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7-2021

Creating a More Diverse Workforce: How the AALL George A. Strait Minority Scholarship & Fellowship Program Is Supporting Future Minority Law Librarians

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CREATING A MORE DIVERSE WORKFORCE



How the AALL George A. Strait Minority Scholarship & Fellowship Program is supporting future minority law librarians.

BY SHAMIKA D. DALTON, ANNALEE HICKMAN & TRINA HOLLOWAY

The George A. Strait Minority Scholarship was established in 1990 by the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL), in partnership with Thomson Reuters. The namesake of the scholarship, George A. Strait, was a pioneer within the law librarianship profession, a long-time law librarian at Harvard University and the University of Iowa, a Marian Gould Gallagher Distinguished Service Award recipient, an inaugural AALL Hall of Fame inductee, and an influential advocate for minorities and human rights. Designed to financially support and foster minority students eyeing a career in law librarianship, the George A. Strait Minority Scholarship (hereinafter Strait Scholarship) has contributed directly to the diversity of the law librarianship profession for over three decades. In fact, a previous *AALL Spectrum* article from 2004 spotlighted the Strait Scholarship recipients up to that point and the broad talents and contributions they have made to the profession. (Read the *AALL Spectrum* article at bit.ly/F04Strait.) But it was clear there was still much more the profession could do for future minority law librarians.

In 2017, Ronald E. Wheeler Jr., then-president of AALL, created a task force to address this issue. When asked why it was important to convene a task force to

The recent addition of a fellowship to the George A. Strait Minority Scholarship offers future minority law librarians a paid internship and mentorship as they embark on a career in law librarianship.

in the job market.” As a result of the task force, a fellowship was created as a companion to the Strait Scholarship, and the standing AALL George A. Strait Minority Scholarship & Fellows Committee was formed and charged to oversee the Strait Minority Scholarship & Fellowship Program.

Strait Scholarship & Fellowship Requirements

The George A. Strait Minority Scholarship & Fellowship are intended to support minority students in establishing meaningful careers in law librarianship. The basic requirements for the Strait Scholarship and/or Strait Fellowship are that the applicant must:

- be a student enrolled in an accredited library school or law school program;
- be a member of a recognized minority group (as defined by current U.S. guidelines); and
- intend to pursue a career in law librarianship.

Students may apply for either the Strait Scholarship, the Strait Fellowship, or both. Receiving funds from one does not necessarily lessen their chances to receive the other. (For more details, visit bit.ly/AALL-scholarships.)

Strait Fellowship Logistics

The Strait Fellowship takes fostering future law librarians a step further than the Strait Scholarship by giving recipients mentors and rich experiences in the law librarianship profession. Each Strait Fellow receives:

- a paid fellowship in a law library, with the fellowship stipend being awarded directly to the recipient in two installments—one at the beginning of the fellowship and one at the end;
- a mentor assigned by the host institution during the fellowship;
- AALL membership for one year; and

- paid registration to the AALL Annual Meeting & Conference that year.

Strait Fellowship Statistics

Since the fellowship began, \$20,000 has been given to the fellows to help support them as they dedicate time and work to their host institutions. The recipients include:

- **Fellow:** Oheneba Amponsah
 - » **Host Institution:** Van Ness Feldman LLP, in Washington, DC
 - » **Mentor:** Susan Pries, Director of Library and Research Services
 - » **Year Awarded:** 2019
- **Fellow:** Christine Park
 - » **Host Institution:** Maloney Library at Fordham University School of Law
 - » **Mentor:** Kelly Leong, Head of Reference
 - » **Year Awarded:** 2020
- **Fellow:** Kimberly Barzola
 - » **Host Institution:** Harvard Law School Library
 - » **Mentor:** Jessica Chapel, Librarian/Archivist for Digital Projects
 - » **Year Awarded:** 2020
- **Fellow:** Michael Muehe
 - » **Host Institution:** Harvard Law School Library
 - » **Mentor:** Karen Beck, Manager of Historical and Special Collections
 - » **Year Awarded:** 2020

The current host institution list, available when students download the application to apply, includes 58 academic law libraries, 30 court law libraries, and six law firm libraries across 36 states, plus Washington, DC, and Canada.

Spotlights on Strait Fellows and Host Institutions

The following insights from Strait Fellows and host institutions

reexamine this initiative, Wheeler stated, “The task force was important to me because I saw a very definite need. At the time, I was hiring for a position in my own academic law library, and I noticed that the candidates of color often did not have the elite schools, prestigious internships, or other indicators that would make their resumes competitive with the best of the best. While we can’t offer admission to elite schools, I thought, we could at least find a way to get these candidates hands-on experience in law libraries we all know, and that might make them more competitive



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– Oheneba Amponsah

demonstrate how valuable the Strait Fellowship can be for both the recipients and the host institutions.

Strait Fellows

Oheneba Amponsah, the first Strait Fellow, paved the way for the Strait Program with his fellowship at a law firm library. In reflecting on his fellowship, Amponsah concluded: “My experience as a Strait Fellow was truly incredible in that I was afforded the opportunity to complete a legal research project of interest at Van Ness Feldman LLP, a firm with a major focus on American Indian and Alaskan Native Law. My mentor, Susan Pries, was phenomenal and gracious. Her expert guidance and world-class instruction were the most memorable part of my experience. My research project analyzed the federal legislative history of the New Markets Tax Credit Program and whether the program has been implemented in a manner that adequately serves American Indian and Alaska Native communities. The project was especially important to me as I am a Ghanaian-American of Alaskan Native descent.”

The experience of being a fellow can have a lasting impact. For Amponsah, he elaborates that “the fellowship was a truly transformative experience and allowed me

to discover a new specific career path in law librarianship: legislative history research, particularly in the fields of taxation, finance, and consumer law,” and he advises “future Strait Fellows to find a subject matter that truly intrigues them and find the best host institution and mentor who may aid them in researching their passion!”

Kimberly Barzola, a 2020 Strait Fellow, first heard about the George A. Strait Minority Fellowship from a former co-worker, whom she has been fortunate enough to work with again thanks to the support of this award.

Barzola shared why she applied for the fellowship: “Before beginning my fellowship at the Harvard Law School Library (HLSL), I was a contingent worker at various academic libraries in the area, and I didn’t have a clear understanding of what law libraries offered and even what a career in law librarianship could look like. What I did know is that I had skills to contribute and a passion for expanding access to resources held at these institutions, both digitally and linguistically. My experience at HLSL showed me that there was a place for me in this field.”

Barzola gives this advice to anyone considering applying for the fellowship: “I highly encourage library workers and, in particular,

those that come from diverse life experiences, to seek out opportunities such as this award to support their career advancement. Having the opportunity to work with dedicated and accomplished colleagues in this field through the fellowship portion of the award is an invaluable experience.”

Strait Host Institutions

Kelly Leong, head of reference at Fordham University’s Maloney Law Library, mentored Strait Fellow Christine Park. Describing her experience, Leong said: “Christine and I worked together to define her goals for the fellowship, including faculty research and instruction experience, and I worked to meet those goals by seeking out opportunities within the work the library is doing. For example, she is working on two long-term faculty research projects, which is something she has not done before.” Since participating in the Strait Fellows Program, Leong advises future Strait Fellows to “do your research when choosing a host institution because every library is different, and you will want to find one that is active in areas that align with your experiential goals,” and she advises future Strait host institutions to “truly understand the goals of your Strait Fellow, assign enough experiential work to meaningfully fill their time, and make a time commitment to manage and teach the fellow.”

Joseph D. Lawson, deputy director at the Harris County (Texas) Robert W. Hainsworth Law Library, is a potential mentor. Lawson believes that public and government law libraries can provide Strait Fellows with a unique opportunity to work closely with a variety of patrons: “My library jumped at the chance to participate as a potential host institution in the Strait Fellows Program. As a government law library focusing on public service, Harris County Robert W. Hainsworth Law Library is continually interested in building a staff



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– Kimberly Barzola

that reflects the diverse community we serve. To promote the same goal throughout our profession, we hope to provide a unique opportunity for fellows who are interested in public law librarianship, access to justice, legal practice technology, and practical legal research. By expanding opportunities for unique practical experience, we hope to promote entry and advancement of new voices in the profession.”

A Call for Action

The AALL Strait Scholarship & Fellows Committee is asking for your support in this impactful diversity initiative. Highlighted below are a few requests from the Committee:

- **Become a host institution.** When the Committee sends out the annual Call for Host Institutions, consider adding your library to the list by providing your law library’s name and main contact person to the Committee Chair. No additional action is required until a Strait Fellow reaches out to you with a request to complete their fellowship at your library. The Committee welcomes host institutions from all sectors—academic, law firm, and court.
- **Promote the Strait Scholarship & Fellowship.** If your university has a library degree program, forward AALL’s annual announcement about the Strait Scholarship & Fellowship to the Dean and encourage them to send it to students of color who have an interest in law librarianship. If

you teach a library science class or supervise someone interested in law librarianship, encourage them to apply, and volunteer to write a letter of recommendation for their application.

- **Invest in your Strait Fellow.** The fellowship program is about more than giving fellows work experience. Our hope is that host institutions and mentors will invest in the fellow’s future as they transition from student to colleague. During their time at your library, allow your fellow to shadow your legal research class to help prepare them for teaching, and invite them to your library meetings to help them better understand the day-to-day operations of law libraries. When your fellow begins to look for employment, review their cover letters, volunteer to conduct mock interviews, or be the audience for a mock job talk. At the AALL Annual Meeting & Conference, help them select programming that will give them a well-rounded experience, bring them along as your “plus 1” to social events, and introduce them to the “movers and shakers.”

If we are serious about increasing the racial diversity in our profession, we must promote and support targeted programs such as the Strait Scholarship & Fellows Program. It is evident that this initiative has made a sizable impact on the experiences of both the fellows and host institution personnel. We want to thank everyone who has helped to make this initiative possible.

Remember: it’s never too late for you to play a role in diversifying the law librarianship profession. ■

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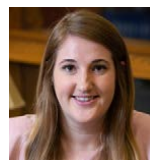
LEARN MORE

Get additional information about the George A. Strait Minority Scholarship & Fellowship at bit.ly/AALL-scholarships.



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