Michelle Cosby was introduced to law librarianship by a law librarian at her university and became a student member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) in 2003. Since joining the Association, she has served in several leadership positions, continually rising through the ranks of AALL. Now, in her new role as President, she hopes to increase professional development opportunities for members, continue to partner with fellow associations and organizations to increase awareness about AALL, and to highlight members’ expertise as legal information professionals and build strong relationships.
In 2006, Cosby graduated from Indiana University with both a JD from the Maurer School of Law and an MLS from the former School of Library and Information Science. “My school offered a joint JD/MLS program, and during law school, I was more interested in the research side of things,” recalls Cosby. “During my first-year legal research class, the librarian said I had good retention of the material, and she told me about the joint degree, so that’s how I began pursuing it.” Her first professional position was as a reference/information services librarian at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, working the reference desk, working on special projects, and guest lecturing in 1L courses. After a year in Florida, she made the move to Lexington, Kentucky, to serve as a reference librarian at the University of Kentucky College of Law Library. In May 2010, she moved to Durham, North Carolina, to serve as the faculty services librarian at North Carolina Central University School of Law Library, before becoming senior reference and instructional services librarian in 2012.

In 2016, she moved to the University of Tennessee to become an associate director and associate professor before transitioning into her current role as director of the law library and associate professor at Temple University, Beasley School of Law Library in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In her role at Temple, Cosby leads the law library in support of research for law faculty and students and oversees the daily operations, including teaching, personnel, budget, and administrative tasks for the library.

Since joining the Association 16 years ago, Cosby has been active on several special interest sections, including the Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section (SIS) and the Research Instruction & Patron Services SIS, and is a member of several chapters, such as the Greater Philadelphia Law Librarians and the Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries. She has also served as a member on a number of committees, such as the Committee on Relations with Information Vendors (CRIV), Conference of Newer Law Librarians (CONELL), Council of Chapter Presidents, the AALL Awards Review Special Committee, and the Executive Board Finance & Budget Committee, to name a few. She served as vice chair and chair of the Awards Committee, chair of CRIV, chair of the Black Caucus of the American Association of Law Libraries, and as vice president of the Executive Board. She is also a member of the American Bar Association (ABA), International Legal Technology Association, and her state and local bar associations.

Here, Michelle discusses her goals for the coming year, the importance AALL has played in her career, and takeaways from the recent AALL Executive Leadership Institute.

**Now that your term as president has officially begun, what is first on your agenda?**

One of the goals of the Executive Board will be to begin implementing the 2019-2022 strategic plan of Talent, Engagement, and Alliances. Goals for the strategic plan include growing a diverse membership, positioning AALL members as thought leaders and influencers of the legal information industry, and encouraging members to engage within the organization. I have also created three special committees: the CONELL Handbook Special Committee, which will determine and document the operating procedures for the CONELL Committee; the Law Librarianship as a Career Guidance Review Special Committee, which is tasked with overseeing the research of the current status of the career of law librarianship and reporting findings to the Board; and the Legal Research Competencies Review Special Committee, which will review and update the current Legal Competency Standards.
Leadership

Research Competencies. (Learn more about these new special committees on AALLNET at bit.ly/AALL-committees.)

What goals or initiatives has the AALL Executive Board set for the coming year?
Right now, one of the Executive Board’s goals is creating microlearning opportunities. To that effect, we are going to expand the Continuing Professional Education (CPE) committee, adding additional members. The second part to this is finding out what type of microlearning opportunities members are interested in. Before the AALL Annual Meeting, the Association sent out an eLearning survey to assess what members need to meet their professional development goals. We will now be getting into the nitty-gritty and fine-tuning what types of education members would be interested in, whether it’s webinars, podcasts, or self-paced certificate programs. My goal is to make education more convenient and accessible for all members. So, we’re defining what the best microlearning opportunities will be.

Of course, it’s important to remember that law librarians are central in determining whether technology offers lasting value and is worthy of investment. As President, I look forward to making sure our members have access to a wealth of educational resources and tools that aid in maximizing their use of technology.

We are also working on alliance building. It was something that kind of carried over from our last strategic plan; we’re trying to be even more strategic about building stronger relationships with chapters and with our sister organizations, and figuring out what works best for the Association. We are looking forward to building these new relationships.

The theme for next year’s AALL Annual Meeting is “Unmasking Our Potential.”
What does this theme mean to you?
I am super excited about the theme “Unmasking Our Potential” for next year’s meeting in New Orleans. To me, this means not being shy about expressing and sharing what it is we do as librarians and informational professionals. It is about stepping into the light and being okay with singing our own praises. It also means digging deep to find out what else you are capable of as a librarian.

What challenges have you faced as a woman in law librarianship? Do you think there has been improvement in this area?
We are similar to other legal industries where there are not enough women in key leadership positions. So, to be where I am in my career today, as well as where I am in my role with the Association is a big step for me personally. I look forward to seeing more women seeking out leadership roles in their own institutions and organizations.

What are some ways to make the profession of law librarianship more diverse and inclusive?
Our association strives to be diverse and inclusive. We recently added inclusion to AALL’s vision statement. We are always looking to bring newer professionals into our ranks as well as valuing the experience of our members reaching retirement. In order to become a more inclusive profession, we have to start letting people know before library school that law librarianship is a career option.

What are the biggest challenges in law librarianship right now?
I think they are pretty much the same as they’ve always been: rising costs and stagnant budgets. The resources are changing, and more so, the...
resources we’re familiar with are changing. But also challenging is trying to determine which resources you actually need to have, as new resources come out all the time and companies get acquired by other companies, so it can become cost-prohibitive and you are forced to make tough decisions. It’s a constant struggle for libraries—not just law libraries, but really all libraries.

**How do you stay engaged and passionate about your work?**

For me being active in the Association helps with that because I love hearing what other people are doing—hearing their ideas, their challenges, and seeing how we can solve these issues together. So, staying professionally engaged definitely helps me stay passionate about my work and the profession.

**What is one of the most valuable lessons you’ve learned in the professional leadership positions you’ve held?**

Being cognizant about how you’re approaching problems when problems arise. It’s a delicate balance. Some people may also call this politics. For example, I went to a leadership institute in February where we learned the importance of knowing when to address a situation head-on and when it is necessary to let it go. Not every issue that arises is a DEFCON 1 situation requiring that you drop everything to find a solution.

**How do you think legal education will change moving forward?**

So much of legal education is driven by the ABA. How do we then help support what the ABA requires in the library? Law students are taught differently than they used to be, and I think it can be taken for granted that students can effectively and efficiently use technology. Yes, they can use technology, but they’re not using it well enough or to its full capacity. Law schools need to help students better understand the different research platforms out there and how to efficiently navigate them. Law schools are also facing the challenge of competing with the likes of Google and trying to get students to understand that not everything about the law will be found through a simple search. There are also so many new educational technologies that librarians can show students—it’s about striking a balance between showing them and actually having them use these technologies.

**What’s the value in being a member of AALL?**

For me, I love the networking opportunities. I always come back from the AALL Annual Meeting with new ideas and a reinvigorated passion for the profession. The Association helps you stay current on what’s changing out there (in the profession and with technology), and it gives you access to fellow colleagues who can help you with issues that you might be dealing with and give you advice if you want to make similar changes in your organization.

**What is the best career advice that you have been given?**

Be mobile, if you’re looking for career opportunities. If you had asked me back when I first graduated if I thought I would ever leave Indiana, my answer would have been no. So, I think being mobile has offered me many great career opportunities and the ability to learn different things and new skills.

**What were some good takeaways from the AALL Executive Leadership Institute?**

During the Institute, we learned how to be a good influencer by having real conversations with people. I have always thought of myself as a good listener, but after this exercise, I realized I could be a better listener, which will help me be a better influencer as I will be better able to meet the needs of the person that I’m trying to influence. On the second day of the Institute, we were given accountability partners, and just today, I looked at my partner’s business card so that I can follow up with her and talk about the homework that we got. Overall, it was a great program for directors—we had conversation circles on Day One to discuss different topics and we were able to hear different solutions. In general, just hearing other directors’ thoughts on certain issues was useful, and being able to ask questions about challenging topics was also very helpful. (Learn more about AALL’s Executive Leadership Institute at bit.ly/AALLelinstitute.)

**What do you find most rewarding about your job?**

The people. I like people—working with students, faculty, and fellow librarians is a very rewarding experience.