

It's Time to Unlock Our Doors—Why We Should Broaden Our Membership Now

An Open Letter to AALL Members from President Frank Houdek

Dear Fellow AALL members,

Next month in Baltimore we will vote to change our Bylaws so that full membership rights in AALL will be available to a much more inclusive group than is presently possible. In essence, the changes will open membership to anyone interested in "law libraries, legal information, and the objectives of the Association," whether they be law librarians, law library staff, members of the legal community, or legal information publishers. All will have full rights of membership, including those of voting and serving on committees, except that holding a position on the AALL Executive Board or running for elected office will be limited to those employed as law librarians.

This proposal to open membership emanates from the Executive Board but is based on a recommendation of two separate blue ribbon Association groups—the Special Committee on the Renaissance of Law Librarianship and the Task Force to Explore the Expansion of AALL Membership. Both gave much thought to the needs of our Association as we approach the end of the twentieth century; throughout their deliberations they gathered considerable input from a wide cross-section of our membership. They independently reached the same conclusion: *open AALL membership.*

The Association's mission has not changed but the conditions in which librarianship is practiced have, leaving AALL with the question of *how* to pursue the mission in a radically different and still-changing environment.

The Executive Board agrees.

This change is a vital step for AALL as we continue to pursue our mission of supporting all law libraries and law librarians. I am writing on behalf of the Executive Board to explain to you why this is such a crucial decision for AALL.

Pursuing the AALL Mission in a Changing Environment

The explicit mission of AALL is "to promote and enhance the value of law libraries to the public, the legal community and the world, to foster the profession of law librarianship, and to provide leadership in the field of legal information" (AALL Bylaws, art. II). This mission has not changed, but the conditions in which librarianship is practiced have, leaving AALL with the question of *how* to pursue the mission in a radically different and still-changing environment.

Changes in technology, in the means of publication, in the economy, and in libraries of all types, are causing fundamental shifts in the ways in which legal information is produced and disseminated, and in the ways in which we deliver it to our clients. Where once librarians organized an orderly, cohesive body of legal information and publications, today we must navigate and manage a vast, ever-changing, chaotic, and largely uncharted sea of information.

Libraries and librarians making their way in this changed environment need a much greater diversity of knowledge and ability than was previously required. No longer just the domain of degreed law librarians, getting the job done in today's law libraries demands a range of talents and skills that are often possessed by paraprofessionals, information systems specialists, and others not traditionally viewed as librarians.

Another aspect of the changing environment that AALL must consider is the heightened awareness of, and interest in, law libraries found on the part of judges, law professors and deans, and law firm administrators. This is a direct result of the fact that the use—and cost—of technology is so integral to the practice of law. Similarly, legal publishers once known for particular resources are constantly expanding the formats of their products, even as they wonder about their own futures amid a constant flurry of mergers and acquisitions.

As law libraries become increasingly complex and those interested in their operation—and legal information generally—become increasingly diverse, AALL must rise to the challenge of existing in an environment that has a much larger sweep than in previous times. AALL must find a way to embrace all those who, by responsibility or interest, directly affect law libraries or influence legal information. We can do no less if we are to continue to achieve each element of our mission: promoting law library value, fostering law librarianship, and providing leadership in legal information.

Promoting Law Library Value

To "promote and enhance the value of law libraries," AALL must help its members build libraries that are valuable to patrons. The value a patron places on any law library is directly related to his/her experience in using it—on the service received, the resources available, and the knowledge of the library personnel who provide assistance.

In today's environment, helping libraries deliver that value means offering information and educational opportunities to *all* library staff members so that they are better able to serve their customers. By opening membership to paraprofessionals, technology specialists, and others who work in law libraries, AALL can more effectively provide such opportunities to the *whole* range of people who affect whether a library has "value" for its patrons. Only in so doing can AALL fully support and promote the value of all law libraries.

Fostering Law Librarianship

Whatever the qualifications or composition of the library staff, the law librarian is still pivotal to the library's success. It is the law librarian who assembles the library's information and staff resources and ensures that every library user receives the best possible library service, and it is the law librarian who must remain the expert on law librarianship and legal information.

To "foster the profession of law librarianship," AALL must provide law librarians with the information and exposure they need to develop and refine their expertise.

In this era of fast-changing technology, it is imperative that every library decision-maker be exposed to a broad range of ideas, resources, and contacts. This can be done most effectively if the law librarian has close contact and good working relationships with other active participants in the legal information arena—technology experts, legal administrators, and legal publishers, to name a few. By opening full membership to the broad array of people involved in legal information, AALL will encourage and facilitate opportunities for law librarians to expand and broaden their expertise.

Leadership in Legal Information

Technology has not only made traditional information issues much more complex, it has also created whole new ones to challenge those involved in developing information policy. And challenge it is, because the policies that are made today will shape our world and the legal profession of tomorrow. Providing "leadership in legal information policy," the third element of AALL's mission, requires familiarity with, and sensitivity to, a wide spectrum of issues and viewpoints. By actively involving the whole range of those interested in these issues as members of AALL, the Association can help members develop a global view to keep pace with and understand the diverse forces at play in the legal information arena.

Concerns and Opportunities

I know that AALL members have diverse opinions on the proposed Bylaws amendments. You have legitimate concerns and questions, and some of you may even wonder why these changes are necessary. To help answer your concerns, you should understand that if the changes are made:

- AALL Chapters will still be free to make their own membership rules more restrictive than AALL's if they wish.
- Control of Association activities and direction will still be the responsibility of the Executive Board and membership in it will still be restricted to law librarians.

As for *why* AALL would benefit by opening its membership, keep in mind that:

- A broader membership base will more closely reflect the changes that are occurring in the staffs of law libraries.
- Increasing the size and diversity of our membership will help AALL gain influence in debates on national policy issues.

- Greater opportunities for interaction on an equal footing could positively affect the relationships between law librarians and legal publishers. The very fact that old roles are being redefined in the wake of a new environment makes it all the more imperative for librarians and publishers to find ways of working constructively together to meet their individual and mutual needs.

Meeting Needs Through A Diverse Membership

Law librarians faced with a changing present and an uncertain future have needs that go beyond simply gaining the skills of librarianship. They need knowledge of technology and the ability to manage information resources—to select the right legal information, in the appropriate formats, to meet the needs of their patrons. They need skills for effectively deploying personnel and financial resources, and marketing their libraries' services to ensure those resources are in demand and available from year to year. And they need knowledge about the changing legal information environment and the policies that affect it.

Meeting these needs has never been easy, but it is particularly difficult in today's environment. There is much to know and many people from whom to learn. And not all of *it* is traditional knowledge and not all of *them* are law librarians. That is why it is so important—so essential—that we cast our membership net as wide as possible to include everyone who is interested in, or has an influence on, law libraries, law librarianship, or legal information. Far from losing our identity or our authority, every AALL member, current and future, will gain immeasurably if we extend the opportunity for full participation in our professional organization to the all those with mutual and complementary interests and enthusiasms. I urge you to support the bylaw changes that will open membership in AALL. It is the right thing to do. It is the right time to do it.

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