

# Don't Get Married to the Results

» Managing library change in the age of metrics.\*

BY COREY SEEMAN

**F**or the past 15 years, and most certainly more, libraries have been managing in a dramatically changing environment. This observation might be especially true in academic libraries where the perfect storm of flat or decreasing budgets is matched with growing pressures for library space. As academic libraries try to balance these two forces with their desire to support the growing information needs on campus, the challenges are all around.

From an administrative point of view, the library can no longer take anything for granted, as the space for students and for collections that we have long believed were stable and secure may not be truly so. To that end, libraries must not only continually adapt to reflect the changing priorities and realities on campus, but also develop flexibility to more nimbly move through the changes that we might face.

In my case, a flexible and patron-centered focus enabled a departmental library to continue long past the moment when its conventional library space and physical collections were taken away—but more about that later. In the same way, dramatic changes in your library must reflect more unconventional thinking of services and metrics since the standard values will not be relevant to the new operation.

## THOUGHTS ON ASSESSMENT

Over the years as a library director, I have developed an iconoclastic approach to assessment and metrics. There is a strong belief in all fields that everything can be measured and that tweaks to existing systems will be a means to truly measure impact and assessment. Like the X-Files, there is a notion that the answer is out there.

And while all programs need assessment tools to ensure that they are meeting the needs of their stakeholders, I believe that



*In the summer of 2013, Kresge Library staff finished the last book shifting project.*

coming up with more numbers is not necessarily the way to proceed. Additionally, there are numerous elements that all libraries share that are commonly used for metrics, but they might not truly measure the overall benefit (or return on investment – ROI) that a library provides for a college or university.

A more informed approach might be one that a library can use to measure its value in the particular environment in which it operates. In this case, a predetermined measure of success for any endeavor, especially a library, is not logical nor helpful. There are so many elements associated with measuring success that we need to explore, far more than wins and losses.

The central theme of a great conference hosted at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan in August 2015, “Re-think it: Libraries for a New Age,” was the design of the library of the future, with the emphasis on interactions with patrons.<sup>1</sup> The conference focused not only on public spaces of the library, but also on the design of services for the community. Great value

was placed on the empathetic design of our services, with our users central in the development and continued expansion of those services. The additional challenge libraries face is that different users of an academic library (thinking primarily of students and faculty) often need and desire different resources and services. So providing sufficient balance is also a key element of the successful library.

One of the true underlying challenges that we face in academic libraries is our unique position on campus, which, I believe, affects our ability for true change and empathetic service models. In almost all regards, academic libraries are campus monopolies. The libraries generally control what resources are acquired and how they might be used.

While we sometimes reference Google as a competitor, that premise only is applicable for the “low hanging fruit.” For years, we have seen fewer and fewer libraries answering questions that are easily found on the Internet, especially Wikipedia. In the busi-



*The Kresge Library Quiet Study Space as it was in 2011.*

ness disciplines, for example, students may easily find all sorts of financial information that they might have come to the library to find in years gone by. With this change, reference numbers are down, and the perception of the library as a self-service entity has come front and center.

But what will not be easily replaced with the open web is access to ebooks and scholarly content in journals. Typically, these resources are acquired for campuses by libraries as a central purchase. This model gives the library great power and responsibility for managing and crafting the resources that are available for research and classroom use.

If academic libraries are viewed as information monopolies, they can be less interested in the customer and end user. The same could be said about utilities: power, cable, and phone services. Mostly, these providers are single-source options for people in a community, and that lack of competition can lead to a lack of innovation and new services. The campus monopoly that libraries have for information resources (for the most part) is a contributing factor in the slow pace of change among libraries over the past years. Without competition, one might ask, how real is the push for an academic library to assess and improve?

### **THE PROBLEM WITH NUMBERS**

There is a tremendous interest all around us to produce facts and the figures. The numbers, whatever they really mean, may tell us how we are doing and what is going on. On the surface, this seems like a perfectly logical approach. Our activity generates results, which may be counted, ranked, and most

importantly, compared with others.

Through a sophisticated set of metrics, we can easily find out how well the library is doing in the grand scheme of things. However, what kind of value can we glean from these numbers, statistics, and other data? It is possible that, on the surface, the numbers appear to provide a great deal of understanding about how the library is operating. But by digging a little bit further, we might discover that they do not tell as compelling a story as the library would have us believe. In so many regards, numbers can easily be manipulated to show value that is not really there.

The problems with numbers are numerous. In a political season, we see that numbers can easily be manipulated to tell the story a certain politician wants to sell. A single jobs report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, for example, can generate “proof” of contrarian points from people on different sides of the political aisle.

We also see the fallacy of numbers in relationship to the “regular price” and “probably price” (after a sale has been applied) for stores like Jos. A. Bank or Kohl’s (and others) that make sales a regular occasion. The same might be said when so much emphasis is placed on standardized testing, and student scores become the primary criteria on which a school system is judged. We place such important values on numbers that can be easily manipulated. In turn, the numbers become no more than noise that does not begin to illustrate what is actually happening.

In the same way, user statistics are problematic when looking at what a library actually accomplishes for its community. One

of the greatest challenges to this approach is the broad assumption that all libraries provide the same services for their communities. This is generally not the case, which may complicate the use of numbers and metrics to compare libraries. There is a great deal of interest right now in “big data,” but it has the potential of misdirecting libraries more than helping. Big data thinking can answer some questions we might have in libraries on usage and direction. However, at the end of the day, does it matter? What if this type of assessment minimizes the need for particular resources that are of primary interest to a smaller population, say faculty?

One instance where metrics do not tell the story accurately is with database usage. With many business resources, librarians are often presented with the “retail” value of the reports downloaded by students over the course of the year (in addition to the basic counts). This number is not truly useful or accurate, however, since students have no incentive not to download a report, even if they end up never using it. Much like a food buffet, we are able to try things out freely, though we often leave much on our plates. Finally, cost-per-use is potentially helpful, but it does not capture the true value of the resource to the community. At its core is a simple calculation—the resource’s total cost divided by the number of items that have been accessed. But what is missing is the nature and purpose of the item being accessed. Are they brief articles or ebooks or scholarly articles or large reports? The simplicity of the math does not tell the full story.

Lastly, sometimes the changes are too small to detect. Many organizations right now are implementing small and seemingly inconsequential changes to products or services as a cost-savings measure. Taken individually, these small changes do not cause a great deal of concern. However, taken holistically, they can lead to much larger and irreversible issues down the road.

So where does that leave us with libraries? With lots and lots of numbers. We are always looking to count things, be it items, access, usage, or head-count, for example. These numbers certainly do tell a story, but it may not be one that resonates with others outside of our profession. Librarians can visualize a collection by the number of volumes, but what difference does it make to an administrator who cannot get the one item that he or she wants on a regular basis?



*In 2013, the last books leave Kresge Library in the shadow of the tree that was moved for the new project.*

This is the contrarian point of view I would like to put forward into a new way of thinking about metrics. In some way, it has its basis of a 1996 article I wrote on, of all things, baseball history. In “Drowning by Numbers: The State of Baseball History,”<sup>2</sup> I argued that baseball history is being bogged down by the fact that each action has a set of numbers associated with it. Historians, in turn, were looking for a greater meaning in all of these balls, strikes, runs, hits, and outs. What we needed in baseball history was a bigger view of what was actually happening, not a rehashing of runs, hits, and errors.

The same might be said for the library. We happily collect and share statistics that have great meaning to us, but potentially mean very little to others, including people who might ultimately make critical decisions about our libraries. We yearn for there to be a set of dashboard indicators that will tell the whole story in a way that everyone will understand. But sadly, they do not exist and, furthermore, they could never tell the whole story.

#### **LIBRARY CHANGE AND YOU**

Library change has been happening all around us, in many small bites that barely register. But among departmental or branch libraries on academic campuses, we can see that change is happening fast and furious. While there are a few exceptions, the vast majority of these libraries are no longer being seen as important to the departments

and schools that they serve. A good reason for this conclusion is the ease by which people can obtain electronic resources. Easy access to journal articles, one of the main reasons why faculty wanted these libraries in the first place, is often as close as their nearest keyboard.

While many in the profession can see the logic behind the closing of the departmental libraries, I believe that their demise is a precursor to things that will be happening across campus. A departmental library may be where some key journals are located—or it can be a vibrant operation that mirrors all the functions of the main library. The Kresge Business Administration Library at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, was the latter.

The Kresge Library was built in mid 1980s to serve the research and curricular needs of the Ross School of Business, and the library was quite substantial. During the Fall and Winter Terms of its last year before construction (2013-2014 academic year), the library provided 108 service hours a week to the community, had seating for 700 students, and had space for around 70,000 volumes.

The Kresge building is centrally located at the Ross complex, which made student adoption of the space very easy to understand. Some of the biggest complaints we heard were focused on not having enough hours for the students. Despite this success, we were in a constant state of “library erosion,” with space being delegated to other purposes and departments. That would end with the Ross

Construction project of 2013-2016.

During the summer of 2013, we learned that a major construction project would begin at the school to fix a long-term space issue. Architects were called in for planning, and a big gift in Michigan’s capital campaign by Stephen M. Ross (the namesake of the school) started the work in earnest.

While internally designs and space allocations were being considered, it was February 2014 before we realized that we would not have space for our 70,000 volume print collection. Within four short months, we had to firm up plans to salvage the print collections (in our case, unique titles went to the main library) and plan for the future with dramatically reduced space. In June 2014, we moved out of the building into temporary quarters that did not have any space for students or collections. When the students returned for Fall Term, they no longer had Kresge Library as a space, but only Kresge Library as a service.

With this dramatic change in the scope of what the library does and could potentially do, a realignment of our value proposition needed to take place. We were no longer a student destination. We no longer could collect in a “format agnostic” manner since we did not have practically any space for managing physical collections. So, instead of being a physical library, we became an ethereal one, focused on the service and information needs of our patrons.

The two years in temporary quarters gave us an opportunity to be entrepreneurial and try things out. Failure was a perfectly acceptable option for a group that had to make so great a transition. While we had long-been considered a service-oriented unit, we were also viewed as a great physical resource for the students. This sentiment was reflected in the May 2015 survey results from exiting MBA students. When asked about Kresge Library, many mentioned the service that they received. But far more gave the library a lower grade because of the closure during the student’s second year. Here are some of the responses:

- “I’d still love an actual library where I can study on the Ross campus.”
- “This is a tough question for someone who didn’t really have a library second year; however, throughout my time here the staff has always been very helpful.”
- “Kresge was closed this year, so I didn’t even really consider them a resource for this year.”
- “My satisfaction with the library was

# Kresge Library's Vision to Supporting the Ross School of Business

**Positive:** Through positive business practices, the potential of people and firms will be realized and society's most pressing problems will be addressed.

- Provide resources and services that support research in all fields of study.
- Support faculty and student research in areas such as International Business, Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, Ethics and Renewable Energy.
- Focus on "patron-driven services" and incorporating the power of "yes" in our decisions to meet the diverse needs of the Ross Community.

**Boundaryless:** Solutions are not confined to one sector, function, or type of person, and that true innovation comes from a boundaryless approach to problem solving.

- Provide resources and services to accommodate researchers' work styles by providing both email and chat reference and supplying materials electronically.
- Support business related reference assistance for students elsewhere at the University of Michigan.
- Grow the very popular Ross Syllabi Archives - the first of its kind on campus and the inspiration for the LSA syllabi archives that launched in 2013.
- Provide Ross alumni and Michigan businesses with access to useful, relevant and freely available information resources to support business through Kresge guides via the Internet.

**Analytic:** Analytic rigor must be the foundation for all business decision making in the 21st century.

- Work to provide Ross faculty and students with useful data sources to enable successful completion of their research and action-based learning experiences.
- Provide the information resources to support strong decision making by our students and faculty in such diverse areas as market research, competitive intelligence or scholarly review.
- Kresge librarians and staff serve as leaders in the information field through presentations, scholarly writing, and participation in local and national organizations.

**Action:** Business acumen consists of a set of knowledge and skills that can only be developed by bridging the gap between theory and practice and engaging in action-based learning.

- Support action-based learning through a unique and essential program of embedded librarians for each team of Ross MBA and BBA students. Kresge Librarians are assigned to work with over 175 action-based learning teams a year to ensure that their information needs are being met.
- Provide timely and quick support for faculty to prepare them for press interviews and added resources for classes on the breaking news of the day.
- Share our theory and practice of supporting student groups through our unique embedded librarian program through presentations and scholarly articles.

Visit <http://kresgeguides.bus.umich.edu/kresgelibraryservices/Ross> to see our full list of how we align our services with that of the school's mission.

lower this year just because there was no easily accessible space. I'm sure it will be fabulous once it is finished!"

For many students, there was a strong, if not critical tie between the library as space and the library as service. When one went (space), it took the other with it. The 2015 evaluations resulted in the lowest scores for Kresge in the last ten years. But in many ways, it gave us an opportunity to build on that low point and grow the library once again.

## TELLING YOUR STORY

The big question one may ask when a library undergoes significant change concerns assessment and knowing if the library in its new format is meeting the needs of the school. How do we really assess our function at Kresge with the new reality? While we still have numbers for reference transactions and instruction sessions, we have no print volume counts and no head count for the library. So moving from a traditional library to one that is online only (as I call it—the ethereal library) causes a real problem in showing how you are doing.

When Gertrude Stein reflected on her hometown of Oakland, California with the now famous phrase, "there is no there there," she was experiencing a loss of an established identity that made it hard to see the connection between the Oakland of her childhood and what she saw as an adult. The same disconnect can take place in a library, especially one that goes through a dramatic change like what took place at Kresge Library.

The title of this article comes from something my dad would say all the time when I was young. It is a counter-intuitive approach to measures and metrics that might be used to determine success for an enterprise. My father was one of the first discount retailers in New Jersey and was one of the key figures to overturn "Blue Laws" that prevented the sale of many items on Sundays. He always wanted us to realize that the results that we attain might not be the ultimate measure of success. Something might appear to be successful, but could not be sustainable in the long-run. Conversely, something might be chalked up as a failure, but provides a good framework for moving forward.

It might be that the outcomes that we record today at Kresge are more indicators and less validators. The successes we have at Kresge add up to a total story about the library in the new age, but do not necessar-

ily indicate that we should stop evaluating the services we are providing to the campus. With an ever changing community that we work with, having this type of flexible approach is truly important. When telling the story of this new type of library, I had my dad's expression in the back of my mind as we moved forward. Here are some of the aspects that we looked at in particular.

*Short and Long Term Benefit:* Academic libraries are unique entities on campuses because they are designed to balance the needs of today's scholars with those in the future. Academic librarians collect for generations to come, and yet that result is very difficult to measure in a period of less than ten to twenty years. The challenge is how this calculation can be done in an electronic-only library.

*The Library's Mission:* Many academic libraries have unique mission statements. At Kresge Library, our mission has always been subservient to that of the school. So, in 2012 when the Ross School of Business established its mission statement and strategic directions around four pillars (Action, Analytic, Boundaryless, and Positive), we were poised to support the very same pillars (see Sidebar). This framework enables us to better connect with the stakeholders at the school (faculty, students, staff, community members, alumni).

*Supporting Student Research Needs:* With the changes that took place at Kresge Library, we were able to shift more attention away from the physical demands of the library operations (circulation, collection management, for example) and direct that energy to more student-facing needs. We were about to increase support of student research as it relates to the school's action-learning programs at Ross before the change. Today, Kresge's embedded Librarian program was able to grow when these learning opportunities were expanded to undergraduate students.

The opportunity to work with sophomores in the core class (BA 200) as well as support student teams across the curriculum was made possible in part by having fewer tasks associated with running a traditional library. The benefit here is that our support of these programs was recognized as having immediate impact by the school's leadership. It also helped bolster our reference and research support interaction counts.

*High Class Problems:* So often, librarians find themselves burdened with a series of low class problems. They might include find-

ing the right audience for a service or a collection. They might also be how to get people interested in the library, especially in research services. These low class problems involve marketing, where you are trying to get others to use your service. These actions might be born from the implementation of a service or resource that was successful somewhere else and implemented now at your library.

Rather than seek out services and then find an audience, however, libraries should figure out what the school needs and build out from there. Then your problems are capacity and how to meet the increased needs of the community. These are the high class problems than any director should seek out.

During our transition, we brought into the library a service that enables faculty to outsource (to us) the work of handing back papers or exams. This was especially useful if they wanted students to review them only. This is not a traditional library responsibility, but there was a demonstrated need and some capacity to take it on. Though we have only done it for two years, it has been a strong success.

*Be Leery of Dashboard Indicators:* In the world of metrics, there is a strong notion and belief that the truth is in the numbers—that if we had better data, we could tell a more convincing story. Personally, I do not believe that such data exists.

Ultimately, the true measure is not our interactions, but how well we tell the story of our interactions. If we can support the school and people see the work, then libraries will continue to prosper. If the administrators cannot see the value of the work of the library, then all the numbers in the world will not provide a safe harbor for the work of a library.

Many library directors have sought out a set of dashboard indicators to definitively show the value provided by the library. And while metrics can provide an overview of the health of the library, what they cannot tell is the external forces that are play in any environment. An academic library that has built a tremendous historical collection may face space constraints not from its own work, but from the needs and demand by others. So while a dashboard will reveal a great deal about your own operation, it does not help clarify what is happening around you. And that is where a library is going to get hurt these days.

*Libraries are People, not Buildings:* Finally, as libraries go through changes, space will be lost and the very nature of what a library

can do will change also. As with the new Kresge Library Services, we had to embrace what we became, not what we were or wanted to be. We needed to shift our services and assessment tools to view the library as it is, not what it was.

As your library shifts from a place to visit to a service unit, consider that you need a new story to measure your success. That success will come from the staff that you have, not the facilities you maintain. To that end, make sure that your staff has the flexibility to choose their path forward—but they must move in that direction.

## MEASURING SUCCESS

When libraries undergo dramatic change, it is imperative that both the library and the governing administrative body give everyone time to adjust to the new environment. Not being married to the results means that a library that undergoes dramatic change should have the ability to take risks, win some services, and lose others.

The key point from the currently evolving story of Kresge Library is that we do not have predetermined measures of success. Likewise, we do not have predetermined levels of failure. If our goal is to meet the needs of our community, then we can be less concerned about the appearance of success or failure.

Remember, the work of the library is not a game, a match, or a race. It is increasing a service that aspires to connect a finite number of people in our community with potentially an infinite number of resources. Given that formula, success should be, and can be, what we make of it. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Re-think it: Libraries for a New Age: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/rethinkit/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Drowning by Numbers: The State of Baseball History" (Western Pittsburgh History 76:2, Summer 1996). See: <https://journals.psu.edu/wph/article/view/4382>.