As with most American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) chapters, the Law Librarians’ Society of Washington, DC (LLSDC) has a mix of members from across all sectors (e.g., academic, corporate, law firm, government). To accommodate the interests and needs of these different groups, LLSDC offers several special interest sections (SISs), which are listed on their website. (Learn more about LLSDC’s SISs at bit.ly/ND19LLSDCsis.) For AALL members, this is a familiar model that allows SIS members to engage with one another and develop educational programming opportunities within mutual areas of interest and expertise. This model naturally led to more siloed conversations that may have benefitted from cross-pollination with other SIS and LLSDC members. One such exchange included the widely recognized need for law students to be better prepared for practice.
Accordingly, an ongoing (and much needed) discussion about “bridging all the gaps” in legal research instruction and real-world practice is taking place, and it has brought together a diverse group of information professionals. The LLSDC has expanded this exchange—which sprang from a discussion between the first-year legal instruction team at Georgetown and some DC-area law firm librarians in 2018—by conducting meetings and joint programs that were made available to the entire LLSDC membership.

**Bridging the Gap**

Numerous strategies, programs, and pilots have been developed in law school libraries across the country to help law students distinguish themselves over the course of their summer associate or new associate terms. Law librarians are eager to leverage mandatory face-time with law students in order to arm them with the skills they will be expected to apply as soon as they leave the academic sphere. Many law libraries have developed targeted programming specifically designed to meet this demand. These sessions are often marketed as “bridging the gap” or “preparing to practice” sessions and are scheduled predictably toward the end of the spring semester. Identifying the elusive window when students are available for this type of programming remains a challenge for many libraries. In an effort to encourage attendance, certificate programs that integrate vendor swag, food, and prizes, have been offered across institutions. These sessions may be included in the required first-year legal research instruction program, but upper-level students may benefit from optional refreshers open to all students. Ideally, the sessions repackage what students have learned in first-year legal research, but often they include an emphasis on, or introduction to, more specialized resources students can expect to see in practice that may not have been covered in their required first-year legal research instruction course (e.g., litigation analytics).

In some DC-area schools, such as Howard University, the University of Maryland, and George Washington University, the librarians have organized panels featuring recent graduates, alumni working in law firms, and law firm library directors or researchers who offer practice-oriented guidance. Law firm library directors may review the types of legal or general research expected from new associates, along with outlining some of the specialty tools or offerings available. Some sample discussion points include:

- Are there research skills that new associates wish they’d acquired in law school?
- What role do information professionals play in your practice?
- What is one piece of non-obvious advice you would give to law students about research?
- What is a common mistake seen in new associates?
- How do associates distinguish themselves?

**Making a Change**

In March 2018, a lively and productive small group discussion on this topic occurred between the first-year legal instruction team at Georgetown and some DC-area law firm librarians. The three firm librarians in attendance represented diverse firms, including a one-office firm, a one-practice international firm, and a global giant. This helped facilitate discussion that included a wide range of opinions and experiences. The firm librarians agreed that students tend to lack a fundamental understanding of administrative and regulatory law, as well as legislative history. Students have also faced the wrath of a partner for failing to consult a secondary source before tackling case law research, or for running up a huge Lexis or Westlaw bill unexpectedly.

The firm librarians agreed that students tend to lack a fundamental understanding of administrative and regulatory law, as well as legislative history. Students have also faced the wrath of a partner for failing to consult a secondary source before tackling case law research, or for running up a huge Lexis or Westlaw bill unexpectedly. The importance of sound judgment—both in analyzing legal materials and in navigating relationships with grace—cannot be overstated.

Soft skills, which are dominating discussions and literature across professions, were featured prominently in those conversations as well. Students who may otherwise be productive summer associates are at risk of not being hired if they fail to navigate the office wisely. As valued members of the team, support staff may be consulted during the hiring process and summer associates may put their hiring prospects in jeopardy by failing to appreciate the weight of these informal references. Alternatively, making the value offered by law firm librarians clear to students on the academic side can dovetail seamlessly with the law firm library branding in practice—whether it’s helping to track down a document or untangle a potentially harmful billing debacle.

**Creating an Initiative**

Thanks to the initiative and continued interest of the attendees, an August 2018 brown-bag lunch was scheduled to discuss how to better prepare students for practice, and was extended to the full LLSDC membership. The discussion was advertised as an informal opportunity to bring librarians together across sectors to describe what has worked for them, gaps they’ve identified, and trends that should be anticipated as we teach the next generation of legal researchers. Librarians shared examples of their new hire training materials, including binders.
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Moving Forward

After the success of the brown-bag program and in advance of the summer associate season, the LLSDC Private Law Libraries and Academic Law Libraries SISs combined for a joint program in March 2019 called, “Training Up the Summers.” This discussion had a special focus on what law schools are teaching their students in order to help inform how law firm and government libraries structure summer and fall associate training. Attendees shared details about what they teach the students and associates, along with what they think they should be learning before they begin working in the summer. The wish list was largely made up of practical applications (e.g., billing practices, use of secondary sources, having a basic understanding of copyright law, and an understanding that the librarians are a resource).

While this article is about the ongoing LLSDC discussion and related programming, there are similar conversations occurring throughout chapters and within AALL itself. The Law Library Association of Greater New York (LLAGNY) had a “Bridge the Gap” program in the 1990s, and more recently, the Atlanta Law Libraries Association (ALLA) finds these conversations occurring organically during their monthly programs or as roundtable sessions during their spring meetings.

According to Patrick Parsons, ALLA past-president, the roundtables focus on “firm vs. academic database and technology usage, curriculum coverage in law schools, and the necessary skills of new associates and summer associates.”

In mid-April, AALL’s Private Law Libraries & Information Professionals SIS hosted a webinar titled “Law School and Law Firm Collaboration: A Bridge Between the Law School and the Firm,” which tackled similar topics. The AALL Annual Meeting often contains programs on exploring these issues as well. For those interested in this discussion, consider listening to the recordings from the following 2019 AALL Annual Meeting programs:

- Assessing Legal Research Competency: Bridging the Gap between Law School and Practice bit.ly/AM19Gap
- Behind the Bench: Preparing Judicial Clerks and Interns bit.ly/AM19Bench
- Let’s Get Experiential! Creating Strategic Partnerships to Develop Experiential Simulation Courses bit.ly/AM19Experiential

Given the unpredictable and evolving legal landscape, discussions will continue to take place by committed librarians across sectors. Both scholarship and more formal programming ensure this conversation is ongoing at both the local and national levels.