

## LEADER PROFILE

# LAW LIBRARIANSHIP A KIND OF KISMET

Destiny, both professional and personal, brought Beth Williams to a career in law librarianship. After working her way up to become a senior director at her organization, she has become well known as a leader in technology innovation within the field.

Beth Williams first became interested in a career in law librarianship while working in a library. “My first job in libraries was when I was a grad student in philosophy. I adored working in the library—I would help patrons even when I was there to visit a friend—and all of the (wonderful) librarians encouraged me to go to library school,” recalls Williams. “But I wanted to be a social justice superhero, so I went to law school instead. Now I know you can try to be a social justice superhero in a library, too! My time at Marquette burnished in my mind the value of library experience: I think working in the library as a student is the best gateway drug to becoming a librarian.”

The law library hasn’t just been a good professional decision, it turned out to be a good personal one as well. “I met my husband while working in the library. We were both grad students



in the same department and we both had jobs working in the library,” notes Williams. “I always tell people that I fell in love in the library.” After receiving her master’s from Marquette University in philosophy, she attended law school at Syracuse University College of Law as a joint degree student in public administration at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs with the intention of becoming a public interest lawyer. She received her JD in 2002. After working for a couple of years practicing law in Maine, she decided to go back to library school. “Library school was always in the back of my head even as I was studying for the bar exam,” says Williams. While taking a break from studying for the bar she came upon an article by American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) member Mary Whisner titled “Choosing

**“There is no better way to learn something new than to try and teach it or to try and figure out how to write coherently on the subject.”** [Beth Williams](#)

Law Librarianship: Thoughts for People Contemplating a Career Move,” published in *Law and Technology Resources for Legal Professionals* in 1992. “I had that thought in the back of my head that maybe I shouldn’t be taking the bar exam. I practiced law for two years. It did not take me long to figure out that I wanted to go back to school and become a law librarian.”

Williams earned her MLIS degree with a special certificate in law librarianship from the University of Washington iSchool in 2005. Her first job in law librarianship was as at the Arthur W. Diamond Law Library at Columbia Law School (CLS) in New York as a reference librarian, a position she held for four years before rotating into the head of public services position. She taught legal research throughout her time at CLS. She also held an appointment as lecturer at

Columbia University, teaching graduate courses in information and digital archive management. After six years at Columbia, she became the director of the law library and information technology at Louisiana State University’s Paul M. Hebert Law Center. In 2015, she transitioned into her current role of senior director of the Robert Crown Law Library and senior lecturer in law at Stanford, where she teaches Advanced Legal Research and courses about information law and policy. Her research interests, publications, and presentations focus on free and open access to legal information and on digitization and preservation efforts in law libraries.

Williams currently serves on the Board of Directors of LLMC Digital and recently finished a three-year term as a member of the Depository Library Council, an advisory board for the Director of the Government Publishing Office on matters related to the Federal Depository Library Program. An active member of AALL since 2005, she is also an active member of the Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section (SIS) and the Social Responsibilities SIS. She was also a co-organizer and presenter at AALL’s inaugural Innovation Bootcamp in spring 2019.

Here, she discusses innovation, her experience at AALL’s Innovation Bootcamp, and the evolution of law librarianship.

### **How important is innovation to your organization?**

At Stanford, innovation is baked into our DNA. It’s not just part of the culture, it’s part of the structure of the organization, both within the law school and the university. Often, when outside people hear the word Stanford, they immediately think innovation because you really have a tremendous amount of freedom and a mandate to think about things in a new way here. It’s just a fantastic environment to work in.

### **There’s a lot of different definitions for innovation. How would you define it?**

I think of innovation as being a clear-headed way of looking at the world and seeing new solutions to old problems. Innovation doesn’t necessarily have to be the next shiny, bright toy. Many times, innovation can be using existing resources in a new way. I think it’s really just a creative way of looking at tools and applying them to real-world problems. Without meaningful

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## QUICK HITS WITH BETH WILLIAMS

## Q&amp;A

**Superpower you wish you had?**

Easy: time travel. I would love to be able to go back in time and see how the world worked before. I'd also like to see loved ones again.

**Words to live by?**

"I've always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library." —Jorge Luis Borge

**Favorite TV show to binge watch?**

Right now, I'm watching *The Good Place* with my children, which is wildly inappropriate for them, but really fun.

**Favorite travel destination?**

Alaska, or maybe the Scottish Isles. I lived in Denali National Park for a season when I was young, and interior Alaska is pretty much heaven on Earth to me.

**Guilty pleasure?**

I ask my students this as an icebreaker on the first day of class and I always say that "I was raised Catholic, so all of my pleasures are guilty."

surprised that the number of law firm librarian attendees was so high. Those law firm librarians were doing fun things, and they were just really thoughtful, super engaged, and also really open to change in ways that were very energizing to me. I got great insight into what's happening in law firms and their libraries. I don't mind admitting that I stole several excellent ideas from them!

**Were there particular commonalities among librarians working in different institutions that stood out for you? Or were there new distinctions that surprised you?**

As a threshold matter, everyone at the event was eager to share and grow. Those two qualities are critical for the success of any program, and they were both fully on display throughout.

The librarians there were very enthusiastic and engaged in their own libraries, but they didn't seem to be as aware of how things worked in their larger organizations. I feel like that's kind of a theme for me lately. Perhaps it's a function of my role, but I see a critical need for librarians in every job to tie these two things together: you've got to have a knowledge of your library, but you also need to see how your library works within your larger organization. I saw a lot of evidence of people really trying to make a difference in their organizations, but they lacked some knowledge about what happens in other departments. This is a real growth opportunity for law librarians to become more connected to our larger organizations.

Overall, those who attended were a really great group. I thought it was ideal to have both a real, interactive experience and also some variety of perspective in the presentations. I felt like there was a lot of talent in the room and a tremendous amount of promise. I'd love to have more opportunities for people to get together like this in a workshop type of atmosphere, rather than a traditional (somewhat passive) conference format.

**What excites you most about the evolution of law librarianship?**

I'm a junkie for change, as my colleagues will attest. I also thrive in an environment that values substance over process. To learn is to change; if I've learned something new then my day feels like a success. That said, it can feel like every single aspect of what we do as librarians is changing some days, and much has been fundamentally changing about our work just since I've become a professional librarian. Collections

application, innovation just becomes a frivolous exercise—to me, real innovation is about finding substantive ways to tackle persistent, complex problems.

**How do you stay on top of developments in legal technology?**

Developments in legal technology within the practice of law are particularly intriguing to me. I read anything I can get my hands on that deals with how things are working in the practice of law with an eye toward how client outcomes are impacted—especially low-income consumers of legal services. I have the privilege of being exposed to a lot of people that are using technology in creative ways. The other way to stay on top of developments in legal technology is to have people to work with on your team who are constantly trying out new things. I am incredibly fortunate in my team, many of whom are interested in new ways of developing technology and incorporating them into our work.

**You were a facilitator at AALL's innovation bootcamp last April. What was your main takeaway from the event?**

I really got a lot out of the bootcamp. I was struck by the proportion of law firm librarians to academic librarians. Because I've been an academic librarian my entire career, I was

are truly different from what they were 15 years ago, as are library services and basic job skills. I know that saying goodbye to the past can be bittersweet, but, for me, this environment of change is a positive aspect of where we are right now. There are a lot of opportunities for us to remain present in our institutions and continue to be productive amidst change.

### **What professional development opportunities would you suggest to students and law librarians just starting their careers?**

I am fortunate to have many new colleagues that are also brand-new librarians. I often encourage new librarians to volunteer, to teach, or to write about something they are interested in as a way of getting started with professional development. There is no better way to learn something new than to try and teach it or to try and figure out how to write coherently on the subject. I think that's the nice thing about our profession: there's kind of a never-ending number of opportunities if you're willing to say yes—not only in your library, but also in your larger institution and nationally. You don't have to be an expert at the outset: volunteering to teach or to write something is a great way to start for a new librarian.

### **What's the value of attending the AALL Annual Meeting?**

Oh, for me, that's easy: it's about networking, having face-to-face time with some friends that I've had for many years and that I rely on when I need advice. That time with my colleagues and friends is just invaluable. Not only do I value the personal connections, I love being able to hear about what other libraries are doing. I strongly encourage my staff to attend conferences. I'm kind of a broken record about it, but it's so important to step away from your own library. A lot of people get nervous about leaving their work or having to worry about burdening their colleagues if they're gone for a conference. But it is invaluable to gain a new perspective on what we're doing by taking a few days a year to spend time with other librarians. I'm a big fan of exposing yourself to new perspectives, and AALL is perfect for that: whether it's attending the educational programs or meeting new people, the social opportunities are incredibly important to our work and our well-being.

### **What does the future of legal education look like from your perspective?**

I don't have a crystal ball about the future of legal education. Not all law schools are making

the necessary adjustments to keep up with the changes in the current market, and I think those schools will be in some trouble. But I see most law schools trying to be responsive to the current market demands. Most law professors I've met care deeply about educating new lawyers.

I am incredibly privileged to work in a law school that approaches legal education in a very dynamic way. Our clinics are full-time, so students work in clinic during their entire quarter, with no distractions to the experience of representing their clients. We also have policy labs where students represent nonprofit and governmental organizations as clients to write white papers and do other policy work. We have very practical classes and deeply theoretical classes. I'm completely biased of course, but I feel like we're a great model for how law schools should be structured. I think predictions about the end of legal education are more than a little premature. I think there's still going to be plenty of opportunity for well-trained lawyers to, for example, populate states as public defenders, as prosecutors, and as general practitioners. The need is increasingly critical in rural areas. Legal work is not going away, it's just being done very differently.

### **What do you wish everyone knew about law librarians?**

Law librarians have a tendency to try to work in an invisible way—we want to make everything look effortless and are often very quiet about what we do. I feel like one of my jobs as the director of the library is to make the invisible, visible. I want to let people know about the depth of intellect and talent that exists in my staff. My colleagues are incredibly bright and hard-working. Yes, we do our work primarily for the sake of others, but I really don't think we should be so quiet about how we do those things. I have an image of the previous generation of law librarians portraying ourselves kind of like butlers—being there, at any time, and anticipating what you need before you even know that you need it. This is kind of a beautiful image. But I am compelled to let people in my organization know how talented the people who work for the library truly are. Just because they can fix a paper jam doesn't mean they can't also write an erudite answer to a complex legal question.