

# DEVELOPING ALLStAR

## WITH COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The challenges, successes, and future of the new library research survey instrument.

**BY JAMIE J. BAKER,  
MICHELLE HUDSON &  
JESSICA PANELLA**

**A**LLStAR (Academic Law Libraries: Statistics, Analytics and Reports) assists academic law libraries in leveraging their data to analyze their allocation of resources, capitalize on their strengths, and tell their stories to stakeholders. The ALLStAR Official Survey combines the questions required by the annual surveys distributed to libraries by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), and *U.S. News and World Report*, and it retains legacy American Bar Association (ABA) library questions of interest, making it a convenient place to gather all library metrics and cross-populate to the relevant surveys.

The potential value of having a resource such as ALLStAR to collect law library metrics cannot be overstated. To showcase the value, look no further than the success story of the Texas Tech University School of Law Library. In 2018, Texas Tech was undergoing its ABA site visit. During the visit, the law library was flagged for its fairly dramatic decrease in budget and staffing since undergoing its last ABA site visit in 2011. While preparing to respond to the ABA, law school administrators asked the law library for recommended budget and staffing levels to properly meet the curricular and programming needs of the law school community. The law library turned to ALLStAR to aggregate available data on budgets and staffing at

various law schools to benchmark and create a narrative showing that Texas Tech needed to increase its funding to establish a law library program comparable to its peers. Because of the ability to benchmark the data and create a contextual narrative, the law library was able to increase the collections budget by nearly \$450,000. In addition, the law library was able to hire two staff positions to stay in line with other law libraries of a similar size.

Texas Tech's success story was not without its challenges, particularly when trying to benchmark using incomplete data sources. Many law libraries have input sparse data over the years, so it was essential to run reports across various years and try to piecemeal data into a compelling narrative.

### Successes

The first ALLStAR Official Survey launched in 2017-2018 and was filled out by 110 academic law libraries. The second survey for 2018-2019 includes trend questions, which are narrow, and topical questions that will change each year and rotate every so often, allowing libraries to benchmark specific topics of interest against peer institutions, in addition to the questions required by the major survey organizations. The 2018-2019 trend questions focus on local digitization efforts. The platform is also growing; it will soon be used by AALL's Heads of Cataloging in Large Law Libraries, providing statistics that will be available to all subscribers.

ALLStAR has an engaged advisory board, led by Teresa Miguel-Stearns. Getting an all-volunteer survey instrument created and completed has not been easy. ALLStAR's first project manager, Robert Dugan, was instrumental in the tool's success by aligning and defining major survey questions, creating pre-made reports, how-to documentation, and answering user questions. ALLStAR also boasts an active user community. The first User's Group Meeting took place at the 2019 American Association of Law Libraries

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(AALL) Annual Meeting held in Washington, DC at the recommendation of an ALLStAR participant.

Within the ALLStAR system, there are now dozens of pre-made reports that cover services, institutional repositories, faculty, enrollment, facilities, interlibrary loan (ILL), collections, expenditures, personnel, and more, all of which quickly helps librarians export and compare metrics drawn from years of survey data from all participating academic law libraries. These reports also provide pre-calculated derived ratios, such as collections expenditures per student, seats available per student, librarians per faculty, and many other useful measures.

### Challenges: Current and Upcoming

While the platform has made great inroads since it launched in 2017-2018, it is seen as a work-in-progress that requires substantial community involvement. Counting Opinions was chosen as the survey platform to host ALLStAR, as it hosts major library surveys and has worked extensively with other organizations as a data entry platform. As the law librarian community continues to improve ALLStAR, Counting Opinions has been responsive to the ALLStAR content committee when problems are found, such as calculation errors, and it works swiftly to correct any issues.

One of the biggest challenges is that filling out ALLStAR's data points is laborious, particularly because there are no automatic imports from library systems, so all metrics must be manually entered from a variety of sources

that may be unique to each library. Thankfully, the ALLStAR Content Committee is currently working on a solution involving application programming interfaces that assist with automatic imports. In addition to the labor involved with filling out the survey, many libraries have not had time to create local workflows that they can rely on year after year to ease the pain of manual data entry for the questions, much less share their workflows and innovations with others to support a law library community of assessment. While the ALLStAR Advisory Board answers questions as thoroughly as possible, it is difficult for the board to recommend efficient and accurate data retrieval methods because of all the different ways law libraries store data in their local systems.

Another challenge is trying to capture all of the data from across the various required reports because of the inconsistent reporting schemes being used by constituents. The ALLStAR Advisory Board Comment Committee and ABA subgroup clarified many questions for the 2018-2019 survey to ensure they are consistent with ARL and ACRL. The ALLStAR Official Survey makes every effort to streamline the major surveys, but the questions from *U.S. News*, ARL, ACRL, and the past ABA survey do not ask the same questions in the same way, making some questions impossible to align, and forcing the inclusion of multiple similar questions to ensure accurate data. Until all surveys are aligned, ALLStAR has no choice but to include all of the various ways a question is asked, and

the advisory board continues to work with constituents to develop the most user-friendly ways to present the questions for both accurate and efficient reporting. A great success on this front is that based on a discussion spurred by ALLSTAR reporting, a group of law librarians is currently working with *U.S. News* on recommended questions that should be required of law libraries for law school rankings purposes. This is a tremendous step forward for aligning data points required by *U.S. News* with those that will also be immediately useful to the law library community.

While writing this article, we submitted a question for feedback on the academic law library director listserv. A common thread in the responses was frustration with the completeness of data points in ALLSTAR. Some libraries believe their peers and aspirant schools have not been filling out all of the data fields, rendering the survey information less helpful for benchmarking purposes. As a result, some libraries are questioning the value of the survey and have even stopped participating. ALLSTAR's value as a benchmarking tool depends on law library participation. The survey is only as good as the data it holds.

A few libraries are worried data may be used against them by law school and university administrators. Those in the assessment community know that numbers do not tell the whole story about a library's activities or value. The amount of reference transactions does not articulate the difficulty or ease of patron questions, who is asking them, and the amount of time needed to answer them. The reference collection in ALLSTAR, created by the ALLSTAR Content Committee of law librarians, gathers additional data points to capture information on the time spent answering reference questions and in research consultations. Contextual storytelling is a necessary component of quantitative assessment in higher education, and ALLSTAR helps provide the pieces necessary for this if a broad slice of academic law libraries provides accurate data.

Because of these challenges, more libraries are subscribing than filling out the data. For the 2017-2018 survey, there were 151 subscribers and only 110 filled out all or part of the survey. Nonetheless, ALLSTAR collects and enters publicly available data for libraries and law schools where available. For example, the ARL law library data is mass-uploaded into ALLSTAR each spring as it becomes available from the ARL Statistics website. Relevant ABA data, such as student and faculty size, certain curricular data, and LSAT ranges are mass-uploaded into ALLSTAR as it becomes available on the ABA's Required Disclosures site.

Additionally, for libraries filling out the Employee Questionnaire, there can be staff resistance to filling out the information when they do not see the benefits. Thus, it is important for libraries to share with their colleagues why they collect data and how they use it to benefit the library and law school.

### The Future of ALLSTAR

As ALLSTAR continues to work with its constituents to create a quality survey instrument, it is important to remember the value of this type of resource for libraries' internal decision-making purposes, including: relying on ALLSTAR for data storage and quick retrieval of internal numbers when law school administration has a question; using ALLSTAR for hiring decisions and position changes; utilizing ALLSTAR for data retrieval in preparation for budget hearings and ABA site visits; and using ALLSTAR to compare open library hours when deciding on operation and reference service changes.

So, will ALLSTAR succeed at its goal of building a robust, quality survey instrument and platform? Given the continued budget and staffing challenges facing many law libraries, it's in the community's best interest if ALLSTAR does succeed. Law libraries must forge ahead and continue building a community-supported platform that meets the needs of law librarians who increasingly rely on benchmarking data to make important decisions.

Arguably, the future of the profession relies on it.

To that end, in January 2020, Amanda Karel started as the next project manager. She will continue to oversee the development of ALLSTAR and the ALLSTAR Official Survey and keep seeking to build community involvement as we all work together to create this invaluable resource.

M+B Management + Business

M+O Marketing + Outreach

T+T Teaching + Training

### READ

Jessica C. Panella, Christine Iaconeta, and Teresa M. Miguel-Stearns' article "ALLSTAR Benchmarking: How Collaborating on Collecting and Sharing Data Is a Win-Win," from the November/December 2017 issue of *AALL Spectrum* at [bit.ly/ND17ALLSTAR](http://bit.ly/ND17ALLSTAR).



**JAMIE J. BAKER**  
ASSOCIATE DEAN & LAW  
LIBRARY DIRECTOR  
PROFESSOR OF LAW  
Texas Tech University School of Law  
Lubbock, TX  
[jamie.baker@ttu.edu](mailto:jamie.baker@ttu.edu)

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[michelle.hudson@yale.edu](mailto:michelle.hudson@yale.edu)

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HEAD OF ACCESS &  
ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES  
University of Connecticut School of Law Library  
Hartford, CT  
[jessica.panella@uconn.edu](mailto:jessica.panella@uconn.edu)

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