

The ethereal library: Thinking creatively when you have no space to think

Corey Seeman

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Abstract

While many academic libraries report losing space to other functions, few find themselves with virtually no room. This presentation showcased how the Kresge Business Administration Library at the Ross School of Business (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) transformed from a full-service library to a virtual one through the loss of all public and collection space. Among the topics to be discussed are expanded reference, embedded librarian programs, and the adoption of new services that were possible and desired by the school.

Keywords

- Organizational Change
- Library Space
- Change Management
- Library Human Resources
- Library Services

Today's library operates in two distinct spaces. First, there is the physical space, where we provide our community a place to work, where we provide access to print materials, and where we can provide a place to provide service. Second, there is the ethereal space, where we connect with users, provide outreach, and where our value is revealed. And in the best case scenario, a library has these two spaces to operate from. However, over the past few years, many academic libraries have seen their footprint erode. This is especially true from the vantage point of the academic departmental library which has been seeing its footprint erode a great deal in recent years.

Starting in 2014, the Kresge Business Administration Library at the Ross School of Business will cease being a full-service library as has been traditionally the case. Instead, our footprints will be reduced to little more than what is needed to house the librarians and staff. Using these challenges, as well as those being faced by other academic departmental libraries, the presenter will share accounts of how the reduction and elimination of library space did not also lead to the elimination of core library services coming from that group. Among the topics to be discussed are expanded reference, embedded librarian programs, and the adoption of new services that were possible and desired by the school. The presenter will showcase how you can move from a physical library to an ethereal one, while retaining services, people and your connection to the school.

The Two Spaces of the Library

In 2013, I was given an opportunity to think about the Library as Place for a program sponsored by the Michigan Library Association. In that program, I shared the notion that the Library had two spaces: a physical space and an ethereal space (Seeman, 2013). While both places are critical for members of the library community, each space provided a distinct function and benefit.

The physical space is used for a variety of functions including: the storage and retrieval of print materials and other physical objects; computer terminals for walk-in access to licensed resources; staff workspace; public desks or interaction spaces;

individual student study; and group study. For some of these spaces, especially individual and group study spaces, the physical environment may be managed just as well by others. While librarians had historically done a good job managing student space in a library, that work did not necessarily constitute the full notion of what a library is on campus.

We have heard many things about the future of the library and what that might entail. While print collections might be 2% of the usage, it represents at least 50% of the perception of the library, maybe more. These numbers are drawn from our experiences in the business space, naturally, with social sciences and humanities, the use of print is considerably higher.

When given the task of coming up with a characteristic for the other space of the library, I was drawn to the notion of the “Ethereal Space” or the “Ethereal Library.” Instead of a physical place that might be managed by just about any office on campus, I wanted to think about the library that is a true value add to the campus community. And while we see print books, reference works, and journals morph into electronic resources, the ethereal space is exactly where we would like to be in the library community. That was the true ‘value add’ of the library and what we provide to the campus.

The ethereal space was where the higher level work of the library took place. This is the place where we connect with our community. This is where we provide clarity to a complicated information universe. This is where we SHINE! And since (especially in the business library environment), we have nearly 98% of our usage from electronic resources – librarians and library staff can operate from almost anywhere. And with ethereal space, we actually have real estate (so to speak) that our administrators and governing bodies cannot take away from us.

So that leads me to think about the academic business library and what does their future hold. Furthermore, what if we could only have one of these two types of spaces, what might we choose? Would you elect to preserve your physical space (for student study and physical library materials) or would you elect to preserve the ethereal space (symbolized by the services that we provide)? And while it would be

great to think that we can chart our own course here, it is very clear to me that there are space constraints on academic campuses that have mostly spared the library. That might not be the case moving forward. Space is a luxury on academic campuses and provosts are asking the questions about whether we need to retain large academic libraries in order to provide the campus with the information resources that it needs. And in many cases, including ours, the decision was made for us. Our path forward was one of our own making, but with the restrictions and limitations established by others.

Kresge Business Administration Library

The Kresge Business Administration Library (<http://www.bus.umich.edu/kresgelibrary/>) serves the research, instruction and curriculum needs of the faculty, students and staff of the Ross School of Business. The Kresge Business Administration Library is a charter member of the Academic Business Library Directors group (<http://abid.org/>) and is one of the leading business libraries in the country. The Library is independent of the main University Libraries at Michigan, receiving our funding from the Ross School of Business. This allows us to focus on the specific information resource needs of the Ross Community, especially in support of faculty research and action-based learning programs (such as MAP). While independent, we work closely with the University Libraries at Michigan on collaborative purchases and services.

If this presentation were given in 2012, the presenter would have made the following points:

- The Library was built in mid 1980s to serve the research and curricular needs of the Ross School of Business.
- Kresge Library is open 108 hours during the Fall and Winter Terms and fundamentally closes the same time as the Ross Campus closes.
- Kresge Library provides seating for nearly 700 students.
- The Library is very visible & centrally located in the center of the Ross Complex.
- While the library originally occupied around 45,000 square feet of the Kresge building, the

library controlled space was around 27,000 square feet. This does not include around 7,000 square feet of group study rooms that double as interview suites.

- Kresge has a print collection of over 140,000 volumes in Ann Arbor and Flint (where they are stored at the University of Michigan-Flint)

One additional point to be made was that the library had found itself in a constant state of erosion when it came to space. Kresge Library was being viewed when new offices needed space. So it came as little surprise that we would find ourselves with less space when we learned about a large construction project at the Ross School of Business. The bigger surprise was that we found ourselves with much less space (Needham, 2014).

In September 2013, Stephen Ross (for whom the school is named) gave an additional \$200 million to the University of Michigan, to be split between the Ross School of Business and Athletics (Davis-Blake, 2013). The \$100 million going to the Ross School of Business was to renovate the buildings (including Kresge Library) that were attached to the new Ross building that opened in early 2009. This building was the result of his initial \$100 million dollar gift to the University. As the plans developed with architects, it became apparent that we would not have as much space as we would have liked. In a scenario where no one department received all that they asked for in the planning stages, the Kresge Library was left with getting less than what they had in the old building. Sadly for the library, they were unique in this scenario. The space afforded to Kresge during construction and in the future essentially translated into staff areas with very modest room for print materials. We currently have 200 books and are at about capacity.

By February 2014, it became apparent that there was no room for a print collection of any kind. There were around 70,000 volumes in Kresge at the beginning of the year. When news first broke about this project and the likelihood that we would lose collection space, I started a dialogue with the University Library at Michigan to see if they could take on any of the print material. In the end, they agreed to take on the print and microfilm collection that was not

otherwise replicated in their existing collection. Second copies and duplicates between the libraries would not be retained. In all, around 37,000 volumes and items went to the University Library. The remaining items were given to Better World Books, where the University had a contract. This is in addition to nearly 50,000 volumes given to Better World when Kresge was asked to vacate the collection space at Flint where we had low-use books since 2006.

Since the Kresge Library building was to be completely renovated, the staff were located into temporary quarters. These quarters are tight and do not afford us a good service point, so we had to give up course reserves and change the way that we work with course materials (cases, etc.). For Kresge, losing the physical space forced the staff to come to grips, in a short amount of time with major changes to the library and our value proposition on campus. Gone are the days that Kresge was a student destination for individual or group study. Gone are the days that Kresge could be format agnostic when it came to collection. But not gone are the ability to deliver reference services, support for action-based learning, and management of the curriculum materials. That is a key to the rebirth of the Kresge Library.

In planning for these changes, we established the priorities as follows: staff, services, stuff, and space. In the end, we managed to hold onto the staff and services while losing our stuff and our space. In planning, we had to focus very closely on building a new library based on what we have, not on what we had. We had no choice but to build an Ethereal Library! In building the parameters of the Ethereal Library, I used some guiding principles that I am calling the 6P Approach: philosophical, patient, positive, proactive, perform, and follow Ms. Pirkola's rules.

Be Philosophical

As difficult as this transition was, we were afforded an opportunity to also be freed from what worked and did not work from the past. With significantly less space, we had to be careful to not try and recapture everything we did before the construction project. If we did, we would be bound to failure. In many ways, this is territory that I had been

in before, when I talked about decisions made by staff when undergoing migrations of library systems. Staff often wanted to replicate systems and procedures from their old systems into their new ones (Seeman, 2002). That approach helped with the comfort from the move, but it did not enable the libraries to fully take advantage of the new system.

Being separated from the space that the library occupied enabled me to think about what our value is and how to continue with the new constraints. As a group, we brainstormed about service points, both real and virtual. And with any type of entrepreneurial exercise, failure is an option. It enabled us to try things that we might not have tried in the past. It enabled us to move our reference service point during the first term and find something that provided the staff with stability and visibility needed to serve our community.

Be Patient

Making this type of dramatic change in a relatively short amount of time is not easy for anyone within the library. In many ways, each staff member goes through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' Five Stages of Death in the process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kellehear, 2009). Even more important is that everyone moves through these changes at their own pace and related to their own job responsibilities. For reference librarians, the fundamental changes are relatively minor, as most of the resources we would regularly use are electronic anywhere. At Kresge, we had long encouraged flexible scheduling and work environments, which allowed people to do work remotely. Besides being a good benefit for librarians, this actually helped prepare us for this eventuality. For staff, especially those in positions where managing and processing physical objects was important, the transition was more uncertain and nerve-wracking. So it became clear that everyone was moving through the challenges at their own pace.

While we needed to be patient with staff as they move through the process of the transformation of the library, I also asked the staff to be patient with me as we moved through these changes. The changes made it very clear that becoming a digital library is much more difficult than being born that way. The two most

well known "born digital" libraries--BiblioTech in San Antonio (<http://bexarbibliotech.org/>) and Florida Polytechnic University in Lakeland (<https://floridapolytechnic.org/library-search>) come to mind. There are tremendous difficulties and culture-changes that take place when converting a full-service library to one that is digital.

Be Positive

When going through this type of challenging process, it is very easy to be mired in self-doubt. The image of loss cannot be your brand or how you are seen by others in the community. To this end, it is important not to dwell on the decisions that had been made and look towards the new future. Quite honestly, it is difficult to do this, but the choices we have as individuals (for example, to stay or leave) enable us to make the decisions that work the best.

In thinking about the upside of losing our study space, there are actually a few silver linings that appear. First, we will not have to worry about expanded hours for exams. We were open until 1am four days a week. That put student temporary staff on campus walking home at 1:15am (not a great situation from an employer POV) Second, being in Michigan, winter weather can be problematic. So not having to worry about opening the library on challenging weather days is a plus. Third, being a public university, we provided walk-in access to people who appeared to use the computers as their personal office. With losing space for these computers, the associated problems go away.

The process of creating a positive approach to this situation is about making the best of what we may have. It is a process of trying to determine how we can continue to meet the needs of the school and the number of communities we serve. It is a process that takes time and reflection. And despite everything - I'd rather be happy than angry.

Be Proactive

During the transition from a centrally located library to one that will be more of a service unit, the biggest issue that we face is that we will be out of sight at the school. The lack of visibility is the biggest challenge moving forward. This situation forced the

library to be more proactive with outreach and connecting with the school's faculty and students than we had been. While we have uses all virtual reference systems (chat & email), we needed to push them more with the community in order to remain visible to the campus community.

In building the library services prior to this change, I have been a strong proponent of a central reference desk – even as many libraries are moving away from that model. Having a central place where people could come for help allowed students and community members to easily approach us with questions. In many ways, the reference and the circulation desks are the face of the library. In looking at where we might have a dedicated reference service point, we explored a number of options. The one that started with was in the School's Tozzi Center (trading floor) where we had a table and librarians on duty would bring a laptop. The service ran from 1pm to 5pm. While we were appreciative of the space, it was not ideal. It felt like we were crashing on a friend's sofa. With this realization, something that can only be learned by trying it out, we looked for alternatives. We were able to repurpose the desk that is at the entrance to the Ross Modular Offices, where the library staff is located. We originally conceived this as a welcome desk with more of a reception role, but that turned out to not be fully needed. So we repurposed the desk as the new reference desk. We expanded our hours to start at 10am and end at 5pm. What became very beneficial is that replacing someone's shift time became easy because they librarians are all in the building. We are working on creating some light-up signs that we can use to let people know in the main Ross building when the library services are open.

Be Performers

In this change to the space and collection of the Kresge Library, there was never an issue about Kresge Library as a service point. That is the entity that truly kept the library moving forward and going as a unit amid these changes, and it would be the entity that would propel us into the future. Drawing from data from the Ross School of Business exit surveys of MBA and BBA students, Kresge Library had been one of the best reviewed service units at the school. It had

always been a great source of internal pride and motivation.

Since Kresge lost our space, we were going to be less about a place to study than a place where to get help. We needed to be creative in how we deliver services to our community. If we failed in our attempts to deliver the information services to the school, there would likely be a reconsideration of the library as an ongoing entity. In many regards, we wanted to simply continue the great work that we were doing at the library and rebuild with that success in mind.

Be Like Ms. Pirkola

Ms. Pirkola was my older son's 3rd grade teacher in the early 2000s. While it has been many years that he has been in her classroom, hardly a month goes by when we do not call her out by name. Besides being a great teacher, she preached flexibility. This was a great lesson for my son and it is a great lesson for me. If the Kresge Library needed anything during this transformation, it was a continued appreciation and understanding about being flexible. For this to work, we needed to be flexible in all directions. We need to be flexible with staff as they to work with these new confines. We asked the staff to be flexible with the leadership as we worked through our situations.

Equally important to flexibility is balance and empathy. With empathy, greater preference for one group can have a direct impact on another. With libraries or other service units, the needs of patrons and the work that staff perform need to be balanced against each other. In the library, the more we provide for patrons, the greater we lean on staff. Conversely, the more we provide for the staff, potentially the less we provide for patrons. Keeping the needs of both the library staff and the library community in balance is a great need here.

Putting it all Together - The Big Changes at Kresge

In thinking about the big changes that are taking place at Kresge Library with this transformation, it is clear that there are services that will continue, as well as new opportunities that will be possible. The additional services are possible in large part because

of the loss of work that is associated with the removal of the print collection from the library.

There are many existing programs that will not change that much in this new situation. Kresge Library's embedded librarian program to support Multidisciplinary Action Projects (MAP) will continue at Ross (Berdish & Seeman, 2010). In these programs, each student team working on a "real-world" problem for a sponsor will be assigned a team of faculty and staff (which includes a librarian) to help them find the information that they need to assess and solve the project. MAP for MBA students (as well as Weekend MBA and Executive MAP is a required core class). While finding space to meet will be a challenge during the construction, the fundamental work does not change. Additionally, starting in Fall 2014, the librarians supported a new core class for undergraduate students. BA 200 is the first class taken by business majors (BBAs) in the Fall Term of their sophomore year. They have an assignment to explore two companies and their response to a social issue. The librarians are assigned to each section of 35 students to provide research support and guidance as the students work on the project. In addition, the Kresge librarians are supporting the faculty through the Faculty Research Service, that provides detailed assistance to more rigorous research projects. Finally, we continue to support other student information needs for any reason they might have (we often classify this as the 5 Cs: coursework, clubs, careers, case competitions & curiosity).

A very important element to Kresge Library is our management of coursepacks used at Ross for cases and other licensed material that are required readings for classes. The faculty work with Kresge staff to identify cases, articles, book chapters, and simulations that will be required for students. Previously, this was managed as a print solution, but the space constraints with the construction project made continuing in this system difficult if not impossible. We moved to online course materials with a commercial vendor, study.net, since they have a strong relationship with Harvard Business Publishing. While the costs will increase with a commercial vendor, many students are happy with the added ability of having electronic course

materials. We offer an optional print version of the cases that may be purchased by students.

With this change, we were also to look at our services and explore possible additions to our offerings. Rather than try to brainstorm about what might be useful, and then try to find the market to adopt it, we looked at programs that were already being tested by other groups. One program that was brought in by Kresge was the exam & assignment program, formerly run as a pilot by the school's Faculty Support group. The premise of the exam program is that many faculty do not want to use class time to hand back assignments and exams. Additionally, many faculty do not let students keep completed exams, but instead, they can review them, but must hand them back to the faculty member. This service ran as a pilot in Winter Term and went into full service with the Library in Fall 2014. With the attention to detail and good customer service focus with the students, the Kresge Library team was well suited to take on this project and service. Additionally, the workload for the exam program balances very nicely with the existing work to support the curriculum materials. For the most part, the peak work for these two services are at different times of the term, which makes it easy to marry to two together.

Other new programs that we are implementing include serving as a pickup location for the Ross School of Business requests for books delivered from the main library and ILL. We are also exploring the opportunities to support other programs in the management of course materials (such as the Global MBA program which had been run independently). We are also shifting evening reference from in person work done by the Kresge Library supervisors (typically School of Information students) to having evening and weekend reference done electronically only. The benefit is that the people doing evening and weekend reference may do so from the comfort of their own home or anywhere else where they can connect to the Internet.

Providing Value With New Constraints

While there has been a great deal of discussion about the "value" of the academic library, we need to

explore what it means to live with constraints that are not temporary, but permanent. I believe what happened at Kresge very well could happen at other academic libraries. It is an indication that we are not going to be able to operate as we have done in the past. The same would be true of many other industries (automotives, pharmaceuticals, journalism, and publishing just to name a few). Our task is very simple - we must provide great value to our community with new constraints. This alters our value proposition for what we can provide to our campuses.

At Kresge Library, we no longer can provide space for students to study or space for collections (in any physical formats). Instead, we need to focus on what our new value proposition will be for the campus. This means that we will need to shift our entire thinking:

- Live within the restrictions of virtually no collection space.
- Figure out new collaboration mechanisms to serve our community.
- Move away from the model where we provided student study space.
- Focus on what we *can* do vs. what we *have done* in the past.

We are currently working on refining the Kresge Library Value Proposition and what roles we can play at the school. This will involve reaching out to the different stakeholders at the school (undergraduate students, graduate students, PhD students, part-time students, faculty and staff) and find out specifically what their information needs are and how we can support them. Hopefully, this project will be done by the middle of 2015.

Closing Thoughts

Despite this dramatic change, there are some things to be positive about. One of the most important is that we had a very large win in that we were able to retain our staffing. There were some University priorities that caused two Kresge staff members to be redeployed at the school. However, we were able to proceed with 19 staff members (including librarians) that we had before the change. We are assessing right now if this is the right number and are working with

the school's HR office to ensure that we have the correct amount of work for the people here. The premise with this reduction has been space and space alone. However, we needed to be realistic about the work that remained in the library and the new services that we brought on. While we had no full-time staff losses related to this move, our temporary staff counts are reduced from around 4.5 FTE to 0.5 FTE. This was the result of dramatically reducing service hours.

In addition, it seems that we have been in this cycle of greater uncertainty for space dedicated to academic libraries. Space is at a premium on campus and where it is for labs, study space or staff/faculty offices, the libraries might lose. The future appears to me that academic libraries will continue to lose space until it is mostly gone. This time horizon is 20 years, but for smaller schools, it might take place quicker. For academic libraries to succeed, we need to be nimble and flexible to meet the needs of the school.

One of the difficulties in moving from a multi-format collection to one that is just electronic is the long-term collection management. Kresge Library managed a print collection the way that many academic libraries are managed. The collection is built on the needs in the current time period and down the road. There have been many studies that have shown that the majority of works will be used within 10 years of their acquisitions. But in an electronic environment, there is not the long-term stability that you have with materials on your shelf, especially with resources that are licensed year in and year out. It seems there will be a growing print divide in the coming years, separating libraries with a historical collection and those with only commercially available electronic resources.

Finally, we have decided to change our name from the Kresge Business Administration Library to Kresge Library Services. The rationale about making this change is to reflect that we will no longer be a "destination" or a library in the traditional sense. We have moved from being a place you visit to being a service that one can utilize. The name "Kresge Library Services" enables us to keep the Kresge name, which has great 'brand' recognition both on campus and at the school, and identify us as a library service unit. We

opted to do that so we did not get confused with existing units at the school (Information Technology or Research). This name reflects a good part of the value proposition that we are hoping to provide to the school.

All across academic libraries, especially departmental and branch libraries, decisions are being made to contract and centralize library operations. Departmental libraries have been closing and shrinking for many years. So for those types of libraries, does this activity serve as the “canary in the coal mine?” Our space contraction appears to be the future of libraries everywhere – we just had it happen all at once. However, what saved the Kresge Library services operation at Michigan was the focus on service and the ability to move from a traditional library to one from the future. This is the challenge of the ethereal library.

References

- Berdish, Laura, and Corey Seeman. A reference-intensive embedded librarian program: Kresge Business Administration Library's program to support action-based learning at the Ross School of Business. *Public services quarterly* 6.2-3 (2010), 208-224.
- Davis-Blake, A. (2013, September 4). U-Michigan to receive \$200 million from prominent real estate developer Stephen M. Ross. Retrieved from <http://michiganross.umich.edu/our-community/alumni/dividend/fall2014/completing-the-vision>
- Kellehear, A. (2009). On death and dying: Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and the five stages of grief. Retrieved from <http://www.ekrfoundation.org/five-stages-of-grief/>
- Needham, B. (2014). Completing the vision. Retrieved from <http://michiganross.umich.edu/our-community/alumni/dividend/fall2014/completing-the-vision>
- Seeman, C. (2002). Invisible fences: A shocking theory for re-examining work flow. *Computers in libraries*, 22(7), 24-30.
- Seeman, C. (2013). The two spaces of a modern library: Using business library collection as outreach and community engagement [Powerpoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/97763>