

Law Library Focused on Technology, Research

New professor helps forge path for student success.

By Annie Flachsbarth, BA '07

Working in a law library was never on Thomas Sneed's radar when in law school. After graduating from the University of Kentucky College of Law, he clerked for the 4th Judicial Circuit of Kentucky. During this time, he also served as the defacto librarian for the county law library, but he eventually moved on to do private practice in real estate. Little did he know that he'd be hitting the books again soon.

Shortly after marrying his wife, Whitney, and moving to Columbus, Ohio, so she could pursue a graduate degree, Sneed found himself reflecting on the future of his career. A law librarianship opening in his area piqued his interest — after all, he had previously worked in a law library and had always been interested in research and academia. He enrolled in Kent State's masters in library sciences program, and soon after took a position with Ohio State's Law Library.

In July 2017, after having obtained a master's of business administration degree and additional library management experience at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, Sneed accepted the law library director role at Washburn University School of Law.

Now, Sneed, also an associate professor in the School of Law, is bringing a wealth of knowledge and fresh ideas to build on the law library's well-established record of excellence.

Adding to the Catalog of Courses

According to Sneed, the first year Legal Analysis, Research, and Writing course is a great way to give students a good taste of legal research, but more knowledge and experience is needed for real-world application. The addition of an advanced legal research class will help to expand and reinforce those skills.

"Studies show that half of the time spent by new attorneys is spent doing legal research," said Sneed. "That's something they're going to need when they get out into practice."

While the library has taught legal research classes in the past, Sneed hopes to make an advanced course a permanent fixture among offerings in the future. At least one advanced legal research class will now be offered per semester, including in the summer, to give the opportunity for students to spend a full semester focused on legal research.

In addition to the commercial databases students have access to while enrolled, Sneed wants these classes to focus on improving students' legal research skills by incorporating what is freely available to the public.

"Commercial databases can be quite expensive for attorneys in practice," said Sneed. "If you can save that cost, and not have to pass it along to your clients or absorb it as a business expense, it's going to help out in the long run."

The Kansas Legal Research course, which started with the spring 2018 semester, is already proving quite popular. The class was full and even had a waitlist, showing considerable interest among students.

Sneed is also looking into other classes that may be needed. A course to help with technological needs may also be added to help students learn about client management systems, how to master Excel and possibly even how to build a website for those going into private practice.

"We realize that technology — not just in a library perspective, but in a practice perspective — is very important," said Sneed.

Updated Space

Sneed also has big plans for continuing the updates that were in the works before he joined Washburn Law. New furniture, along with the reorganization of the physical space and updating study spaces throughout the library are at the top of the list.

The library's entryway is one of the more notable changes. In addition to moving some stacks out of the area to make the area more inviting, they've also added more comfortable seating and tables for study groups.

The entry area is incredibly popular, with students congregating constantly. It's even been the location of a few small receptions — including a scholarship reception and another reception for the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals during a recent visit.

"The Law School doesn't currently have a good space for bigger gatherings, so it's been a good opportunity to show off the



Thomas Sneed, library director and associate professor of law, sits in the new furniture positioned in the front of the Law Library. Photo by Doug Stremel

space and remind people that we're here and available to help," said Sneed.

In the future, Sneed is hoping to find ways to make areas on the second floor more conducive to studying.

"Study spaces are extremely important. At our busiest time around finals, we see about 20 percent of our student body in the library studying at the same time," said Sneed.

A new home in Topeka

Now seven months in, he, his wife, and their three children, Henry, Charlie, and Penelope, are starting to settle in to life in Kansas. They recently purchased a new house and Topeka is already starting to feel like home.

"I remember telling my wife when I was applying, 'That was the nicest group of people,' and 'it just feels more like a home than a lot of other places do,'" said Sneed. "The faculty, students, and staff are all amazingly nice and caring. I've truly found a place I love."

Alumni Opportunities

Big things are happening in the law library and Thomas Sneed, director, made a point to mention all alumni are welcome to visit at any time.

While there, be sure to check out a few things in addition to the updated space, including the cane collection that was once on display in the Kansas room. A new display case will showcase them prominently in the reorganized space.

Also, be sure to check out a display of the Dr. John Davis Jr. collection of Supreme Court justice autographs. The autographs and others can also be found in the Washburn University School of Law digital archives, among other interesting photos, bulletins, directories, and previous editions of the Washburn Law Journal. Those can be found at contentdm.washburnlaw.edu/