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Practicing Reference . . .

Everyday Research*

Mary Whisner**

Law students and lawyers, like the rest of us, need to find information for their everyday lives. Ms. Whisner outlines ways that law students can use research to help them find jobs or decide what type of legal career they want to pursue.

¶1 Law students and lawyers, like the rest of us, need to find information for their everyday lives. Although research classes focus on helping them develop the skills to write memos, briefs, and seminar papers, their everyday research can also benefit from instruction—or at least a few tips. I like to remind students that research is not just for class or work assignments: it can make their lives better. I'm speaking lightly when I make that claim but, really, wouldn't finding good information about potential employers or career paths make a student's life at least a little better?

¶2 I was thinking about law students' need to research career information—their most pressing everyday research need—when I came across a research project on my own campus. Project Information Literacy¹ is studying the research habits of college students at colleges and universities across the United States, and the project's latest paper is about how college students conduct everyday life research.² This is just the topic I wanted to write about, looking at a population that's only a few years behind law students.

¶3 The undergraduates interviewed discussed a number of information needs unrelated to class: "Could a recent tick bite cause Lyme disease? What news is being reported in the hometown newspaper? What does a diagnosis of breast cancer mean for the patient? What is the starting salary for civil engineers? What are the values of a certain religious group?"³

¶4 Some everyday questions had big consequences—for instance, the purchase of an expensive product. Or, as one student explained, the preparation of food: "If you're just writing a paper for class, it reflects on your knowledge, skills, abilities and ethics. If you're curing a ham, the knowledge, skills, ability and discernment

* © Mary Whisner, 2011. I appreciate the help of my regular reader, Nancy Unger.

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1. PROJECT INFORMATION LITERACY, <http://projectinfolit.org> (last updated May 3, 2011).

2. Alison J. Head & Michael B. Eisenberg, *How College Students Use the Web to Conduct Everyday Life Research*, FIRST MONDAY, Apr. 2011, <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3484/2857>.

3. *Id.*

you use actually affect your health and your life. Big difference.”⁴ That student, aware of the importance of the research task, consulted blogs, an online cookbook, and the County Extension Office. Like that student, others also used many different sources—Google and Wikipedia, as we’d expect of this wired generation, but also friends, family, classmates, and instructors (although only fourteen percent used librarians).⁵ Surprisingly (to both the researchers and to me), forty percent of the undergraduates used online research databases, such as JSTOR, EBSCO, or ProQuest, for everyday life research.⁶

¶5 Two-thirds of the undergraduates in the sample reported looking for information about work or career (e.g., job openings, salary ranges) within the last six months.⁷ Since many of the students in the study are early in their education—only forty percent were seniors⁸—I assume that many are not thinking as intensely about their careers as law students do.⁹ We would be likely to see close to a hundred percent of law students looking for something related to jobs and careers in any six-month period.

¶6 Law students have a variety of career-related information needs, almost from the start. What do lawyers do? Do I want to apply for an externship? What kind? What experiences do I want to have? Which judge might be good to work for? Can I find a summer job? What employers hire first-year students? How can I learn more about practice areas? What sort of practice would fit with my interests, skills, and strengths? Is there much difference among big firms? Between big firms and medium firms? What classes should I take to develop the skills needed in the type of practice I plan to pursue? How can I best prepare myself for an in-house job in five or ten years? How can I learn more about the attorneys who will be interviewing me tomorrow? How can I find out about public interest fellowships? How can I make some connections in the city where I want to practice?

¶7 Like the undergraduates in the study, law students are probably heavy users of Google. And why not? If you want to find a law firm’s web site, Google is terrific. It’s even pretty good for more general searches. I tried typing in **career advice law students** and found some helpful material in the first page of results.¹⁰ And it’s easy to try variants, such as **criminal defense careers** or **in-house counsel career path**. In fact, after trying these searches, I think I’ll start encouraging law students to play around with them.

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.* fig.2.

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.* fig.1.

8. *Id.* tbl.1.

9. When I was an undergraduate, I had only vague thoughts about my career—even though in my last year of college I worked at the university’s placement office and was surrounded by people talking about career planning!

10. E.g., *Law Student Resume Basics*, VAULT.COM, <http://www.vault.com/wps/portal/usa/vcm/detail/Career-Advice/Resume-Advice/Law-Student-Resume-Basics?id=4944> (last visited May 5, 2011); Randall Ryder, *Seek Legal Career Advice from Multiple Sources*, LAWYERIST.COM (Mar. 21, 2011), <http://lawyerist.com/seek-legal-career-advice-from-multiple-sources>; Rufus, *Unsolicited Career Advice for Law Students—Not That You’re Going to Listen*, BEYOND THE UNDERGROUND (Sept. 29, 2004), http://www.legalunderground.com/2004/09/unsolicited_car.html.

¶8 Not only can the Google search lead to some worthwhile pages, but those pages in turn can lead to more resources. For instance, searching for **in-house career path** leads to an interview with a successful lawyer on the JD Bliss blog.¹¹ The latest post on the blog is from 2009, but keep browsing posts anyway. The Categories list in the left sidebar links to posts tagged as Attorney Career Success Stories, Career News, and Career Resources—all good possibilities for browsing. And the right sidebar links to dozens of blogs that have more on careers, work-life balance, solo practice, and so on. That one search can be the start of a lot of productive browsing.

¶9 There are few law students who couldn't come up with this sort of basic searching and browsing on their own. The only hurdle would be thinking to search in the first place. Where I think law students can use some pointers is in going beyond this basic search-and-browse approach. I think of the forty percent of undergraduates in the study who used online research databases in their everyday research, and I wonder what portion of law students would say the same. My guess is that a good number of law students use LexisNexis or Westlaw for some career searching, given that they use those systems so frequently and the vendor representatives sometimes train students how to use them for job hunting. I suspect, though, that many of the law students could use even these familiar systems more effectively. My evidence is anecdotal—a conversation with a law student who doesn't know how to find the Martindale-Hubbell files in LexisNexis, or an e-mail message from a career counselor who says that a student asked her how to find graduates from our law school in another city. To help students use the directories on LexisNexis and Westlaw, I created a guide with sample searches.¹²

¶10 Directories on LexisNexis and Westlaw are just a start. There are also free online directories—from bar associations as well as from commercial providers such as Martindale.com, Findlaw.com, Nolo.com, and Avvo.com. For the public service sector, there are searchable organization directories within PSLawNet.¹³

¶11 And then there are news stories about lawyers, firms, cases, and legal developments. Because I use news databases in LexisNexis and Westlaw and those licensed by our university library, I am often surprised at the law students who use only Google News. They are sometimes just as surprised to learn how many news sources are available in our commercial services, with all the accompanying bells and whistles (search features, downloading, and printing options). Within LexisNexis and Westlaw, students can also research firms, attorneys, or organizations by searching for cases, dockets, or jury verdicts. These searches are probably

11. *Interview: Margaret Denton: The In-House Counsel Career Path*, JD BLISS (Oct. 15, 2005), http://www.jdblissblog.com/2005/10/margaret_denton.html.

12. Mary Whisner, *Sample Searches for Networking and Informational Interviews*, <http://lib.law.washington.edu/ref/jobsearches.html> (last updated Oct. 20, 2009). I discussed this sort of search in an earlier column. Mary Whisner, *Little Biographies*, 98 LAW LIBR. J. 427, 428–30, 2006 LAW LIBR. J. 22, ¶¶ 5–9.

13. PSLawNet is available to nearly all law students and lawyers—any student at or graduate of “over 200 American and Canadian law schools.” *About PSLawNet*, PSLawNET, <http://pslawnet.org/aboutpslawnet> (last visited May 5, 2011).

within the skill level of most law students, but the students might not think to try them.

¶12 Library and online resources can also be helpful to students when exploring the bigger picture. To learn more about what lawyers do and care about, a student could skim the state or local bar journal where she hopes to practice. National sources, such as the *ABA Journal* or the *National Law Journal*, would also expose the student to a range of types of practice and legal issues.

¶13 If a student thinks he would like to specialize in some topical area (such as bankruptcy, tax, or criminal law), it might be a good idea to start following a newsletter in that area (say, one of the many from BNA) to keep up with new developments. Another way to learn about a field is to follow one or more blogs by practitioners. One advantage of blogs over newsletters is that the posts are generally very short. Even an overburdened law student can skim a couple of paragraphs here and there. Following newsletters or blogs will help the student decide whether the area really is interesting to him.

¶14 Sometimes outside reading can also keep students' spirits up. I recently talked to two students who said they liked looking at blogs because it connected them, in the midst of first-year required classes, with what they're really interested in—the reason they came to law school.¹⁴

¶15 Reading bar journals, blogs, newsletters, and so on will also help students learn about the profession—either in a subject area or a geographic area (or both). They will be able to recognize names of prominent lawyers. They might be able to impress interviewers by bringing up a cutting-edge issue. And what interviewer wouldn't like to hear a candidate say, "I always enjoy your column in the county bar newsletter"?

¶16 "Research" can (and should) include talking to career coaches, family, friends, classmates, professors, attorneys in the school's mentor program, and others. Online and print research can provide a range of information, but personal conversations are probably the only way to garner subjective, but important, observations such as:

- "A couple of associates I've talked to at firm X say that they don't get much guidance or support there."
- "I've known attorney Y for years and respect her tremendously."
- "Attorney Z is really smart but unorganized. You could learn a lot working with him, but you'd need to work around that—make sure you get him to review your drafts in time to meet court deadlines."
- "Knowing you, I think you might like practice in a smaller city, like Yakima or Bellingham. Let me put you in touch with my friend, Terry, who moved from Seattle to Wenatchee and loves it there."

Even here, our research skills can help. There isn't a database that gets students directly to these pointed observations, but research can help them find some people to talk to about their concerns.

14. Books can also serve this purpose. See Mary Whisner, "Good Reads" in the Law Library?, 93 LAW LIBR. J. 517, 520–22, 2001 LAW LIBR. J. 25 ¶¶ 10–15.

¶17 It's worth noting that learning to research career-related questions is particularly important for students who don't come to law school with extensive professional networks. Every school will have some law students who grew up with lawyers—parents, family friends, neighbors, and so on. They have a head start on networking. But some students not only lack lawyers in the family, they also did not grow up in affluent neighborhoods where they babysat lawyers' children or were in Scout troops led by lawyers. They won't hear law firm gossip or professional advice over Thanksgiving dinner, so learning about the profession in other ways matters more. This is not to say that the more privileged students won't benefit from research: of course they will. If a student's parents are big-firm lawyers and the student wants to be a public defender, for instance, or the student's family is in New York and the student wants to be on the West Coast, then the student needs to do just as much research to develop knowledge and connections.

¶18 Law students need to find a lot of information related to their career development. Like undergraduates, they already have research skills and habits, which most likely involve using the web and personal contacts. But it's likely that their skills are not as good as they could be, and they are missing sources that could help them make important decisions. Beyond a simple Google search (perhaps followed by browsing a site), they could use directories to find people to network with, employers to apply to, and more. They could also use news and legal databases to learn more about employers. And, stepping back a bit, they could follow journals, newsletters, and blogs to learn more about the profession and particular practice areas. Research *can* make their lives better.

