A Modern Multimedia Librarian

Philip Berwick makes the compilation of legal knowledge accessible.

A scholar from the University of Chicago recently called librarians at the Washington University School of Law for assistance that his university could not provide. He needed the first American edition of Blackstone’s Commentaries, imprinted with an alphabetical subscription list.

“We were able to make legible photocopies of the subscription list because our copy is in such great shape,” says Philip Berwick, associate dean for information resources for the School of Law. He noted that the first name on the subscription list is John Adams.

Requests like this are all in a day’s work for Berwick and his proficient staff. The Department of Information Resources provides an array of services beyond those of the traditional law library: providing computer training and support; teaching students techniques for legal research; overseeing the School’s Web site; producing live Webcasts of law school conferences; and cataloging rare law texts in a rapidly growing rare book collection.

Libraries have been a central part of Berwick’s life for nearly 30 years. He even met his wife, attorney Carol Fichtelman, in a law library.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1973, Berwick immediately went to work at the Biddle Law Library as a stack maintenance assistant. He then attended law school at the University of Toledo College of Law, working in its law library as the evening circulation clerk. By the time he graduated in 1978, Berwick had decided to combine law and library science. For the next year, he continued his 4 p.m.-to-midnight shift in the library, while commuting 60 miles each way to earn his master’s degree in library science from the University of Michigan.

Berwick has served on the staffs at the Toledo College of Law, the Library of Congress, Georgetown University Law Center, and George Mason University School of Law. In 1996 when he joined Washington University as associate dean for information resources, three services were consolidated: multimedia services, computing resources, and library services. “At that time, it was uncommon for all these services to be consolidated in one department,” Berwick notes.

Today, Berwick supervises 26 staff members and nearly 90 undergraduates during the academic year. As technologies change, he and his staff keep pace by continually upgrading services. In 2002, for instance, Information Services helped develop virtual interviews that allow law firms in another city to interview students in real time. “We’ve just had our first success: A New Orleans firm hired a student based on an initial video interview,” says Berwick.

Berwick is also editor of Trends in Law Library Management and Technology, a magazine for law librarians. And he teaches both Legal Research and Writing and Advanced Legal Research.

“I’ve been in a law library nearly every day since 1973, and I still love walking around in the morning, checking on all the departments.”

Philip Berwick

by Jeanne Erdmann