular topics precisely at the point of need. While we cannot directly tie usage figures to the existence of research pages, many of our databases have seen increased use over the past two years.

Academic Search Premier is a good example of a database that appears on several different research pages. During the fall 2002 semester, 315 searches and 57 articles were downloaded or printed in PDF versions from this database; during the fall 2003 semester, 817 searches were performed and 269 articles were requested. As faculty members become more familiar with the content of the research pages, they steer students to the databases that are listed. While we don't have usage figures on BNA® databases, these databases are ideal resources for many of our seminars. The prospect of high student use makes subscribing to these expensive resources seem more justifiable than if use is limited to one or two faculty members.

Unintended Benefits

Now that the course research pages are well established, other possibilities and potential uses have become apparent. Expansion of the program to include research pages for various student journals, the Moot Court Board, and trial teams is under discussion. Also, the law school's Web page includes a section with information about upcoming conferences; conference topics often overlap with the subject matter of courses. It is a relatively easy process to convert related course pages into a format that can be linked with conference notices.

Placing the full list of course research pages on the library's Web page has been of benefit to alumni and other library users. Access to subscription databases are password protected; however, many of the Web-based resources linked on the pages are freely available, and the collection by topic is very helpful. The nature of law school seminars is such that many deal with hot topics for which conventional collections of resources may not be available.

Another unforeseen result is that this project pulled together the issue of course materials and their relationship to e-reserves, electronic database subscriptions, and course management systems. As the research page system became more established, some faculty members began to assign class readings from the list of sources on their research pages. Beginning this year, our Blackboard system was set up in a way that gave library course liaisons automatic access to entire course pages, allowing them to monitor the progression of the courses.

The initial reason for doing this was to allow for changes to the research page midstream, if the course began to head in an unanticipated direction. It gave librarians forewarning of new assignments or other developments about which they may receive questions. In reality, the implications were much broader, because it put the librarians squarely in the middle of the process of adapting law school courses to the information age.

Access to the Blackboard pages, for example, makes it easy for librarians to provide help to faculty and their administrative assistants linking course materials in databases. Far from viewing this as an affront to their privacy, faculty here have been generally enthusiastic about obtaining such assistance. The reality is that librarians are better positioned than any other group in the law school to pull these things together into a coherent package. Taking a leadership role in this area can only enhance the library's reputation and position within the school.

The role of the faculty in this project has evolved over time. Experienced academic librarians could reasonably question the rosy picture of cooperative faculty painted in this article. The truth is that obtaining syllabi and information for development of course pages is not always easy and was often downright difficult as the project got underway. Faculty involvement and buy-in is critical, because resources selected for inclusion on the pages should not conflict with preferences of the faculty member who is teaching the course.

Program Deemed a Success

Within the relatively short period of two years, this project has become an important part of the school's academic program and is now much higher in faculty consciousness than at its inception. Most of the work on the research pages at this point involves updating with less need for reliance on syllabi, because fewer pages are being designed from scratch. Students are well aware of the value of the pages and put pressure on faculty to focus in instances where their attention is required.

The University of Maryland's course liaison program, while still evolving, has been a successful addition to core library services. Although heavily dependent on technology, the program has led to increased use of all key library resources—the print collection, expertise of librarians, and electronic resources. In addition, integrating the library more closely with the academic program has increased visibility of the library within the school and focused attention on our most important role: navigating the increasingly complex world of information sources.

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