

Customer Insight

“What if You Could Start with a Clean Slate?”

by Craig Miller

Planning Drexel University College of Law’s new library presented its staff with an unparalleled opportunity to create a modern research facility with the patron’s needs in mind.

The Drexel University College of Law, Philadelphia, opened its new main building in January 2007. In planning the library’s collection and research technology, library staff realized it was an opportune moment to attempt a new model for academic law libraries – one that joined the service attributes of the best libraries with a collection that embraced the best of digital and print resources to meet faculty and student needs.

Drexel’s acquisition decisions were guided by a collection development policy created by Christopher Simoni, law library director and professor of law; Rob Richards, head of Technical Services; Steve Thorpe, head of Public Services; and Keith Berthrong, Electronic Services librarian. The early planning suggested that the library’s information resources would be mostly, if not exclusively, digital. As the planning progressed, however, the emphasis shifted from thinking

predominately about format to thinking about faculty and student research practices and preferences as well as the quality of information, regardless of format. As a result, the library’s new collection is a mix of print and electronic information but with a decided preference for electronic resources, as appropriate to its patrons’ needs.

Says Simoni, “I saw this as a wonderful opportunity to attempt to answer the question law library directors frequently ask one another: ‘In this information and educational environment, what would you do if you could start with a clean slate?’ Drexel provided that opportunity and added a commitment to innovative education, a strong focus on developing interdisciplinary relationships with other colleges and schools within the university, and a commitment to leadership in educational technology. It was an offer I couldn’t let pass.”

Richards, whose career path included six years as an academic law librarian at the University of Colorado Law Library, says that after completing law school and practicing for a short time, “I was eager to return to

academic law libraries. This past winter I saw the posting for an acquisitions librarian at Drexel, and saw that Professor Simoni was the director. I was excited at the opportunity to work for him, and to help to build a

first-rate academic law library collection from the ground up. Academic law librarians rarely have an opportunity to design a library collection from the very start, so I did not want to miss this opportunity.”

Primary collection considerations

Drexel’s acquisition policy is informed by several broad principles: satisfying the American Bar Association accreditation standards; using faculty teaching and scholarship agendas to determine areas for collection development, with an emphasis on concentrations in health law, business and entrepreneurship law, and intellectual property law; and supporting the law school’s mission of combining instruction in legal doctrine with training in practical legal skills.

Although the collection planners prefer the electronic format where appropriate, they also realize that a variety of factors need to inform their decisions, among them patrons’ preferences, citation requirements, the availability of e-mail notification, labor costs associated with print subscriptions, space constraints, and the need to provide students with instructional exemplars of types of legal information resources (e.g., though the library subscribes mostly to digital looseleaf services in deference to users’ preferences, it also subscribes to several looseleaf services in print, so that students can become familiar with the structure and function of a paper service).

All of the library’s print resources and many digital titles, including individual titles of many full-text electronic books, are cataloged in an online catalog. The library also offers catalog records from Cassidy Cataloguing Services for treatises available on Westlaw® and LexisNexis, its electronic titles are listed on the library’s Web site; and all of its full-text electronic journals are indexed in the campus’s e-journal management system. “By making all of this metadata available,” says Simoni, “we make it easy for our patrons to discover all of the materials available in our collection regardless of format.”

Guided by its collection development policy, the library selects non-US and transnational legal resources primarily to meet the needs of the school’s faculty in the business and entrepreneurship law and IP concentrations, as well as those of faculty teaching public international law. Says Simoni, “The policy also provides that we purchase high-quality comparative law materials in the subject areas in which our faculty conduct research. The Thomson publishers obviously play a substantial role in the market for these materials.

Sweet & Maxwell's UK and European primary law titles will be of interest to us, as well their treatises on transnational business law and IP. We will also be looking at Carswell's treatises on Canadian business law, intellectual property, and human rights. Because of

Asia's significance in international business and innovation, secondary sources in business law and IP from Sweet & Maxwell Asia warrant our attention. Through our Westlaw subscription, ELLIS will be a key source of EU legal materials for our patrons."

Emulating the law firm library

As Drexel's collections become increasing digital, technical services librarians spend less time on traditional goods-based purchasing, bibliographic control, preservation, and accounting issues, and more time on content analysis, complex price analysis, licensing, consortial purchasing, budgeting, systems integration, and analysis of usage data. Digital technology allows public services librarians to automate or disintermediate certain routine functions, including current awareness services and document delivery, and devote more time to providing customized research services to faculty. Technology is driving the academic law library to emulate the law firm library: occupying a smaller physical footprint, channeling a rich digital information stream, and delivering timely, high-quality, personalized research services to patrons. The role of the academic law librarian is increasingly to identify each patron's unique information needs, and to furnish a set of customized services to meet them.

When planning a law library's collection, Simoni and Richards advise beginning with a collection development policy that is rooted in the mission of the law school and the subject areas and jurisdictions embraced by the faculty's research and the law school's curriculum and programs. Work with faculty liaison librarians

to determine the precise needs of faculty requiring foreign and international legal resources. Budget sufficient time to research and evaluate the various sources and formats for the necessary resources. Ask plenty of questions about product features, such as pagination and supplementation costs. Be mindful that pricing and content expectations of legal information consumers in other nations may differ markedly from those in the US. Remember that academic subscriptions to Westlaw and LexisNexis provide a wealth of non-US legal material.

University libraries' subscriptions to international government documents databases and e-journal aggregator services may afford the law school access to a rich set of transnational legal resources at no or modest cost. As interdisciplinary scholarly research thrives, university libraries and graduate business schools may also be eager to partner with the law library in subscriptions to digital international legal resources of interest to scholars in non-legal disciplines. Legal periodicals published by non-US law schools often provide high-quality coverage of foreign and international legal issues at minimal cost. Consortia may permit access to valuable transnational digital legal resources at substantial savings. After acquisition,

monitor usage carefully to determine the actual value of resources to patrons.

Professor Simoni, who has consulted extensively with law libraries in developing nations, notes that creating a law library that will meet patron needs comes down to resources and strong management.

“Although the conditions of the various African law libraries for which I consulted were uniformly desperate because of a long-standing lack of resources and technology, it does seem that in a few instances libraries with strong management were able to implement technology in a way that permitted them to use digital resources to begin to make up for some of the gaps in their collections,” says Simoni. “Without that strong leadership, however, technology did not provide any lasting benefits. And the African law libraries are still

in need of great assistance in being able to afford even the smallest portion of the rich array of digital resources that are available.

“At Drexel we’ve found that with a strong technology infrastructure, strong management, and a commitment to digital resources,” he continues, “we have been able to build a collection of primary legal materials that is primarily digital, and deliver those materials to our patrons, anytime, anywhere, without having a large print collection. So, in some sense, we’ve been able to do what the African law libraries I know best had hoped to do. In the end, it all comes down to resources, and without the proper resources, it’s difficult to run a library that will meet most of one’s patrons’ needs. With those resources, however, almost anything is possible.”



Christopher Simoni

Professor Christopher Simoni, J.D., M.L.I.S., Ph.D., M.A., A.B., is a professor of law and director of Drexel University College of Law Library in Philadelphia. Before accepting the position of Director of the new Drexel Law Library, Professor Simoni was the Associate Dean for Library and Information Services and Professor of Law at Northwestern University School of Law, and assistant professor and director of the library at Marquette University School of Law. He is very active with the American Association of Law Libraries, the Association of American Law Schools, and the American Bar Association, and has consulted at law libraries in Ethiopia, Ghana, and Uganda on the use of information technology for library collection development and research support.



Roberts C. Richards

Robert C. Richards Jr., J.D., M.S.L.I.S., M.A., is head of Technical Services at Drexel University College of Law Library. His most recent law library experience was six years of serving as Technical Services Librarian at the University of Colorado Law Library. His research interests include commercial law, bankruptcy, intellectual property, legal publishing, and legal information systems.