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Library-supported portfolio pieces for law school students and graduates

Marie Stefanini Newman and Taryn L. Rucinski

“Publish, publish, publish!” is a piece of advice commonly offered to students by career services departments in law schools across the country. Student publications typically take the form of law review or bar journal articles or perhaps competition submissions; however, with the advent of accessible Web 2.0 technologies, publishing has evolved to encompass all sorts of content, styles, lengths, and audiences.

While many law schools have experimented ad hoc with these options, this past year Pace Law School librarians took the bull by the horns and began to expand the concept of the law student portfolio by aggressively exploring what the library can offer to students and recent graduates to assist them with developing portfolios in support of their job searches.

The Pace Law Library approach has been mostly electronic in nature and incorporates into Pace’s advanced legal research courses portfolio pieces such as student-authored LibGuides, blog posts, and bar journal articles. Moreover, student notes that satisfy the school’s Upper-Level Writing Requirement are being given greater exposure by posting them to the school’s Digital Commons.

The idea was to give students the opportunity to grow their professional portfolios and to increase student publications by taking advantage of existing law school resources and infrastructure. While the benefits of this shift are still being fully realized, tangible results can already be seen.

Student LibGuides

The Pace Law Library was an enthusiastic adopter of Springshare’s LibGuides platform for its online research guides, and the reference librarians have made extensive use of the software to create guides that support the curriculum. Traditionally, the work product for the three-credit Advanced Legal Research course was a written research guide or pathfinder, but this assignment began to seem somewhat irrelevant to the needs of the students. It was time for a change. Brainstorming sessions with the reference librarians and review of similar capstone assignments generated by students at law schools, including Georgia State University College of Law, Creighton Law School, and University of Washington School of Law, led to a change in the work product for the course. Online research guides would better meet the course’s pedagogical goals and more fully engage law students of the Millennial generation. This change was implemented during the fall 2012 semester and has proven to be a success.

Once students finalize their topics at the beginning of the semester, they turn in a list of 20 relevant online sources with their URLs; this list is graded, and students get feedback during individual meetings with the instructor. Students immediately put the list of sources into service during the LibGuide instruction class and are able to begin building their guides with the sources they identified earlier. Learning how to locate, evaluate, and use online sources of legal and non-legal information is a skill that will stand students in good stead when they are practicing attorneys.

It quickly became apparent that devoting one class to LibGuides instruction was not enough for most students. Anxious students besieged the reference librarians for help with their...
The final requirement for the course is a brief paper (six to eight pages) in which students discuss preferred approaches for conducting research on their topics; it serves as an opportunity for the students to sum up and reflect on the semester’s work.

To date, Pace has five student LibGuides that are publically available on topics ranging from the Alien Tort Statute to the Truth in Lending Act (libraryguides.law.pace.edu/profile.php?uid=68191). In addition, 15 guides are privately published on topics including Securities Arbitration, Dodd-Frank, and New York Landlord Tenant Law. When analyzing the statistics for these sites, 13 of the 20 guides had hits in the months after students completed the class. Particularly with the private guides (eight of 20), which are excluded from search engine results, these statistics seem to indicate that students are providing their guide URLs to prospective employers. This pattern is anecdotally supported by exit surveys conducted with students. While a formalized “discard” schedule for student guides has not been adopted, the library hopes to keep them active for at least three years after publication. This may require some work on the part of the librarians if the students opt not to update their guides themselves or must include a disclaimer indicating that the guides are not being updated.

Blog Posts and Bar Journal Articles
As part of Advanced Legal Research for Environmental Skills, students were provided with two opportunities to enhance their résumés: a blog post and a bar journal article. Students were first assigned to draft a short blog post (approximately 250 to 500 words) featuring an online environmental resource. Blog posts were chosen because they are now a frequent medium for law firms to publicize their work and services. Each post discussed the scope and value of the information provided, how best to navigate the resource, and/or a discussion of its important features or datasets. Six blog posts were generated from the class and posted to the external library blog Pace Environmental Notes, paceenvironmentalnotes.blogspot.com, spotlighting such unique resources as the USEPA’s WebtoolSurvey and the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. A review of the metrics for these posts shows that each was viewed between 29 and 77 times by readers over a six-month time frame after the class ended. These statistics suggest that the students have included their blog posts on their résumés.

In lieu of a traditional research paper, students were asked to submit a final paper suitable for publication in a bar journal. A bar journal format was selected to expose students to this common type of professional publication. These informal articles, which were assigned as capstone assignments for Advanced Legal Research for Environmental Skills and New York Practice, were designed to provide practitioners with short pathfinders on discrete issues of New York and environmental law. Students initially struggled with the format—eight to 12 pages with footnotes—but later adapted after examples were provided. To date, one student paper has been published with two others pending publication (digitalcommons.pace.edu/lawstudents/15).

Digital Commons
In 2006, the Pace Law Library enthusiastically embraced the Bepress Digital Commons, a hosted electronic digital repository for scholarship that had been adopted earlier by the university. The law library organized a separate collection for Faculty Scholarship (digitalcommons.pace.edu/law). Shortly thereafter, in a massive project headed by Head of Reference Services Cynthia Pittson, the Pace Law Library uploaded all of the school’s student-edited law reviews into separate collections on Bepress. To help highlight student scholarship, the Digital Commons Library at the law school has been expanded to include collections for Dissertations and Theses and Student Publications (more than 200 publications). The library is also engaged in the creation of a new Digital Commons Library that will include papers that fulfill the Upper-Level Writing Requirement.●