Ronald E. Wheeler Jr. talks diversity, education, and the importance of innovation in order to move the profession forward.

Ronald E. Wheeler Jr. is dedicated to creating greater opportunities for members within the Association by means of education, diversity, and most of all, innovation. Wheeler’s love for the legal industry started a bit unconventionally, but today, the industry and AALL are the driving force that keeps him motivated and excited about the profession. “I briefly ‘dated’ a library school student when I was in my first year of law school in 1987. I was not enjoying law school, and he was ecstatic about his exciting courses in library school. His enthusiasm stuck with me,” Wheeler recalls. After working as a public defender, followed by service with several AIDS nonprofits, he finally decided to give library school a try. Although originally intending to abandon the law altogether and become a general academic librarian, his wise professors told him that with a JD degree, he absolutely had to do law librarianship.

“Of course, they were exactly right! I am so fortunate to have had incredible professors and advisors at the Wayne State University (WSU) School of Library and Information Science. At the time, Georgia Clark was the law library director and was such a great mentor to me. But, I am especially grateful to AALL
member Jan Bissett at the WSU Arthur Neef Law Library, who taught my Legal Bibliography course along with AALL member Margie Heinen, now at Sherman & Howard L.L.C. in Denver. I thought I knew it all, and they gently took me down a notch while also tutoring and encouraging me. I learned from all of them—neither Margie nor Georgia has a JD—that experience is what matters. A JD degree is but one indicator among many. I now have the utmost respect for our numerous talented and experienced members without a JD degree.”

Wheeler, who began his term as AALL president this past July, is director of the Fineman & Pappas Law Libraries and associate professor of law at Boston University. He’s been an active member of AALL since joining in 2001, when he was working as a librarian intern at Marygrove College Library. Since 2001, he has gone on to serve at several institutions including the University of New Mexico School of Law Library, Georgia State University College of Law Library, and the University of San Francisco School of Law. Most recently, he served as director of the law library and information resources at Suffolk University Law School’s Moakley Law Library in Boston. In addition to serving on the AALL Executive Board as Vice President/Elect last year, he has also chaired and served on several committees including the Appointments Committee, Future Summit Planning Special Committee, Annual Meeting Program Committee, Diversity Committee, and Placement Committee. He has also served in various positions for the following special interest sections (SIS): Research, Instruction and Patron Services SIS, Social Responsibilities SIS, Academic Law Libraries SIS, and Legal Information Services to the Public SIS. He is an active member in several other law library associations, and is an active contributor to the Law Library Journal, penning a diversity dialogue column in addition to being an active contributor to AALL Spectrum. Following, Wheeler discusses his focus on diversity, the importance of continuing education, and how innovation is the way of the future.

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

A couple of things actually—I’m really interested in finding ways to do more with our Association’s commitment to diversity. I’m also really excited that the educational offerings at the AALL Annual Meeting & Conference in Chicago were so great—I’ve received nothing but compliments on them. Because of the positive feedback, one of my main focuses this year is to really use the Chicago meeting as the starting point for the year’s educational offerings, revisiting all of the great topics included during the meeting. This is also the first year of our new three-year strategic directions plan—knowledge, community, and leadership—which is really aspirational and focuses around developing a knowledge base and innovation labs, so I hope our members will look for more information on those projects as we continue to develop them.

Can you talk a little more about the concept of innovation labs?

What I want to do is create a space for innovators—people who are developing new ideas, new products, new services, new ways of thinking about librarianship, etc. I want to create a space for them to develop those ideas to help move our profession forward into a real twenty-first century information profession.
An innovation lab would be a place for people to preview ideas, get feedback and encouragement, and if necessary, money to help them bring their ideas to life.

You speak on issues of diversity and contribute a regular feature in Law Library Journal aimed at engaging scholarly conversation on issues of diversity and inclusion in librarianship and the legal profession. Are you planning to initiate any programs on these issues?
I have been thinking a lot about what it means to be truly committed to diversity and inclusion, and what it takes to help people from disadvantaged minorities succeed in our profession. Some of the things we already provide—like the George A. Straight Minority Scholarship and the Minority Leadership Development Award—are a great starting point toward this initiative.

I frequently look at resumes from students of color and I’ve been thinking a lot about ways to make them more competitive in this market, since one of our goals is to help disadvantaged minorities get a leg up. One of the things I’ve been thinking about is creating a fellowship program, which is something I will be exploring in the months to come.

I am also excited to continue writing the “Diversity Dialogues” column in LLJ, and in the coming months I’m hoping to expand beyond what we consider to be the traditional aspects of diversity, because I do see diversity as a really broad topic. The types of diversity that help make us a vibrant profession go far beyond race, sexual orientation, national origin, or religion. I also want to include things like language of origin, country of origin, personality type, and so on.

Do you have any special initiatives or goals planned for the coming year?
Beyond the fellowship program, I want to focus on education and keep developing, honing, and tweaking our Annual Meeting programming, working with the Annual Meeting Program Committee to tie these programs into continuing professional development that can be carried on throughout the year within the Association’s educational offerings. I’ll work with CPE to offer programming throughout the year in various ways that tie the meeting to educational articles in AALL Spectrum, LLJ, white papers, and beyond. These are the things I’m focusing on most urgently right now.

What do you think the biggest challenges in law librarianship are?
I honestly think the biggest challenge is staying relevant to our parent organizations and continuing to think about what it is that we do that adds value for our stakeholders. In the past, we added value by building strong print collections and, for some, that’s still an important value that they add to their organizations. For many though, their added value has changed. The challenge for many of us is to figure out the skills, talents, and attributes we have that will feed into services that really provide added value and meaning for our organizations. This is something we are going to have to continue to think about as a profession, which is why I think an innovation lab of some type is in order. We have to start thinking about how to innovate and how to highlight the talents of our profession.

How do you stay passionate about your work?
Honestly, by talking to members. Over the last year I did a lot of traveling—probably far too much traveling—and there were times when I got really tired and overwhelmed, and without
fail, whenever I landed in a new city and started talking to members of various types around the country, that’s when I got really excited about our profession. Our members are so smart, so innovative, and so great that all I have to do is pick up the phone and call someone, look on our website, look at one of our member profiles, and it gets me reenergized and it reminds me why I do this.

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

The most valuable lesson I have learned is listening to criticism, and accepting it without taking it personally. One of the things I signed up for is to help lead the profession, lead our Association, and part of what I take on when I’m in these leadership roles is that I have to be open to critique and criticism from members, which can be difficult at times. Over the last year as Vice President, I learned that that’s part of my job—I have to set limits, but also be open and willing to hear criticism and take it seriously.

It is a goal of the board and the committee to have the Principles and Standards for Legal Research Competency recognized as the gold standard within the legal community. Can you discuss how AALL is working to help make that happen?

As identified in AALL’s new Strategic Directions, it is a goal of the Executive Board to “create a process for identifying current and emerging competencies that translate into actionable knowledge points to apply to education, publications, and programs.” We want to be able to say to law schools and law firms and government agencies: “If you want a competent knowledge manager, here are the skills and attributes you should be looking for, and our members have those qualities.” We’ve already done this work with regard to the Principles and Standards for Legal Research Competency. Those competencies are a great start. As an Association, we want to define the other skills and competencies, beyond legal research, that are necessary for legal information professionals to add value.

How do you think legal education will change moving forward?

I think in the coming years, we are going to see legal education—how we deliver it and how we assess what is quality legal education—completely change. There are already rumblings within the American Bar Association about changes in how they accredit law schools. This is an opportunity for academic law librarians to be part of that change, to keep our ears to the ground at our organizations, and as law schools change—because they must—offer our services as legal information professionals on how we can help our organizations weather the changes.

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

I always say the smartest people I know are AALL members. Our members are the most passionate, talented, motivated, and hardworking people I’ve ever encountered. I think our Association prides itself on continually bettering its members through educational programs, webinars, articles, etc. We learn from each other and we continue to grow and are always looking for ways to stay relevant and engaged. AALL members are shaping decision-making throughout the legal professions—from legal information vendors, to the courts, to every level of federal, state, and local government, to law firms big and small, to every law school in the country. We are driving the information train and guiding the creation of legal knowledge everywhere. We know this is true, but now it’s time to let the world beyond our membership know as well.

What is your leadership style?

I’m the direct opposite of the term “lead by intimidation”—no one is intimidated by me! I think my leadership style is interpersonal; I like to build personal relationships with people and I think that through collaboration is how you make the best headway.

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

To be a good director, always surround yourself with people who are smarter than you, and give them the resources and freedom they need to succeed.

What’s your favorite thing about your job?

The people! I work with amazing librarians here at Boston University. I have a phenomenal dean, ultra-talented staff, and students who regularly blow my mind. I have trouble sitting at my desk and working because I want to get up and talk to my exciting coworkers.