Information Literacy Plans

Does your law library need one?

By Judith Gire

Does your law library have a written information literacy plan? Should it? The librarians at Franklin Pierce Law Center gave little thought to an information literacy plan until one of our accrediting organizations incorporated information literacy requirements into its standards. Suddenly we needed to draft a plan before our next accreditation inspection—one that would demonstrate our law school's commitment to equipping students with the research skills necessary to navigate the information age.

The subsequent process of drafting an institutional information literacy plan proved unexpectedly valuable. It introduced us to the information literacy movement and its relevancy in a law school and law library environment. It forced us to evaluate our existing methods of research instruction and identify new teaching opportunities. And most importantly, it prompted us to work with our faculty to craft a plan providing more integrated research instruction throughout the law school curriculum.

What is Information Literacy?

In *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,* the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines information literacy as a "set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." Many U.S. colleges and universities have developed information literacy policies and programs based on *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* that focus on teaching students critical skills to become lifelong learners, including the abilities to: (1) determine the extent of information needed; (2) access the needed information effectively and efficiently; (3) evaluate information and its sources critically; (4) incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base; (5) use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose; and (6) understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information,

as well as access and use information ethically and legally.

These standards offer performance indicators and a range of outcomes for assessing student progress toward information literacy. As we explored the basis of the information literacy movement, it was clear the standards coincided with our law school's mission to prepare legal professionals to access, manage, and analyze large quantities of information from multiple sources.

Information Literacy in Law Schools

While there are many published texts as well as websites on information literacy, there is surprisingly little written about information literacy in a law school setting; the few articles that exist focus on the *need* for information literacy in this venue. In the her Law.com article, "Students Lack Legal Research and Information Literacy," Tracy Kasting draws a distinction between information technology skills and information literacy skills and concludes that contemporary law students lack the latter.

In a 2003-2004 AALL Research Grant Program project, Kathryn Hensiak, Stephanie Burke, and Donna Nixon developed a survey instrument of 30 questions completed by 330 law students from three law schools that confirmed their hypothesis that students begin law school lacking basic research skills. Cathaleen A. Roach points to these survey results in her *Legal Writing: The Journal of the Legal Writing Institute* article, "Is the Sky Falling? Ruminations on Incoming Law Student Preparedness (and Implications for the Profession) in the Wake of Recent National and Other Reports," as a basis for her conclusion that law students are good at gathering information but weak at converting it into a real paper with a real thesis and argument. Likewise, in "'Who Are Those Guys?': The Results of a Survey Studying the Information Literacy of Incoming Law Students," an article in *California Western Law Review,* Ian Gallacher finds incoming law students vastly overestimate their research skills and suggests law schools do more to improve students' information literacy. However, none of these articles describe how a law school could design and implement an information literacy plan.

In contrast, H. Kumar Percy Jayasuriya and Frances M. Brillantine's *Public Services in Law Libraries* article "Student Services in the 21st Century: Evaluation and Innovation in Discovering Student Needs, Teaching Information Literacy, and Designing Library 2.0-Based Student Services" suggests specific knowledge a law student should have to be information literate and supports extension of information literacy skills beyond first-year research instruction through traditional reference services, formal teaching, research guides, and tutorials. Additionally, this article discusses elements of a well-designed research tutorial.

Jackie Davies and Cathie Jackson's *The Law Teacher* article, "Information Literacy in the Law Curriculum: Experience from Cardiff," offers a more comprehensive discussion of how information literacy has been implemented in a law school environment. It explains in detail how Cardiff Law School actually used information literacy concepts to integrate legal research, information technology, and other legal skills training into a compulsory first-year module.

In October 2009, the AALL Joint Committee on the Articulation of Law Student Information Literacy Standards submitted "Draft Information Literacy Standards for Law Students" to the AALL Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section for comment. While these draft standards generally track *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,* they are tailored to the unique legal research needs of law students and promise to provide more appropriate information literacy guidelines for law schools in the future.

Developing the Plan

Inventory

After reading and digesting what we found on information literacy in general, as well as information literacy in law schools, the next step was to inventory the instructional services our library provided. Working with the standards, performance indicators, and outcomes from *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (since these guidelines seemed to be the most widely used in information literacy plans), we listed our two-credit required first-year

legal research course, our elective advanced legal research course, specialized elective courses in intellectual property research and patent searching, research presentations in substantive courses, and non-credit workshops provided by librarians in addition to those offered by our LexisNexis and Westlaw reps. The inventory also included any skills-based courses involving research not taught by librarians.

We assessed each offering to see how many information literacy standards, performance indicators, and outcomes were addressed. This process of dissecting every research course or workshop allowed us to step back and rethink what we were doing in each and discuss ideas for new teaching opportunities. For example, our reference librarian opted to retool his advanced legal research course into several practice-oriented mini-courses. This inventory

process proved to be one of the most useful things we did and became an effective starting point for developing the actual information literacy plan.

With our inventory completed, we were poised to tackle the plan. In September 2008, our dean appointed an ad hoc information literacy committee consisting of the library director, one teaching librarian, and two full-time

teaching faculty members to draft and implement a plan by September 2009. As an independent law school, there was no over-arching university information literacy plan for us to mirror, so we started by downloading information literacy plans from various college and university websites to use as samples. However, since we did not find any specific law school information literacy plans, it appeared we were sailing uncharted waters. We also purchased several te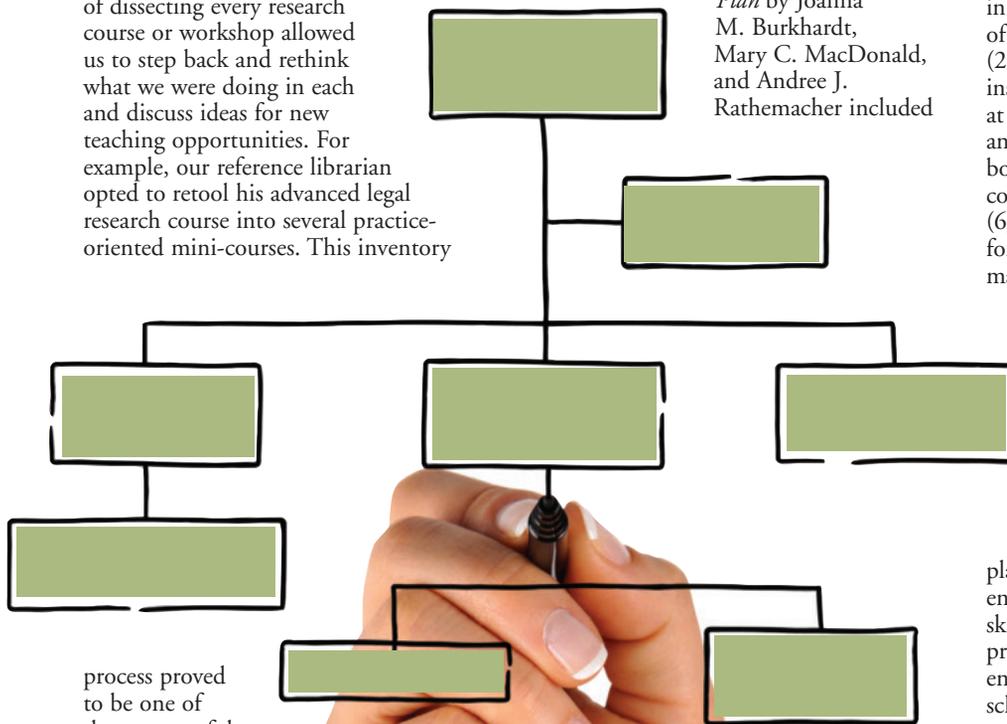xts on information literacy plans. *Creating a Comprehensive Information Literacy Plan* by Joanna M. Burkhardt, Mary C. MacDonald, and Andree J. Rathemacher included a valuable step-by-step guide complete with worksheets and model plans from a variety of academic libraries. Armed with the results of our inventory and model information literacy plans, we began drafting.

Format and Content

An information literacy plan sets out an institution's goals for information literacy, presents an outline of instructional components the institution will apply, and includes methods of assessment to measure success. There is no uniform format. According to *Creating a Comprehensive Information Literacy Plan,* however, most plans include the following sections: (1) introduction with a definition of information literacy and other nonstandard terms, an explanation of why information literacy is important in the information age, and the scope of the program (broad, narrow, etc.); (2) history of trends in library instruction and instructional programs at the particular institution; (3) goals and objectives of the program; (4) body of the plan with instructional components; (5) oversight of the plan; (6) methods of assessment; (7) timeline for implementing the plan; and (8) marketing the plan. Some plans seemed rather superficial, while others were extremely detailed and expository. As a small law school, we opted for a simple format. We targeted our teaching librarians as the primary audience and our faculty as the secondary audience and wrote our plan for these two user groups.

In writing the introduction to our plan, we stressed the importance of ensuring students graduate with research skills essential to become effective legal professionals in the evolving information environment. We tied this to our law school's mission statement and built upon the research instruction programs previously developed and delivered by our librarians. We also adopted *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* as the foundation of an instructional program that would provide increased non-curricular learning opportunities and faculty/librarian collaboration. In a short second section defined "information literacy," we listed the five standards from *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* and addressed meeting the information needs of our students as they progress through all levels of the law school curriculum.

This section essentially set out our goals.

The body of an information literacy plan serves as the "blueprint" for implementing an institutional information literacy program. Since this is the working section librarians and faculty will refer to repeatedly, it is important to make this section user-friendly. Options for organizing the body of the plan include: by student populations (class level); by target populations (specific groups of students); by discipline or program (more useful for the college or university-wide plan); by location of instruction (for institutions with multiple locations); by method of delivery (web tutorials, seminars, workshops, credit courses, etc.); or by implementation timeframes (year one, year two, etc.).

We chose to organize the body of our plan by student populations, which created three levels of instructional components: Level 1 targeted first-year law students; Level 2, second- and third-year law students; and Level 3, graduate students enrolled in our master of laws programs. Within each level we addressed our research objectives, the outcomes from *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* that were met, and the specific methodology employed.

Having previously inventoried and evaluated all our instructional services in terms of the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* proved invaluable at this point. When necessary, we further subdivided by semester. For example, our Level 1 (first semester) objectives included: introduction of basic search strategy; primary and secondary legal

legal research topics. We repeated this process for each level.

Level 2 for second- and third-year law students had more advanced and specialized objectives and included our Law Practice Information Literacy mini-courses, patent searching courses,

research presentations by librarians in substantive courses, electronic pathfinders developed by librarians to augment substantive courses, LexisNexis and Westlaw vendor training classes and topical research workshops, and training classes presented by librarians outside of class. Together the three levels really do function as a "blueprint" for all aspects of research instruction throughout our curriculum.

Faculty Collaboration
Information literacy plans are deemed most effective if they involve participation from librarians, teaching faculty, and IT staff. Accordingly, we included a section in our plan addressing faculty collaboration with a two-pronged focus. The first prong gently advocates improving faculty information literacy through the library's liaison program, monthly presentations by librarians at faculty meetings, and including a teaching librarian on the faculty teaching effectiveness committee. The second prong encourages faculty to integrate research presentations into their courses, target specific *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* in course syllabi, and build in

timetable. Most of the instructional components listed in each level of our plan were already operational while newer components were left for the teaching librarians to implement as schedules and staffing levels permitted. Each summer the teaching librarians will

review the plan to prepare for the new academic year, identifying which components will be operational and which will remain aspirational.

Assessment Mechanisms
Information literacy plans need built-in assessment mechanisms to measure efficacy. We tracked the three levels of our plan (Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3), identifying how to assess the various instructional components in each. For example, assessment mechanisms for our Level 1 Legal Research & Information Literacy course include: graded and ungraded course assignments, a self-assessed student research narrative that is part of the final research assignment, and routine institutional course evaluations. For in-class research presentations by teaching librarians in substantive courses, the librarians plan to design and administer a brief survey for students to evaluate the effectiveness of the presentation, but will also rely on feedback from individual faculty who evaluate the research in their assignments.

Additionally, we included a section on assessing the overall program performance of the information literacy plan that details a variety of opportunities to assess student research skills. First, the library's triannual student survey will add a section on research skills, and teaching librarians will simultaneously conduct focus groups for feedback on research prowess.

Second, the teaching librarians will monitor student responses to questions on research instruction in the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) completed annually by our students. Third, the plan calls for teaching librarians to administer the AALL Academic Law Libraries Student Services Committee Sample Survey of Law Student Research Habits and Skills to first-year students at the beginning and close of first semester, as well as to students completing externships and summer legal jobs.

Fourth, we will explore future use of standardized assessment tools, such as ACRL's Project SAILS knowledge test targeting a variety of information literacy

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authority; mandatory and persuasive authority; accessing, evaluating, and updating primary and secondary sources; and appropriate choice of electronic versus print formats. We included the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* that would be addressed in Level 1 (first semester) and completed this with a brief description of our required first-year Legal Research and Information Literacy Course, LexisNexis and Westlaw vendor presentations reinforcing basic first-year research topics, and librarian presentations to supplement first-year

assignments assessing student mastery of specific information literacy goals. The plan also briefly discusses collaboration with the law school's IT staff.

Timelines
Many information literacy plans include a timetable indicating when various parts of the plan should become a reality. Timetables seem particularly important where there are issues related to funding, available space, and required mandates from the administration.

As a small, self-directed institution, we did not feel the need to incorporate a

Further Reading

Check out the following books and articles for more information on developing your library's information literacy plan.

Association of College and Research Libraries Toolkit
www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/acrlinfolit/informationliteracy.cfm

Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education
Association of College and Research Libraries
American Library Association

Creating a Comprehensive Information Literacy Plan: A How-to-Do-It Manual and CD-Rom for Librarians
By Joanna M. Burkhardt, Mary C. MacDonald, and Andree J. Rathemacher
Neal-Schuman Pub., Inc.

"Information Literacy in the Law Curriculum: Experiences from Cardiff"
By Jackie Davies and Cathie Jackson
The Law Teacher 39:2 (2005) 150-160.
http://orca.cf.ac.uk/5093/1/Law Teacher.pdf

"'Who Are Those Guys': The Results of a Survey Studying the Information Literacy of Incoming Law Students"
By Ian Gallacher
California Western Law Review 44 (2007-2008) 151-218.

"2003-2004 Completed Research Grant Projects: Assessing Information Literacy Among First Year Law Students: A Survey to Measure Research Experiences and Perceptions"
By Kathryn Hensiak, Stephanie Burke, and Donna Nixon
AALL *Law Library Journal* 96 (2004) *867-68.*

"Student Services in the 21st Century: Evaluation and Innovation in Discovering Student Needs, Teaching Information Literacy, and Designing Library 2.0 Based Student Services"
By H. Kumar Percy Jayasuriya and Frances M. Brillantine
Public Services in Law Libraries 26 (2007) 135-170.

"Students Lack Legal Research and Information Literacy"
By Tracy Kasting
www.law.com/jsp/PubArticle.jsp?id=900005456841

"Is the Sky Falling? Ruminations on Incoming Law Student Preparedness (and Implications for the Profession) in the Wake of Recent National and Other Reports"
By Cathaleen A. Roach
Legal Writing: The Journal of the Legal Writing Institute 11 (2005) 295-327.

skills based on the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.* This tool is not designed to measure legal research skills, however, and there is a need for a customized assessment tool for law schools. Additionally, our plan calls for the dean to appoint an ad hoc committee every three years to review the information literacy plan and make needed revisions to guarantee its ongoing success.

Immediate Advantages

When completed, our draft information literacy plan was circulated to the teaching librarians for comment and sent to the faculty for discussion, followed by a unanimous vote of approval. Having faculty buy-in for the information literacy plan gives it institutional clout and makes implementation by the teaching librarians much easier. The plan has been posted on the law school website to alert prospective students and faculty as well as accrediting organizations that the law school has made a commitment to ensuring the information literacy of its students. The teaching librarians have started to integrate information literacy concepts and terminology into research course syllabi and have added "information literacy" to several course titles.

From inception through approval, the process of creating an information literacy plan took us one academic year with several intense weeks devoted to the inventory and drafting. The advantages of having a coherent, comprehensive information literacy plan have been immediate. Because the plan clearly maps out all instructional components for our three student populations, preparing our research instruction program for the next academic year is already more manageable. We simply plug in the players for each instructional event.

As a result of the plan, a teaching librarian has been appointed to the faculty teaching effectiveness committee, which should help us promote information literacy classroom opportunities. Inspired by the information literacy concept, the faculty curriculum committee has added information literacy activities to two required courses. And, of course, we are now ready for that next accreditation inspection—which was what prompted us to create our own information literacy plan in the first place.

Information Literacy Plans for Non-Academic Law Libraries

Although information literacy plans were initiated by and for academe, there is no reason they will not work in any law library. Information literacy is about preparing patrons with the skills necessary to locate, evaluate, and effectively use information throughout their lives, including their lives in law firms, corporations, government agencies, and courts, as well as law schools. An institutional information literacy plan makes perfect sense for any law library in the business of equipping patrons to manage the information age like pros regardless of whether those patrons are law clerks, associates, partners, judges, or law students. And isn't this the business of every law library?

Today's law librarians are teachers. As teachers, law librarians must determine the educational needs of their patrons, design curricula and methods to meet those needs, evaluate the education process for effectiveness, educate patrons in the methodologies of legal research, and provide training in the organization and use of legal resources in various formats. The institutional information literacy plan is a key tool to help law librarians do this. Court librarians can work with judges and court administrations while firm librarians can coordinate with managing partners and IT staff to adapt the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* or the new Draft Information Literacy Standards for Law Students to fit their institutional missions. With a bit of creativity, academic information literacy plans and assessment tools can be modified and tailored to fit the educational needs of any law library setting. Why not be the first in your firm, your agency, your court, or your law school to suggest an information literacy plan and remind everyone that law librarians are the leaders and experts in legal information and legal research? ■

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