

Demystifying Law Librarianship: Educating and Diversifying the Next Generation

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ABSTRACT

In this third decade of the 21st century, the legal information profession is engaged in dialogue about the perpetually shrinking pools of qualified candidates for law librarian positions. COVID retirements and the Great Resignation have resulted in a nationwide labor shortage and private sector hiring spree that is outpacing and outspending higher education, government, and many small businesses. This combination of factors is resulting in smaller and less qualified candidate pools, and, at times, unfilled law librarian positions. There are simply not enough new librarians coming into the field of law librarianship. While the circumstances of the last few years may be an anomaly, the demographic cliff that is upon us in higher education will only serve to worsen the situation for the foreseeable future.

Of even greater urgency, law librarians have been lamenting for decades that the legal information profession does not accurately reflect the diversity of the communities it serves. The literature shows that diversity conversations began in earnest in the 1970s and continue today. Despite efforts from a variety of entities within law librarianship, the data show the profession has not meaningfully diversified.

The panelists recognize that as a profession, we have not done enough to promote, recruit, and grow law librarianship, or to educate and diversify the next generation of law librarians. We believe that collective action and innovation are needed now. We also believe there is an opportunity at hand to collaborate amongst law libraries, law librarians, and LIS programs to leverage this shortage of law librarians to creatively recruit previously-untapped LIS students with or without a legal background.

Law libraries take many forms: academic, law firm, government, and public. Academic public services and law library director positions are the only positions that traditionally require dual-degreed (Juris Doctor (JD)/Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS)) law librarians. Technical services positions in academic law libraries generally require only the MLIS, as do nearly all law firm, government, and public law library positions. Nonetheless, librarians without law degrees rarely seem to consider a career in law librarianship, and LIS programs rarely seem to promote careers in law libraries, even though fewer than 20% of law librarian positions require a JD. Nonetheless, the myth that a JD is required for a career in law librarianship permeates librarianship and LIS programs. We aim to dismantle that myth.

This panel will begin with a dialogue with audience members, asking them to share whether their institution has courses or programming on law librarianship. The audience will be

invited to share perceptions about law librarianship and barriers or pathways to law library education that they have experienced.

The panelists will then share quantitative and qualitative data highlighting the state of law librarianship today. The data illustrate that law librarians are leaving the profession at a rate far outpacing the number of librarians entering the profession. The data also illustrate that employers are encountering miniscule pools of often-unqualified candidates, resulting in failed searches, followed by lower standards of hiring. Longitudinal data show that diversity in law librarianship is lagging its allied professions despite great leaps forward in diverse LIS and law student enrollment.

Next the panelists will share with the audience the various types and general structure of law libraries, including which positions require or prefer a JD, and which require only an MLIS. We will explain the innovative pathways created at the University of Arizona – a collaboration between the College of Law library and the School of Information – to begin to recruit students, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and students from historically excluded groups (HEGs) who are interested in law and librarianship but who cannot, or do not, wish to invest the time and expense of a three-year J.D. We will share both the support and criticism our innovative new practices have received from our colleagues in the profession.

There are 34 institutions that have both law schools and library science programs. In order to reflect the current landscape of law school and LIS program interactions and collaborations, the panelists have surveyed the law library directors at these 34 institutions for this session at ALISE. We will present data as to their successes and as to their barriers in collaborating with their respective LIS programs on campus. We aim to both inspire and share ideas as to future successful partnerships with law libraries.

We will wind-down our presentation with concrete ideas, gathered from the survey of law library directors, as well as our own experiences, on how LIS programs can economically partner with local law librarians to promote law librarianship within their own institution.

At last, we will return to the audience in the hope of eliciting suggestions from LIS educators in the audience to take back to law librarians for future collaborations to implement educational programming. Our ultimate goal is to inspire and promote law librarianship as a viable career alternative for LIS students who may not have a legal background, including BIPOC students from HEGs, and, in turn, creating viable pathways to growing, educating, and diversifying the next generation of law librarians.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

education programs/schools; curriculum; students; academic libraries; special libraries

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

law librarianship; law libraries; diversity, equity, and inclusion; recruitment and retention

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2023.1317>