Question: What new or creative legal information services have you recently implemented? What best practices informed your decision?

As a county court law library with a constrained budget and limited space, we have few opportunities to be creative. But we do have paper resources and a website with a self-help section. The patrons who most inspire our creativity are the self-represented litigants. Retrieving an obscure document for an attorney might be an entertaining task, but it’s not fraught with the issues involved in serving the self-represented litigants who are a large segment of our users. Our goal is to create understandable, inexpensive information that doesn’t cross that dreaded line into legal advice but supports pro se access to the courts. Frequently, our self-help material convinces patrons that the court process is more complicated than they expected, and they decide to see an attorney.

Decades ago, we envisioned an internet system with forms/instructions for no-fault divorce. Eventually the idea became reality. After the success of the divorce topic, we steadily expanded to eight self-help topics. A ninth
section, a long-planned Landlord/Tenant topic, is in the final stage of development. While the specificity of the instruction varies depending on what forms are available statewide from the Pennsylvania Courts or locally from the Court of Common Pleas, each topic contains only the generic procedural steps every filer would need to complete the action. Available in the library and on the court website, topics include: Certificate of Title for a Motor Vehicle; Expungement; Divorce; Child Custody; Name Change; Small Claims Court; and Suspension of Driver’s License Appeal.

Our old-school creativity is showcased in paper “Pathfinders” that define terms, highlight rules and processes, provide sample pleadings, and lead to citations in legal sources. Pathfinders allow us to standardize the information provided by library staff. A new staff member can provide the Pathfinder on Emancipation of Minors without much training. Pathfinders are inexpensive, easily updated, and helpful when training new employees. The free Pathfinders are located outside the library entrance and a selected core are posted on the Law Library webpage. The 20-plus topics range from Paternity Testing to Nunc Pro Tunc Appeals. Topic popularity fluctuates—there is a custody season every year in September—and over the long term, topics such as Annulments have lost popularity. Pathfinder topics are determined by how many times staff answer the same question. If we feel as though we should have a recording of the answer so we can just push the play button, it is time for a new Pathfinder!

To enhance our programming, we launched a Halloween “Boooo-k Hunt,” in which student teams raced through the stacks to answer questions, take #shelfies, and compete for coveted prize editions of Black’s Law Dictionary. We also expanded the Law Practice Technologies course from two credits to three to cover more topics. Faculty research services grew to meet committee and associate dean requests such as surveying other schools’ curricula and identifying grants available for faculty projects.

As part of our outreach efforts, and to promote interest in archiving and local history, we created a digital collection that tells the story of how our school was the first at UNC to integrate. We also developed programs to share legal research tips with public librarians in our state. In addition, our repository recorded significant downloads of notes and comments in our core journal, The North Carolina Law Review, after they were carefully transformed into individually discoverable articles.

On the education and professional development front, we created an in-house workshop series that encourages librarians to read and write law and library professional publications. We hosted former UNC colleagues and a legal writing professor in addition to our own librarian authors. All workshop drafts are currently slated for publication.

We named our graduate assistantship for Laura N. (“Lolly”) Gasaway, the former director and professor emerita who created this position and mentored many librarians. We also hired a record three graduate assistants this past year, who helped to celebrate Lolly and support these new services.

To develop these services, we stayed connected with and listened to our community, and we were opportunistic. We noted external factors such as pressures on public libraries and North Carolina’s new technology CLE (continuing legal education) requirement. We made our funding go farther by renovating while the university was paying for asbestos abatement.

At the same time, we replaced the collection security system, conducted collection review, gave budget presentations to new campus leaders, and taught an array of CLE programs and other courses, including Introduction to the Law of the U.S., Privacy Law, and multiple sections of Advanced Legal Research. We largely avoided the “Yirka question” of what to stop doing so that we could add new things to our agenda. I credit the UNC librarians and staff, who were remarkably creative and energetic, and the management team, who stayed engaged in balancing the workload.

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