A Career as a Law Librarian

Law librarians work in legal settings such as law schools, private law firms, and government libraries. Pursuing a career as a law librarian can be undertaken through several different educational routes. Some of the degrees obtained by law librarians include M.L.S., M.L.I.S., M.S.I.S., M.L., and M.A. in L.S.B. These may be required for careers in the law librarianship profession. According to the Task Force to Enhance Law Librarianship Education, 85% of those working as law librarians have graduate degrees in library science. In addition, most employers require master’s degrees from an American Library Association (ALA)-accredited institution.

"A law librarian should have an analytic mind that allows them to break down a legal reference problem into key concepts that can be searched using print and electronic resources. Familiarity with the legislative process and court procedure is crucial to providing high-quality reference service," said Herb Somers, International/Foreign Law Librarian at the Jacob Burns Law Library at George Washington University Law School in Washington, DC.

Mr. Somers started out as a government documents librarian. After 9 years in the field, Mr. Somers decided to attend law school. After graduating, he took his first position at George Washington. Two years later, he entered the international and foreign law librarian position where he currently works. "My experience with international organization documentation and my law school coursework in international law and international business transactions was very useful in this position," Mr. Somers said. "My career as a law librarian has been extremely satisfying."

Nearly 30% of all law librarians also have J.D. or L.L.B. degrees, preferred by employers to be from law schools accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA), according to the Task Force. Less than 20% of the law librarian jobs being filled require both degrees, the Task Force said.

Work experience in a law library setting is often as important as having a law degree. Brian L. Baker serves as Director of the Charles N. and Hilda H.M. Mason Law Library at University of the District of Columbia's David A. Clarke School of Law and is also Assistant Professor of Law at the school. He began as a library messenger for the Law Firm of Morgan Lewis and Bockius in the early 1980s, where he sparked an interest in the librarian profession. He took a position at American University’s Law Library as a government documents assistant and attended night school to finish his B.A. after having been out of school for almost a decade. He then went on to obtain his M.L.S. and J.D. "It was a long strange trip, but I have ended up where I hoped, and I love it."
Many schools offer joint J.D./M.L.S. degrees, which typically are at least 4 years of study. Having both J.D. and M.L.S. degrees will better qualify a student for more positions in law librarianship. However, beyond the degrees, becoming a law librarian means having a number of skills and traits.

"Patience, knowledge, and a mind that can work like a thesaurus. You need to constantly be flexible in your thinking in order to do the deep analysis that may be required," advised Mr. Baker. "You need to be able to operate in a less structured environment. More often than not, your research will be complete in a few hours or by the end of the day. You need to be ready to start fresh the next day, possibly working in a completely different area of law."

Mary Ann Keeling, J.D., M.L.S., is a Law Librarian for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, in Washington, DC. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in communications, she taught 8th- and 9th-grade English. She went on to attend law school, and it was during her 3 years of study that she was "thoroughly taken with the skills the reference librarians displayed." Following graduation, she attended an ALA-accredited library graduate program.

She said breaking into her first job was difficult. "I had worked gainfully in other fields, but to get 'library experience' and a job, I accepted temporary and non-law library jobs: a prison librarian, late-evening telephone reference. But after 10 months, I interviewed for a law library position, was offered, and I accepted. After 14 years, I haven't looked back since!"

Ms. Keeling recommends practicing an attitude of helping others as an important quality of a law librarian. "Plus, for researchers, the following traits: persistence, logic, curiosity, ability to work with others under less-than-ideal circumstances due to work pressure, sense of humor, and interest in law."

Robert E. Riger is Executive Director at Miami-Dade County Law Library. He became a Law Librarian in the late 1970s and received his M.S. in Library & Information Science with a specialization in Law Librarianship from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute. Mr. Riger has worked at almost every type of Law Library—county, nonprofit, academic, and law firm—and served as a consultant. Throughout his career, he has seen changes in new library and information technology take form. "The three major changes that I have seen in my career are obviously the rise of the Internet as a resource; the shift from one centralized database terminal and printer to desktop access for all end users; and, for public law librarians, the shrinking of public funding for law libraries."

There is always the concern about re-organization or downsizing, said Ms. Keeling. This is due to factors like budget, and the perception that electronic desktops will replace the information professional. She said to "maintain cutting edge," one has to always "reinvent oneself."

The introduction of electronic resources to the legal profession has indeed changed the way librarians work. "Now, not only are we choosing an information resource that answers the question at hand, but we must also be able to choose an appropriate format for our patron when a choice is between a print and electronic resource," said Mr. Somers.

Mr. Baker added that technology has changed the way and speed in which research is done. As a result, law librarians are on duty often late into the evening, and, with the dawn of email, they are always within reach. "Law Librarians are now always 'on,'" Mr. Baker said.

As the others, Ms. Keeling said all in all she thoroughly enjoys the challenge of working with various patrons and is "very satisfied" with her career as a law librarian. "I can't imagine doing anything else."

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