Library Leadership and Collaboration:

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Slide 1:

Good morning and good evening, everyone. Thank you, JASPUL, Maruzen, Mr. Tagaki, and all the organizers, for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Trevor Dawes. I currently serve as Vice Provost for Library, Museums, and University Librarian at the University of Delaware and am the co-founder of the consulting firm Inclusive Knowledge Solutions. I'm also honored to serve as co-chair of the Information Access Working Group within CULCON, the Japan-United States Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange.

Today, I will share perspectives on library leadership in the 21st century, drawing on my experience in the United States while recognizing that the context in Japanese libraries differs. I also want to explore how we can strengthen collaboration between our library communities to address shared challenges and advance our common mission.

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Before we begin, I want to acknowledge that our library systems operate in different cultural and institutional contexts. U.S. and Japanese universities have distinct traditions, governance structures, and expectations. However, I believe that the fundamental principles of library leadership, service excellence, innovation, collaboration, and advocacy transcend these differences.

The ways in which we provide service may differ, but at the heart of what we do, we want to ensure that the students, scholars, and researchers have access to the resources they need to be successful. We recognize that we must innovate and collaborate across institutions, and even across borders, because no single library, no single institution, can provide everything our community needs.

My goal today is not to prescribe American solutions to Japanese contexts, but rather to share ideas and experiences that might resonate with your own work, while learning from the approaches you've developed. The best outcomes emerge from mutual exchange, not one-way knowledge transfer.

But before I delve into more detail, let me share a little more about myself, and I will thank Mr. Takagi again for his introduction.

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My leadership journey can be described as “linear.” I was a staff member, then a supervisor, and later a department head at the Columbia University Libraries in New York City. I was then given the opportunity to be a division head (overseeing several departments) at Princeton University Library. It was there that I also became actively involved in professional associations, including the American Library Association, the Association of College and Research Libraries, and the Association of Research Libraries. I also participated in local organizations such as the New Jersey Library Association. I was later invited to serve as the Associate University Librarian at Washington University in St. Louis, which allowed me to expand the areas for which I had responsibility and to hone the skills that would be beneficial in the role I currently hold at the University of Delaware.

Here I was invited to serve as a commissioner on the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission and as a panelist for CULCON, but I’ll say more about that later. For the last two years, I have been a professor at the Kyoto College of Graduate Studies for Informatics (KCG.edu).

I don’t believe my path is uncommon among many people in positions like mine, but I also believe leadership occurs throughout the organization, a theme to which I will return later in this talk.

I will also share some information about the University of Delaware and our Library to provide some institutional and organizational context.

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The University of Delaware is one of the oldest universities in the United States, tracing its origin back to 1743. We have a student population of just over 24,000 (mostly undergraduates) and a staff of close to 5,000 (roughly 1,500 of which are faculty members). We have 10 colleges and schools, with our College of Arts and Sciences being the largest. Other colleges include the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the College of Earth, Ocean, and Environment, the College of Education and Human Development, the College of Engineering, the College of Health Sciences,

the Biden School of Public Policy and Administration, and two interdisciplinary colleges - the Honors College and the Graduate College. Across these colleges and schools, we offer more than 150 majors and minors, and over 200 graduate and post-baccalaureate programs.

Some of our outstanding programs include Chemical Engineering, Education, and Physical Therapy. We are also proud to be the first U.S. university to offer a study abroad program, more than 100 years ago (to France). Today, we have students studying in many countries around the world, from the Virgin Islands to Thailand, and yes, Japan (in collaboration with Soka University outside Tokyo).

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The Library, Museums, and Press (that I'll refer to as the Library), like all academic libraries, supports the university's teaching, research, and service mission. We do so through providing access to collections, services, programs, and workshops. We are well integrated into the academic programs, although more so in some colleges and departments than in others. We have one main library building and three smaller branch libraries. The museum comprises three galleries: contemporary art of the Americas, African American art, and a mineral collection. Until 2016, when I arrived, the museums reported separately, and we spent some time after 2016 thinking about how to build greater synergy across the library and museums so we can work even more closely than we did prior to the organizational change.

The University of Delaware Press publishes approximately 15-20 books annually in the subjects of art history, material culture, English literature, and Delawareana (materials about Delaware and the surrounding areas).

Combined, we have a staff of 115 librarians, archivists, curators, IT professionals, data professionals, and other professionals. The full-time staff is complemented by approximately 100 students who provide invaluable services for us and for the community.

Our Special Collections, which include rare books, manuscripts, and archives, bring scholars from around the world to use our resources.

As I go through the talk today, some of the examples I share will come from our experiences at the University of Delaware.

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We often describe libraries as "the heart of the university." But what does this really mean in practice? It's more than just being physically central to campus, although that certainly helps. It's about being intellectually and operationally central to the academic mission.

The library serves as an intellectual commons where disciplines intersect, where undergraduate students prepare for their first research papers, and doctoral candidates find the resources to defend their dissertations. The concept of the academic library as the "intellectual commons" on campus captures several interconnected ideas about the library's role in higher education:

It is A Shared Space for Knowledge Creation: we emphasize that it's a place where knowledge isn't just consumed but actively produced through collaboration, dialogue, and inquiry. Unlike privately owned resources, a commons belongs to the community as a whole and supports collective intellectual work. At the University of Delaware, for example, we have a data visualization laboratory, and we've created spaces for our diverse student populations (like a reflection room, at the request of our Muslim Students, or our Open Space at the request of our LGBTQIA graduate students, and are about to create a family study room for our students (mostly grsgraduate students) that have small children). Although these spaces are developed at the request of a particular group, all our spaces are available to all library users.

Bridging Disciplinary Boundaries: The library is one of the few spaces on campus where scholars from different disciplines naturally intersect. A biology student might sit next to a philosophy major; a historian might collaborate with an engineer. This cross-pollination of ideas doesn't happen as readily in department-specific buildings.

Democratic Access to Information The "commons" language emphasizes equitable access - the library provides resources and expertise that level the playing field, ensuring that intellectual inquiry isn't limited by individual purchasing power or departmental budgets. This includes physical collections, databases, technology, and expert assistance.

Physical and Virtual Gathering Place Modern academic libraries function as both physical destinations and virtual platforms where the campus community comes together to study, research, create, and exchange ideas. The commons concept encompasses reading rooms, collaborative spaces, makerspaces, digital repositories, and online research guides.

Stewarding Collective Intellectual Assets: Libraries preserve and provide access to the institution's scholarly output and cultural heritage, making the collective knowledge of the university community available to current and future generations.

The library also supports the entire academic lifecycle, connecting people not just to information, but to each other and to new ideas. This begins with

Discovery and Exploration. We help users identify relevant sources through search tools, databases, and discovery systems. Reference librarians provide consultation to help refine research questions and develop effective search strategies. This foundational work shapes how projects begin and evolve.

Access and Acquisition: Beyond providing immediate access to purchased collections, libraries obtain materials not in their holdings through interlibrary loan, document delivery, and resource-sharing networks. This ensures that geographic location or institutional budget doesn't limit what researchers can access.

Critical Evaluation and Information Literacy Librarians teach users to assess source credibility, understand peer review, recognize bias, and navigate the scholarly communication ecosystem. These skills are essential throughout one's academic career and beyond.

Creation and Production We support knowledge creation through writing centers, digital scholarship labs, makerspaces, media production facilities, and data visualization tools. We provide both the technology and expertise to help users produce scholarship in various formats.

Management and Organization Libraries offer tools and instruction for citation management, research data management, and project organization. These skills become increasingly critical as research projects grow in complexity.

Publication and Dissemination: Through institutional repositories, open-access support, digital publishing platforms, and scholarly communication expertise, libraries help researchers share their work widely. Many libraries, including ours, now provide copyright guidance, support for author rights, and assistance with navigating publisher agreements.

Preservation and Stewardship Libraries ensure long-term access to scholarship through digital preservation, special collections care, and participation in preservation networks. This guarantees that today's research remains available for future scholars.

Teaching and Curriculum Support. Beyond individual research support, libraries partner with faculty on course design, provide course-integrated instruction, and develop open educational resources that reduce costs while improving learning outcomes.

This support distinguishes academic libraries from other information providers. We are invested in the full arc of scholarly work, not just isolated transactions. This framing has become particularly important in justifying library investments and asserting the library's

central role in the academic mission, especially during periods of budget constraint or when the library's value is questioned.

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How else do we demonstrate this value? I think about it in four key areas:

First, teaching and learning. Information literacy is not just about finding sources—it's a critical thinking skill. Our librarians embed in coursework, partner with faculty, and help students become sophisticated consumers and creators of information.

Second, research support. This has evolved far beyond collection building. We now provide research consultation, data management services, and facilitate access to global resources. We help researchers navigate an increasingly complex information landscape.

Third, information literacy in its broadest sense. We teach digital citizenship, ethical information use, and critical evaluation of sources—skills students need throughout their lives. Information literacy today also includes AI literacy and so many other focused areas of knowledge, such as visual literacy, financial literacy, and data literacy, to name a few.

Fourth, community engagement. We connect the university with the broader community through public programming, cultural events, and the preservation and sharing of institutional knowledge.

Let’s spend a little more time specifically on the teaching and learning aspect.

Academic libraries have reframed information literacy from a mechanical skill (knowing how to search databases) into a sophisticated critical thinking practice. This shift recognizes that in an environment of information abundance, misinformation, and algorithmic curation, the real challenge isn't finding information - it's evaluating, contextualizing, and using it responsibly.

Information literacy as critical thinking involves:

- **Interrogating sources**: Understanding who created information, why, for what audience, and with what potential biases or limitations
- **Recognizing knowledge as constructed**: Seeing scholarship as an ongoing conversation where authority is contextual, and claims are provisional

- **Understanding information ecosystems**: Recognizing how algorithms, paywalls, search engine optimization, and platform design shape what information we encounter
- **Ethical engagement**: Considering issues of attribution, intellectual property, privacy, and the social impact of information sharing

Frameworks like the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education explicitly position these as threshold concepts - transformative ideas that change how students understand research and scholarship, not just discrete competencies to check off.

To meet students where they are and for librarians to be more visible, the embedded librarianship model moves librarians away from the reference desk and into the spaces where teaching and learning actually happen. Rather than one-shot instruction sessions, embedded librarians become ongoing partners in the educational process.

An embedded librarian might be listed on the course syllabus, maintain regular presence in the learning management system (Canvas, Blackboard), participate in class discussions, and provide feedback on student work. They're available when students are actually grappling with research challenges, not just during a scheduled library session.

Instead of trying to cover "everything about research" in one session, embedded librarians work with professors to integrate information literacy throughout the semester. Early assignments might focus on source evaluation, mid-semester work on developing search strategies, and final projects on ethical use and citation. This scaffolding reinforces that critical information skills develop over time.

Embedded librarians tailor instruction to disciplinary norms and expectations. What counts as a credible source in biology differs from what counts in history; legal research follows different conventions than literary analysis. By embedding in specific courses or programs, librarians can meaningfully address these contextual differences.

When librarians are embedded, they can assess student learning more authentically - reviewing annotated bibliographies, providing feedback on research proposals, and evaluating final projects. This ongoing assessment allows both librarians and professors to identify where students struggle and adjust instruction accordingly.

Perhaps most importantly, embedded librarianship builds trust and rapport. Students who know their librarian by name and have interacted with them multiple times are far more likely to seek help when they're stuck. This relationship-building is especially valuable for first-generation students or those who might feel intimidated by the library.

Embedded librarianship is resource-intensive. With limited librarian staffing, we have to be strategic about which courses or programs receive this deep level of support. It works best when professors are genuinely collaborative partners who value information literacy, not just outsourcing the "library day" to someone else.

The combination of positioning information literacy as critical thinking and delivering it through embedded partnerships represents the library's evolution from warehouse to active educational partner - from providing access to fostering intellectual capabilities that serve students throughout their lives.

Beyond collections and services, libraries can demonstrate leadership in information literacy, research support, and community engagement.

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But library leadership doesn't stop at our own walls. We have opportunities, and I would argue, responsibilities, to lead on campus-wide initiatives that align with our expertise and values.

Three areas where library leaders can make a particular impact are: Open Access initiatives, where we advocate for scholarly communication reform and help faculty navigate publishing options; Research Data Management, where we're often best positioned to develop university-wide policies and train researchers in best practices; and College Affordability through Open Educational Resources, where we can calculate and demonstrate real cost savings for students.

Libraries have emerged as institutional leaders in these areas because they sit at the intersection of scholarship, access, equity, and institutional mission.

In terms of open access, libraries have been the primary advocates and infrastructure builders on most campuses, often against significant institutional inertia and publisher resistance.

Librarians have led efforts to establish institutional open-access policies, educating faculty senates about author rights, article processing charges, and the public-access implications of federally funded research. We've helped faculty understand that they can retain rights to their work rather than signing them away to publishers.

Libraries build and maintain institutional repositories that provide free, permanent access to faculty scholarship, student theses, conference proceedings, and other

institutional outputs. We've developed workflows for deposit, metadata creation, and preservation that make open access sustainable rather than just aspirational.

As the costs of journal packages have become unsustainable, libraries have negotiated transformative agreements that shift spending from subscriptions to open-access publishing. We've also fought to make these agreements transparent and to ensure they don't simply replicate existing inequities in a different form.

Librarians help researchers distinguish legitimate open-access venues from predatory publishers, protecting both scholarly integrity and research budgets.

Regarding research data management, libraries have claimed it as a natural extension of our traditional roles in organizing, preserving, and providing access to scholarly materials.

With U.S. federal funding agencies requiring data management plans, libraries stepped in to provide expertise that didn't exist elsewhere on campus. We help researchers think through data formats, storage, documentation, sharing, and long-term preservation before research projects even begin.

Libraries have built or partnered on data repositories, providing sustainable storage solutions and ensuring research data remains accessible beyond the life of individual grants or researchers' careers. This includes both institutional repositories and partnerships with discipline-specific or national repositories.

Through workshops, consultations, and embedded support, librarians teach researchers about metadata standards, file-naming conventions, version control, documentation practices, and FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable). These seemingly mundane practices are essential for research reproducibility and data reuse.

Librarians bring important perspectives on data privacy, particularly for sensitive research involving human subjects. We help researchers navigate the tension between open data principles and ethical obligations to protect participant confidentiality.

Data management often requires collaboration between libraries, IT, research offices, and discipline-specific experts. Libraries, as boundary-spanning organizations, frequently serve as conveners and coordinators, ensuring campus approaches are coherent rather than fragmented.

Finally, libraries have championed Open Educational Resources (OERs) as both an equity issue and a pedagogical opportunity, recognizing that textbook costs create real barriers to student success.

We have effectively made the case that when students skip buying textbooks, drop courses, or take lighter course loads due to costs, this directly impacts retention and time to graduation. We've quantified these impacts in ways that resonate with administrators and faculty: students at your institution likely face thousands in textbook costs annually, and this burden falls heaviest on low-income students and students of color.

Libraries have built platforms and guides that help faculty find high-quality OER alternatives to commercial textbooks. This curation is critical because the decentralized nature of OER can make discovery challenging.

Moving to OER isn't as simple as swapping one book for another. Libraries provide instructional design support, copyright consultation, and technical assistance to help faculty adapt and integrate OER into their courses. Some libraries, including ours at the University of Delaware, offer grant funding to support faculty adoption.

Libraries have led efforts to document the impact of OER on student success, demonstrating that well-implemented OER doesn't just save money but can also improve learning outcomes. This evidence is critical for sustaining institutional commitment.

Libraries have also advocated for and implemented other affordability initiatives: course reserves, textbook lending programs, inclusive access models (though these require careful evaluation), and partnerships with bookstores or publishers that reduce costs without sacrificing quality.

These leadership roles don’t happen by accident. Libraries are positioned to lead because:

- We have mission alignment around access and equity
- We understand both the scholarly communication system and its challenges and limitations
- We have relationships across campus with faculty, students, and administrators
- We bring technical expertise in metadata, preservation, and systems
- We operate on institutional rather than departmental timelines, allowing us to build sustainable infrastructure

The challenge, particularly in resource-constrained environments like ours, is that this leadership requires dedicated staff time and expertise. Every position left unfilled, every budget cut to collections, makes it harder to provide these services effectively. Yet these are precisely the areas where libraries demonstrate value that extends far beyond

circulation statistics - we're advancing institutional missions around research excellence, student success, and educational equity.

Beyond campus, we strengthen our profession through involvement in local and national organizations, through mentoring emerging librarians, and through international engagement.

Participation through IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations, is one way to be internationally engaged. IFLA offers librarians distinctive professional development opportunities and institutional benefits that differ significantly from national or regional library associations:

Academic libraries worldwide face remarkably similar issues - budget constraints, evolving scholarly communication models, information literacy demands, and technology integration, but approach them with different strategies shaped by local contexts. IFLA participation exposes librarians to international approaches to common problems, providing fresh perspectives that can inform local practice.

For example, European libraries' experiences with Plan S and transformative agreements offer valuable lessons for U.S. libraries navigating similar transitions. Scandinavian models of open access infrastructure might inspire alternative approaches to institutional repositories. Learning how libraries in resource-constrained environments maximize impact with limited funding can inform strategic decisions anywhere.

IFLA builds networks that transcend national boundaries and cultural contexts. These relationships become invaluable for international initiatives, collaborative projects, and understanding how information access issues play out globally. These networks also facilitate resource sharing, collaborative collection development, and joint digital preservation initiatives that would be difficult to establish through purely domestic channels.

IFLA advocates for libraries, information access, intellectual freedom, and literacy on the world stage, engaging with UNESCO, WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), and other international bodies on issues such as copyright, censorship, and digital rights. Individual librarians involved in these efforts gain a sophisticated understanding of information policy at scales that inform local advocacy work.

IFLA sections and special interest groups provide opportunities to develop deep expertise in specific areas, including academic libraries, digital preservation, government information, library buildings, and information literacy, while engaging with international experts.

For academic libraries and their parent institutions, having staff engaged in international professional organizations enhances reputation and visibility. It signals commitment to global engagement, positions the institution as a leader in library innovation, and can facilitate international partnerships, exchange programs, and collaborative research.

IFLA involvement requires real resources; conference travel internationally is expensive, time zones complicate virtual meetings, and committee work demands time.

However, for institutions with international programs, globally engaged faculty, or international student populations, IFLA engagement by the librarians directly supports institutional internationalization goals in ways that domestic professional development doesn't.

Demonstrating knowledge of open access, research, college affordability, or international engagement is one way to show leadership. But what makes an effective library leader?

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I want to emphasize that leadership happens at every level of an organization, not just in senior positions. Some of the most transformative initiatives I've witnessed have come from frontline staff who recognize an unmet need, from mid-career librarians who build cross-institutional collaborations, or from emerging professionals who bring fresh perspectives to entrenched problems. When we restrict our concept of leadership to titles and hierarchies, we miss the distributed expertise and creative problem-solving that exists throughout our organizations.

That said, I believe there are some traits and qualities that are essential for leaders.

Vision and Strategic Thinking The ability to see beyond current constraints and anticipate user needs distinguishes effective library leaders at every level. This doesn't mean having all the answers; it means asking the right questions. A cataloging librarian who recognizes that existing metadata practices exclude certain communities and proposes alternatives is exercising strategic vision. A circulation supervisor who notices usage patterns suggesting new service needs is thinking strategically. Vision means connecting daily work to larger purposes and imagining how things could be different and better.

Strategic thinking also involves understanding context—institutional priorities, budget realities, political dynamics—and finding pathways forward that acknowledge constraints without being limited by them. It's the difference between saying "we can't afford that" and asking "how might we accomplish this goal given our resources?"

Collaborative Mindset and Relationship Building. We cannot accomplish our goals alone, which makes collaboration fundamental rather than optional. But genuine collaboration goes beyond coordinating schedules or dividing tasks. It requires building bridges across departments, breaking down silos, and fostering inclusive decision-making where diverse voices genuinely shape outcomes rather than simply being heard.

This means actively seeking perspectives different from our own—engaging with facilities staff who understand building usage patterns, IT colleagues who bring technical expertise, faculty who know disciplinary research practices, and students who experience our services directly. It means recognizing that the reference desk assistant, who interacts with students daily, has insights into user needs that administrators in offices might miss.

Collaborative leadership also involves creating spaces where people feel safe contributing ideas, disagreeing constructively, and taking informed risks. It's building cultures where "I don't know, but let's figure it out together" is valued over false certainty.

Adaptability and Resilience Our rapidly changing environment—evolving technologies, shifting user expectations, unstable budgets, new models of scholarly communication—demands leaders who can navigate ambiguity without becoming paralyzed. Adaptability isn't about abandoning principles or changing direction with every trend; it's about remaining flexible in approach while staying grounded in mission.

Resilience means learning from setbacks without being defined by them. When an initiative fails, when funding doesn't materialize, when expected support evaporates—resilient leaders analyze what happened, reflect on the lessons learned, adjust strategy, and move forward. They model for their teams that experimentation involves risk and that failure is information, not catastrophe.

Emotional Intelligence and Cultural Competence Understanding diverse user needs requires more than demographic data or usage statistics—it demands emotional intelligence and genuine curiosity about people's experiences. This means recognizing that a first-generation student's hesitation to ask for help may reflect anxiety about belonging rather than a lack of interest. It means understanding that international students navigate not just language barriers but different educational cultures and expectations about libraries.

Emotional intelligence involves self-awareness—understanding our own biases, triggers, and limitations and using that awareness to build authentic relationships.

Building trust across cultural and disciplinary boundaries requires humility and patience. It means listening more than talking, asking questions rather than making assumptions, and recognizing that our way of doing things isn't the only valid approach.

Communication and Advocacy Skills Articulating library value to administrators, faculty, students, and external stakeholders requires meeting people where they are and speaking their languages. Explaining scholarly communication issues to a CEO or CFO demands a different framing than discussing them with faculty. Advocating for information literacy with deans means connecting to retention and student success metrics, not just educational philosophy.

Effective communication also means storytelling—making abstract concepts concrete through specific examples and narratives that resonate emotionally, not just intellectually. Budget numbers are important, but the story of a student who succeeded because of library support creates a different understanding.

Advocacy happens at all levels. A subject librarian advocating with a department chair for embedded instruction is exercising leadership. A metadata librarian explaining to IT why certain technical decisions matter for discoverability is leading. Staff advocating for more accessible service policies are shaping the organization.

This also means speaking difficult truths with courage and care—telling administrators that proposed cuts will genuinely harm students, telling faculty that their favorite database is unsustainable, telling colleagues that current practices perpetuate inequities. Effective advocacy balances honesty with strategic awareness of what's possible.

Commitment to Continuous Learning The library field evolves constantly, requiring leaders who stay current with emerging technologies while developing new competencies as needs evolve. Continuous learning goes beyond attending webinars or reading professional literature; it means cultivating genuine intellectual curiosity and modeling lifelong learning for our organizations.

Continuous learning also involves helping others develop. Leaders mentor emerging professionals, create professional development opportunities for staff, and build organizational cultures where learning is valued and resourced, not just expected on people's own time.

Equity-Mindedness and Social Justice Orientation Library leaders must actively work to identify and dismantle barriers to access and success. This means examining policies, practices, and collections through equity lenses—asking who is served well and who is excluded or marginalized.

Systems Thinking Understanding how different parts of the organization interconnect and how changes in one area ripple through others prevents unintended consequences and enables more effective problem-solving. A leader proposing new services considers staffing implications, technical requirements, training needs, budget impacts, and user expectations—recognizing these aren't separate issues but interconnected elements of organizational systems.

Courage and Calculated Risk-Taking Sometimes, leadership means proceeding despite uncertainty, championing unpopular positions, or challenging powerful interests. Whether it's a subject librarian proposing radical changes to collection practices or a dean confronting unsustainable publisher pricing, effective leadership requires courage tempered by strategic judgment.

Fostering Leadership Throughout the Organization

Creating cultures where leadership emerges at all levels requires intentional effort. It means:

- **Distributing decision-making authority** so people closest to the work have meaningful input
- **Creating opportunities for emerging leaders** through project leadership, committee work, and professional development
- **Recognizing and celebrating leadership** from unexpected sources, not just formal positions
- **Building psychological safety** where people can propose ideas, disagree, and take risks without fear
- **Providing mentorship and coaching** that develops capabilities rather than just assigning tasks
- **Removing barriers** that prevent staff from leading, whether resource constraints, rigid hierarchies, or cultural norms that privilege certain voices

When leadership is cultivated throughout the organization, libraries become more innovative, responsive, and resilient. They can navigate complexity more effectively because more people are engaged in sensing environment changes, identifying opportunities, and developing solutions.

These leadership traits, if present throughout the organization, can foster a healthy organizational culture.

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Toxic Dynamics and Culture Change in Academic Libraries

I've written about toxic dynamics in academic libraries—patterns that, unfortunately, persist in many institutions despite our profession's stated values of access, equity, and service. These include hierarchical rigidity, in which decision-making is concentrated at the top, and frontline expertise is systematically devalued. We see resistance to change manifesting as "we've always done it this way" defensiveness, where protecting established practices takes precedence over meeting evolving user needs. Exclusionary practices appear in who gets heard in meetings, whose ideas are taken seriously, who receives developmental opportunities, and whose perspectives shape strategic direction.

Other toxic patterns include siloed thinking, where departments operate as competing fiefdoms rather than collaborators; cultures of blame that punish mistakes rather than treat them as learning opportunities; and performative consensus, where the appearance of agreement masks underlying conflicts or suppresses dissenting voices. Some libraries struggle with credentialism that values degrees and titles over demonstrated competence and contributions, or with informal power structures in which real decisions are made in hallway conversations, excluding those not in the inner circle.

The cost of toxic culture is real and measurable. Staff burnout and turnover drain institutional knowledge, waste recruitment and training resources, and create service disruptions. When talented people leave because the environment is unsustainable, we lose not just their labor but their relationships with users, their specialized expertise, and their institutional memory.

Toxic cultures create barriers to innovation because people stop proposing new ideas when they've learned those ideas will be dismissed, criticized, or appropriated without credit. Risk-aversion becomes rational self-protection rather than problematic conservatism. We miss opportunities to evolve and improve because the organizational culture has trained people that speaking up carries costs.

Perhaps most seriously, toxic internal cultures ultimately diminish service to our users. Staff who feel demoralized, disrespected, or disempowered cannot bring their best selves to user interactions. Organizations riddled with internal conflict and dysfunction cannot respond nimbly to changing needs. Libraries that fail to leverage their staff's full talent and creativity inevitably underperform their potential.

Creating healthier organizational cultures requires fundamental shifts in how we understand and practice leadership. Distributed leadership models offer alternatives to traditional hierarchical structures by recognizing that leadership capacity exists

throughout the organization and that better decisions emerge when we tap that distributed expertise.

Distributed leadership doesn't mean everyone leads everything or that hierarchy disappears entirely. Rather, it means the leadership functions of setting direction, making decisions, solving problems, building relationships, and facilitating change are shared across the organization based on expertise, context, and capacity, rather than concentrated in organizational charts.

In practice, this might mean:

Domain-Based Authority, where leadership flows to those with relevant knowledge and capabilities rather than automatically defaulting upward.

Project-Based Leadership that develops leadership capacity broadly while ensuring projects benefit from appropriate expertise at each stage.

Shared Governance Structures with meaningful committees, working groups, or teams where decisions are genuinely made rather than rubber-stamped.

Rotating Leadership Opportunities in which opportunities are created for people at all levels to lead by chairing committees, representing the library externally, managing projects, and facilitating meetings.

Transparent Decision-Making Processes that clarify who makes which decisions, how input is gathered and weighted, and what factors influence outcomes.

Empowered Teams give teams genuine autonomy over their work in terms of how they organize tasks, solve problems, serve users, and improve processes rather than micromanaging from above.

Distributed models tap organizational intelligence more effectively. Frontline staff see usage patterns and user struggles that don't appear in statistics. Mid-career professionals bring fresh perspectives from recent graduate programs or previous institutions. Subject specialists understand disciplinary contexts that generalists miss. When we access this distributed knowledge, decisions improve.

These models build organizational resilience. When leadership capacity exists throughout the organization rather than depending on a few key individuals, departures or absences don't create crises. Knowledge and capabilities are more widely distributed.

Perhaps most importantly, distributed models increase ownership and engagement. Distributed leadership isn't simply about being nice or democratic; it requires structural

and cultural shifts that challenge deeply embedded assumptions about authority, expertise, and organizational control.

Senior leaders must genuinely share power, not just delegate tasks while retaining ultimate authority over every decision. This requires trusting that others will make good decisions even when those decisions differ from what leadership might choose. For some administrators, this feels threatening rather than liberating.

Culture change is difficult and slow, but it's essential to creating organizations where people thrive and do their best work. It's difficult because culture is deeply embedded in unwritten rules, habitual behaviors, power dynamics, and shared assumptions that operate below conscious awareness. People who benefit from existing cultures resist change, even unconsciously. Those who've learned to navigate toxic systems may fear new uncertainties.

Change is slow because culture shifts require consistent reinforcement over time. A single workshop on inclusive leadership or distributed decision-making won't transform organizational culture. Change happens through hundreds of small decisions and interactions that gradually establish new norms—how meetings are facilitated, how conflicts are addressed, who gets heard, what behaviors are rewarded or sanctioned.

The path forward requires sustained commitment from leadership at all levels, willingness to examine and change long-standing practices, patience with the process of transformation, and faith that better ways of working together are possible.

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Let me turn now to CULCON and our collaborative work. CULCON, as you may know, is the Japan-United States Conference on Cultural and Educational Exchange. It is a binational advisory panel that serves to elevate and strengthen the vital cultural and educational foundations of the U.S.-Japan relationship, and to strengthen connections between U.S. and Japan leadership in those fields. The Information Access Working Group focuses on improving bilateral scholarly access, supporting U.S. scholars studying Japan, and facilitating Japanese scholars' access to U.S. resources.

This work matters because scholarship transcends borders. Japanese Studies scholars in the U.S. need access to Japanese resources, and researchers in Japan need access to American collections. We're working to reduce or eliminate barriers that impede this essential exchange. Some of these barriers include copyright restrictions, database

licensing restrictions, the expense (in time, human, and financial resources) associated with digitization, and language barriers, to name a few.

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We face several significant challenges. Cost and licensing issues create real barriers to access. Copyright restrictions—which differ between our countries—complicate resource sharing. Limited digitization of critical resources means that many materials remain inaccessible to scholars who can't travel to specific collections.

But within these challenges lie opportunities. We're developing collaborative solutions: shared digitization projects that pool resources and expertise, reciprocal access agreements that benefit scholars in both countries, and technology transfer that shares best practices and learns from each other's innovations.

I cannot say much more about the work at this time, because we will present our final report with recommendations in a few weeks in Okinawa. I will say, however, that we make reference to many collaborative efforts across borders and hope these can serve as models for future collaborative efforts.

Slide 13:

Looking forward, I envision enhanced collaboration between the U.S. and Japanese library communities. We share many challenges: digital preservation, open science initiatives, and international research support. It seems logical that we should share solutions.

Concrete next steps might include professional exchange programs, such as staff exchanges and joint training, that build relationships and mutual understanding. Collaborative grant applications where we pursue funding together. Resource sharing innovations that go beyond traditional interlibrary loan. Joint collection development strategies that eliminate duplication and fill gaps. Digitization programs where the costs are shared across institutions and access to the digitized content is open to all. And knowledge-sharing platforms with regular communication channels and best-practice documentation.

Slide 14:

Libraries have always been about building bridges; between people and information, between past and present, and between communities. Today, I'm proposing that we intentionally strengthen the bridges between the U.S. and Japanese library communities.

Our work through CULCON is just a beginning. I believe there's tremendous potential for deeper collaboration, for learning from each other's innovations, and for jointly addressing the challenges we all face.

I'm eager to hear your perspectives, to learn about the work you're doing, and to explore how we might collaborate more effectively. The best ideas emerge from genuine dialogue, and I'm hopeful that today's conversation is the start of strengthened partnerships.

Slide 15:

Thank you for your attention. I'm now very much looking forward to your questions, your reactions to what I've shared, and most importantly, hearing about your own experiences and ideas. Are there opportunities you see for collaboration? What challenges are you facing that we might address together? What can we in the U.S. learn from your approaches and innovations?
I know that some questions were submitted in advance, and you also have the opportunity to ask questions now, but I also believe we will take a brief break before we move to the Q&A portion.

Thank you again for taking the time to be here today. I am grateful for your attention.