ACADEMIC LAW LIBRARIES & THE EARLY DAYS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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How Vanderbilt University Law Library and UC Berkeley Law Library reworked procedures and services to preserve their missions.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and its effects have dramatically changed the way that institutions and organizations function worldwide. Concerns about transmitting the disease have led to widespread changes in the provision of services and resources to the public. Like other entities, law libraries have had to make significant adjustments to safely meet the needs of their users. Academic law libraries, for example, have had to creatively rework their procedures and services to support law schools’ efforts to preserve their missions during the pandemic. This article provides an overview of how two academic law libraries—the Massey Law Library at Vanderbilt University and the UC Berkeley Law Library—navigated the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial Responses to COVID-19: Massey Law Library at Vanderbilt University

The Alyne Queener Massey Law Library serves the faculty and students of Vanderbilt Law School. The Law Library director and six full-time law librarians provide support to 557 JD students, 72 LLM students, 50 full-time faculty members, 91 non-full-time faculty members, and five academic journals. Students regularly use the Law Library as a place for study and quiet gathering. Members of the public are also allowed access during limited hours.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed how the Law Library has functioned. Physical access to the Law Library ceased on March 24, 2020. This was later than the originally scheduled date for closure of March 20, 2020. However, students requested additional time to access the printers, so Law Library Director Larry Reeves accommodated this request by opening the Law Library to students himself on March 23, 2020. Although physical access has not returned as of July 2020, the services and resources provided continue. Thus far, three major areas of Law Library activity have been affected by the pandemic: legal research instruction; provision of reference and research services; and access to Law Library resources.

Legal Research Instruction

One of the first changes to Law Library services at the beginning of the pandemic was the modification of legal research instruction. In-person classes across the university were canceled on March 11, 2020. Online instruction began on March 16, 2020. For both 1L and upper-level legal research instruction, this meant speedily adjusting class components for online implementation.

For spring 2020, there were five 1L legal research class sessions scheduled, the last of which was to be held the week of April 6, 2020. Law librarians quickly made changes to the session so it would work virtually. For upper-level legal research instruction, multiple class sessions had to be revamped to be held online. Zoom has been used to provide recorded material to replace the in-person lectures that were originally planned. Synchronous Zoom consultations were scheduled as needed to address student questions.

Reference and Research Services

Traditionally, the Massey Law Library provides in-person, telephone, and email reference and research assistance to the Law School. COVID-19 made it impossible to continue in-person reference and research services during the rest of spring 2020, but services were still provided remotely. In fact, to more quickly respond to user needs during the closure, the Law Library implemented a live chat reference service using LibChat from Springshare. This service is available from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM each weekday and has allowed the Law School community to receive help more quickly. It is likely that online chat reference will continue for the foreseeable future, even after the Law Library reopens.

Law students and faculty have also sought more extensive real-time assistance. It is not unusual for students to request Zoom conferences to discuss questions. Law faculty have traditionally contacted law librarians via email for assistance and that has continued even with the addition of live chat reference. However, law librarians do provide Zoom consultations with faculty members as needed. For example, Zoom consultations were instrumental in helping address many faculty members’
RESEARCH GUIDES

These research guides provide answers to the most common library-related questions, walk users through the process of requesting electronic materials, explain the changes to the Interlibrary Loan process, and highlight some COVID-19 issues and resources, respectively.

- “COVID-19 and Racism: Legislative Responses,” bit.ly/SO20COVID (tracks state and local laws passed to address racism and xenophobia since the pandemic started.)
- “Law Library Interlibrary Loan,” bit.ly/SO20loan
- “Lawyer Professional Development,” bit.ly/SO20prodev (provides students with information on available continuing legal education and professional development opportunities, as some students have had their summer jobs postponed and need information about activities to aid in their professional growth during the hiatus.)

Law Library Resources

Of all the initial changes due to COVID-19, perhaps most extensive were those related to providing and expanding Law Library resources. Access to print Law Library materials was halted from March 23, 2020, until June 1, 2020. During that time, the Law Library was able to provide electronic versions of many print resources. Additionally, negotiation with vendors often resulted in new or expanded access to electronic resources on a temporary basis. On June 1, 2020, a book pick-up service was implemented to allow students and faculty members to request print items by completing a form provided in the library catalog. The item is then routed to a specific pick-up location. This service has proven to be very popular across the university library system.

Initial Responses to COVID-19: Law Library at UC Berkeley Law School

The UC Berkeley Law Library serves faculty, staff, and students of the UC Berkeley School of Law (approximately 1,100 students, 170 faculty, and other instructors), as well as several clinical programs and 13 student-run journals. As part of one of the state’s university systems, we are also open to the public. There are 30 people on our Law Library staff, 10 of whom routinely provide reference services. We provide in-person, telephone, and chat reference services. Students can schedule one-on-one focused research appointments with reference librarians. Faculty use an online faculty research request service and an online faculty paging service. Librarians also teach two legal research classes—Advanced Legal Research, and Foreign and International Legal Research. Students routinely use the Law Library’s reading rooms to study, our small study rooms to collaborate with other students, and our student computer lab for on-site tech assistance and computer work.

The COVID-19 impact on the Law School, and in turn the Law Library, unfolded over a period of weeks in early March as the crisis in the San Francisco Bay Area mounted. In accordance with university guidelines, all Law School classes moved online on March 9, 2020, using the Zoom platform. Beginning March 10, 2020, the Law Library stopped physically staffing the reference desk and providing in-person student reference appointments, instead offering chat reference and Zoom appointments. On March 16, 2020, the Law Library was still open to students when Alameda County announced that effective at midnight the county would move to shelter in place.

With the Law School’s physical closure, the Law Library shifted to a remote services model. The Law Library quickly produced a LibGuide entitled “Law Library in the Time of COVID-19: General Shutdown Information,” explaining how services would work during shutdown (read the guide at bit.ly/SO20libguide). Our “Student Computing Guide” was modified to add information on using Zoom and to provide computer chat support, since the computer lab was inaccessible (read the guide at bit.ly/SO20libguidecomputer). Like at Vanderbilt, the shutdown mostly affected how the Law Library provided legal research instruction, reference and research services, and access to legal resources.

Legal Research Instruction

The Zoom course instruction that began just prior to the shutdown continued for the remainder of the semester. Law Library instructors met individually with students on Zoom as necessary. Michael Levy, associate director and Advanced Legal Research instructor, notes that “every Zoom class session was a learning session for instructors, as we tried to find the most effective and inclusive use of the Zoom platform (polls, breakout rooms, chat, live video of guest speakers). I would try different approaches to engage students, but I never knew in advance what would work.” Instructors met during the semester and throughout the summer to discuss what worked and how best to build a virtual classroom community to prepare for full virtual instruction.

Reference and Research Services

Despite the physical closure of the Law Library, our reference and research
services adapted well to a remote format. The chat reference service continued Monday through Friday during regular reference desk hours. Students also used our online student reference appointments service to schedule individual research appointments that the reference librarians set up on Zoom. Since faculty typically request research assistance through our online faculty requests service, our interaction was relatively unaffected, and we responded via email and Google document sharing. In general, reference librarians were able to assist faculty and students effectively using a combination of databases, ebooks, and other electronic resources. Dean Rowan, director of reference, states, “I think students might have gotten more from individual Zoom meetings than they did from in-person ones, because they had no choice but to watch how we identified and navigated the tools via the screens we shared with them. It demonstrated the superiority of showing rather than telling.” Still, reference librarians missed the easy on-site collaboration with colleagues, the casual interactions with students in the Law Library, and the print research collection.

Law Library Resources
With the closure, all access to print books and other physical material ceased. We used our existing catalog to identify electronic sources for materials on course reserve, although not all were available. Many publishers stepped up to provide temporary access to casebooks through the end of spring semester, and the Law Library created a “Casebook Access Guide” for students posted on our website. We expanded our efforts to increase our digital collections to support research and instruction by purchasing/licensing more digital content, as well as relying on services such as HathiTrust (a collaborative effort with our main library). We modified our library catalog to create special electronic collections and to add linking for new electronic resources in both our database list and catalog. Yet, as our associate director Marci Hoffman emphasizes, “Many of our print resources are not available electronically, and due to licensing restrictions and/or cost, it is not feasible to provide certain print resources electronically.”

The Law Library also reached out to the Law School with community building resources during this extraordinary time. Reference librarians presented a Zoom research series for staff on basic legal research topics (e.g., case law, statutes, secondary sources), which included remote access tips. We used our “Hot Tips” scrolling feature on our website to post ongoing COVID-19 related news and resources of interest to the Law School community. The Law Library created two lists based on recommendations from the Law School community: “Gimme Shelter,” a list of books, audiobooks, and podcasts; and “Gimme Shelter, Part 2,” a list of streaming movies and TV shows that we posted to our website. (View “Gimme Shelter, Part 1” at bit.ly/SO20part1 and “Gimme Shelter, Part 2” at bit.ly/SO20part2.) Since we could no longer furnish our typical finals stress busters (e.g., candy, jigsaw puzzles, plastic emotional support animals), we created and shared with students a list of virtual “Top 10 Stress Busters from the Law Library” (bit.ly/SO20stressbusters).

Lessons for the Future
To quote from a classic Monty Python sketch: “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!” Certainly, academic law libraries did not expect the changes brought about by COVID-19. There has been much commiseration about the rapid pivot needed to quickly plan for providing exclusively virtual reference and research services, modifying legal research instruction, and enhancing access to databases, ebooks, and other resources. The good news for the Massey and UC Berkeley law librarians is that this period of learning has sharpened our skills and led to some important realizations:

- Remote reference services can be effective given the abundance of electronic resources available. Still, the process lacks the warmth of in-person consultations;
- Access to casebooks, ebooks, databases, and digital resources carried academic law libraries through the end of the spring semester. Still, some portions of the collections exist only in print and cannot easily be replaced electronically; and
- Even though law librarians have proven their ability to endure through tough times, we still miss the law students and faculty, our colleagues, and being at our wonderful law libraries.

READ
AALL’s Academic Law Librarians Special Interest Section My Communities post “4 Student Services Topics in 4 Weeks” at bit.ly/SO19ALLSIStopics.