



## "Is This How Men Always Feel?": The Power of Being Surrounded by Female Leaders at CONUL

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Holly Meade Kennedy with her colleague Sarah Lindsay. Picture credit: Holly Meade-Kennedy 2025.

I left CONUL 2025 with a (free) notebook full of ideas, a mind full of questions and one quiet, persistent thought I can't shake: is this how men always feel?

It was the first time I felt so at ease at a professional event - and it happened to be led almost entirely by women. There was no special focus on gender, no headline panel about women in leadership. Women were just there - leading, organising and shaping every part of the CONUL conference.

When I was awarded the bursary to attend CONUL, I envisioned writing a blog post after the conference about speakers I enjoyed hearing or tips for next year's attendees. But instead, I had a genuinely impactful experience I had not anticipated.

From the first panel where Dr Sandra Collins, Monica Crump, Allison Kavanagh and Ciara McCaffrey reflected as leaders on challenges and opportunities facing our research libraries, I felt inspired because I could see elements of myself in these women. Their career paths seemed wildly impressive but possible with hard work and commitment.

Despite progress, many industries still exhibit a significant gender imbalance at the leadership level, which means that in the past when I have attended conferences or seminars, I am usually listening to middle-aged (white) men and although I still respect and learn from them – I don't see myself in them so I can't relate or be inspired in the same way.

I know that men of quality including my own dad, husband, brother and even colleagues in MU Library have always understood that is not an attack on them – it's simply an honest reflection on my own experience. I am thrilled that smart, kind, experienced men have the chance to lead and present – I just want women to be on the bill too.

Even though our libraries are mostly made up of female employees, men are disproportionately represented in top leadership positions comparative to the numbers they make up overall.



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Anne Jarvis, University Librarian at Princeton presenting at CONUL. Picture credit: Holly Meade-Kennedy 2025.

I had the unique opportunity to ask Anne Jarvis about this. Anne was the first female University Librarian in Cambridge's 800 year history and she now holds the same title at

Princeton. Anne shared incredible insights in her answer – noting that she believes one of the key elements to helping women secure top leadership roles within libraries is mentoring.

She acknowledged that women do have a tougher time advancing professionally and encouraged women to work on not doubting themselves and to insert themselves into conversations and seize opportunities that come their way. To see an Irish woman excelling at the highest level was so heartening. When Anne took to the podium, she didn't spend her keynote talking about gender. She spoke about leadership, vision, strategy and community. She didn't justify her presence, she embodied it.

In doing so, Anne offered something rare and radical: the image of a woman in power without apology, without preamble, without footnotes. She acknowledged her experience, but she didn't let it define her talk. As I listened, I realised this is what real representation does. It shifts the air in the room, even when no one says a word about it.

Throughout the conference, I noticed how safe and inclusive the space was. I felt welcome to ask questions and strike up conversations. Unfortunately – as with many others across the world – I have been in professional situations where inappropriate comments or unprofessional behaviour from men much more senior than me has made me feel uncomfortable at best, intimidated at worst. I realise many people who work in libraries have done so throughout their whole career – but as someone who has worked across many industries – I was genuinely struck by the ease I felt and I believe that was largely down to being surrounded by so many women.

As the winner of the bursary supported by UCD, I was also offered the opportunity to be mentored by Gillian Kerins from TUD who was so friendly, kind and helpful. Again, this was a powerful way to help me network and give me a direct link to another impressive lady working within the library space.

I also had the chance to attend the presentations given by my own MU colleagues – amazingly competent women all passionate about the individual roles they play in making our library so great. It was especially meaningful to have the chance to listen to Laura Connaughton, Head of Academic Services in MU Library, share about our gender equality initiatives as part of our Athena Swan Bronze Award submission – a project I have loved being a part of. Having Laura, Michaela Hollywood and Fiona Morley from MU all present and visible at CONUL is so motivating and I appreciate their leadership being grounded in approachability and kindness.

What struck me most was that all of this leadership and visibility was not a theme. These women weren't on the programme because they were women. They were there

because they were talented and hardworking people who just happened to be women.

And in that quiet normalisation, I was left wondering - is this how men always feel?

What must it be like, to walk into rooms and always see yourself represented at leadership level? What must it feel like, to feel included by default? What must it feel like to always feel safe in unfamiliar spaces and situations?

This experience has made me want to work to build more spaces like that for everyone.

Because although I am speaking from my own experience, I want to also acknowledge there is so much more work to be done in our sector to diversify further to include more people from different races, religions and cultural backgrounds. Representation shouldn't be radical - it should be routine.

Leaving CONUL 2025, I want to help build spaces where more people can feel that same sense of belonging, safety and possibility I did - not as a surprise, but as a standard. Because if this is how men always feel - seen, included, inspired - then I want that for everyone. Not just women, but people of every background. CONUL gave me a glimpse of what's possible, and now I want to help make it permanent.