

# Georgia State University College of Law

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From the Selected Works of Kristina L Niedringhaus

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May, 2007

## Building for Future Change

Kristina L Niedringhaus, *Phoenix School of Law*



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Building for

# Future Change

*Phoenix School of Law designs its  
law library for a growing school*

by Kristina L. Niedringhaus



The Information Resources Center (IRC) at Phoenix School of Law (PhoenixLaw) has undergone tremendous change during the past two years. As a brand new law school seeking provisional American Bar Association accreditation, PhoenixLaw has been, and continues to be, in a massive growth stage in all areas of the school and the IRC.

### The Challenge

In July 2005, with a student body of 27 part-time students, PhoenixLaw occupied temporary space in Scottsdale. In that facility the IRC and computer labs took up approximately 3,000 square feet, and IRC staff offices occupied approximately 425 square feet.

By August 2006, PhoenixLaw had a full-time and part-time student body totaling 118 students. The new facility, which PhoenixLaw moved to in early fall 2006, is just north of downtown

Phoenix. The space provides nearly 14,000 square feet for IRC and computer lab space, more than 4,000 square feet for IRC offices, and nearly 2,000 square feet for the IT staff offices and data center.

But this is only the first step in a staged expansion as the student body grows. And here was the greatest design challenge—how to design library space with an eye toward periodic future expansions that would not require redesigning large amounts of space.

### Temporary Off-Site Storage

PhoenixLaw has been fortunate to have wonderful community support. The IRC received so many donations from local firms and attorneys that we eventually had to turn down offers of free materials. Those materials needed to be checked for damage, assessed for addition to the collection, sorted, and processed.

We also wanted to open the new facility with many of our large collection building purchases on the shelves, so we required space for receiving and processing those materials that was unavailable in the temporary law school space. We leased a 4,000-square-foot store front with rear garage doors for deliveries.

After installing old shelving purchased from a local law firm, the staff set about sorting the materials and staging them for the move to the new building. Initially, the

pallets of materials were packed so tightly that the space resembled a garden maze constructed of cardboard. Known affectionately (sometimes) to the IRC staff as “the Warehouse,” the legends of time spent in this facility will be repeated to new staff members for years to come.

The warehouse provided the space needed to sort and evaluate materials for damage and/or duplication. The IT staff set up computers and printers and wireless network access that allowed materials to be cataloged, processed, and boxed for moving. Because we would integrate the warehouse materials with the materials from the existing IRC, they were carefully labeled and staged so they could be taken directly to their designated shelf in the new facility. The entire collection was mapped so that we would know precisely on which shelf any given volume belonged.

### Building Design

After considering several sites in and near downtown Phoenix, PhoenixLaw selected leased space in an office complex just north of downtown that will be on the new light rail transportation line. The complex consists of a 20-story tower surrounded by several two-story buildings. PhoenixLaw leased the majority of the first floor, the second floor, and the third floor in the tower, as well as a floor in one of the outlying buildings. We have the option to expand to other floors in the complex, which meets our need for staged expansion as the law school grows.

In addition to the public elevators that serve all floors of the tower building, floors one through four are served by a private elevator. Since it was necessary for the IRC and staff offices to occupy multiple floors, we were able to dedicate this elevator to IRC staff use and design technical services work space around easy access to the private elevator.

The second floor of the tower was reinforced for compact shelving and dedicated to the public side of the IRC and a computer classroom. The classroom is used as a lab when not reserved for classes or workshops. Approximately half of the first floor of the tower has been used for contiguous IRC staff office space.

In order to make the IRC space flexible for future expansion, the space was divided into pods. Those pods were then designated as either high-density or low-density shelving areas or study table spaces. As we

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grow, low-density pods can be converted to high-density pods. Eventually the IRC can expand to higher floors, and study table space can be shifted to allow additional shelving to take advantage of the floor loading already completed for the second floor.

We decided to provide one service point in the IRC. The circulation functions and reference functions are housed at one desk. In addition to the benefit of providing one centralized service point, this design conserved space to be used for other needs and allows for more flexible staffing. The desk is generally staffed by both circulation staff and a reference librarian. However, by having one service point, staff can more easily move back and forth to the stacks to complete tasks while working at the desk.

## Study and Research Space

A key priority in the IRC space design was to make the space inviting for study and research, a goal seems to have been achieved. “The design respects the variety of preferred learning styles of students,” says Karol Schmidt, director of academic success. “It allows students to be themselves and supports their needs.”

Carrels are arranged along the outside of the space to allow for more private, secluded study space while study tables are arranged in the middle of a large, open, brightly lit space. Glass-walled study rooms allow for small group discussions without disturbing other patrons and maintaining an open and well lit environment. Finally, soft seating offers a more comfortable area for reading, relaxing, or quiet conversations.

The design is modern and open and takes advantage of the nearly continuous Arizona sun with lots of windows and interior glass. Pods of high-density shelving were kept to the outer corners to allow more light to pass through to the interior study rooms and study tables. Carrels line the windows, and soft chairs and couches with low tables create well lit nooks for casual reading or discussion.

All areas of PhoenixLaw are equipped with wireless access. Group study rooms are equipped with wall-to-wall whiteboards, and markers and erasers are available for check out.

The space has been well received by the students and faculty. In an anonymous student survey in fall 2006, one student wrote, “The new IRC is awesome; spacious and bright.” Dean Dennis Shields describes the IRC as providing “excellent usability, great lighting, and outstanding physical resources. All in all, it is a great place for students to study and do research.”

## Staff Space

In July 2005, I was the only member of the IRC staff. By the time of the move, the IRC had expanded to a staff of 10—obvious office space issues arose when we all shared 425 square feet. All IRC staff members currently have their own office space, and two separate work areas flank the offices.

The law school mailroom was placed inside the IRC office space and is directly across from the technical services work area and the IRC elevator. Another work area is adjacent to the IRC conference room.

The IRC offices occupy space that used to be a bank. An old bank vault, complete

with a large round vault door, has been converted to a conference room. The vault provides a space large enough for the IRC staff to gather for meetings and is always a novelty during tours of the school.

Designing and moving to the new PhoenixLaw space has been both an exciting and challenging experience. We have space that meets our need for flexible and efficient expansion. Feedback from students, faculty, and administrators suggests that we have achieved our key priority of creating inviting, comfortable space that encourages varied and frequent use by the PhoenixLaw community.

All in all, it is a striking environment that is well used. Professor Stephen Gerst explains, “When I bring people for tours I either show the library first because they’ll be so impressed or I show it last because it’s the pièce de résistance.” ■

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## Captions:

*Photos by Don Burns, first-year law student at Phoenix and professional photographer.*

1. Sarah Prosory and Becky Gremes assist PhoenixLaw student Cid Kallen, at the circulation/reference desk.
2. Koviena Nelson, Susie Zappia, and Mike Mason meet in a PhoenixLaw Information Resources Center office.