

LEADER PROFILE ADAPTING WITH THE TIMES

As technology continues to evolve and the need to incorporate metrics to demonstrate the library's value to stakeholders becomes more and more vital, former American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) president (2012–2013) Jean M. Wenger is helping her team navigate the new role of the librarian and adapt to the realities created by the ever-shrinking budgets of government law libraries.

Jean M. Wenger serves as deputy law librarian for Cook County Law Library, where she has held a number of positions over the last 28 years. Cook County Law Library is the only law library in Chicago freely available to the legal profession and the public. Throughout her career, Wenger has provided valuable service to the profession and to library users. She has served as chair of the AALL Executive Board Strategic Directions Committee, the Annual Meeting Program Committee, and the Foreign, Comparative, and International Law Section. A former Chicago

minor in Economics. In college, my academic interests were focused on the international arena, and on government. After college, I worked as a foreign currency trader. This position—balancing a demanding clientele with expensive, volatile commodities—served as a crash course in customer service. Wanting to satisfy an interest in law, a few years later, I attended law school at the University of Illinois. However, not convinced I wanted to practice law, I worked as a reference law clerk at Cook County Law Library after my first year. My co-workers there were talented and extremely generous with their time, taking me under their wing. At the end of my first week, I was hooked. I was offered a full-time librarian position after graduation and later earned my MLIS.

Through my work at Cook County Law Library, as well as several years at Cornell University Law Library, I have been able to work in many areas, including public services, reference, acquisitions, government documents, foreign/international law, administration, and teaching.

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Jean M. Wenger

Association of Law Libraries (CALL) president (2004-2005), she is also a contributing author to AALL’s “Defining ROI: Law Library Best Practices” white paper.

Having spent years serving the residents of Cook County, Wenger is in a position to offer sound advice and best practices for law librarians looking to take on the challenges of overhauling existing library space, providing excellent customer service, and demonstrating their library’s return on investment (ROI).

How did you initially enter the field?

Law librarianship was a good fit for my skill set. I have a BA in Public Administration and a

Describe a typical day.

There are many versions of typical. I am involved in drafting library policies, developing new services, managing human resource issues, budgeting, and collection development. Recently, the library underwent renovations and my weekly time was spent consulting with building management and the construction company. I research and contact potential speakers for our education series held in our new space. Since a major initiative for the county is performance management, I collect and analyze the library’s performance management metrics and report these into a balanced score card system on a monthly basis. When needed, I cover the reference desk and handle the more challenging foreign law and government documents questions.

How do you organize your marketing objectives for the library?

The county recently did a complete overhaul of their entire website (mentioned in AALL’s ROI white paper), which has been a great benefit for us because there are now more avenues for

JEAN M. WENGER

- DEPUTY LAW LIBRARIAN
- COOK COUNTY LAW LIBRARY
- CHICAGO, IL

QUICK HITS WITH JEAN M. WENGER



ebooks or print?

Depends on where I am—ebooks for a plane or a train; print at home.

Favorite takeout?

Pizza. I also enjoy unique salads from some great restaurants near my house.

Mac or PC?

PC at home and at work, and iPad for everywhere else.

Last book you had the pleasure of reading?

I'm currently reading *Originals* by Adam Grant. I am also reading anything and everything about home renovation.

Words to live by?

"Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies." I seek to apply these words from Mother Teresa to my professional and personal life.

Scrabble or Words with Friends?

Scrabble. Mahjong is also a new interest.

Favorite app?

So many to choose from but I enjoy museum and cultural heritage apps.

Favorite travel destination?

British Isles—England, Scotland, and Wales.

driving users our way. Additionally, we host several educational events per month, and lawyers and the public can register online. These events give us the opportunity to publicize our services, collection, and reference assistance. In addition, we promote visits and tours and share what we fondly call "propaganda" about the library. We are located on the 29th floor of a 30-floor courthouse, so it's all about helping people find their way to us by targeting our audience properly. Once users find their way to the library, they can conduct their research looking at incredible views of the city.

What type of traffic do you get at your library?

We're not a membership library. We are open to the public. Our users include the general public, self-represented litigants, judges, attorneys, and other legal professionals, as well as government officials and their staff. Law firms often send their newest staff attorneys over to learn about the law, as we have a range of resources that law firms—large or small—

do not have in their collections. New lawyer incubator programs and public interest law groups approach us for orientation to legal resources and for tours. We are also finding that self-represented litigants—in light of the cuts to legal aid—are using the library more and more. They seek research for how to interact with the court, or for information and forms.

What are the qualities that make up an effective leader?

Libraries and the information universe are being transformed at an unprecedented rate. Have a vision about where your institution needs to go, communicate that goal to all involved, and facilitate the means to get there. Listening and being empathic are also important leadership traits. In addition, seek out the leadership potential in others and encourage it. People did that for me, so I work to give those opportunities to others. Also, be passionate about what you do and why you do it.

What services does your institution provide?

We have extensive collections of current and historical resources along with practice-oriented works in print and electronic format. We have been able to add more titles through strategic rebalancing of databases. We offer legal and public interest programs and continuing legal education classes. In several of our branch locations, we collaborate with legal assistance organizations to offer a lawyer in the library. With our reconfigured space downtown, we aim to expand this program to the main library.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing government law librarians today?

We are all facing shrinking funds and greater expectations for government law libraries to provide more services. The challenges are to adapt to the changing research needs of our users, to expand our education initiatives, and to do more outreach—all with smaller staffs and revamped collections.

What opportunities are there for government law librarians?

Break the mold, and think about what's important to the larger organization. What

services do you provide that can demonstrate your value? Government libraries continually work to be more service-oriented and innovative. Governments are beginning to realize they need to preserve information, and they are looking to digitize, preserve, and archive records. Librarians possess the skills needed to advance these interests for the larger organization. We look to see how we can collaborate with other departments in the county.

What advice would you give to those looking to advocate for themselves or their libraries?

Take every opportunity to market your library's services; it can be as simple as a conversation. During our renovation last year, people were uncomfortable with the concept of change. I found that being able to articulate what we were doing, why we were doing it, and the benefits of renovation allayed concerns. Being enthusiastic about what you are doing conveys more than words, it conveys possibilities. Advocating goes beyond just explaining; it's about presenting the information in a way that highlights the benefits to your audience. Also engage and involve your staff in delivering the message. Today, when advocating for your library in government, you need to be able to convey the metrics and demonstrate your value, quantifying what you do and the services you provide.

What role has AALL played in your career?

AALL has played a very significant role, and it continues to do so. The honor and privilege to serve as the Association's president has been a highlight of my career. AALL reinforces law librarianship as a profession. Starting out, it provided me with the resources and tools I needed as a new law librarian. Throughout my career, AALL has challenged me to think outside the box. AALL membership includes government, academic, and private law librarians engaged in many tasks. Being able to interact with professionals across such a wide spectrum has enabled me to adapt new ideas and to find more innovative solutions. The most enduring benefit has been the network of colleagues that I can turn to for advice, ideas, and inspiration. My participation in AALL, through leadership or work on committees and sections, has allowed me to develop and practice skills that I can bring back to my workplace.

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What lessons have you gained through the leadership roles you've held?

Become a good listener. No one has all the answers. I rely on the skills and expertise of committees, boards, and staff that I work with. People aren't always going to agree with you but that presents opportunities for talking through issues and concerns. Open lines of communication are essential. Oftentimes, these different points of view are the basis for new and exciting solutions. At the end of the day, it's important to be able to make good decisions based on the information you have received. Lastly, never forget to say thank you and show appreciation for the people who have helped you along the way.

What career advice would you give to newer law librarians?

Be curious. If you have an idea for a new project, make it happen. You may not think it is a big deal but you never know unless you try. Recognize that you are always developing your skills. Veteran librarians can learn from you just as much as you learn from them. Also, volunteer at your institution or for your professional association to work on projects and committees. The interpersonal experiences are even more valuable than the practical skills you acquire. Essentially, be a lifelong learner. The people you meet in this profession make wonderful allies, mentors, and friends. After all these years, I'm still having fun. ■