Understanding the 21st Century Research Landscape: Emerging Trends and Needs Within and Across Disciplines—Perspectives from a Business Library

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Understanding the 21st Century Research Landscape: Emerging Trends and Needs Within and Across Disciplines—Perspectives from a Business Library

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Abstract:

The needs of researchers in key disciplines are changing rapidly and this has important implications for the library's role in enhancing research productivity and impact. This session will create a roadmap for supporting 21st century research needs that draws on published research and rubber-hits-the-road insight from subject experts. Are there common threads to 21st century research needs that cut across all subject areas? To what extent are emerging trends common to the sciences, social sciences, or humanities, and to what degree are they discipline-specific? Key areas to be explored will include research funding trends, new methodologies such as article data mining, content needs such as e-books and datasets, emerging research technologies and tools, and new approaches to collaboration and dissemination of research findings. This presentation was the one focused on business research in an action-based learning context (Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan).

Looking at the position of the library in the role of student and faculty research in business, I see some very strong and positive aspects that could serve us well in the future. I am writing from my experience as the director of the Kresge Business Administration Library at the University of Michigan. In particular, I will focus on three areas when exploring the 21st century research landscape: general observations, specific research trends for business and I will pose a question on "where do we need to be?"

The general perception is that reference transactions in all means are down at academic libraries. Libraries are moving to more self-service models with the nearly full adoption of electronic resources. Students have a strong affinity for searching and typically do not have issues with very basic searches. This is even easier and provides better results in the age of discovery platforms that appear to more effectively search over multiple resources at once. While many patrons do not have a great sense of how things work "under the hood", they still are able to find materials sufficient for their work.

To this end, we have seen many libraries opt to close reference desks or combine them with the circulation desk.

In regards to specific research trends for business in academics, I will look at this in two basic components or research: faculty/PhD research and

students (undergrad and MBA levels). Since Kresge Library is what I call a boutique operation, generally all staff work with the patrons. My vision of my own role as library director is definitely that of a practitioner-administrator—so I work very closely with Ross students and faculty in their research projects. This provides me with an unfettered view of our reference services and the use of our licensed materials at Kresge. With Faculty and PhD student research, much of our work is designed to support access to the scholarly literature, the assessment of historical data, and data mining of text (especially analyst reports, press releases and other business documents). With the advent of tremendous programs that can analyze a great deal of information, we find that more and more vendors are placing downloading limits that are too low for what the researchers need.

In regards to student research, our work is directed by the action-based learning (ABL) approach used at the Ross School of Business. By taking the ABL approach, the Kresge Library has a very different interaction with business students that many schools experience, especially with schools that use the case method for instruction. In a business case, the student generally receives all the information that they need to participate in the class and assess the problems that they are exploring. So their need to delve into business resources is limited only to external assignments. With ABL, students at Ross

work with "real world problems" and, in turn, have tremendous information needs that far extend what might be found in a case. This is a great opportunity for the library to demonstrate value to the academic community.

As ABL has been developed at Ross, students work in groups with faculty, communication and research advisors. The secondary research advisor for a team is one of Kresge Library's eight librarians who is assigned to their team. The assigned librarian serves as a guide and mentor to the group and helps them find the information that they need to complete their project. From a personal standpoint, topics that I have worked with include healthcare tourism; recruitment and employment services in Ireland, the UK and Poland; reducing carbon emissions throughout a dairy supply chain; creating a market for online sales of tools; supporting women garment workers in Bangladesh; and numerous other topics. Librarians work with multiple teams, and in the peak season for MAP (when we have nearly 90 teams for the 8 librarians), we have other staff work at the reference desk (to balance our workload). The benefit of having the student teams work with a single librarian is that they do not need to explain their project time and time again to different people who might be at the desk. Instead, the librarian already knows what resources they have seen and where their project has been. This saves considerable amount of time for both the librarian and the students over the course of a project.

The success in supporting ABL is shown in many ways. While many projects get information that they need from their sponsor agency, librarians make strong bonds with students via MAP. This is demonstrated during the student's second year when they often reach out to their MAP librarian directly for other projects. This is definitely where we show our value. Here are quotes from the annual report from the 2011 Exit Survey of MBA students[i]:

- Another gem at Ross. Whenever I have asked Kresge for help (in person or remotely through Meebo), I have never been disappointed. They helped me greatly during my internship. My only issue is that the school should do more to educate the students about this amazing resource that is often under-utilized.
- Best thing about Ross hands down. Very knowledgeable and responsive staff overall.
- The librarians are amazingly responsive and supportive. I will miss them and their resources.
- The librarians were phenomenal.
- Kresge Library staff is awesome! They answer to the e-mails promptly even during the weekend and they are very helpful. The chat is also very useful.
- Kresge library staff rocks! One of the best things about Ross.
- Kresge is world-class.
- The librarians were incredibly helpful in navigating all of the data that was available. They are the most responsive people in all of the business school and it was greatly appreciated.

While this demonstrates great success for Kresge Library, there are lessons that we have learned that are applicable to a wider audience of academic libraries. In regards to the academic library landscape, I proposed the question that we should ask ourselves: "Where do we need to be?" This is the biggest question that we have to ask ourselves as we look at the future of academic librarianship and academic libraries. We do not need to be everywhere—just everywhere our students are. If our students are not on twitter—then we do not need to be there—and the same would be true with Facebook and other social media sites. In regards to where we are and where we need to be, I offered the following ideas.

First, self-service is critical when patrons know what they want. But customer service is critical when patrons do not know what they want. We have seen everyone make assumptions about our users with the notion that there is one type of question and one type of response. If you spend any time at a reference desk, you release that this is not the case and it is a poor (or maybe dangerous) management assumption. Over the last five years, we have expanded our reference desk hours by 4 hours a day and opened up IM to cover basically all the hours of the library. Along with strong outreach, our reference stats have grown in each of the last five years.[ii]

Second, make sure that your library staff is available for the "half-question." From a management perspective, we want to make the library easy to use. That being said, we should be focused on making it easy for people to ask any question. If we make it difficult for people to ask questions, either by cumbersome forms or by removing staffed desks, many students may not go through the effort to ask the question. If we make it easy for students to ask question, then we might make connections and receive more complicated ones, showcasing what we can provide for the patrons.

Third, we should be focused on building a relationship, not completing a transaction. We work with patrons all the time who often ask us narrow and almost simple questions. Possibly, we might find that underlying that question is a larger project that we can assist with. At Kresge Library recently, a librarian helping a student with a rather straightforward question discovered (through conversation) that this was a part of a much larger research project at a Ross institute and now we are in position to assist them. While it would have been nice if they thought about the library at the beginning of the project—they did not and we have to be OK with that. Each question we get is an opportunity to build the relationship with our patrons that showcase our skills and ability to the broader academic community. As this can be seen as our primary role and function, making these connections is critical for the survival and growth of the academic library. And at Kresge Library, it serves as the central tenant in our service renaissance.

[i] Quoted in the Kresge Library 2011 Annual Report: http://www.bus.umich.edu/KresgeLibrary/downloads/annualreports/KresgeAnn2011.pdf

[ii] For reference statistics, please see the Kresge Library's annual reports: http://webservices.itcs.umich.edu/mediawiki/KresgeLibrary/index.php/Kresge_Library#Kresge_Library_Annual_Reports or http://webservices.itcs.umich.edu/mediawiki/KresgeLibrary/index.php/Kresge_Library