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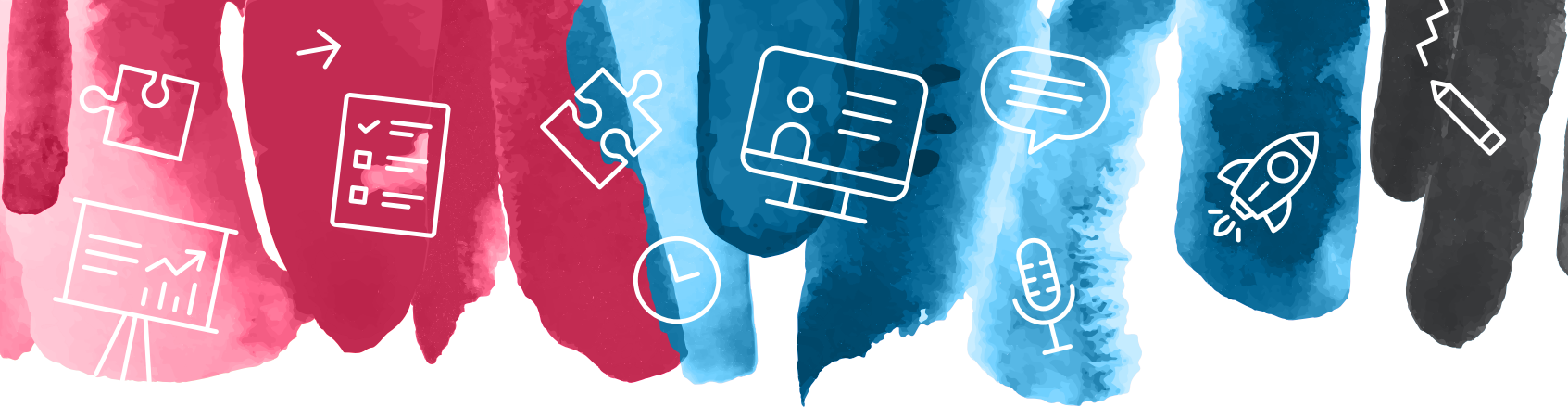
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HOW ACADEMIC LAW LIBRARIAN FELLOWSHIP BENEFIT PARTICIPANTS & SPONSORING



A closer look at the different types of fellowship programs, considerations for establishing them, and how they can jump-start careers and improve the profession.

BY AAMIR S. ABDULLAH & CODY B. JAMES

Today, in the formative years of the twenty-first century, law library fellowships are as important as ever. Academic law libraries understand the benefits fellowships provide to both the participants and the institutions themselves. Conversely, participants and would-be fellows understand the benefits that such positions can afford their future careers.

Both of this article's authors were fellows at the William A. Wise Law Library at Colorado Law School. After completing their fellowships, the authors believe that fellowships have much to offer. This article will delve into the types of fellowships available, some considerations for establishing a fellowship, and the benefits that fellowships provide for the institution as well as the fellow.



report and data collected by the authors, there are between nine and 13 fellowships offered by academic law libraries in the United States. The *2019 AALL State of the Profession* report noted 13 fellowships, the *2021 AALL State of the Profession* report noted nine, and our independent research found 12 fellowship programs (as of 2022). The discrepancy in numbers can possibly be attributed to differing definitions of fellowships and the different years that the information was reported.

Though these 12 fellowship programs vary greatly in their length and structure, they can be broken down into the following three categories: full-year fellowships, short-term fellowships, and school-based fellowships.

Full-Year Fellowships

As the name implies, full-year fellowships last for a minimum of one year. Some of these fellowships also provide the option to renew the fellowship for an additional year or two. These fellows are full-time employees at their respective universities, and they work on tasks such as reference, outreach, teaching assistance, and special projects. These programs are generally open to applicants with a JD or a MLIS.

Some of the current law libraries that offer full-year fellowships are the [University of Colorado Law Library](#), the [University of New Mexico Law Library](#), [Cornell's Law Library](#), and [Emory University's Law Library](#). The Cornell Law Library fellowship program is also a diversity fellowship granting new law librarians from underrepresented groups the opportunity to gain experience within the profession.

Short-Term Fellowships

Short-term fellowships range in length from six weeks to a full semester. During the fellowship, the fellows work full-time and are compensated with a stipend. Fellows learn about the profession, practice applying practical skills, and complete projects for the library, as needed. Like their full-year counterparts, short-term fellowships are open to applicants with a JD or a MLIS.

The [University of Chicago Law Library](#), [Stanford Law Library](#), and the [American Association of Law Libraries \(AALL\)](#) are some of the organizations that currently offer short-term fellowships. AALL's [George A. Strait Minority Scholarship & Fellowship](#) can be applied to multiple different institutions, including law firm libraries and government law libraries. It also promotes greater diversity in the profession by awarding the fellowship to outstanding applicants from underrepresented groups.

School-Based Fellowships

School-based fellowships occur when the law library and the library school are on the same campus and

PROGRAMS

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What is a Fellowship?

Generally, a fellowship is a paid job opportunity in an academic environment that lasts anywhere from a couple of months to a year and focuses on the professional development of the fellow. Fellowships share many similarities with internships; both are designed for new members in the profession and focus on professional development. Still, there are key differences. Namely, fellowships tend to last longer than internships and fellowships provide some type of monetary compensation. This compensation can take the form of a stipend, tuition discount, or salary.

Fellowships in Academic Law Libraries

The number of fellowships varies from year to year. Based on data from the *AALL State of the Profession*

At times, the fellowship can be viewed as a “finishing school.” By the time the fellow leaves the institution, they are ready to hit the ground running in their first job. That is to say, the fellow will not need to be trained in the general framework of law librarianship.

work in conjunction with one another. Unlike the other programs, school-based fellowships require fellows to be currently enrolled in the MLIS program at the same campus as the law library. These positions are part time, 15-20 hours a week, with a stipend or hourly pay, as well as other benefits such as tuition discounts. Though the programs are part time, these fellowships tend to last the full two years of the student’s time in the library program. Like the other fellowships, these fellows gain experience in a variety of areas within law librarianship. Additionally, some programs offer specialized law librarian classes for their fellows to take.

In conjunction with their respective library schools, the [University of Arizona Law Library](#), the [University of Texas at Austin Law Library](#), and the [University of North Carolina Law Library](#) provide school-based fellowship programs.

Three Considerations for Establishing a Fellowship Program

- 1. BUDGET** - What kind of resources does the library have available for this fellowship? For a full-year fellowship, it’s the equivalent of creating a new full-time position. On the other hand, a short-term fellowship is significantly less expensive. If the library is looking at establishing a school-based fellowship, look to see if the university can provide tuition reduction for the fellows.
- 2. LOCATION** - Think about the spaces that the library has available for the fellow. Is there a space for the fellow to work, or will a space need to be created? More fundamentally, decide if the fellowship will be in-person or fully remote. Relocating for a temporary job, whether that be for a full year or for six weeks, can be costly for a fellow. A fully remote fellowship eliminates the cost barrier of relocating, which might attract a wider and more diverse application pool.
- 3. DEVELOPMENT** - Assess the resources available within the library for the development of the fellow. Create an outline of the envisioned weekly duties that the fellow will perform. This does not

need to be extremely detailed, but it can help give the library and the fellow a clear vision of the goals and expectations of the fellowship. Also, effective professional development of the fellow takes time and work. Since fellows change every year, decide if the library has the available time to effectively train new fellows on a yearly basis.

Benefits of a Fellowship Program

As can be observed from the descriptions above, fellowships come in all shapes and sizes. However, the ultimate outcome is the same—fellowships rock! These benefits are discussed more in-depth below.

- **THE LAW LIBRARY PERSPECTIVE.** Law libraries undeniably benefit from fellowships. Benefits include an infusion of new ideas and staying up to date with current trends within the profession.
- **BRILLIANT IDEAS.** Law libraries are filled with books, technology, and professionals thirsty to be of service. These professionals have put in the time to learn the ins and outs of their institutions, the materials that most of their core patrons will utilize, and how to best engage with their respective law schools. However, time continues to march on. Faculty continues to retire, relocate, and the expectations of the faculty body ebb and flow. Students will continue to adapt to the rigors of law school, the world, and attempt to meet the expectations of their ever-varied faculty. As with any job, law librarians fall victim to remaining stagnant, even with the perpetual change. After all, why mess with what has worked in the past?
Fellows, on the other hand, bring with them an implicit understanding of the immediate present. They are transitioning into the profession from some other field, and they are most likely currently in, or just graduating from, an MLIS program. They are earnestly trying to apply the lessons learned in school to their new role.
- **MOVING THE NEEDLE TOWARD THE FUTURE.** The ideas and hopes presented by the fellow are an amalgamation of their real-world experience as a law library end-user, the classes and training they

received during their MLIS program, and their genuine interest in the field. After all, most of us working in an academic law library joined the profession after working in other institutions—public libraries, a law firm, etc.

This genuine interest in law librarianship is not so much learned as it is fostered. Yes, academic law librarians spend hours upon hours on college campuses. But we are working. Fellows spend hours upon hours in classes, reading about the profession, and filling their minds with the hopes and ideas of what academic law librarianship must be like. Most current professionals are fortunate enough to have membership in AALL, where they can stay abreast of the latest trends, learn about new and exciting advances within the field, and connect with others. However, the fellow only has experience with the theoretical aspects of the field—learning current trends, gaining hands-on experience with current tools in the field, and learning about the library of tomorrow. Together, both the experienced professional and the novice can make a dent in the institutionalized inertia present in any organization.

- **FELLOW'S PERSPECTIVE.** As noted above, both authors participated in the William A. Wise Law Library fellowship program at Colorado Law. From personal experience, we can say that fellowships are a wonderful way to dip one's toes into the profession. Participation has had a considerable impact on each of our careers.

With Great Knowledge Comes Great Responsibility

Arguably the most important aspect of the fellowship is the transfer of law library practical skills from one generation to the next. The fellowship provides would-be law librarians with the ability to learn from the tried-and-true professionals within the field. In exchange for the fellow's influx of new and trendy ideas, the law library imparts the summation of that institution's knowledge. There are two reasons why providing practical skills training is important.

First, the fellow learns the ins and outs of law librarianship. Depending on how the fellowship is set up, the fellow has the potential to learn about the technical service and public service side of the organization. Alternatively, it allows the fellow direct contact with the institution to make connections. Ultimately, it is this placement that encourages the fellow to learn what they would like to do once they commit to the field. Just as importantly, this hands-on experience is invaluable when the fellow is interviewing for their first librarian position after the fellowship.

Secondly, the law library prepares the fellow for success within the profession. At times, the fellowship can be viewed as a "finishing school." By the

time the fellow leaves the institution, they are ready to hit the ground running in their first job. That is to say, the fellow will not need to be trained in the general framework of law librarianship. Sure, the specifics of the institution need to be provided, but everything else should already be crystal clear.

Parting Thoughts

It should be clear from the information above that fellowships have a beneficial impact on all participants. It should also be acknowledged that each academic law library has different wants and needs, as well as a different ability to provide exceptional service to their patrons. Therefore, the thought of implementing a fellowship may be daunting. But, as noted above, fellowships may take multiple forms and can be crafted to fit the specific needs of each individual law library.

The profession would be remiss to not at least consider the option of providing a fellowship program. This article is meant to help start the conversation for establishing a fellowship at your own library and serve as a starting point for individuals who are looking to enter the profession. As such, please feel free to reach out to the authors of this article, your peers, or just drop a cold email or call to someone at an organization that has implemented a fellowship program you think would benefit your institution. ■

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