Legal Information Literacy Standards for Law Students: New England Working Group

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In October 2009, ABLL held a meeting at which members articulated a number of concerns about new associate research skills. Inspired by the list of top ten concerns developed at that meeting and AALL’s work on information literacy standards for law students, Suffolk Law School librarians Betsy McKenzie and Susan Vaughn sent a general call to the ABLL and LLNE lists in early 2010 looking for librarians interested in developing a training program to address those concerns while addressing the AALL information literacy standards. The initial call drew 26 New England law librarians from firms, law schools and the federal government.

A spirited discussion at the initial meeting in February focused on the standards and what they might look like. Attendees called for standards that would be clear, concise, and possibly tailored for different groups such as providing a short version for law students and partners and a longer version for law librarians and other interested parties. A conversation on “prepare for summer” and “research certification” programs at law schools suggested that while many law schools have offered such programs, they have mostly met with limited success due to internal constraints and often a lack of interest from students. A clear exception was Boston University’s Certificate in Research Skills for Practice program, which succeeded in attracting close to 100 students this past spring (see sidebar). It was agreed that in addition to drafting standards, members of the group would develop a certification program that could be offered at different schools and marketed to both law students and hiring partners or committees at the firms. Volunteers were requested for two committees: a Standards Committee that would review pertinent materials and draft proposed standards and a Certification Program Committee that would design the certification program based on these standards. Both committees include members from law school and law firm libraries.

In July, both the Standards and Certification Committee members met to discuss next steps. The Standards Committee developed a timeline for a first draft of the standards, and brainstormed plans for adoptions by firms, and how to increase awareness of the program. They are busy at work now preparing this initial draft. The Certification Committee decided that it would be helpful in devising a program to have a baseline understanding of what research training local law schools currently offer. To that end, this committee drafted a short survey for law librarians to determine what local academic law libraries are currently offering, what already works, and how a certification program might work within existing programs. A similar survey is being considered for law firm librarians to gauge wider interest in the certification program and topics that might be of most value. The Certification Committee is planning on unveiling the program by fall 2011.

A wiki for the working group and its committees, http://legalinformationliteracystandards.pbworks.com/, contains the documents, meeting notes, information about the committees and its members, and a nascent bibliography. If you are interested in joining this wiki or participating in any way, no matter how small, with this initiative feel free to contact Susan Vaughn at svaughn@suffolk.edu.