Casandra (Cas) Laskowski has a unique background—she served in the United States military for five years as a geo-spatial analyst, including a 15-month tour of Iraq before attending college and law school, then ultimately ending up in law librarianship. But her time spent in the service afforded her several critical life lessons about leadership, inclusion, and patience that she values and carries with her in everything she does. Whether blogging or writing a chapter on an important topic, serving on a committee or jury, or working with her students to help them become the best people they can be, Laskowski has proved to be a young leader in innovation and technology in the legal information space.
After a chance conversation about Neil Gaiman’s Ocean at the End of the Lane with law librarian Jill Smith at the University of Maryland School of Law, Cas Laskowski asked a question most law librarians probably hear at some point in their careers: What exactly is your job? “After hearing her answer, I perked up because I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with my law degree and her job sounded so amazing,” notes Laskowski. That simple question put her on the path to becoming a law librarian. After completing her law degree in 2015, she entered the University of Arizona’s Law Library Fellows Program to earn her MLIS in 2016.

Since becoming a member of AALL, Laskowski has been involved in several special interest sections (SISs), including: Academic Law Libraries; Computing Services; Professional Engagement, Growth, and Advancement; Research Instruction & Patron Services; and Social Responsibilities. She is President of the Latino Caucus and Chair of the Diversity & Inclusion Committee.

Following her time at the University of Arizona, Laskowski began her current role as technology and research services librarian at Duke University School of Law, J. Michael Goodson Law Library.

Here, she discusses staying on top of legal technology and the importance of innovation, the essential role of law librarians, and how she applies the lessons she learned in the military.

You are a military veteran, which makes you unique among AALL members. Do you apply any of the lessons and skills you learned to your leadership style and the way you approach teaching?

Yes, 100 percent. One of the biggest things I learned from my time in the Army is how much more respect I had for leaders who were willing to get down in the mud with me and do the things that needed to get done, not just sit back, even though they could delegate and watch us. They would never ask us to do anything they themselves wouldn’t do.

There is so much going on in everyday life, so I try my best to respect people’s time, and that includes running a really strict meeting with set amounts of time that I abide by. I also try to make sure that I’m not just asking people to come to meetings for no reason.

I try to make teaching sessions interactive and interesting. In the military they use a lot of PowerPoint demonstrations, where they read off slides, which is terrible. So, I try to avoid that! My goal is to work with students to create structures to help them become their best selves. I had a colleague in the military who had several officers in the chain of command give up on him. He ended up on my shift and I had to train him. Once we actually sat down together, I realized he was failing because he had never been properly trained. No one had taken the time to realize he didn’t know how to use any of the things we were using because he wasn’t with us during training. So, the two of us worked

“After that initial conversation, I volunteered to work in tech services at my law library for about five hours every week,” said Laskowski. “Pam Bluh, associate director for technical services, found me a paid position for those five hours and then eventually got me a summer job in the reference department of the library.”

Her first exposure to the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) came after fellow AALL member C.J. Pippins, who worked at the University of Maryland, introduced her to the Southeastern Chapter. “C.J. was on the Scholarship Committee and was trying to encourage me to sign up for a scholarship because I was still in library school,” said Laskowski. But it wasn’t until she was at Arizona that she really learned about the Association; she joined in August of 2015.

CASANDRA LASKOWSKI
- Technology & Research Services Librarian
- Duke University School of Law
- J. Michael Goodson Law Library
- Durham, NC
together to make sure he succeeded, and on the next deployment he was so valued by his unit that they wouldn’t move without his intelligence.

So, I try to do the same thing with my students because I find that even when they’re falling behind, there’s usually a reason for it. When I teach, I really try not to just shove knowledge into their heads, but to also build good habits and structures that allow them to succeed.

In leadership roles I never ask people I’m working with to do anything I wouldn’t do. I don’t try to just pass off the hard work to other people because I don’t think you gain respect that way. But the best advice I can share from my time in the Army is keep a brag book, a collection of all of your major projects and accomplishments. It makes job applications easier, but its true value is in proving to yourself that you do more than you realize.

What subjects are you most passionate about exploring in your writing, whether it’s your blog or through any of your other projects?

Two subjects I am most interested in exploring are tech trends and inclusive innovation.

Innovation doesn’t always mean we’re developing something new; it also can mean we’re reinvigorating something that exists. It’s being more creative about how we think about innovation, both in including multiple stakeholders and in accepting the idea that not every innovation is a new app.

I really want people to demand their seats at the table as law librarians because so many things are changing in the legal profession.

The Library Services Corporation released a “Library Initiative White Paper” in 2016 about how libraries are this untapped resource for providing access to justice services. I get flummoxed by things like that because law librarians and different communities have already been doing these things in libraries.

Lastly, engage with stakeholders. It’s so easy to forget people, to talk to the people in the room and forget there’s somebody else who will be impacted or affected by whatever we do. It’s easy to implement an idea you think will change your corner of the world, but it’s worthless if you developed it without including the people you think you’ll help.

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

I try not to be hyper-focused on legal sources. I read general technology resources such as Wired and MIT Tech Review. I look for books that challenge the status quo such as Technically Wrong and Invisible Women. I also make an effort to follow a broad range of accounts on Twitter, from self-proclaimed queer storyteller Mermaid Queen Jude to Black in AI to Women Talk Design. We have to engage with different communities and look at things from their perspectives.

Also, I try to ask people I respect as thought leaders in this industry who I should be following. Those people usually come up with stories and ideas and thoughts that’ll pop up in the news within the next week or so, but they’re already on top of them because it’s their niche.

It’s impossible to be on top of everything, so I try to make sure I have a range of people to follow. I make sure their voices have some space in my periphery.

How do you stress the importance of being innovative to your students?

I highlight the different efforts going on around the nation, from the Bail Project to design thinking programs at law schools to Legal Zoom. I try to have them consider what assumptions they are making about our legal and societal systems, and then I ask them to find reasons to challenge them. If IBM admits that every product is a work in progress, then who are we to think that our systems and workflows were right the first time and never need to change?
You are Chair of AALL’s Diversity & Inclusion Committee. What is the committee working on that makes you particularly proud?

I was lucky to join the committee while it was asking itself what more could it do for the profession. The thing I’m most proud of is the Diversity Dialogues, which are webinar-supported conversations between the community and subject-matter experts on different diversity and inclusion topics. We get to have these very deep discussions, and I’ve had people reach out to me afterward, thankful for the opportunity to have a platform to ask questions they may not have ever been comfortable asking before or known who to ask.

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the women’s voting rights amendment, we are having two powerhouse women speak at the AALL Annual Meeting Diversity & Inclusion Symposium: American Bar Association President Judy Perry Martinez and Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson. I’m super proud of the fact that they agreed to join us and that we can give them a platform on this really momentous occasion.

How do you incorporate design thinking into your classes and why is it important for students to learn and understand it?

I love design thinking because, when done right, it combines innovation and inclusion. A big part of it is empathetic engagement. That means giving room for people to explain their journey without judgement or assumptions, and then letting their voice carry through development of the solution.

You are currently editing an OER textbook titled Introduction to Law Librarianship. How did you become involved in this project?

I realized we didn’t have a textbook on this topic. The only textbook on our profession was from 2012, so, since I’m a big advocate of open educational resources, I sat down and wrote a table of contents. I then ranted to AALL member Zanada Joyner about how much this textbook was needed and that I wanted to have an awesomely diverse group of voices to contribute to the growth of our profession. I asked her if she would be my co-editor, and she enthusiastically agreed.

I’ve already worked with creating an open-access legal research textbook internally here at Duke, so I have the actual development of it under my belt. I’m hoping this book conveys different perspectives, and some of the proposals have touched on topics I’d never thought of, such as law librarians inside of corporate legal departments.

We want the textbook to provide a comprehensive starting point for newer members. There is great information in our field, but it’s scattered. We are committed to giving space to a diverse set of authors so that new librarians can find themselves in the book in addition to relevant knowledge. And we also want to address difficult topics early, so that newer law librarians are prepared for the different situations they might face.

What do you wish everyone knew about law librarians?

I wish they saw us as partners and not as gophers. A lot of the time it can be really easy to treat the library as an afterthought, like it’s just a resource center, it’s just a place to get things. But it’s filled with people and experts, with all sorts of skills and perspectives and, more importantly, passion. When you think of us as collaborators, we can help build stronger partnerships and stronger initiatives.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

The flexibility to engage in many different things. I have several faculty members who have always engaged with me as a partner and thought about me and my skills and how I could work with them on different projects. I’ve been fortunate enough to be involved in different legal efforts and have lent my voice to strategic planning initiatives and to the development of an IBM-Duke partnership. I have been able to secure seats at different tables to help contribute and be part of the development, which has allowed me to tinker with a lot of different things and build programs that help students engage with technology.

There is a culture at Duke that I love, one where the librarians are included in faculty workshops and other different activities. We hosted the American Bar Foundation (ABF) Southern Roundtable for the future of Latinos, and I requested to join the roundtable. Instead of being excluded as non-faculty, I was welcomed, which was beautiful. I’m now working on a web app with the ABF and others to try to figure out what we can develop as part of an information portal, based on that roundtable. I don’t know that I would have had that opportunity anywhere else.