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11-16-2021

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Recommended Citation

Smith Schlinck, Olivia, "Dare to Dream: How Would You Teach 1Ls Legal Research with No Restrictions?" (2021). *Library Staff Online Publications*. 2.
<https://larc.cardozo.yu.edu/staff-online-pubs/2>

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Dare to Dream: How Would You Teach 1Ls Legal Research with No Restrictions?

Posted on [November 16, 2021](#) by [Olivia Smith Schlinck](#)

When I started in my current role as an instructional librarian, I was given space to make the changes I thought necessary to improve an already-changing legal research program. I've made changes – some small, some more major – in both the 1L and upper-level research curriculum, but there is more to do. In particular, I'm not entirely satisfied with how we teach legal research to 1Ls.

This fall semester, we implemented a video-and-practice-exercise instruction model: students watch a prerecorded lecture on a discrete topic (like using secondary sources) then practice applying the skills discussed by completing short exercises as a group. We did this three times throughout the semester, with sessions on secondary sources, case law, and statutory law.

Based on discussions with my colleagues, it does seem that this format of instruction is an improvement. But in interactions at the reference desk, it's clear that many students are still on shaky ground when it comes to research. I've spent this semester struggling with this tension, trying to create some new model that will better prepare them for their legal writing assignments and upcoming summer internships.

I recently met with the director of our legal writing program to discuss more potential changes to 1L research instruction. She asked me: "If you could structure the program however you thought was best, what would you do?"

My first thought was: "a 1- or 2-credit Legal Research class during the first year." But that's not possible and I know that, and so I struggled to come up with an answer. Because there is, of course, a caveat to that question: time and money.

As I am sure is true in most (if not all) law schools, there is no room in the 1L curriculum to add another credit-bearing class. Student participation in non-credit-bearing instruction isn't always productive – inevitably, students prioritize their graded course load over ungraded instruction (even if their legal writing success is bound up in their ability to research well).

If a required research class *could* fit into the 1L curriculum, there is still the problem of money. Adding a new class for hundreds of students would require hiring more instructors – either more librarians or more adjuncts or some combination of the two.

It's a dream world, a change that is incredibly unlikely to happen. At least, not anytime soon. And until we get that required 1L research class, I still needed to figure out a better way to teach our current and immediate-future students.

Then I remembered that some of the best ideas are seeds grown from a more outlandish one. I thought: what if this dream world *was* real? If time and money were no issue, how *would* I structure 1L legal research instruction?

So, I started to brainstorm. Here are some ideas:

- During 1L orientation, law librarians could teach overview sessions about legal information, citation, and research to start the students off on the right foot when it comes to research.
- In the fall semester, 1L research instruction could be an online and asynchronous component of the Legal Writing class. Law librarians would create, implement, and manage online instruction. Successful completion of the online class would be required to pass Legal Writing; perhaps the online class would be graded and worth some percentage of the Legal Writing grade to add incentive.
- All 1Ls could attend a mandatory “intensive” or “bootcamp” training in the winter intersession or after Spring semester finals to learn research skills outside of the already-packed semesters. The program would last a few days and cover basic research skills, taught by librarians.
- All 1Ls could be automatically enrolled in a credit-bearing Legal Research course in the fall semester. It would cover basic research skills like research planning, creating effective searches, locating primary authority (statutes and caselaw), and using secondary sources. This course would be taught by law librarians and be two or three hours weekly so as to slowly introduce the students to research concepts without overwhelming them.
- Research instruction could be a mandatory course in the 1L fall curriculum, and Legal Writing could begin in Spring of 1L and carry through the second year.

Are any of these plausible? Maybe. And I’m sure there are many, many more ways to approach 1L research instruction, outlandish or otherwise. Please comment how your school handles 1L instruction and/or how you wish it would be taught!

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1 Response to *Dare to Dream: How Would You Teach 1Ls Legal Research with No Restrictions?*



[Melanie](#) says:

November 17, 2021 at 4:28 pm

These are great ideas! Some we implement at my institution and they are good. I.e., an Orientation session + three research classes in the Fall that are part of the LRWA class (three classes set aside for Librarians), which include in-class research exercises (online Core Knowledge for Lawyers). We also try to time the classes to relate to their open memo research and fall right before a required research outline is due. In the Spring, we pick up statutory research with them and the LRWA director creates a spring problem based in statutory law. We get the best outcomes when our materials are tied to their writing class and close in time with need. They are still shaky, and we encourage them as much as possible to visit with librarians 1 on 1. We’re thinking of (dreaming big!) offering advanced research classes of 1 or 2 credits in the second and third years, where Librarians have more control of the syllabus and content and students have a better framework and understanding of the law and legal writing so that some of what we tell them has a place to stick. Thanks for your post!

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