Building a Virtual Law Library on a Shoestring

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Building a Virtual Law Library on a Shoestring

Company News, Law Libraries, Librarianship, Trends Interactive
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Tags: Collection Building, Library Consortia, Long Range Planning, Strategic Plans

The goal of Trends Interactive is to generate freewheeling discussion of a variety of subjects of interest to law librarians. This article on collection resource strategies in the face of severe budgetary constraints has been written by Adeen Postar, Director of the Law Library, University of Baltimore School of Law.

Introduction

The University of Baltimore School of Law moved into a beautiful light-filled, platinum LEED certified, 12-floor ultramodern building in spring 2013. The Library is on floors 7 to 12, and is more than 34,000 square feet. That’s the good news. The not-so-good news is that we have 9,946 linear square feet of shelving, with all but 1,826 linear feet occupied. We do not have any compact shelving or off-site storage, and due to severe budget constraints we will not have any in the future. Our space and revenue challenges dictate every single decision we make on our resources. We have no choice but to operate under the “just in time” collection and resource strategy. For us the “future” is now; but the true question is whether that strategy is an appropriate one for an academic law library whose primary mission is to support the curriculum and scholarly requirements of the students and faculty here at UB. After all, we are not a law firm with a defined practice; our patron’s interests are literally global. The most important questions are whether our collection and policies satisfy the ABA’s Standard 606 that requires us to provide our patrons with “essential materials through ownership or reliable access ....”

A New Strategic Vision

After trimming the collection by at least two-thirds to move into this building, and forced by our financial condition to cut thousands of titles and subscriptions, our library is only now coming to terms with what that means for our future collections and policies. We are beginning the process of writing a new collection development plan, and just finished writing our inaugural strategic plan, posted at http://law.ubalt.edu/library/docs/UBLL_Strategic_Plan_2015-18.pdf
The strategic plan is our first attempt to address our need to go digital by making a commitment to “Continue to develop an excellent collection that supports the curriculum of the UB School of Law and the scholarly needs of its faculty and students, with a focus on electronic resources.” The entire staff of the library participated in writing it, after receiving an overview of the process that the Jacob Burns Law Library at George Washington Law School followed that was very generously provided us by Scott Pagel last March. We focused on fusing our plan with the existing UB Law School strategic plan that asked us to provide additional support for faculty research and scholarship. To help fund these additions to our resources and services, we included plans to pursue alternate revenue streams, including establishing a Friends program and pursuing grants and other external funding opportunities in the immediate future. The plan was unanimously approved by the Law School’s Library Committee and our Dean, Ron Weich.

The Print Collections

As a publicly funded law school, we have a responsibility to keep our state’s print materials available to those who cannot or prefer not to use online versions. We do have LexisNexis Academic and a small subscription to Westlaw Public Access, but their use is limited to the four terminals we have that are available to the public. We have no reporters, few of the large and basic secondary sources like ALR and CJS, almost no loose leafs, and the only print state code we subscribe to is Maryland. In addition, we continue to purchase paper format versions of student study aids. We also have a few titles that we have kept specifically because members of the public frequently use them; these include Am Jur and a few general form books. We also keep one copy of all Maryland primary and secondary materials in print, which are also primarily used by our public patrons.

What we’ve done so far isn’t much different than what other libraries have done who have similar budget issues. It’s just in the scope and the fact that we will have to make very careful decisions on our print collection, basically forever.

The Online Collections

We’ve essentially stopped subscribing to ANYTHING that is available on Lexis Advance, WestlawNext, Bloomberg Law and other specialized databases. Using the money saved from cutting print materials, we have greatly expanded our subscriptions to HeinOnline. However, we cannot afford to purchase West Academic’s online subscription to student study aids because it would take a huge chunk out of our state budget (something like 20%), and that is just too high a price to pay.

We are now looking into acquiring several E-book packages and databases. However, adding any digital product to our collection is problematic, both for cost and for accessibility reasons. I am sure that most of you know that if it’s not on Lexis or Westlaw, most students will not find it or even think to look for it in another
database. That has required the library to do several things that it had not done previously, including purchasing catalog records for these materials and sending our teaching librarians into subject-specific classes to show students our resources, and to almost constantly work on our website so that we can best showcase reliable free resources and our own subscription databases. We share a catalog with the 16 member libraries in the University System of Maryland and Affiliated Institutions (USMAI) consortium, and we have found adding electronic records to be a cumbersome, time-consuming and difficult process. But we are doing it, and we are also in the process of adding a discovery layer to our catalog (a resource that is free to us by virtue of our USMAI membership).

**Consortia**

Our membership in the USMAI consortium allows UB law students and faculty to easily borrow materials from the other libraries in the University of Maryland System. This certainly increases the ability of our users to get access to print materials, but not to their electronic resources, which are limited by license to the subscribing institution. This limitation has caused some issues for us, but so far we have been able to resolve them by borrowing the book from another library or purchasing it for the collection.

**Conclusion**

The interpretation for Standard 606-1 says that “The appropriate mixture of collection formats depends on the needs of the library and the law school. A collection that consists of a single format may violate Standard 606.” We haven’t stopped collecting in print, exactly; we just do it only when there is no alternative or if, as in the case of student study aids, the digital version is too expensive. We are trying to make our electronic collections more visible and user-friendly—a long and complicated process. I just hope we have made enough progress toward this goal before our 2017 ABA site visit to meet and even exceed the requirements of Standard 606.