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The Research Assistant Pool in the Law Library

By DARCY KIRK & BARBARA RAINWATER, Georgetown University Law Library

We were afraid we would throw a party and nobody would come!

For some time, we had been looking for ways to expand our services to the faculty at the Georgetown University Law Center. One area for expansion, we knew, was research. However, we did not have the staff resources to do anything more than quick reference work for faculty.

Thus, when requests came from the faculty to the library for more extensive research, we had to refer them back to their own research assistants. We were anxious to be able to handle some of those requests. Although the idea of creating a research assistant pool in the law library was not a new one,¹ we did not know if it would work at Georgetown which has a very large faculty, some of whom already have two or even three research assistants.

Fortunately for us, an opportunity presented itself when our Academic Dean commented that he needed to keep a closer watch on the requests made by individual faculty for additional research assistants. We took advantage of his cost-cutting focus and made a proposal to create a Research Assistant (RA) pool in the library in order to help the Law Center use their RA funds more efficiently.

Our proposal asked for funds to hire four RAs at ten hours per week each for the academic year. The RAs would report to a reference librarian who would hire, train and monitor their work with the faculty. We envisioned advantages for all involved with the operation:

1. For the faculty, we predicted that they might obtain a better work product having the expertise of the librarian overseeing the student's research. Further, for those faculty who did not need a full-time RA or those who had special projects, they could use the RA pool at their convenience. And finally, the faculty would have the added flexibility of working through the librarian, but spending as little or as much time as they wanted working directly with the student.
2. For the administration of the law school, we assumed there would be a savings of funds for RAs brought about by our helping the RAs to do research more efficiently and a drop in requests for additional RAs by faculty.
3. For the students, the advantage entailed the chance to work with more than one faculty member on more than one type of research project. In addition, their

research skills would be honed by the oversight of the reference librarian.

4. Finally, the advantages for the library were our chance to expand our services to the faculty and to utilize the RA pool as a public relations tool within the law school.

But, the big questions remained—"Will it work? Will anybody call?" We got the go-ahead to hire the students for the fall of 1992. We advertised the new service by sending a memo to all of the faculty. The Academic Dean who had been supportive all along also encouraged faculty to use the service. And, indeed, we did get calls.

The RA pool quickly found its place for some faculty. It was useful for longer term projects which needed some oversight and didn't have a short deadline. It was useful for visiting faculty who had relatively modest research needs and didn't find it necessary to hire a research assistant for one semester. It was useful for faculty members with an RA already involved in a long-term project who occasionally needed additional help for quick projects.

The RA pool proved least successful for dealing with the request for instant information—an answer within an hour or two—primarily because of the difficulty in scheduling RAs for work coverage for each hour during the "normal" work week. Those immediate gratification requests always seem to come on Friday afternoon around 2 pm or later. In these instances, the supervising librarian honed her skills in the area of information and document delivery.

In our research for patrons, we were willing to tackle almost any project or request. We "bluebooked" four chapters of a professor's textbook and finished in less time than he had expected. We prepared an annotated list of subject-specific periodicals with contact persons, requirements for article format, indications of their willingness to accept simultaneous submissions, etc., for a professor wishing to publish in a relatively esoteric area. We researched and prepared a lengthy memo on institutional liability in curriculum-related student activities. We found and delivered computer leasing forms; provided information for a professor who was to be on a late night talk show; and reconstructed a "lost" bibliography for a textbook in order to meet a publication deadline.

One of the areas in which we found ourselves most helpful was providing assistance with practice-related

materials. Students seem to have the least amount of experience and the most difficulty in finding these materials—forms, rules, etc. Help from the librarian in identifying sources for these really promoted efficiency.

During our first year, we served 28 individual members of the Georgetown University Law Center faculty of about 85. Some of them were one-time users, others used the service many times. Our feedback was unsolicited and positive. "This is terrific!" "This is exactly what I needed." "I am never going to hire another RA. I'll just use yours." The simple "Thanks" were welcome and shared with the student assistants. Not only did the users of the pool praise the work done, but the students assistants also praised the pool for the opportunity to work with a variety of faculty and in a directed program which provided a positive learning experience.

Now, one and a half years and many research projects later, we can definitely say that our RA pool is here to

stay. It has been an overwhelming success. Although we are rarely inundated with work, we have enough work to keep the four RAs busy and the calls keep coming. We hope, at some time in the future, to expand into a full-service faculty services department. For the time at hand, however, we are simply delighted that our party was a success!

Note

1. Schultz, Jon S., "The Faculty Services Department: Fine Tuning the Research Engine," *83 Law Library Journal* 771 (Fall 1991).

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To Fine or Not to Fine

By JOYCE PURCELL, Senior Librarian, Water and Power Library

What else can we do to get employees to return their books on time?" This was the question posed by an exasperated circulation clerk after she had processed a record number of overdue notices last month.

I am in charge of a unit of the public library serving a public utility with over 10,000 employees. Currently we do not charge fines for overdue materials, realizing that many library users do not work in our central building and must use the interdepartmental mail to return items.

After checking with several comparably sized special libraries in the area, I decided to tap the collective wisdom of the BUSLIB-L listserv on the Internet. Within a week I received eight responses, two of which came from law librarians mentioning the extreme difficulty of getting attorneys to return anything. After I posted the summary of responses on BUSLIB-L, editor Mark Estes asked me to expand it into an article for this newsletter.

None of the librarians responding recommended charging fines. Not only would it be more trouble than it was worth in terms of the money collected, it would create bad PR for the library.

Two people suggested sending a message to the effect that if you don't return the materials, we will order a replacement and charge the cost to your unit. This is very tempting, but I don't have the authority to extract funds from another division's budget.

Two people suggested the "office raid" method of going to the employee's office to retrieve the books. This is also practiced by my colleague at the City Attorney's library. This works for employees here in the building, but not for the employees ninety miles away at Power Plant No. 1.

One person suggested contacting the employee's supervisor. While it works with conscientious supervisors, some of the supervisors are also part of the problem.

One person suggested referring other users who want the material to the overdue borrower to negotiate the return. I would love to be able to do this, but we would have a conflict with confidentiality.

Two people suggested noting the material as on "permanent deposit" at that office and recalling the books if anyone is interested.

Two people also mentioned the need to clear employees' records when they leave the company. We have had an ongoing problem with this as well, and are working with the Personnel Department to tighten up the procedure.

It looks like we will continue our policy of not charging fines, and will send a memo to the employee's supervisor if there is no response to three overdue notices. We will also mention the fact that it is a violation of the Los Angeles City Municipal Code and the California Education Code to keep public library materials an excessive

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