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Experienced Director, New Job: Some Tips to Aid the Transition

By PATRICIA A. CERVENKA, Saint Louis University School of Law

So you have a job as the new law library director. You prepared for the interview, went through the interview day, survived the voting, negotiated the offer, and the job is yours. You have a staff waiting to see what you are going to do. The faculty has had the same director for more than thirty years and is a little pensive. Some concerns were expressed in the interview, but given the fact that the interview lasted only one and a half days, there is still a lot left unsaid.

In the past I have followed directors who were in place for more than thirty and forty-eight years respectively. In cases such as these, there are staff members who have known only one director's way of doing things. It has been my experience that they continue to introduce you as the "new" director even if you have been on the job for two to four years. I have developed a list of things I do to become established in the new arena.

Study the Mission Statements

Even though there are many jokes made about mission statements and the strategic planning process, they are a necessity. You read mission statements, you think about them, you talk to the lead administrators about how to accomplish the articulated goals, and you work with the law library staff to accomplish those goals. This is a dynamic process involving all law school constituencies. Additionally, the ideas articulated during these conversations often become the starting points for future projects and ideas.

Each school and law library has to look at their respective mission statements at least once every seven years for the ABA. Some libraries review their mission statements, or at least the objectives born of the mission statements, regularly. Once you begin the job, you work with the staff to find the practical

services to carry out the mission statement. There may also be precedent for annual goal-setting for the library staff so the mission statement review may be in place either in connection with staff evaluations or as part of a library retreat.

You also need to review any other strategic planning documents that spell out new directions that the school might be pursuing since the last site visit. If the dean is a recent arrival, you will want to find out whether she or he came in with a particular agenda or something akin to a five-year plan. Questions to be asked include: What role does the dean see the librarians and library staff playing in his or her long-term plan? Does he or she have staff reorganization in mind that will affect either the librarians or the library staff? In addition, if the university has gone through a recent accreditation visit, there may be documents articulating goals and outcome assessments for the law library within the university.

Get to Know the Library Staff as Quickly as Possible

A good way to get to know the staff is by interviewing each member using a set of questions designed to elicit the individual's goals, special projects they are involved in, the things they like about their job, and how they like working not only in the law school but for the university. It also helps to find out what types of projects each person likes to work on, and whether he or she likes to brainstorm, to be a project leader, or to be the detail person. I ask the librarians about their professional goals, workshops they would like to attend, and what they would like to learn and explore to help themselves, their careers, and the law library. I find out whether they like to be involved in national library or state library organizations, or if they want to

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attend local workshops and meetings. If the university has a strong community service statement in the mission statement, I try to find out how that plays into the employee's work life.

I spend some time working alongside each worker for a period of time to gain an understanding of the position's requirements. This includes observing the workflow for the group, checking whether their workspace is comfortable and user-friendly, and learning what they think is their most productive time of day. In other words, those first few weeks are a mini-consulting project.

Learn about the Faculty's Research and Teaching Interests

The mission statement says that the law library serves to support the curricular and scholarly activities of the students and faculty. I have found that short visits or lunches with faculty early in the job can help develop lines of communication necessary to determine specific faculty research requirements. The visits also serve to give you the faculty member's perspective on library services.

If there is a faculty services liaison program in place, the visits help you determine its usefulness. Is the liaison program a strong connection for learning about new and developing ideas for faculty research? If there isn't a faculty liaison program in place, you can explain to faculty members how it might work and find out whether they would see a value for their teaching or research in such a program.

You also will want to explore what services are available to adjunct and visiting faculty. That information may come from a combination of visits with faculty, administrators, and librarians.

The faculty aspect of the director's position also provides a number of opportunities to learn more about the school and the library's role in it. Faculty meetings, faculty committees, and university committees all are means of strengthening knowledge and collaboration with the law faculty. It probably is a good idea to ask the dean early on about the committee appointments process so that you can be placed appropriately. In one of libraries where I have worked, for example, the curriculum committee made it mandatory for a new course proposal to contain a statement about the new course's impact on the library resources. As a result, it was appropriate that the director be appointed to this committee.

Participating as a tenure-track faculty member also has advantages for the law library director. As hiring decisions are made you become aware of the school's

decision-making process in that area. You learn about the culture of the law school from the questions asked at interviews or at faculty colloquia.

Become Acquainted with the Administrative Staff

Looking at a law school organization chart is not enough. You also must identify the school's important decision-making bodies. You should ask whether the law library director or her or his representative is included in technology meetings, facility planning meetings, and budget meetings. You must explore what it actually means to be an associate dean at your school.

The library doesn't operate in a vacuum. You need to collaborate and establish a rapport with the budget administrators and the other cost centers. Budgets mean choices, and this means that you must provide the dean with accurate data if you expect allocation decisions to reflect the importance of the library in the law school community.

I have worked on seven university campuses and within six law schools. Each institution is unique, with its own management philosophies, budget and personnel processes and, yes, rumor mills. Also, I have been surprised to find that librarians and other law school personnel often are not aware of recent university procedural changes. As a result, I try to meet with department heads around campus.

Another area needing attention is the status of law librarianship at the institution, and what groundwork has been laid about the law librarian profession at the law school and university by the previous long-term director. Are you walking into a place where there is respect for the profession? Where librarians have been involved in national or state library organizations? Where they are well-known beyond the boundaries of their own library? Many administrators and faculty will expect you to be the same sort of librarian, because they never have seen any other kind in action. If this is not your style, then you may need to educate your law school administration about support for those differences.

Cultivate a Good Relationship with the Rest of the University Library Community

If you weren't able to meet the rest of the university library community during the interview process, make contact with the administrators to learn about those individuals and the goals they have for the university library. Find out which cooperative projects are in place. You or members of your staff should be involved in decisions that have a university-wide

impact. The bottom line is that you should look at the other campus libraries as allies, not competitors.

Learn about the City and Legal Community within It

Check the AALL directory to see the listings for law firm, court, and corporate law librarians in the vicinity. Take the initiative to meet and visit with your colleagues in the community's law libraries. Find out whether there are formal or informal gatherings for collegial contact, discussions, and workshops. Introduce yourself to the law librarian community and offer your services when they ask for volunteers. Find out what programs are already taking place within the community and what you can do to help.

Attend local bar association meetings and alumni meetings whenever possible. Find out the from alumni and members of the local bar what is expected of the library. Sometimes the relationships already are well developed, so it is just a matter of making yourself known to the local groups. Other times you will start from scratch with particular groups.

As you start your new position, keep in mind the basic rule you learned in law school: assume nothing and ask questions about everything. Your initial weeks and months on the job are your best window for gathering information and establishing yourself as a major player in the law school and legal community.

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