

## **An Interview with Dr. Aisha M. Johnson, Advocate, Educator, & Scholar by Ray Pun, IFLA CPDWL Advisor**

February 6, 2024

When we think of leadership in professional development, we need to think about different approaches and styles, and how to grow as a leader in the library field over time. We spotlight professional development trainers and experts in librarianship to talk about their work. In this blog post, we interview Dr. Aisha Johnson for her thoughts on leadership and professional development.



[Dr. Aisha Johnson \(she/her\)](#), Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Outreach at Georgia Institute of Technology Library, is a revelator of Southern library history, information access, and literacy. Formerly MLS Program Director for the School of Library and Information Sciences (LIS) at North Carolina Central University, continuing as adjunct, she stands on her commitment to enhancing LIS through service, practice, and curriculum to produce librarians and archivists who become scholar-practitioners and leaders.

**Thank you for taking the time to chat with us! Can you briefly tell us about your work as a library leader and your professional development interests?**

Aisha: I've been working in libraries for since 2006, starting as a circulation assistant for a public library. I have worked in a variety of libraries/archives (and departments) including academic (public and private), federal, and public. More specifically, I have worked progressively in archives and library leadership for more than 10 years. In these different roles, I have experienced different styles of leadership, some I didn't agree with and some I did. Oftentimes, I found myself in the position of not receiving the type of leadership I needed; people leadership. Those experiences helped me become the people-leader that I am today, with a toolbelt for situational leadership.

My style of leadership is strictly about people and professional development. As an educator, I always say I love to be the vehicle to someone's epiphany, and I mean that for students and professionals. That's my leadership! That is what I focus on, advocacy and professional development. When we better understand that people need to feel seen, valued, and heard for a true investment in the well-being of the organization, I think leaders – and those in managerial positions – will better understand emotional investments. Currently serving as the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Outreach at the Georgia Tech Library, I have been able to employ a variety of leadership skills from my toolbelt that has helped me be an inspiring leader and scholar-practitioner.

**What do you think are the challenges in engaging library workers at all levels in leadership development activities?**

Aisha: Organizations (and state politics) that restrict engagement with policy and funding. We know, everything DEI is under attack, but the reality is we have had to shift over the decades in a variety of ways due to political challenges. Our very core of intellectual freedom is challenged. But we are information professionals! We are and will continue to become more innovative in our approach to language concerning foundational activities and people. I encourage everyone to learn educational policy as it relates to your organization and follow the ink, if you will. Discuss it and see where it's going so you are ready without surprise. Learn the policy, learn the game. We got this, for the communities we serve. They need us and we need them.

Also, people. People are a challenge, sometimes. The "we've always done it this way" people. A good leader seeks to bring everyone along. Sometimes, we only focus on new and/or mid-career professionals. And while it may be challenging, it is not fair to neglect your seasoned and veteran professionals. They have institutional and professional knowledge. While it may take some maneuvering, do it. You won't regret it and they will appreciate it.

Challenges will always exist, and it is leadership's job to curve the challenges so that your library workers have a smoother day serving the patrons. That's leadership.

**What are some trends or areas in the library leadership field that you are seeing?**

Aisha: The leaders that are doing it right are invested in the development of their people...even if it means the person outgrowing the organization. Be invested in your people for the profession. We want to retain professionals for the LIS field, not just one organization. Bright minds should have bright futures.

I do not care for boxed-in departments, you know those that do not allow for the people to explore the work of others or engagement. I love when leaders are open and allow the natural curiosity of library workers to explore and engage. I think that is a wonderful "trend," but really it should be the culture. It breaks down barriers on a variety of levels and builds

understanding of how various parts of the big machine works. It gives way for empathy and appreciation of your colleagues.

Also, I wouldn't call community engagement a trend. It's a part of our core values; serving the community in social, recreational, and educational ways. I love that! It is one of the most exciting things when the library is meeting the community where they are in a fun and intriguing way.

**What resources or opportunities would you like to share to highlight the people-leadership skills?**

Aisha: Talk to people, communicate. Ask about experiences and seek guidance. This profession is filled with kind people who want new leaders to emerge and develop. No one will turn you away or not share their experiences. At least, I never do. The saying is "closed mouths don't get fed," and I have extended that to half open mouths don't get full. Talk to people.

Invest in your own professional development. Seek leadership and management training through professional organizations like [Association of College and Research Libraries](#), [Association of Southeastern Research Libraries](#), [American Library Association](#), [Society of American Archivists](#), [state library associations](#), etc. Even webinars and seminars provide helpful insight. You can learn leadership skills from a variety of places.

Get involved in the profession. Leadership needs to be seen. People need to get to know you and your platform. Seek to build partnerships and collaborations that add to the LIS platform of advocacy. Become scholar-practitioner. You have something to say, write about it. It helps build the LIS curriculum.

Get outside of yourself. Believe it or not, I am introvert. Yes, yes I am. But it was my passion and love for the profession that evolved me into the advocate that I am. I knew in order to get things done, I had to put the shyness to the side and build this platform. Not to say I do not get exhausted, but it does get easier. Now advocating – for libraries and archives, librarianship and archivists, leadership and professional development, representation, and inclusion – is my favorite thing. Advocate to the point that others are advocating for you and the platform. I'm really good at that and I only do what I am passionate about. It's the easiest way to remain authentic. Also, when it gets to the most frustrating moments, it's the simplest way to recall "the why."

Leave. Sounds absurd, right?! But be ok leaving. First let's be clear. People do not leave organizations; they leave leaders that are not invested in growing the individual. Always have a plan and be open to relocation. Especially early in your career, know that three to four years of impact is enough time for you to make a difference. Grow or Go. Be impactful for the profession, and sometimes (often times) that does not mean staying in the same

location for 5-10+ years. As long as you are building on an impactful platform, this will not hurt your career.

Pay attention to the leaders of the field, look at those CVs and resumes. Build the path for you while learning from others. Have a goal that highlights and uplifts the profession.

**Thank you for speaking with us! Anything else you'd like to share that we didn't get to talk about?**

Aisha: For library leaders, see your role beyond the library. The library is the soul of the schoolhouse, so commit to partnerships and collaborations across campus and community that highlight the services, collections, and people as resources. That's how we remain relevant as a primary resource. It will only strengthen the advocacy for students, faculty, and the community. Talk to people.

For those who aspire, leadership goes beyond a title. Leadership is innate, but it is also a taught skill set refined with experience. Even if you do not hold a titled leadership role within your organization, you can get involved in the profession and develop as a leadership, mover, and shaker. Leadership is a life skill that is transferable.

### **Visiting a Library Series: A High School School Library by CPDWL Advisor Ray Pun**

March 17, 2024 Categories: General



Recently I made a visit to the [Sequoia High School Media Center, a school library](#) in California, USA. I had a chance to meet with Ms. Snow, the teacher librarian to learn more about how her work as a teacher librarian and the school library supports high school students (ages 14-18). As part of this series on visiting libraries, I wanted to highlight what I learned from this visit and hopefully inspire you to visit your libraries and bring some ideas! It was amazing to see how Ms. Snow recruited and partnered with student ambassadors to promote the library. It really creates a lot of excitement when they take on initiatives to promote the library on social media and in person. Students also created "March Madness bracket" which was placed in front of the library.



The library ambassador team! Photo provided by Ms. Snow



A student-made March Madness bracket shared by Ms. Snow



Photo shared by Ms. Snow



Photo shared by Ms. Snow of student ambassadors; “each student put their name on a book spine and the goal of ambassadors is to build community around the media center and its goals.”





Here are some of the student ambassadors in cutouts holding a QR code to promote research and information literacy videos on their [YouTube Channel](#). The students are also in the videos and explain how to use the library resources.

There is also a book bike where Ms. Snow used after the pandemic to deliver books to students. This was based on an inspiration to deliver books with Ms. Snow's own bike. The book bike is occasionally shared during school events and parades. According to Ms. Snow, "The book bike appears in the quad and around campus from time to time to remind folks that literacy exists everywhere!" The library has a book display celebrating women's history month, in March.



Library Bike – photo provided by Ms. Snow



The library also has an exercise bike for anyone wanting to read while on-the-go! It's been used in the library's social media videos to promote reading and library resources. The library also has many graphic novels on display to be borrowed. There was also a series of

Dragon Ball graphic novels on display in honor of Akira Toriyama, creator of Dragon Ball, who passed away recently.



The media center also has a computer lab where students can learn different technology skills. Ms. Snow also teaches proper citations. The space is also used by the school's lego club. The shelf on the left contains books focusing on Indigenous experiences by Indigenous authors. The collections support the school's ethnic studies curriculum.



In addition, there are also "[zines](#)" which are small-circulation self-published works of original or appropriated texts and images, created by students to share out. On the shelf, there are also book recommendations created by students, like a bookstore you would see. It's a very clever way to get students involved in creating and sharing their experiences in this space.





I had a great time chatting with Ms. Snow about media literacy as well as other projects related to text books, multimedia learning, and podcasts. I highly recommend visiting a high school library because it's very different from an elementary or middle school library. In fact, visit any school library and meet with a school librarian if you have the opportunity!



**An Interview with Tracie D. Hall, Incoming Distinguished Practitioner in Residence at the University of Washington Information School**

April 19, 2024 Categories: General



Tracie D. Hall

Professional development work is more than attending a conference or a webinar. It's about learning how to bring one's values into the learning to address issues like inequity and disparity in the field. We spotlight library thought leaders and their thoughts on professional development and research. In this blog post, we interview Tracie D. Hall, [Incoming Distinguished Practitioner in Residence at the University of Washington Information School](#), for her thoughts on library issues like censorship, her current research project, and reflections on IFLA WLIC 2023

**Thank you for speaking with us! Please tell us about your work, your research, and what you are focusing on in libraries. What are you looking forward to regarding the University of Washington Information School?**

Since leaving the American Library Association (ALA), I've turned to a research project that has literally been on the side of my desk for the past decade. I'm interested in the history of de facto and de jure efforts to restrict the right to read and the right to learn to read, both in and beyond the United States. Censorship, compulsory illiteracy, and disinformation have long been used as tactics to repress and disempower people. I am returning to that subject in the hopes that I can produce some substantive writing that will raise visibility and inspire reparative action.

I think what I'm looking forward to most at the University of Washington Information School, which is also my alma mater, is co-investigating with students the deeply political nature of information access in and outside of libraries. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the flow of information and the ability to access and interpret it, ultimately determines socioeconomic and political agency or conversely, disenfranchisement.

**You attended IFLA WLIC 2023 in Rotterdam, what did you think? Any highlights and reflections you want to share with us?**

As always at IFLA, I spent a lot of time at the poster sessions. I really learn from talking with library practitioners about applied research. There were librarians from places like Senegal and Indonesia doing really progressive work. I was particularly impressed with the lengths that librarians at Chaoyang University of Technology (CYUT) in Taiwan have gone to make their Poding Memorial Library open to the broader community beyond the campus. I think

that colleges and universities have a real opportunity to grow their reach and impact by expanding their adult education offerings beyond degrees and certifications, and the library can be a resource for that.

Another huge highlight of WLIC 2023 is that I spent a significant amount of time, as I always try to do, visiting public libraries. I was able to get to the Rotterdam Public Library, De Boekenberg (the public library of Spijkenisse), The Hague Public Library, Utrecht Public Library, and of course OBA — Amsterdam's public library, which I first visited shortly after its opening in 2007 and remain obsessed with.

Visiting libraries outside of the US and looking for new and different models of service and how users respond is an indispensable part of my ongoing development as a librarian, LIS strategist, and educator. I have been known to plan my entire travel itinerary around libraries, even when taking vacations.

**We've been seeing an increasing wave of book banning especially on authors and illustrators who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) or LGBTQ+ in North America, in Asia, and in Europe now, what are your thoughts about these issues happening globally?**

You are right that the resurgence and really unprecedented nature of book censorship today has quickly become a global phenomena.

In the last six months I've spent sustained periods in Australia, South America, and Europe speaking about and observing the suppression of information, which has increasingly become state-sponsored or aided. Though book censorship is not new, what's concerning is that we are seeing the rise of censorship occur in and across democracies that fought for and were founded on civil liberties such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly. Restricting any one of these interconnected freedoms poses a threat to the ecosystem necessary to maintain democracy.

What's really worrying is that I am seeing evidence that those that seek to restrict the right to read and to discredit the histories of marginalized people in order to politically suppress those communities are being informed and emboldened by the book banning and media disinformation that has become so rampant in the US. Now we have some states banning not just books but also words like "gay" and in Alabama censoring whole concepts like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. My concern is that if we are not careful, censorship — as well as information restriction, and thought-policing — will become one of the most consequential US exports of this contemporary era.

**When we met at WLIC 2023, we briefly talked about the meaning of justice as a value in our work. You mentioned in a presentation at the ALA Annual 2020 virtual conference, ["Let our legacy be justice."](#) How should we ground ourselves in this meaning, and consider what justice means in librarianship work?**

It isn't lost on me that of the speeches I made and writings I authored during my tenure as executive director at ALA, "let our legacy be justice," seems to have left the most indelible mark. I'm grateful for that.

I wrote those words less than a month after the murder of George Floyd, when compounded by the racial and class disparities further revealed by the pandemic, libraries like other institutions were encountering lines in the sand: racist or antiracist, complicit or accountable, performative or committed, unjust or just. And to be honest, there are long histories of libraries being on both sides of these relationships.

What I wanted to stress then is that we who run and work in libraries always have a choice to reinforce the status quo of racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, and bias, or resist it. History judges every generation. That judgement becomes our legacy. My plea was then, as it is now, that when we are judged for what we did and what we did not do, let's work to ensure that the collective legacy of library workers practicing today is that we consciously tried to stand on the right side of history. Let it be that we consciously chose equity, accessibility, fairness, and inclusion. Let our legacy be that we did not let disparity, violence, and tyranny stand unchecked even when it loomed over us, even when it called us out.

Categories: General