

Iowa Law Collections Symposium Article Abstract Submission

6/30/2025

Submitted by Rebecca Kite and Paul McLaughlin of the Joel A. Katz Law Library.

Proposed Article Title: Pro Se Patrons and the Digital Divide: How the Shift to Electronic Resources in Law Libraries Leaves Public Patrons on the Wrong Side of the Gap.

One of the principal functions of academic law libraries open to the public is to allow pro se patrons access to legal materials and reference assistance. As the ABA standards regarding law libraries evolved to allow libraries to utilize more digital resources, many law libraries reduced their print collections. While the shift to digital resources provides libraries with certain advantages, it has negatively impacted pro se patrons. Online versions of publications pro se patrons have traditionally relied on to advance their cases may restrict access to patrons who lack a sufficient connection with a school to qualify for a user account with the platforms that host the publications, effectively barring self-represented patrons from using these materials

As libraries discontinue or reduce their print collections, the issue of patron access to materials becomes more acute as print versions of publications become outdated or are eliminated from library shelves entirely. The shift to online resources also restricts how reference librarians can help their patrons. As more holdings become accessible through online platforms only, librarians are faced with a greater possibility that the materials a pro se patron needs will be available to the students and faculty of their schools, but not to the public patrons who come to them for help. Even if a publication is available for a public patron to access, law librarians then face a variety of challenges in trying to keep their patrons' personal information secure. Restricted access to shrinking resources coupled with increasing privacy concerns with digital materials constitute a potent one-two punch for the self-represented patron.

This article examines various pressures put onto law libraries to shift their collections toward digital resources, how the shift has impacted law library collections, and how the changes in the formats of library holdings have created new challenges, both for pro se patrons in accessing the materials they need and for reference librarians assisting them. This article advocates for law libraries to consider pro se patrons' needs when making collection decisions and offers strategies reference librarians to address access and privacy concerns with self-represented patrons.