Alumni Services: Strategies for Keeping the Law Library's Doors Open After Graduation

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The sounds of “Pomp and Circumstance” should not be a swan song for the relationship between the law library and the graduate. As the final strains fade, so begins a new chapter, not the culmination of the tale. Graduation merely marks a shift in the relationship between law schools and their students. As new graduates enter the legal field, their need for support—from the institution as a whole, as well as the library—rather than abating, becomes even more profound. The alumni-law school relationship is symbiotic and critical to the vitality of the law school. Active and engaged alumni are key to student recruitment, ongoing financial support, and employment opportunities for future generations of lawyers. Law libraries can play an important role in fostering and maintaining this relationship.

Earlier this year, shortly after our law library launched HeinOnline’s Alumni Access, I received an email from a particularly enthusiastic alumna. Her rural location and relatively small law practice made accessing legal periodicals an expensive and generally futile chore. She concluded her email by saying that this service was the best thing the law school had done for her since graduation. That last sentence was the impetus for this article. Instantly, it raised a number of questions, the most pressing of these being: Have we been neglecting a portion of our patron base? And what can be done to better serve this group?

The concept of offering library services to alumni is not novel. Copy-and-send services have been around for decades. Most academic libraries allow alumni lifetime access to their physical collection. Frequently, on-site access to a subset of the library’s electronic resources is available, too. However, all too often, these traditional services have been an afterthought, and today they simply are not enough. We must adapt to keep pace with the needs of our alums. In addition to changing alumni demographics, which are rendering service mainstays obsolete, shifts in resource formats have erected barriers to service as restrictive contracts with database providers prevent the use of many electronic resources by this patron group. Yet, these challenges can be combated with deliberation and careful planning.

Who Are Our Alums?
Knowing who are alums are and anticipating their needs is a critical starting point. The volume of library articles on specific patron populations is considerable. There are numerous works about serving self-represented litigants, members of the bench and bar, disabled patrons, and a wide array of other constituencies, but the literature is surprisingly scant when it comes to identifying and addressing the research needs of former students.

Today’s law school alums are diverse, both geographically and demographically. Increasingly, they come from and return to diverse locales. This negatively impacts the efficacy of conventional library services. As a practical matter, geographic distance
dramatically reduces the accessibility of resources available only on site. In extreme circumstances, it even undermines so-called “distance” services, such as print copy-and-send requests, which become impracticable with overseas alumni. Gaining insight into who your institution’s alumni are and where they are headed after graduation is a crucial preliminary step. Armed with that information, the creation of new programs and tweaking of the old can be better accomplished.

What Can We Offer Today’s Alumni? The short answer: a ton. The slightly longer answer: our resources, expertise, and time. Even the most seasoned attorney will, on occasion, encounter a research challenge that could be resolved or aided by a competent librarian. In addition to the research expertise of the librarians, academic law libraries are accumulators of unique material. We have specialty resources in our collections to which alumni’s access may otherwise be limited or nonexistent. Finally, we have the time, duty, and opportunity to assist alumni throughout their careers, for the benefit of the individuals and the institution as a whole.

Having identified what we can offer, let’s explore a few general strategies that can be implemented to enhance services for alumni.

Know Where They Go Closely related to knowing your alumni, keeping current on the jurisdictions, practice areas, and post-graduation employment of your alums is essential. Use this knowledge to fine-tune services and collection-development strategies accordingly. Selecting materials that can be shared with alumni and that are relevant to their practice areas and jurisdictions bolsters the library’s ability to serve this demographic.

Develop Transitional Programs Too often, the development of practical skills in law school is given short shrift. Transitional programs can help impart research competencies when in-class instruction isn’t feasible. At Indiana University, the law library has for many years offered the “Jumpstart” program, optional small group sessions with librarians designed to prepare students for conducting research in the course of their employment, both during the summer months and after graduation. These meetings highlight the resources available to students and alumni at the law library, including specifics about the collection and an overview of our online research guides. Each session concludes by giving them contact information for the law library’s reference desk and letting them know that the librarians remain a resource even after they finish law school. These consultations have been popular with third-year law students, many of whom we hear from again as they embark on their legal careers.

Invest in Products Designed for the Benefit of Alumni Earlier this year, we purchased HeinOnline’s Alumni Access to its Law Journal Library. The alumni response to this new service has been outstanding—interest is high, and expressions of gratitude are plentiful. The recent integration of Fastcase’s case law content into the database has further boosted the value of this subscription. As a welcome byproduct, this acquisition has led to an uptick in the demand for, and increased awareness of, other library services and resources.

Given the economics of legal publishing, it seems unlikely that BWEXIS will be inclined to offer affordable alumni subscriptions to law school libraries; however, small and medium-sized vendors may be amenable to developing these kinds of products in the future. Hopefully, the success and buzz generated by HeinOnline’s entry into this market will inspire other publishers to follow suit. As librarians, we can assist in the effort by advocating for the creation and affordability of these kinds of products, encouraging the development of open-source materials, and creating our own in-house resources.

Leverage Open-Source Resources Maintaining a thorough and fluid knowledge of open-access resources, such as the Hathi Trust, RECAP, and CourtListener, can improve our services to alumni. Free legal resources act as no-cost expanders to the library’s holdings. Moreover, the majority of alumni don’t have the time to keep abreast of developments in legal information; by sharing our knowledge, we can assist by directing them to previously unknown resources.

Promote Services Often and in the Proper Channels Once acquired, proper promotion of alumni services is paramount. Ergo, Indiana University’s School of Law alumni magazine, has been an ideal advertising spot for our HeinOnline Alumni Access service. After each issue, we receive dozens of requests from alumni on how to gain access and a steady stream of appreciative emails. A digital sign in the library is used to advertise the service to students before they even leave the building as graduates, and, after, our social media presence helps maintain these connections and publicize new services.

Give Them a Special Place It is a small thing, but the gesture of carving out a space to highlight services for alumni goes a long way. Indiana University’s law library, like many other academic law libraries, has created a subpage on its website to emphasize services specifically for alumni. Unquestionably, alumni who are remembered and feel appreciated are more engaged in the life of the law school after graduation.

Collaborate with Other Law School Departments Other departments within the law school deal closely with alumni as part of their core functions, including alumni services, career services, and development offices. Increase dialog and communication between the law library and these units to ensure that these departments know what services and resources the law library can offer to them and to alumni. The law library’s resources typically include legal directories and other materials associated with professional development, including job searching and career development guidance, which are invaluable to these groups.

Create Professional Networks to Provide Better Service Establish solid working relationships with law firm librarians, government librarians, and your colleagues at other institutions. A network of librarians is beneficial to all patrons, including our graduates. Join organizations with listservs to allow you to crowdsource requests for particularly obscure or difficult-to-find material. Consider entering into reciprocal agreements, whether formal or informal, with libraries in other locales. In addition to resource sharing, these arrangements give geographically distant alumni a comparable substitute for their alma mater in their location. Along these lines, be willing to pick up a phone or to pen an email to another law library on behalf of an alum. Often, proactive librarians can open doors for alumni at these facilities that would otherwise remain shut.