



AALL's new executive director, Susan E. Fox, comes to AALL after 8½ years as executive director of the Society of American Archivists.

With more than 20 years of management and research experience, Susan E. Fox joined AALL Oct. 15 as its new executive director. Fox comes to AALL after 8½ years as executive director of the Society of American Archivists. Among her notable honors and professional activities, she was recently named a fellow of the American Society of Association Executives for her dedication to and excellence in association management. Former AALL President Robert Oakley interviewed Fox Sept. 19 at the headquarters of the SAA. An edited version of that interview follows.

Robert Oakley: Good morning, Susan. As we begin, I wondered if you had any initial thoughts that you wanted to share with the members of the Association.

Susan Fox: Thank you, Bob, for coming to do this. As I was reading the Strategic Plan, I was struck by how all professions are dealing with similar issues, including the pace of change, declining budgets, cutbacks in various areas and technological development. The archivists are going through the same thing, and I can name a host of other professions that are facing very similar issues. Everybody feels like they are scrambling for air, but it's really something that we are all collectively struggling with. A lot of times we feel alone in these struggles, but the real message is that we're not alone. There are ways of making your way through. To do that, though, we really need our professional association. Even if we never needed it before, we need it now, because this is where we get the tools to cope with the changes.

Oakley: Excellent. Now tell me a little bit about your background.

Fox: I went to school in Boston, getting my B.S. in public relations from Boston University and an M.S. in public affairs from the McCormack Institute at the University of Massachusetts. My first job was with the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce compiling an economic profile of the city. It was an intellectually challenging job, and I loved it because it brought me out into the city. From there I went to Arthur D. Little, a management consulting firm,

and then to the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. That was a fabulous job. The organization was driven by the belief and passion of its leaders. Their message and the physicians' hard work received recognition in 1985 when the organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Those were exciting times, and it was my first experience with a member-based association. The dedication of the physicians floored me. These men and women worked 100-hour weeks in their professional jobs, and then they would put in another 40 hours on top of that working on behalf of IPPNW and the cause.

From there, in 1988, I went to the Kennedy School at Harvard University. I had always wanted to work at the Kennedy School and had always admired what they were doing. I started out with the Science, Technology and Public Policy Program, headed by Lewis Branscomb, a physicist. Together, we got the program up and running. Lew was very much involved with the public policy issues of the Internet, which have become so important today. It was early, just at the time when the Internet was evolving from a National Science Foundation backbone into the private sector, and there was a great deal of unease about what was going to happen. For example, would the private sector absorb the cost of running the Internet? Would they find the incentive? Clearly, this was before Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web.

Oakley: With that background, how did you make the shift into association management?

Fox: By 1994 I had reached the top of where I wanted to go at the Kennedy School, so I had to make a decision: Did I want to continue in university administration or did I want to go in some other direction? Ultimately, I decided against university administration, and I thought back to my experience with the physicians and how much I enjoyed working with a membership-based organization. Then I picked up the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, flipped through the pages, and saw a little ad for SAA. I thought, "This has my name written all over it." The rest is history.

Oakley: I noticed from your resume that you are a Certified Association Executive. What does that mean?

Fox: It's a credential given by ASAE, the American Society of Association Executives,

(continued on page 8)

Introducing New AALL Executive Director Susan E. Fox

by Robert L. Oakley

after a half-day-long exam, in which you are tested in various competency areas, including governance, board relations, membership development, meeting management, personnel — the whole gamut of skills that you need to run a good association. The pass rate is not high, so it's a tough test.

Oakley: Are there courses to help you prepare for the test?

Fox: There are no courses, but here in Chicago we had a weekly study group, so I was able to get together with other CEOs. That was a good way to learn from each other and also to find out how we were different but also how much we were alike. Being able to network with other CEOs was a good learning experience and very valuable.

Oakley: You are also a fellow at the society?

Fox: It's a big honor. ASAE has 25,000 members and only 170 fellows. You have to be nominated by your peers, and then you have to write a series of essays about your vision for the profession. That's what they are looking for, people with commitment, vision, creativity and innovative management styles.

Oakley: What attracted you to AALL?

Fox: Lots of things. Perhaps most importantly, the value system that law librarians hold: your abiding belief in access to information, authenticity, and your belief in the intellectual underpinnings of society. That is what attracted me to SAA and certainly to AALL. I admire librarians, and I admire archivists. These professions deserve a lot more recognition and respect than either ever adequately receive.

Oakley: What do you see as some of the issues facing AALL?

Fox: Keeping up with the pace of change affects the Association just as it does the profession. The key issue is finding ways to articulate both vision and leadership to the profession of law

librarianship and to give members a clear path to follow, a clear set of tools to use.

Oakley: The question, of course, is how to do that.

Fox: Exactly. I don't have a blueprint, but I'm coming to AALL good at two things. I can usually see an inherent need, a need that is just below the surface but starting to rise, and I'm good at bringing people together, to get the members, who

are the experts, at the table to have the conversation about how to address a particular need. I also help to keep people focused so we come out of the meeting with an action plan. That is what I have been doing with SAA, and

it is what I hope to do with AALL. The members know what the profession needs. Sometimes those needs are articulated clearly, and sometimes they are not. The challenge is finding a way to negotiate our way through that, to set priorities, and to keep people focused on the larger goal.

Oakley: Do you have thoughts about some of the goals that you will have over the next year or two?

Fox: Initially, it will be important to establish credibility with the membership. I'm eager to get out to meet members and to engage in a conversation with them. I come from northern New York, on the St. Lawrence River, up on the Canadian border. It's where I grew up. It's hard-core Republican territory, but Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton carried all of those counties by a landslide, which is just astonishing to me because she's a woman and a liberal Democrat. How did she do that? She did it because she went up there, asked the questions, and actually listened to what the people were saying. Then she came back with a plan, but first she listened. She called it the listening tour and everybody kind of pooh-poohed her for that, but it worked. And I think

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that is what every executive has to do coming into a new association. You've got to go out and do a listening tour and find out firsthand what the concerns are, where the pressure points are, and where the opportunities might lie.

I think it's dangerous for me to come in and say this is my vision for AALL. I can say, however, that I plan to do for AALL what I did at SAA, which is to lift the organization up to a whole new level of accomplishment. I can do that. But I'm not going to tell you how, because I have to listen first — to *everyone* — the members, the staff, the leadership, the renegades.

Oakley: Looking further out, how do you think the organization might be different five years from now?

Fox: Every association, including AALL, is going to have to be very nimble in response to member needs, and that means delivery of services, perhaps delivery of programming content, delivery of continuing education content. We are going to have to be very responsive to outside public policy and other types of issues or events, and we have to be able to respond quickly. We can no longer afford to be a slow, lumbering association. I'm not saying AALL is like that now, but I'm saying we can no longer have the traditional association model that is highly process-driven to the point of paralysis. Instead, what we need to do is to find means to free up people to make decisions and

to move far more quickly than we've been able to do in the past.

We're having an intriguing discussion right now at ASAE. It's called Future Models, looking at

what the association model might look like in the next five to 10 years. There is some provocative thinking going on. There is so much that is basic about what an association is that is extremely valuable, and, of course, what's fundamental has to stay, even while you try to evolve. The foundation that must remain is the passion, the mission, the vision and the strategic planning. Bringing people together face-to-face is extremely important — that's never going

to go away. But beyond that, what does the new association model look like?

Oakley: Give me a couple of different approaches that you hear.

Fox: Well, some say that you don't even need a board of directors, you can do it all virtually, and it can be one person administering the whole thing via the Internet. I don't buy it, but that's one model. Another model is to reconfigure the governance structure. A lot of executives see the governance structure as being somewhat petrified. This approach would slim it down so that you can have faster, more fluid decision-making. But if you do that, of course, you lose the control and the consensus-building that you get from the older structures; balance is key. The Future Models discussion is very pie-in-the-sky but useful in forcing us to question and probe long-held assumptions.

There is a new book called *Linked*, by Albert-Laszlo Barabasi, a physicist out of Notre Dame. It's about the new science of networks, and it has sparked my interest. It looks at organizations and other systems to identify "gatekeepers," "hubs" and "nodes." Using this analysis, you can look at an organization to see who occupies which role. The individual who is the most connected is the hub; the one who has the information, like the secretary to the CEO, is the gatekeeper. And so on. The model also allows you to see who is isolated and to help get those people more integrated into the organization. Associations, especially professional associations, are all about networking. The applicability of this theory to our sphere opens up a whole new way of thinking about association management.

What is interesting about the book is that the author has discovered that this hub-and-node network applies to everything. It applies to the Internet. Google is a huge node. It applies to biological cell structure, terrorist cells. It applies to organizations of all types. IBM has used it in helping to better integrate women and minorities into its global knowledge network. So this new knowledge has profound implications, and I see important implications for association management and association models.

Oakley: Not only in terms of diversity issues, but as you were mentioning before also the renegades. That could help you to take advantage of the creative ideas that they bring and draw them more into the organization.

Shifting gears now, one of the things that is a big issue for every association are the financial issues. Do you have any thoughts about how we can strengthen our financial position over the next few years?

Fox: Every association will always be challenged financially because the needs are infinite, and we've always got to stretch to try to meet them.

Good portfolio management is critical, especially these days. We've got to always find more nondues revenues, means to diversify the revenue sources and take the pressure off the dues dollar as much as humanly possible.

I also take some encouragement in the fact that there are now alternative delivery mechanisms for many association services. Paper still counts of course, but paper is expensive, so we should look for ways to off-load more to the Net. Of course, that has costs, too, but nonetheless it's there, and that is one of the things I have been doing at SAA. I've been getting members to stop producing paper newsletters and to send them out by e-mail. Since the newsletters all have links in them anyway, it just made more sense.

Oakley: That's a good transition to the next topic. I wanted to pick up on the technology theme, because I was wondering how you might use technology more than what we are doing already.

Fox: The first thing that came to my mind was broadcast e-mail. We can use that more to greater benefit. Most people like to receive things by e-mail rather than by fax or even snail mail, so I'm hoping we can make more use of that. It is a great way to communicate if you

do it right. I think CD-ROM technology is another means that can be used to great effect. We will need to listen to members and pay close attention to preferred delivery mechanisms, but technology, when used properly, can be a tremendous asset.

There are also bells and whistles that are fun. For example, there is a way you can get an entire annual meeting program downloaded to your PDA. Or you can have the whole trade show on your PDA. ASAE uses this technology at its meetings and it's very helpful to the attendee.

Oakley: How do you expect to work with the board?

Fox: The board, the president and the executive director have a team partnership. One thing I've learned along the way is that no one can do it alone. In order to truly advance

the mission, we need to have all three working very closely and with a high degree of mutual respect.

Oakley: Are there questions that I haven't asked that I should have asked?

Fox: I just want to say how much I'm looking forward to coming on board AALL, how honored I am to be chosen to follow in Roger Parent's footsteps — a daunting prospect after his fine tenure — and how very much I'm looking forward to working with the staff. I can't wait to get out there and hear what everyone has to say!

Robert L. Oakley (oakley@law.georgetown.edu) is director of the law library and professor of law at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C. He served as AALL president in 2000–2001.

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