



2016

Why Can't I Just use Lexis or Westlaw? Promoting Lesser Known Legal Research Platforms to Law Students

Theresa K. Tarves

Follow this and additional works at: http://elibrary.law.psu.edu/library_faculty

 Part of the [Legal Education Commons](#), and the [Legal Writing and Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

ALL-SIS Newsletter, 35(3), 3.

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by Penn State Law eLibrary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Library Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Penn State Law eLibrary. For more information, please contact ram6023@psu.edu.

Focus on Outreach

Why Can't I Just Use Westlaw or Lexis?

Promoting Lesser Known Legal Research Platforms to Law Students

by Theresa K. Tarves, H.Laddie Montague, Jr. Law Library, Penn State Law
on behalf of the ALL-SIS Library Marketing & Outreach Committee

Law students learn early on that they must become well-versed in using Westlaw and Lexis in their legal research and writing classes. They spend their entire first year becoming intimately acquainted with these two resources and are convinced that these legal research databases are the be-all and end-all research tools for their legal careers.

What they do not realize is that there are a number of resources available to them outside of Westlaw and Lexis that can be used for legal research and may even be better suited for certain types of research. In fact, many students may ultimately find jobs with organizations that do not subscribe to Westlaw and/or Lexis or they may find that the organization restricts their use of these resources by requiring them to start their research with alternative resources.

However, it can be difficult to convince law students to try new resources outside of Westlaw and Lexis, especially when these two resources seemingly have it all from a law student's perspective. How do we expose law students to lesser known legal research resources so that they can be well-informed researchers who do not become dependent on only a few resources to carry them through their entire legal careers?

Start Them Early

At Penn State Law, we teach a two-credit first-year legal research course, so we have the opportunity to expose our students to other resources during their first semester of law school. However, with a lot to cover over the course of one semester, it is hard to devote the time that we would like to alternative resources since it is still very important for students to learn to use Westlaw and Lexis effectively. It is nearly impossible to impart knowledge on the many resources

It can be difficult to convince law students to try new resources outside of Westlaw and Lexis

that the students could use, so choosing a few resources to highlight is a good start. In my section of the course, I focused on Bloomberg Law (which is still very underutilized by our students), Fastcase and HeinOnline—as well as reputable free resources, like government websites—to expose the students to a few alternatives. I incorporated demos of these resources throughout the course and, whenever

possible, required the students to do in-class exercises using these resources.

I discussed the costs of all of the resources we used and stressed the importance of learning how to use a variety of resources while the students are in law school so that they are prepared to do legal research no matter which resources are available to them in practice. Not surprisingly, students continued to rely on Westlaw and Lexis; however, many students did seem to understand the resource limitations that they may face in practice and were very interested in alternative resources that they can use in the future.

Continue the Exposure

While many law schools have Advanced Legal Research classes where second- and third-year law students are exposed to alternative legal research resources, not all students choose to take this class. Therefore, it is important to continue to expose second- and third-year students to these resources outside of the classroom. The key is determining how to market these resources to the largest proportion of students. Here are a few suggestions that may work in a variety of situations.

- **Database of the month**

One relatively easy way to continue the exposure is to feature on the library website a database of the month, highlighting an alternative database and its

continued from page 3

Focus on Outreach—Promoting Lesser Known Legal Research Platforms

uses for students. The database can be featured on the law library website, Twitter or other social media account, through a monthly workshop that teaches students how to use the database or through other platforms that the law library uses to disseminate information to students. Even better would be finding a way to introduce students to actual use of the database outside of the classroom—for example, by sponsoring a contest requiring students to use the database to complete a research assignment and offering a prize to the winner from each year.

- **Appeal to their interest in law practice**

Many students are very interested in information that will help them when they begin their jobs. By marketing alternative resources as tools that can be used in practice, students may be more likely to

[S]tudents may be more likely to pay attention.

pay attention. At Penn State Law we offer a certificate program in practice-oriented research for second- and third-years, the main focus of which is on the types of research they will do in practice and the resources they can use to do it. This year, we are hoping to provide more student interaction with the resources than we have in previous years, so that the students get a feel for the types of research that they may do in practice and how they can use databases or resources other than Westlaw or Lexis.

- **Connect with faculty**

While this may not reach as many students as the other approaches, letting faculty know that the

library has alternative resources to help them with their work can lead faculty to keep these resources in mind when a student asks the faculty member about research. Many students have sought out alternative resources because they were recommended by faculty members. Most recently, I have had a few students request help with using legal research databases for interview prep, and they have been very impressed with what they can find by using alternative resources. This gave me the chance to recommend resources that the students may not have the opportunity to use in their law school courses.

[S]tudents request help with using legal research databases for interview prep

Westlaw and Lexis are great resources and our students do need to know how to use them. But they will not be able to research everything using one or both of these resources. Teaching students the benefits of using other resources throughout law school will help them to be more well-rounded legal researchers and better prepared for practice. Exposing students early on to alternative resources and continuing to use marketing and outreach strategies to reach the greatest number of students throughout their law school careers is crucial to encouraging students to round out their skills and better equip themselves to conduct real-world legal research after they graduate. 📖

Focus on Outreach is contributed by the ALL-SIS Library Marketing & Outreach Committee. Look for another installment in the Summer issue.

—Ed.