Rethinking Bibliographic Services – The University of California Libraries Asks How They Can Provide Better End-User Services Through Bibliographic Processing

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Recommended Citation
The University of California Libraries asks how they can provide better end-user services through bibliographic processing.
An outgrowth of the AALL Special Committee on Fostering Legal Research, Teaching Legal Research is a new AALL Spectrum column. It is one of several initiatives in motion to reposition the topic of teaching legal research in the forefront of all law librarians’ experiences. Other initiatives will include a more prominent presence within the AALL Web site and programs at future AALL Annual Meetings.

The column is designed to appear four times a year and will cover news about all aspects of teaching legal research across all types of law libraries, whether it is news about what the bibliographic environment may look like or actual hands-on games to use in a classroom. The first four articles this year will cover the topic in the academic, judicial, and law firm environments, reflecting the places where we work.

If you are interested in contributing to this column, please contact Peggy Martin at pmartin@stblaw.com.

One year ago this month, the University of California Bibliographic Services Task Force (BSTF) released its final report, Rethinking How We Provide Bibliographic Services for the University of California. Immediately following the publication of the report, a flood of bloggers discussed the contents, and members of the BSTF found themselves asked to give interviews and make appearances at conferences and library schools.

After this initial rush for comments from the authors of the report subsided, the UC campuses and entities concerned were asked to discuss the report and respond to it. Those responses have now been assembled, and, after a review of the original report, a summary of the results follows. How the university librarians will implement the recommendations made by the BSTF has not been decided yet, but the actions taken will have a lasting effect on one of the largest library systems in the world and its patrons.

Defining the Problems that Need to be Solved

The first charge given to the five members of the BSTF by the Systemwide Operations and Planning Advisory Group (SOPAG) was to inventory all of the end-user services supported by the bibliographic processing data and identify the “middleware, workflow, and processes involved in exchanging data between silos of bibliographic information supporting these services.”

Once the inventory was complete, the BSTF was to “clearly articulate the problem(s) that need to be solved.” In perhaps what are the most often quoted sentences in the entire report, the BSTF not only clearly stated the overarching problem but also the major hurdle for its libraries today, and it did so with admirable frankness: “Our users expect simplicity and immediate reward, and Amazon, Google, and iTunes are the standards against which we are judged … Users want what the library has to offer, without having to come to the library to get it.”

Following the first part of the charge, four more points were outlined to the BSTF asking it to “[d]evelop a vision and design principles for a new bibliographic service environment” and “analyze the opportunities to pursue solutions” while offering its “recommendations on which opportunities should be pursued as high priorities.” The final report divided the BSTF’s core recommendations into four categories:

1. Enhancing search and retrieval
2. Re-architecting the OPAC
3. Adopting new cataloging practices
4. Supporting continuous improvement

Contained in those four categories are 15 major headings and more than 30 specific sub-recommendations for the UC system, stated by the BSTF as plainly as the above-mentioned problems. For example, Recommendation 1.1b says, “Provide an I-want-this button that is present when the context warrants, with the goal of always offering a fulfillment option. No dead ends. Give the user an option to specify turnaround time; work behind the scenes to fulfill as well as we can.”

Comments from all UC Campuses

Two months after the publication of the report, the chair of SOPAG issued an invitation for groups from all the UC campuses to offer comments that would then be used to inform the discussion with the university librarians regarding which recommendations should receive priority. SOPAG asked that the responses be framed around six questions, (simplified here):

(1) Which three to five of these major 15 headings do you think are the most important for UC to address?
(2) For each of the three to five major headings selected above, which of the sub-recommendations do you think should be given the highest priority; that is, which do you think UC should address first and why?
(3) Section II.1 recommends creating a single public catalog interface for all of UC … If a decision is made to pursue this recommendation, which of the two options that the task force analyzed would you recommend and why?
(4) Section III.1 recommends re-architecting cataloging workflow to view UC cataloging as a single enterprise … If a decision is made to pursue this recommendation, which of the three organization options that the task force analyzed would you recommend, and why? … Which of the three architecture options that the task force analyzed would you recommend and why?
(5) Are there any other comments or suggestions you have with regard to the next steps that should be taken in following up on the recommendations of the report?
(6) Is there anything else you think UC should be doing in pursuit of improving bibliographic services?

Responses came from a total of 18 groups that included the Librarians Association of UC, All Campus Groups, and each campus library. An analysis of the feedback is contained in a 36-page report by SOPAG, released in April 2006, and the full text of all responses can be found on the SOPAG Web site.

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MAIL announces a new photo contest winner, whose submission beautifully celebrated the memory of summer. Piper Walters’ photo (see page two) captures the essence of summer fun in the land of 10,000 lakes. To learn more about the photo contest, visit the MAIL newsletter, available online at www.aallnet.org/chapter/mall/news332.pdf.

NOCALL Participates in SIMS Career Event, Member Publishes Article
On March 15, the Northern California Association of Law Libraries’ (NOCALL) Academic Relations Committee co-hosted a catered career event at the University of California Berkeley School of Information Management Systems (SIMS). Joining with academic, special, and medical librarians, committee chair Cynthia Papermaster, law librarian at Gibson Dunn Crutcher, and California Attorney General’s Office Supervising Librarian Mark Mackler participated in a speed networking session where students rotated from librarian to librarian to do informational interviews and find out about library careers. This packed event introduced many SIMS students to the working world of law librarianship. The committee hopes that at least some of them will join the field as new law librarians.


NOCALL participated in the second annual Professional Legal Management Week (PLMW), which was held this year on October 2-6. NOCALL and other local chapters of national legal organizations sponsored social events where attendees networked and learned from fellow legal professionals. This year there were four concurrent social events held in the San Francisco Bay Area: Palo Alto, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Walnut Creek.

SCALL Planning 35th Annual Institute
Jim Senter, vice president/president-elect of the Southern California Association of Law Libraries (SCALL), and the SCALL Institute Committee are busy planning SCALL’s 35th Annual Institute, to be held March 15-17, 2007, in San Diego. The institute will focus on meeting global information needs. Check out SCALL’s new blog for more details: http://scall2007.blogspot.com.

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Results of the Questionnaire
The results of the first four specific questions showed definite consensus among the librarians. With regard to the first question, (Which of the 15 major headings would be most important for UC to address?), six of the 15 major headings appeared most often in the top five: provide users with direct access to items, offer better navigation of large sets of search results, deliver bibliographic services where the users are, create a single catalog interface for all of UC, support searching across the entire bibliographic information space, and re-architect the cataloging workflow.

Of the 30 or so subheadings (question two), the highest priority was placed on having a logical, default choice appear when a patron searches for an item using UC eLinks (the UC customized version of SFX, a product of Ex Libris that links from an article or book citation to the full online content of the item or helps the patron initiate a loan of the item), echoing the BSTF’s statement in favor of “no dead ends.”

All of the responses indicated that a single catalog interface was a good thing (question three), although there was no consensus as to how to implement this. Most responders were in favor of coordinating cataloging across the entire system, but had strong reservations about physically locating cataloging to one or two centers within UC.

With the views of the libraries and librarians of UC accounted for, SOPAG is preparing a report and recommendations for the university librarians to consider. Whatever decision is made by the university librarians regarding the next steps to redesign library services for patrons, the library staff is enthusiastic about taking action now and avoiding a conservative approach. As one comment from UC Irvine put it: “Build it, try it, improve it.”

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For Further Exploration

