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# Supporting Faculty Research: A Direct Role for the Library

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# Trends in Law Library Management and Technology

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## Supporting Faculty Research: A Direct Role for the Library

By MARGARET A. LEARY, University of Michigan Law Library

The primary mission of the University of Michigan Law Library is supporting faculty research and teaching. For most of the library's history, that support was indirect, aimed at building a collection that would meet present and future faculty needs.

In the 1980s, however, it became clear that the law library's collection would never again be able to meet all faculty needs, or all student needs; law was no longer an isolated discipline, and we would need to supply information from many sources and in varied formats. The University of Michigan Law Library has had a faculty document delivery system for more than twenty years. Dubbed "Phone Page" after its single-purpose phone line with an answering machine, the service was by the mid-1980s delivering 3,000 to 5,000 items annually to faculty offices. Between a quarter and a third of these items were from libraries other than our law library.

We noticed an increasing need for the students who processed the Phone Page requests to consult reference librarians for help deciphering them. We also noticed that, although the law school provided ample funding for faculty research activities, few faculty members seemed to hire research assistants. How were those who had no RA doing their work? Why weren't they hiring RAs? Was there a new role for the library?

A bit of thinking led to a hypothesis: most research requires almost random help from an RA. Hiring, training, and supervising are not functions most faculty members relish. Since the need for help is hard to predict or plan for, the hassle of hiring, training, and supervising might cause many who would need help not to get it.

If the hypothesis were true, there was a clear library role: the reference department would hire, train, and supervise a pool of RAs; faculty would bring the research needs to the reference department and, with professional oversight, the library's RAs would do the work. If the work was complex, the librarians would do it or break it down into manageable pieces for the RA.

We took the concept, in the form of a request for \$2,500, to the faculty committee which administered research money, and our request was granted. The first year, 1986-87, we barely spent the money, but by 1989-90 we expect to spend nearly \$6,000, supplied not from the library's regular salary account but from the faculty's research account.

Typical RA projects have included LEXIS, NEXIS, and WESTLAW searches; compiling bibliographies of books and articles for seminar preparation or as background for a prospective book or article; finding state statutes on particular types of crimes and cases interpreting them;

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classifying all recent cases on particular questions of constitutional law; and updating citations for a casebook revision.

We are always alert to the possibility that one or two people could monopolize the RAs' time; careful professional supervision and communication with faculty members are needed to keep each assignment reasonable. We describe the service as "short projects, usually not longer than 5-10 hours," but in fact we can put more time into one assignment if the work can be spread over several weeks or a whole term.

We offer the service to visitors as well as regular faculty, but not to graduate students. In 1987-88 the service handled 38 requests; in 1988-89 the number had more than doubled. The existence of the service also stimulates faculty questions directly to reference librarians. Over the last three years, those numbers have jumped from 669 in 1986-87 (the first year of the research assistant program) to 1,138 in 1988-89. Faculty now ask about 10 percent of the total questions handled by

the reference department. This is a marked change from 1984-85, a year typical of those before the Faculty Research Assistance program, when reference answered only 321 faculty queries, 5 percent of the total of 6,496 annual queries.

We have done no formal evaluation of the service, believing that our communications are open enough to receive critical comments (we do get them, and we respond) and that the best performance measure is repeat requests and increased demand.

We cannot explain why faculty readily bring questions to a service provided by what appear to be students, when they formerly brought few research requests to the professional library staff. We can speculate, but it really doesn't matter. What does matter is that the Faculty Research Assistance program seems to have increased faculty awareness of the library's staff and collection as essential to their teaching and research.

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