

Don't Get Married to the Results: Managing Library Change in the Age of Metrics

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Don't Get Married to the Results: Managing Library Change in the Age of Metrics

Corey Seeman, Director, Kresge Library Services, University of Michigan

The following is a transcript of a live presentation at the 2015 Charleston Library Conference.

Corey Seeman: Thank you. Thank you very much. I'm going to spend a lot of time talking about my library and myself so I'm not going to do any introductions. I'm Corey Seeman, director of Kresge Library Services at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. My presentation, "Don't Get Married to the Results: Managing Library Change in the Age of Metrics," is all about the program changes that we've gone through, and when I posted it on Twitter it went to Facebook and my stepbrother Blaine freaked out because he saw that all that came through in his feed was a Tweet or a Facebook post from me saying, "don't get married," and I mentioned to him that that would be something that my wife would present on.

So, I've been at the University of Michigan for 10 years. It will be 10 years later this month and if we want to use an altmetric that's four football coaches, so it's kind of an interesting way to think about things. So, last week I was on campus and I saw this wonderful squirrel and he just captured what I want to do. He was sort of measuring the acorn that got away. So what I'm going to do today is talk about some opening thoughts on assessment, problems with numbers, library changes and you, about Kresge Library and what we're doing—and if at any point I move away from the mic, please let me know—and then telling your story, and this is really about what we're trying to do at Kresge.

So, I am a bit of an iconoclast when it comes to assessment. I think that we can rely on our gut to be a little more definitive about what we're doing. Oh, by the way the slides are available online. There's a tiny URL that will show up again at the end. I think that assessment needs to be periodic and continual, but it can't be the sort of "hear all and end all." One of the things that was really wonderful—so I saw a colleague from Grand

Valley in the audience. Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan has a library that anyone would be envious of, and they had a conference this August that was fantastic: "Re-Think It: Libraries for a New Age." This is a picture of the library. It helps when Steel Case is a partner, but they really did a great job, and it was all about design thinking, which is really about empathy, which is really about understanding the end users. This is a dynamic—this is a graphic that really focuses on what our world looks like in business, and I know there are a couple business librarians here. The resources, the faculty; maybe in history it's more similar, but at least in business the student needs are different than the faculty needs. So, faculty needs include scholarly journals, articles, books, datasets, etc. Students' needs are articles, company and industry information, and market reports. The community, we work with alumni—we have some alumni resources—they are more geared toward students, so assessing becomes very tricky when we're looking at different populations with different needs. And then, finally, I was talking to my colleague from Michigan State and said all of my pets will make an appearance somewhere. This is my cat, Cosmo, and the reason why I chose this picture is because he's in a Postal Service box, and in academic campuses, I feel very strongly about this, we are on-campus monopolies. We are sort of the way that people get information and so we have to work differently. If we think about some of the frustrations that we have with IT departments, who are also on-campus monopolies, we will sort of get the same thing.

I want to talk a little bit about some problems with numbers. Okay, so it's a political season. It will continue to be a political season for one more freakin' year. Stupidity with numbers—so for those of you who are keeping score: 271,000 jobs, 5% unemployment, that's good news, unless you're Ben Carson, Donald Trump, etc., etc. So, Kohl's pricing is something I've always talked

about in so far that it's part of the ridiculous notion of numbers when you spend \$55 and realize you've saved over \$200. John Oliver has a great piece on school testing that I encourage everyone to look at. And then Halloween—so we had two trick-or-treaters. We live out in the middle of nowhere; we bought a big candy bag and so we were able to give that out. Yeah, bad return investment, but happy kids so it was worth it. In my picture, that's my dog and those are my nieces. That's my dog, Flapjack. So, big data, we were talking little earlier—so Gary (Price) freaked us all out; he freaked me out about “big data” and I think that people are really excited about the possibility and the potential, but I don't really see that this is just right around the corner for us. I think that it may actually be years before we can harness some of this information so I'm not that enamored with it.

So, back to Kohl's, retail pricing is really important. So, this is a business database and we're told that for our \$5,000 quarterly investment our students have downloaded \$3.7 million worth of content. Now no one at University of Michigan can turn \$5,000 into \$3.7 million, not even Coach Harbaugh. So, I'm going to think that these numbers maybe aren't as accurate or useful. And then another thing about retail pricing: I'm not hugely enamored with a cost per use. I think it's a good metric, it's good to know, but it doesn't really tell the whole story. I did notice George's Loan Company on King Street: “Money to loan on articles of value.” So, if we just had pawn shops near our campuses we would know what books are valuable. And there's my cat, Wanda, proving once and for all that cats prefer print to “e.” So, we are trying to connect a usage with value, but it's not always clear cut and I think that we're trying to find, we're trying to answer the question, we might be burning daylight. So, more problems with numbers: we are very good about making tiny cuts. If we go flatline we all know that we have to reduce resources so we make small incremental changes and then taken holistically or taken over the course of a matter of years we end up with some big problems, that we really changed our fundamental value and that we drop below the just noticeable thresholds. This is a can of Chase and Sanborn, which was a very popular

coffee brand and now it's really kind of the worst coffee you can get, so the small changes over the years can lead to bigger issues.

This is something I found from *The Economist* very recently. Most of us flew here, and it's very sad, but treating flyers well apparently is bad for airlines' bottom line. This gentleman here is cramped in his seat. I flew on a 757 and I didn't have half that much room so I'm not sure how he did well, but when we sit there we have a service that we are providing to a campus and the more that we do, it does provide some benefit but it's not really adding sometimes to our bottom line and then change happens. So this is the Chase Furniture Company, which is one of three furniture stores north of here on King. I'm at the Hyatt Place so I've been walking back and forth and it's now the Charleston College of Law. One furniture store just closed and the other is still open, probably not for long. This is Reed Brothers, which is a fabric store that I went into. There is a sign that says “stereo department,” and I think it's a trap, so I didn't go down that road—so I'm not sure exactly where that path, I'm not sure exactly what it is. But this is the dynamic of what we're dealing with. Very quickly through this, Katherine (Skinner) talked this morning about “Moneyball.” I've done some stories about or some articles about baseball history as well back in the day, talking about how we spent more time talking about contests then context, and so that's really where I think the metrics do us poorly.

So, in summary here when we think of library statistics a lot of us think of items, access, usage, headcount. A lot of us have been talking about what are the outcomes not the outputs, and we're trying to make connections that are really hard to find. What is the library contribution toward retention, for example? What is the library contribution to faculty's success and to tenure promotion? And I think that there are a lot of issues here that are really very tricky. And then we also love to oversimplify our numbers. So, this was from two winters ago. It was -21° . I drove the car and it had a thermometer in it; well it was my wife's car, so everyone loves dashboard indicators and they do a really, really great job of sort of dumbing down what's going on, simplifying it. It

does a really good job and I'll get back to this at the end—it does a great job of telling you how you're running, but it doesn't necessarily tell you about environments at your institution.

Library, change, and you. So, change of course is a very personal experience, and your mileage may vary and we all have change from a very distinct point of view. If you ask anyone in the library field 35 years ago when the conference started, they would tell you "Oh my gosh, things are changing so much with the OCLC. We used to do such curated cataloging records." I believe right now we're at the tip of real systemic change. I'm in a departmental library, a small 19 person library that's now even smaller. Medical libraries, science libraries, and business libraries have all been contracted. One of the things—this is the Skillman Branch, 1931 in Detroit. It is a beautiful building, and across the façade it says, "The fountain of wisdom flows through books." It is a really beautiful sentiment and certainly the case in 1931. But, the changing use of space is something that is really important. Steven Bell, who talked at—he gave a keynote a couple of years ago—did a great column not that long ago about an external forces. We always talk about internal change that we want to do and that's great, but the external forces are the bigger issues and he talked about Sweet Briar closing, or closing and then not closing, and LaSalle University dealing with dramatic decreases in tuition dollars—this is just my thought in summing it up: our virtue is not our salvation. That's what I said: it was me.

So about Kresge, I'm going to go through this quickly so I can move on. So we're an independent library. We were built in the 1980s, and when you have a library built in the 1980s you have lots of stacks and you have lots of items. We were open 108 hours a week. We had seating for 700 students, very visible, very citifying. We originally had a collection of 140,000; then it was reduced to 70, but we were in a constant state of library erosion. Here are some pictures, very crowded, and it wasn't like this was the one day a year it was crowded. This is pretty much Monday afternoon to Thursday at five. At U of M, Thursday is your drinking night so everyone—Thursday night the place clears out and then Friday as

people sober up they come back in so it's usually around 10 or 11. We don't have that anymore and then in the bottom you can barely make it out but that's a giant mascot, Sprout, because General Foods was recruiting that day. I'm going to skip over this because they just created—I'm going to read this really quickly and I apologize. This just came from some Ross faculty who are writing about the Ross project, and I want to talk about it positively so I'm going to read this. This just came yesterday: "The second challenge involves the downsizing of Kresge library. As a result of the construction of the new building on the Ross School Campus and the demolition of the former library location, Kresge Library lost its entire physical space. The library was no longer a place with **stacks of books**," and I'll explain why it's bold, 'and journals nor a "go-to" place for students to study. The leader of the library relayed his unit's choice to avoid soaking, rebelling or resisting. Instead, the positive pillar was consciously employed as a reminder to look at this process in a particular way towards focusing on what we might have and what is working right rather than what we lost. The library director was able to create a positive vision for an ephemeral library,' and explained that, "including publishing academic journal articles, his vision on the library of the future. These articles and his leadership allowed Ross to become a pioneer in creating the library of the future." Okay, so two things. So first thing, I'm going to go to the second thing, I'm referring to this as the ethereal library, not ephemeral library, so I made that clear. I grew up in New Jersey so the fact that I can say anything is pretty awesome, and I asked them to change "stacks of books" because "stacks of books" sounds like we're an episode of "Hoarders" yet to come. But I think this captures what we're doing. It's not on the slides that are available because again I just got it but I guess it will be coming out in print at some point soon.

This is our library. Twenty-seven thousand feet, now we're around five and change. There are six group study rooms across the top. There are a few tables, a few terminals for Bloomberg and things like that, and then we have open office behind. There is very little room for stacks; almost nothing. We have room for about 200 books,

which incidentally is the same number that the Mission San Juan Capistrano had in 1834, so I thought that was cool. I think they were trying to prove a different point. When we first started designing this we were really trying to bend over backwards to create a space that students could still use, and then it dawned on us: we can do it. There's not enough real estate. So we have to sort of realign. Failure, very importantly, is an option that we can deal with. In the discussion that we had with the leadership team we talked about the academic nature of the collection. We talked about the fact that 90%, our estimate, did not have a digital counterpart, and if we were to get rid of it, it's gone, and people asked the question "well, maybe it wasn't that important if it didn't have a digital counterpart." And of course in this crowd you're like "AHHH!" But, you know, for people trying to fit a lot of building in a small space it becomes a question that they ask. We did have some redundancy with the main library and our colleagues at the U of M have been great—they actually took on our unique content. We did have circulation of around 10,000 to 14,000 a year over the last couple of years. It wasn't insignificant; it was actually pretty decent. But, the big thing for us I explained is that if we go this route I can't collect print. I can't collect nonelectronic format. I won't have the space and in the end that was determined to be okay. So, in the end we lost our space. So, we're shifting from a library of space to a library service, and there are some very, very interesting things.

To follow what Katherine (Skinner) said this morning, it is not only our moment of loss, but it is also our moment of opportunity. So to talk about those things sort of at the same point, this is actually—people have heard about moving of the tree. That's the tree they moved to the front of the school. That's the last cart of books that rolled out of the building, and the library is to the right of the tree. Libraries are going through all sorts of shifting right now. A lot of librarians are taking on more teaching roles instead of being bibliographers, and it really is a whole lot of change going on. The library did not close, although I was asked last night "oh, you're here? I thought your library closed." It's totally legit. I can understand that and what I'm saying is that we

didn't close—we lost our lease. So, what are we doing now? We are trying to be very entrepreneurial. We have a long history of doing that and we're doing that with all except the bottom one. Entrepreneurs will always talk about a new approach to a problem, new worlds, new market opportunity, creative thinking, empathetic focus, willingness to fail. The exit strategy, and that came up in the session yesterday; we don't have an exit strategy right now, so that's really how we're just a little different, but what we wanted to determine was how do we tell the story? So we only got the 200 books. Aerostats are a breeze. I've got that going for me, and we used our budget really to reframe how things are going. The change of library as a place to library as a service was huge. Gertrude Stein's quote about the Oakland of her youth, "There is no there there," is really about not being able to recognize the place that you worked and the place that you used. For us the big thing is the loss of established identity, and so, you know, you see a building that's open and it's great to and that's all wonderful.

So, a lot of the things that I want to talk about for the next 10 minutes or so really stem from my dad and here we are, here he is. My dad was a great innovator in the New Jersey retail space. He owned a clothing store, and it was one of the first true discounters in New Jersey and it really kind of started a movement with discount malls and so the retail focus really helps us, helps me at least, frame what we're trying to accomplish. Balancing is really important. Academic librarians try to balance from today and tomorrow, build the collection for now and down the road. There are opportunities to do that but we're not really in a great shape to do that, and I think it's kind of a big obligation for us right now and so we're really focused on the short-term, which really creates a very, very different kind of library. Thinking about the future is really a good thing. It's not something that we can easily do right now, and here's a squirrel burying nuts for later and squirrels; by the way, do remember where they have put those nuts as they cash them all over the grounds.

The big thing for us is that the school—our mission is the mission of the school. So the school

went through and they were talking about positive pillar; there are four pillars: action, analytic, boundaryless, and positive. And everything that we do what Ross School of Business needs to funnel into one of those. So, we do not have our own specific mission at Kresge. We basically say “it’s that,” and so what we’ve done is we’ve created a document that says “for each of these four things, here is how we support it,” and we control that but it really ties us to what the leadership team wants, which I think benefits us at the end.

Connecting with stakeholders is really important. We had conversations with faculty, staff, and students, ironically after the decision was made, for whatever reason. The communication was such that it would all happen very, very quickly. This is the Kresge staff, the great people I work with. Actually, we first found out that this might be happening during a shifting process, and we were integrating some books and we couldn’t really stop in the middle of it so we had to go through it even though we knew it was possible—we did this in the summer of 2013. By going through this work we actually were able to create a clean slate and try to figure out what is needed by our community, and we used the mission sort of as a North Star reference and we moved in that direction.

One of the things that’s really important, although we are hard to find and a lot of people think we are closed and there’s a lot of confusion about Kresge, communication is, of course, a huge issue. We’re still central to reference, and our reference numbers are pretty consistent and actually maybe even trending up. We have an expanded role. We have some capacity that we have been able to redirect to reference, and so we have actually more people doing reference than before and this is one of the academic deans and one of the faculty members—very important in MAP, which is our multidisciplinary action program where we have our embedded librarian program. So, you know, if our reference numbers imploded in addition to our space they would be making some dramatic changes, but the service again saved us. We’ve always strived for sort of the high-class problem. The high-class problem is one of trying

to figure out capacity versus the low-class problem trying to figure out how to get people to use it. We have way too many low-class problems in publishing, librarianship, etc. This is our annex. We actually couldn’t find space in the Visgo for this, so the great people over at Law set us up, which is actually symbolic. I’m looking over my friend, Breezy, from Michigan State, as their business library is also in the Law, so we have that in common. They’re good friends at East Lansing. So we were doing what the school needed, so a lot of people are erring toward sort of creating—we want to teach classes, we want to be more educators, would want to do bigger and loftier things. What we determined was that there was an opportunity to go in and actually create, have the library manage a program that the school wanted, and it was an exam and assignment program so that they could hand back exams—the students could look at it but they had to be returned. This was a service that was run through our faculty support unit, and they couldn’t handle it so was folded into the library, which actually was great for the circulation staff who didn’t have anything to circulate. So, it actually did fantastic things because it was a service that the school wanted. Most importantly from my perspective, it saved jobs and it produced a real value in it was a real win—we needed one.

From our exit survey—we don’t survey but the school surveys the students; we have some MBA student exit surveys—the good news is: “Kresge libraries are amazing”; “D” who is one of our employees: “D” was a great help for one of my projects”; “Shout out to Sally, who was beyond phenomenal during our MAP project”; Laura Burnish gets a lot of praise here as well. “Kresge team might be one of the best at the school.” That’s all good. On the downside: “Kresge being closed for the second year was a big loss”; “Will it get better in the new building?” Maybe, maybe not. One of my favorite ones was there were lot of people complaining about the library being closed and one person complained about the hours of the library, and so, well, if it’s closed are there hours? But, the students were equating Kresge as space, not service, and this is actually something UNCG Greensboro’s Tim Bucknell, at a presentation that I went to yesterday, was talking

about: how people who are coming into the library are not using materials; they are not using a lot of the materials but they are using the flat surface. They're using it as a place to study and that is what our students wanted, and that was a great session with Rick (Anderson).

And so the time horizon of our work has really changed and this has been really tricky. I have realigned us for the short-term and so it's the short tail. Okay, it's all I got. Speaking of metrics that don't mean anything, I have over 17,000 pictures on Flickr of University of Michigan campus squirrels, so every so often you'll see a number that doesn't make any sense and that's two of them. So, what we're trying to do is we're trying to share our accomplishments as they resonate with our stakeholders. It's not aligned with the profession, it's not aligned with tradition, but it's going to, actually, I think put us in a better spot down the road. From the budget request we have shared the ways that we manage these spaces and these issues. We changed our names to Kresge Library Services because Kresge Library connotes a place. Services at the end connotes what people can expect to find there. We moved to electronic course materials thru study.net. Reference location after-hours help has moved a lot, but our reference interaction has actually increased, I think.

The last thing I want to talk about a little bit: here's a picture of me when I was four—I'm the little one. That's my older brother and my dad in 1968. When you're going through dramatic changes, there is a great tendency to go back and think about the way things were. We don't have the opportunity to do that, and I think a lot of people if they're in this position may not have this. I've given staff a lot of flexibility to choose their own path. Some people I know are looking and that's fine. It's a different kind of library, and it's not the library that everyone necessarily wants to work at. We want to consider services that are going to meet the needs of the school rather than ones that we need to sell with. The title comes from something my dad always told me: "Don't get married to the results." And it's really—I think very, very useful because it is that, and it was always something he would say whether

something happened good or bad, and sure he got married four times in his life so maybe there's a different message here. But one of the things that we've especially found in big change—we've decided that we weren't going to start with any predetermined measures of success, so we didn't have—we needed reference to go up by "X" amount; it doesn't really matter. What we wanted to do was we wanted to look at what we were doing, tweak, and be nimble enough to change. We look at usage stats really as indicators, not validator's, and so we try to tell that story as best as we can. And having the appearance of success doesn't mean you actually have it, and so that's one of the things that I think we need to be really careful about: not to say that we need to live in a paranoid world, but we need to live in constant sort of reflection of what our schools need. And you know if too many metrics like school testing, getting back to that reference to John Oliver, could be at the expense of other elements. If we wanted people to use our resources we could thrust the discovery layer down their throat. It's not always what people need, and so it's really a matter of trying to be attuned to what our patrons need and don't let yourself be judged by what we didn't accomplish. I mean, I have a very patient boss right now. I have a different boss and I will have a different boss in January, but they are very, very good about understanding the role that we are going into. And then one closing thought: so one block from here, if you go down Calhoun and you go to Bay, this happened. This was my mother's car. My mother used to live here and she'll live here again, and so we were driving back from Fort Sumter. It was our first visit to town and we were rear-ended, and so when people love talking about dashboard indicators, I will share that dashboard indicators are wonderful to tell you how you're doing but it doesn't necessarily tell you about the idiot behind you. That is a very, very tricky situation on our campuses, on our universities, on our communities, etc., so being aware of all of that is something that is really important. The slides are right here, a tiny URL CHS 15 Cory, and with that we're at 11 o'clock so if you need to leave early to get your next session, that's great. If you have questions, we will do that. So, thank you very much for your attention.