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## VOICES ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

# Unmasking AALL's IDEA Special Committee

A closer look at the committee's process for creating AALL's new Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Policy.

BY CLANITRA STEWART NEJDL & RONALD WHEELER

The goal of this column is to describe the process used by the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity Awareness (IDEA) Special Committee, which provided the foundation and resources for AALL to create the new [Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Policy](#). The committee, initially appointed and charged by the 2020 AALL President Emily R. Florio, began meeting in 2020, and started its work with discussions aimed at defining and narrowing the scope of its charge and finding consensus on what we were setting out to accomplish. During this initial stage, our discussions helped us find commonality to understand the points of view within the committee, and to build both understanding and trust within it. These facets were essential given the difficult and often personal nature of our future discussions. If we were to function effectively and proceed in a productive way, we had to have trust. All the committee members brought their passion for equity and inclusion, their desire to do good for our Association, their unflinching honesty, and their respect for difference to their work on the committee. From the very beginning of our work, differences of opinion emerged, yet these differences

never became divisive or problematic due to the members' commitment to respectfulness and professionalism, and their sustained focus on the task at hand.

Quite quickly the laws of group dynamics took hold, and roles emerged for many of our committee members. The roles that emerged and were assumed by members included an organizer, a task master, a jokester, a statistician, a naysayer, and an eternal optimist, among others. Each one played a crucial role in getting us from start to finish in the execution of our charge.

Although each of us brought to the committee our own experiences as legal information professionals and as AALL members, it was quickly apparent that our combined experiences were not enough to generalize or to extrapolate to the entire AALL membership. We needed data about perceived areas needing improvement. That realization led us to author our survey.

## Surveying Members

In determining the first steps for the committee, the committee members agreed that the best place to start was to consider the existing concerns of AALL members about diversity, equity, inclusion, and awareness (DEIA) issues related to both the profession of law

librarianship and to AALL itself. Accordingly, the committee started its work by drafting a 27-question membership survey to gather this information. The survey included questions related to demographics, the ability to meaningfully participate in the profession, the role of allied professionals in the profession, and member education interests and needs. This included questions about structural impediments, workplace support of DEIA, negative professional experiences related to DEIA, and interest in DEIA-related education.

The survey was distributed to AALL members on January 27, 2021, and it remained open through February 12, 2021. A total of 406 survey responses were received. The committee members analyzed the responses with a focus on identifying trends in member responses and determining what actions, if any, could be taken by AALL to address members' concerns. Each member of the committee was involved in interpreting the survey results, which ensured that all member concerns were carefully considered by the committee.

The survey results greatly helped to inform the final recommendations to the AALL Executive Board made by the committee, particularly the open-ended questions that allowed members to express their concerns directly to the committee. The process of analyzing the survey results also allowed the committee to get a sense of trends related to members' DEIA-related concerns.

## Committee Recommendations

The committee made 21 recommendations to the AALL Executive Board focused on four categories:

- Reducing or eliminating potential structural impediments within AALL and AALL-related activities
- Reducing or eliminating potential workplace barriers to meaningful participation in the profession

- Supporting the needs of allied professionals
- Promoting DEIA training and education

### REDUCING POTENTIAL STRUCTURAL IMPEDIMENTS WITHIN AALL AND AALL-RELATED ACTIVITIES

Recommendations under this category focused on DEIA as related to AALL and AALL-sponsored activities. Most notably, the committee recommended that the AALL Executive Board adopt the DEIA policy drafted by the committee. The committee also recommended that AALL improve its member education and awareness related to participation in AALL committees, award juries, and in AALL leadership, as well as education and awareness about the AALL Annual Program proposal process. Further, the committee recommended that AALL improve technology-related and mobility-related accessibility for members with disabilities and that AALL host a series of listening sessions to allow AALL members to share their DEIA-related concerns. Finally, the committee recommended that AALL reduce or eliminate AALL-related activities scheduled on religious days of worship.

### REDUCING WORKPLACE BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN THE PROFESSION

While recognizing that AALL does not have the power to affect the policies of individual law libraries, the committee recommended that AALL develop and promote DEIA-related education opportunities for law library management. It also recommended that AALL increase support for members of marginalized communities within law libraries.

### SUPPORTING THE NEEDS OF ALLIED PROFESSIONALS

Recognizing the needs of allied professionals within law libraries, the committee recommended that AALL create a new membership category.

The committee further recommended that AALL normalize the use of the phrase “allied professionals” in place of the term “paraprofessional.”

### PROMOTING DEIA TRAINING AND EDUCATION

To promote DEIA training and education, the committee created a curated list of DEIA-related training and education, as well as a curated list of DEIA speakers. The committee also recommended that AALL make DEIA-related training mandatory for all AALL-sponsored leadership training, host facilitated discussions and roundtables on DEIA-related training and resources, make DEIA-related trainings and webinars easier to access on AALL eLearning, and require a minimum number of DEIA-related programs at the AALL Annual Meeting.

### Additional Recommendations

In addition to these recommendations, the committee further recommended that AALL add a DEIA domain to the AALL Body of Knowledge. The committee also recommended that the AALL Executive Board direct the Economic Status of Law Librarians Committee to review the issue of pay equity to address DEIA-related disparities in pay.

It must be noted here that interpreting and synthesizing the survey results and then fashioning recommendations from those results were not easy tasks. Indeed, they were the most difficult and time-consuming parts of our committee’s work. Not only did differences in interpretation emerge, but so did basic and fundamental disagreements about the actions that AALL should or should not undertake. These differences were to be expected, yet the grace, professionalism, restraint, kindness, and respect each committee member displayed was both unexpected and inspiring.

### Thoughts on the Future

Despite having completed this committee’s two-year tenure, and despite the recommendations made and the AALL Executive Board having adopted

some of our recommendations, it is unquestionably true that this work must continue. An unfortunate truth of the world that we inhabit is that there will always be forces that serve to divide us from each other, forces that serve to oppress parts of our membership, and forces that serve to obscure our many commonalities while magnifying our few differences. If we hope to foster success in all our members while also maintaining a unified Association, ongoing self-reflection and self-critique coupled with innovative and creative change will be essential. These realities are true for any twenty-first-century professional association. The work toward greater diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility must be constant and unrelenting if we are to successfully serve the needs of the society in which we live. There has never been a greater need for the skills and talents of trained and experienced legal information professionals than there is today. ■

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