Summer 1992

University of Florida Introduces New Electronic Reference Room

Rosalie M. Sanderson

Betty W. Taylor
University of Florida Levin College of Law

University of Florida Introduces New Electronic Reference Room

by Rosalie M. Sanderson and Betty W. Taylor

For over twenty years the University of Florida College of Law Library has provided traditional reference services by a professional librarian stationed at a reference desk, surrounded by volumes of reference works. The desk, strategically located, served as the focal point upon entrance to the large reading room with adjacent split-level stacks. Until the last few years the room functioned perfectly well.

The arrival of CD-ROMs and online services brought with them considerable discussion about location of equipment for the best service and use. Finally, agreement was reached that the CD-ROM indexes should be located near the hard copy volumes to encourage the transition from hard copy to computer. Other equipment joined the first two computers to provide access to other CD-ROMs that were growing rapidly in numbers, primarily for reference assistance in their use. The reference librarians also acquired a personal computer with modem for providing online assistance at the desk.

In the meantime, computer labs were established in the library for graduate tax students and in an adjacent building for all law students. Students were on duty in the larger lab to work with law students, faculty, and staff when they needed help. The staff was pleased that we were able to offer these services to the students and worked with this arrangement for many years, but we talked constantly about finding some way to improve the service.

If students asked questions at the reference desk that librarians thought could be answered best by using LEXIS or WESTLAW, librarians had two choices: (1) send the patron to the computer lab and hope that the

person was able to find a satisfactory answer to the query or (2) use the computer at the reference desk to help the patron find the solution.

In a typical situation, the reference librarian would work with students and suggest appropriate databases or files. Then the librarian would discuss search strategy with the patron and demonstrate an actual search. Often, particularly when more difficult searches were involved, the librarian would print a copy of the search request so that the student could go to the computer lab and work on the search independently. The student would have received some direction from the librarian, some idea about databases that might be useful and some help to form a query. However, the Reference Desk personal computer could not be tied up indefinitely with the work of a single student. The student would be forced to perform the search at a different

---

Students learn much more from the hands-on experience.

---

workstation to actually browse documents retrieved from the search.

Librarians were frustrated with these options. For one reason, they were never sure the patron even went to the computer lab, or if so, if he or she used the computer systems properly, or ever found the answer to the query. For a second reason,

while the librarians tried to use the computer at the reference desk as a teaching tool with the students, librarians were never sure that students learned from watching them how to handle the transaction independently. Without having an independent hands-on experience did the student learn to access the systems, frame queries, or find solutions to problems?

The reference staff desperately wanted workstations for students located close to the reference desk, so that reference librarians would be able to help students help themselves. It is a far different experience for students to search themselves while being assisted by the reference librarian, than to observe while librarians perform a search. Students learn much more from the hands-on experience. They encounter the problems and learn how to solve them, making subsequent search encounters far less intimidating. While searching for some way to provide additional workstations close to the reference desk, we ran headlong into our constant problem, lack of space. The one obstacle we face in every change is lack of space as we are at near capacity in seating, shelf space, work areas and storage.

Our vision of the ideal arrangement was to integrate the computer services with the reference services so that librarians could point patrons to the proper resources for solutions to their information queries—whether hard copy or computerized data. Plans began to evolve for bringing all of the computers into the reference area. The concern was acceptance of the concept, impact on study and reference in the reading room, a place for instruction in computer use and support of the administration and faculty.

Our first choice was the main floor of the reading room adjacent to the reference desk but with a glass partition to reduce noise from equipment and patron conversation. Since funds were limited, the glass partition was deleted from the proposal. With this element gone from the plan, the staff decided to locate the computers on the upper level of the stacks off the main reading room. They proceeded with floor plans and when it came to implementation, the electricians pointed out that all the wiring would have to come from the ceiling and that would be much more expensive. The vision of all these poles in the room soon discouraged that plan.

Back to the main reading room, the staff laid out plans for the physical arrangement. We planned to make space for sixteen PCs, eight WESTLAW PCs and eight LEXIS PCs. We selected tables that would hold two workstations each. Four tables each with a custom-designed cabinet to hold two printers—one on top of the other—were ordered along with 16 computer chairs. The furniture and equipment arrived and the services were installed just prior to the commencement of classes in August 1991. We were adamant that the furniture and PCs be installed before classes began. We thought that students would be more receptive to the change if it were in place when classes began. Students don't seem to like major changes in mid-semester.

We are gratified by the acceptance of our plan. The equipment is noiseless and has caused no complaints of any kind from occupants of the reading room. Most of the conversation is between a reference librarian and student, and is kept to a minimum. No negative comments have been heard from anyone to our knowledge.

Most of all, the staff is elated over the improvement of service. When a patron asks for assistance at the reference desk, the librarian assesses the query, type of patron (some patrons would not have passwords to use the systems), and determines the best method for reaching a solution

to the problem. Once the assessment is made, the librarian then pursues the problem—either by having the student work at the computer under guidance or by way of appropriate reference materials.

Librarians can now advise students of their best alternatives in finding information and can capture their attention when there is a need for

---

For the first time, students are integrating their use of print and online materials.

---

information. Librarians are able to work with students at LEXIS or WESTLAW workstations and to teach them how to use either system. In addition to helping students form queries, librarians are often called upon to help students select appropriate databases. Students often don't really known which databases or files include the full text of a law review, as opposed to a citation. They may be unaware that the full text of federal bills is available on LEXIS, or that regional newspapers are available on WESTLAW through DIALOG. Frequently, administrative materials are a complete mystery to students, and librarians help students find their way to useful sources.

For those students with some familiarity with the systems, this is a convenient location for finding a citation or text. Some dash in and sit down at the computer, work for a few minutes, go to the shelves for a book and speed off to the copy center. The convenience is one of the drawing cards for use of the equipment in reference. We keep database lists, user guides, and charts in pamphlet boxes beside each

workstation for quick reference.

The impact of the sixteen LEXIS-WESTLAW workstations in the reference area has been overwhelmingly positive. These workstations stay fairly busy throughout the day and evening. In fact, they are busier than our main LEXIS-WESTLAW lab in the Media Center, which is located in a separate building. Reference librarians are much more involved helping students with LEXIS and WESTLAW than in the past. The students also spend of lot of time helping each other.

For the first time, students are integrating their use of print and online materials. Every morning, librarians find print copies of law reviews, codes or reporters on the computer tables at the workstations. Obviously, students have been using the print and online sources together. While we have always encouraged students to integrate use of print and online materials, it has been almost impossible because our main CALR lab and the Legal Information Center are in separate buildings. In addition to learning more about online searching, students have been learning about print materials as well. For example, one student asked a reference librarian if there were a print equivalent of LH. This was a great opportunity to discuss legislative history, source documents, commercial publications and indexes.

Just maintaining the equipment and keeping paper and ink available has been an added responsibility. Because librarians are often working with students at the workstation, we have changed our reference desk staffing patterns. For several years a part time library assistant has helped at the reference desk every afternoon. After the new lab opened at the reference desk, we needed more help. Library technical assistants from Technical Services are working on a rotation for two hours every morning to help us staff the reference desk. These technical assistants are highly skilled and are very helpful with LUIS, our integrated automation system. They also help with telephone reference

and other reference and location questions.

The reference facility also has been used an additional training area during peak training times. We did not anticipate using this area for training. We thought students would complain about the noise. However, training 200 students twice each year taxes the facilities very heavily, and the reference workstations were a welcomed facility. When we realized that we would be forced to use the reference facility for training sessions, we posted signs announcing the time of training, and to our great surprise we received no complaints from anyone. Our impression is that students who want to work in quiet find other places to study when they know there are training sessions scheduled in the reference area.

Overall, we are delighted with this new facility. We think it helps us provide better, total reference service to students. We don't just give them information; we try to teach them how they can best find what they need whether they use a print or nonprint source. In the future, if we have a new building, we might plan to locate all of our CALR workstations in the reference area instead of only sixteen. □

Rosalie M. Sanderson is Assistant Director for Computerized Information Services. Betty W. Taylor is Professor of Law and Director of the Legal Information Center.