A ''white elephant'' in the library: a case study on loss of space from the Arizona Health Sciences Library at the University of Arizona

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The Arizona Health Sciences Library is housed in a 4-story building that serves 4 University of Arizona colleges in Tucson. In October 2005, the dean of the college of medicine informed the library director that one floor of the library had to be converted to open classroom space by June 2006. Library staff planned and participated in the conversion of the space. Twenty thousand seven hundred square feet of library space (34% of public space in the building) was used briefly for large classes but is now rarely used. The space is now largely open and contains a variety of moveable seating and tables not suited for quiet study.

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, the staff and administration of the Arizona Health Sciences Library were surprised by a request from the college of medicine for an entire floor of the four-story library building. The space was to be used as a large, flexible classroom to support the new curriculum. One semester later, after a huge moving project was completed, the space was hardly being used at all by the college, and the library was left with a ''white elephant.''

BACKGROUND

The Arizona Health Sciences Library (AHSL) serves the colleges of medicine, public health, pharmacy, and nursing at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The library occupies a four-story building with large windows that offer views of the campus and surrounding mountains. The former configuration of the building was:

- First floor: offices, administration, collection services, systems, and interlibrary loan
- Second floor: entry-level floor, information/circulation desk, reference, reserves, consumer health and audiovisual collections, computer commons, group study rooms, two library classrooms, some staff offices, coffee bar, and large open study area
- Third floor: journal stacks and a variety of study seating (tables, carrels, comfortable seating)
- Fourth floor: monograph stacks, group study rooms, and a variety of study seating

In late October 2005, the dean of the college of medicine (to whom the library reported at the time) informed the director that the college needed one floor of the library for a new, open classroom space. The college was implementing a new curriculum focusing heavily on team and group learning that would be taught in large and small group sessions. The college felt that several large, open areas could be created on one floor of the library to accommodate these new learning modalities. Relinquishing one floor of the library (approximately 20,700 net square feet [NSF]) meant the loss of 34% of the public space.

In the past, the library had opened library classrooms for use by others on campus with the understanding that no classes would be regularly scheduled in those rooms and that the library would retain ''bumping'' privileges. Housing a large, open classroom area was a new experience. One concern was that the advantage of having college of medicine students regularly coming into the building would be offset by the disruption caused by the movement of groups of students in and out of the building during the day. The third and fourth floors are open to each other at the north and south ends. Library staff thought that noise from a large class on either of these floors would interfere with quiet study on the adjoining floor. In addition, quiet study space (carrels, tables, and lounge chairs) interspersed with and surrounding the stacks on the third or fourth floors would be replaced with moveable furniture so that the open classroom space could be used in a variety of configurations. Although the seating capacity of the library would be essentially the same, the moveable furniture could easily be configured to accommodate large groups in the evening, again disrupting quiet study.

THE PROJECT

The request from the dean came as a total surprise to the library administration. In retrospect, staff noted that the dean, who had arrived about a year before, had walked unannounced through the building on several occasions. The staff knew he was looking at the library's use of space but did not anticipate the magnitude of his request. The dean did not talk with the director of the library about library space in general, although the director had had conversations with other administrators. There was no organized planning process. When the dean finally met with the director, it was clear that the reallocation of a floor in the building was not negotiable, only some of the details were negotiable.

The library director immediately convened an all-staff meeting to discuss the implications. Kübler-Ross's five stages of grieving (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance [1]) were written on the

board at the front of the meeting room. The group learned about the project and worked its way through several of the stages. Most, faced with the inevitable, came to acceptance by the end of the meeting or soon afterward.

The dean initially requested the third floor because of a secure pass-through to a college of medicine classroom area on that floor. In working with campus facility planners and the vice dean for academic affairs, the library administration pointed out that converting the third floor would cut the building in half vertically. In addition, opening the secure pass-through for students would compromise the library security system. Finally, the library's journal collection was housed entirely on the third floor, which would present a formidable moving problem. All parties quickly agreed that the fourth floor would work just as well.

The timeline for the project called for the open classroom to be ready for the fall semester in August 2006. The college of medicine would cover all costs (other than library staff time). The library was asked to vacate the floor by the end of June 2006 so that new carpeting and ''office landscaping'' could be installed. The library had eight months to move the entire monograph collection to the third floor. During this time, a shelving plan was developed and implemented. A small portion of the third floor had been reinforced when the building was constructed to allow the addition of compact shelving. Structural engineers were brought in to verify the location and load-bearing capacity of the reinforced floor. A request for proposal (RFP) was issued for the compact shelving.

Several strategies were carried out to fit the entire print holdings of the library on the third floor. First, bound volumes that duplicated electronic back runs of journals from trusted sources were discarded.* AHSL librarians identified these titles. Almost all library staff participated in pulling these volumes and scanning their barcodes. Collection services staff later used the barcodes to update the library's journal holdings. Second, because most runs of bound volumes would not be growing, journals were more closely packed on the shelves. Third, the previously empty top shelves of the stack ranges were used to hold journals. Fourth, shelving ranges were added to the east and west ends of the floor, and some shelving ranges were made longer with additional shelving units. One advantage gained was a new arrangement of the journals on the floor. The flow of the alphabet across the shelves had previously confused library users and shelvers, making it difficult to anticipate where a title might be located. During the project, every journal title was handled, and all were moved into a new, more logical arrangement. Supervised by librarians, temporary workers from an agency carried out this portion of the move. Finally, after the earlier steps had been completed, the addition of compact shelving allowed the monograph collection to fit on the floor. Without enough time to plan and execute a weeding project, no monographs were weeded during this project. Space gains came from the print journal collection.

OUTCOMES

Initially, the only problems with the new use for the fourth floor were logistical. When the entire freshman medical class was using the space as an open classroom, some noise did drift down to the third floor. Library staff members began posting signs at the library main entrance whenever a class was in session on the fourth floor warning users of possible noise.

The library also enjoyed the mixed blessing of 110 students entering the building and using the stairwell en masse once or twice a day. Library staff members posted signs in the stairwell reminding the students that voices carry easily in a confined space.

The additional shelving on the third floor meant that many study carrels and tables had to be moved to other areas or removed altogether. Carrels and tables were removed from the fourth floor. Rolling chairs and mini-tables on wheels were purchased for the area. The library experienced a net loss in traditional study space but an increase in the number of seats.

Perhaps the most disruptive aspect of the new configuration was the use of the space in the evenings, when no classes were being held. Students had used the fourth floor as a study space in the evenings. While carrels and tables had been interspersed with stacks in the past, the space (almost half the size of a football field minus the end zones!) was now virtually empty, except for moveable furniture and a few ''office landscaping'' cloth walls that did not reach the floor or ceiling. Students who used the fourth floor before the conversion expected the space to be quiet in the evenings. Instead, the new layout lent itself to group study sessions that were disruptive to those who wanted to study alone or in a quiet environment.

For the next year, the library staff and administration fielded complaints about the space. After meetings with student representatives and numerous attempts to find a solution, the problem seemed to solve itself as the sophomore class moved into their third-year clerkships and the freshman accepted the space as they found it, without expecting it to be a quiet study space. Time did seem to heal this wound.

Another problem that seems to have passed with time is the ownership issue. College of medicine students knew the space had been remodeled for them, resented use of the space by students from the other health sciences colleges in the evenings, and often blamed them for the lack of quiet. Again, over time, this problem seems to have gone away as the students who knew the history of the space moved on.

Perhaps the most discouraging aspect of the whole project is that, after two semesters, faculty members

* Arizona law does not allow donations of state property, and the volumes had no resale value. No viable offsite storage was available. Discarded journals were sent to a recycler.

have found other teaching spaces that they prefer. The space that the library staff worked so hard to create is now rarely used except for occasional meetings or social events. The library is now talking with campus planners about other uses for the space that will not disrupt the functioning of the library. However, the high ceilings; four light switches for the entire floor; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning designed for stacks; and odd location (top floor of the building) make it a difficult space to renovate without major expense.

This project brought about at least four positive outcomes. First, it forced everyone in the library to face the new reality of library space. The library does not need as much space as it did in the past and cannot claim ownership. Second, just about everyone on the staff was involved in one way or another on the project. Most staff members worked a shift or two physically moving volumes from shelves to recycling bins. Others were involved in planning, purchasing, and dealing with campus surplus services or the new campus poetry center, which benefited from the discarded shelving. This widespread involvement was a true ''bonding experience'' that provided the opportunity for staff from different departments to work side by side. Third, print journals are now much easier to locate on the third floor, thanks to the new shelving arrangement. Fourth, looking to the future, the loss resulted in an examination of all of the library's space to determine what space was not being used to its full potential. This review led to the library administration's decision to move or rearrange several departments to create group study rooms from prior offices. Some underused office space was offered to a newly enlarged college of medicine information technology unit, bringing new people into the building, with the advantages that come from proximity.

There were negative outcomes also. Many hours of staff time were consumed either by planning the move or helping to carry it out. Other projects were delayed during this time. The final configuration of the fourth floor also left something to be desired. A large, flexible space was created with nice, modern furniture. However, with large windows all around and lights that were either all on or all off, using projectors is very difficult. Also, many faculty and students have complained about glare on computer screens. The existing lighting was not changed during the renovation process. Additionally, the floor was used for classes only a few hours a week at first. In later semesters, other space was considered better for regular class meetings, so the space is rarely used for its intended purpose. However, in the evenings, when students are used to spreading out over the whole building to study, the fourth floor is now a poor study area. The large, open space, blocked only at wide intervals by thin cloth dividers, allows sound to travel long distances and bounce around. There are no more stacks to absorb the sound.

It is highly likely that more library space will be sought in the future. Campus administrators, always looking for space, view the situation in stark terms: ''Everything is electronic so you don't need the space.'' This is, to some extent, true and is part of the message that we ourselves have sent. Because the AHSL is being more proactive in the search for best uses of space, future requests will not be surprises and will be met with alternatives that have come from a library planning process.

Partially as a result of these experiences, the library is now in a state of continuous weeding. All printed journals that have a reliable, archival-quality digital version are being considered for removal from the collection. The goal, for now, is to provide more study space for students and fewer crowded shelves. However, there is an understanding that the library may be making room for the offices or classrooms of the future.

CONCLUSION

Given the current environment, every library should expect to be asked to give up space in the near future. The experience described in this case study has caused the AHSL to examine how its space is used and to compare this use to the mission of the university and vision of the library. The library director, many of the librarians, and staff can now look more dispassionately at how space is being used. Attitudes in the library are changing from an ownership to a stewardship model. Certainly, some uses of library space will continue as they have in the past, but only if they meet the needs of today's faculty, students, and staff.

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