IN SEPTEMBER 2010, the Dean of Libraries at the University of West Florida (UWF) charged a task force to review space in the John C. Pace Library and provide recommendations for improving the arrangement of patron areas, staff space, and collections. The eight-member task force conducted an exhaustive literature review, surveyed the university community, and visited other libraries in the Southeast (Florida State University, Tulane University, and Pensacola State College) that had recently completed renovation projects.

A number of common themes emerged during the literature review, including the need for comfortable furnishings, natural light, artwork and color, lower shelving, appropriate technology, and more collaborative group spaces and established quiet areas in the library. The task force developed an informal survey to seek input from patrons, populated with themes addressed in the literature. The survey was made available by placing it on a whiteboard near the elevators on the first floor of the library; cookies and questionnaires were placed at a table near the entrance of the library, survey boxes were installed in several locations in the library, library instruction classes were asked for feedback, an online survey was posted on the library web page, a pop-up survey followed the login process at library computers, and the administrators and directors of campus groups were e-mailed for dissemination among their constituents.

The survey simply asked patrons to mark “Yes,” “No,” or “Don’t Care” by each item on the list, indicating their level of interest in having these items in their library. Space was provided for comments or additional suggestions, and we did not limit the number of times a patron could respond. We received 9,490 responses over a 16-day survey period. Over 50 percent of responses came from the online surveys, especially the pop-up survey that appeared during the login process. The whiteboard near the elevator was visible and proved to be a “low-tech” way of gauging public opinion, while the paper surveys were the least popular method. Overall, the results of the survey gave us a clear picture of our users’ needs and expectations, and provided the following summary of statistics. (See figure 9.1.)

More computers and comfortable chairs topped the list, while areas for group collaboration and quiet individual study and a reading room also ranked high on the list of desires. Fortunately, we were able to act on several of these items almost immediately. For example, we designated a quiet floor, installed more PCs and opened up our instruction room for computing when not reserved for classes, and added additional seating. Furthermore, plans to address group study spaces are currently underway.

As we considered the space on the library’s second floor, we concluded that the Serials department staff did not need the 1,964 square feet of prime space they occupied. As a result of attrition and budget cuts, the Serials department...
had been reduced from six positions to two positions in less than five years. Two lines were cut, two were reassigned to other departments as part of a library-wide reorganization, and the two remaining Serials staff were ultimately folded into the Cataloging Services department on the first floor. This reorganization made sense because the UWF Libraries was receiving fewer and fewer print serials and no longer had the need for a traditional Serials department.

With the increased availability and continual addition of more and more online subscriptions, journal packages, and databases, most libraries have seen a steady decrease in print journal subscriptions, and UWF libraries is no exception. Furthermore, we just completed a lengthy and in-depth, focused review of individual subscriptions in order to increase access to electronic full-text content and maximize the purchasing power of the libraries' budget. The following chart illustrates the decline in print serials based on numbers from annual reports since 2001 (see figure 9.2).

Historically, the UWF Libraries calculated the number of subscriptions by simply taking the figure from the previous year’s annual report and adjusting the total according to the number of serial titles added or cancelled during that next fiscal year. However, as part of the recent journal review project, we took an inventory of current print subscriptions and found the actual number to be much lower. This explains the drastic dip in 2011-2012.

Before the reorganization was implemented, we gradually reduced services offered by the Serials department on the second floor. We started by decreasing hours at the service desk, then closed the desk permanently while the staff were still physically there, before finally moving the staff to their new space on the first floor. This incremental reduction of services allowed us to assess the impact of closing down one of the library’s public service points.

When we began decreasing hours at the Serials desk, we started with evening and weekend hours, which were lower traffic hours usually staffed by a student assistant. Signage referred patrons to the first floor service desks for assistance, and staff at the Information and Circulation desks tracked the number of questions received related to bound journals, microfilm, and second floor computer and printer issues. As part of this transition, all Reference and Circulation staff, including student assistants, received training on the microfilm readers and storage in order to adequately assist patrons. We also developed more comprehensive guides available on the computers attached to our microfilm readers, to allow patrons to utilize the equipment with less staff involvement. When the decrease in hours caused only a small increase in the number of related questions asked at the Information and Circulation desks, Serials staff began leaving the desk “open” but unmanned during the weekday hours, eventually removing the bell from the desk, and then keeping the service window grates closed. Finally, after almost two semesters of a slow reduction in hours and services, the staff moved to their new space on the first floor.

The task force’s original recommendation proposed turning the second floor space into a reading room. However, converting the entire fourth floor of the library into a quiet floor lessened the perceived need for a quiet reading room. Returning to the drawing board, two ideas emerged. The first was related to a university decision several years before to convert the main dining space on campus from an à la carte model with open seating to an all-you-care-to-eat buffet model. Thus, in order to sit in the area, you had to pay at the door. There was strong faculty opposition to the change based on the loss of space to mingle and converse with students and colleagues without needing to pay for a full meal or even bring a lunch.

The second idea was to look to the works of UWF Faculty Emeritus Dr. Ray Oldenburg for inspiration. Dr. Oldenburg is an urban sociologist and the originator of the idea of the “third space,” or, as he refers to them in his works, the “Great Good Place.” Dr. Oldenburg posits that there are three “realms of experience,” the domestic, the gainful and productive, and the inclusively sociable, which must be balanced in order to have a relaxed and fulfilling daily life.
With these two ideas in mind, it was clear that we wanted to move forward with a space that encouraged informal gathering and sharing amongst students and faculty. Thus, the Great Good Place was born.

In order to understand our goals for the space and the service that it provides to the university community, it is important to understand more about the idea of the Great Good Place. Oldenburg discusses the application of the third space on a college campus in this way:

I suggest that learning takes place in three contexts. There is the classroom, where experts impart knowledge to novices and instruct them. There is private reflection: reading and reflection, writing and reflection, imagining and reflection. And there is conversation with others, especially with one’s peers, but also with people who are different: younger, older, richer, poorer, wilder, funnier, more political, less educated. It is often talk that is boisterous, noisy and heated.

Using this concept, we began to plan a space that encouraged conversation and drew a wide variety of people. One of our main goals throughout the space study, and particularly in the conversion of the Great Good Place, was to emphasize the fact that libraries are not just physical locations for using resources and services—they can, and should, serve as spaces for intellectual discourse and scholarly collaboration. The John C. Pace Library, which is ideally situated in the center of the main campus, is particularly suited to this role.

The original space consisted of a large L-shaped central workspace, two smaller offices with doors that opened into the larger workspace, and two public service windows with counter workspace on the staff side and rolling grates for security when the desk was closed. The space had three entrances, including a service door near the freight elevator. Besides cosmetic changes to paint and carpet to brighten up the space, we made the decision to wall off the service entrance for both security and aesthetic reasons. We retained the openings for the public service desk, but removed the grates and installed plate glass windows in their place. This allows visual access to the space while keeping it (and the potentially noisy discussions we hoped would take place there) contained. We replaced the main entrance with a door with a large inset window, and kept the existing lighting fixtures throughout the space intact. The counters under the former public service windows were replaced with a counter of a similar height and depth that better matched the new colors in the room.

The innermost of the two former staff offices was converted into a room for vending machines and microwaves. As Oldenburg states, “Great hangouts are often connected with what Emerson called ‘our institutions of daily necessity,’ namely eating and drinking.” We hoped that the inclusion of the vending machines and microwaves, as well as the availability of snacks in the coffee shop on the library’s first floor, would encourage eating and drinking within the space. The window looking out from the office to the main space was left in place, and the door was replaced with one with an inset window to increase the lines of sight into the room. The outer office was demolished to provide room for a faculty publications display case. The decision to include a built-in faculty publication case was an intentional strategy to encourage and foster communication between faculty members and students and to draw faculty into the space. The glassed-in upper portion of the case is lighted and holds works from faculty throughout the university, while open shelves in the lower half of the case hold issues of current newspapers and other popular periodicals.

Once decisions regarding the structure of the room were made, we began to investigate how best to utilize the large floor space in the middle of the room. The original proposal called for a fairly even ratio of tables to upholstered lounge, or “comfy,” chairs. In developing the plan for furniture and organization of the space, the planning team solicited input from Dr. Oldenburg, who offered several recommendations for encouraging the use of the space for conversation and collaboration. He pointed out that round tables are more effective at facilitating conversation and also help to remove hierarchical distinctions—an important facet of the Great Good Place. In order for a place to truly function as a third space, “a transformation must occur as one passes through the portal of a third place. Worldly status claims must be checked at the door in order that all within may be equals.” We ordered sixteen tables of different heights, shapes, and sizes. The chairs were chosen for comfort, but also for their similarity to the types of seating and tables found in typical Great Good Places, such as coffeehouses or English clubs. In addition to the tables, an L-shaped counter near the entrance provides seating for another six individuals. Four upholstered lounge chairs (only 5 percent of the total seats available in the space) are grouped around a low table. Dr. Oldenburg advised that these chairs have a low back and open sides to increase lines of sight and facilitate conversation.

Signage throughout the space encourages people to remember that the Great Good Place is a space for conversation and camaraderie and that quiet study areas are available on the fourth floor. We strive to encourage people
to carry on normal-voiced conversations and to use the space for its intended purpose—collaboration and connection—without having to worry about disturbing others.

As for wall décor, we wanted more than wall color to provide visual inspiration for conversation. We installed a Walker Display system, a museum-quality art display solution that uses acrylic rods to hang artwork. Just as the faculty display case showcases faculty talent, the artwork in the Great Good Place is an opportunity to showcase the work and talent of our students. The Dean of Libraries made an adjustment to the job description of an existing library staff member with a background in art to account for liaison duties with the UWF art gallery manager and overseeing the rotation of student art in the Great Good Place and other display spaces throughout the library. The intention is to rotate out different art displays at least once per semester and to eventually serve as an alternative gallery space for final projects and other student exhibitions. By coordinating with the gallery director and the Art department, the UWF Libraries is able to take advantage of an already existing pool of art submissions, as well as an established set of policies and procedures. In addition to the student artwork, we utilized the American Library Association’s READ software to create READ posters of faculty from throughout the university to place on the remaining columns and other wall spaces. These posters have proven to be immensely popular with both faculty and students.

Finally, to decorate the large plate glass windows that replaced the original service openings, we commissioned a haiku from Dr. Oldenburg and had it screened for the windows. It reads:

Here we can gather
Mid the circle of friendship
And learn all the more

This sentiment not only pays tribute to the idea of the Great Good Place and the author of both the haiku and the Great Good Place concept, but it provides visual interest from outside the space, serves as an advertisement to draw people in, and clarifies the purpose of the space.

Another issue that arose during the planning period was the question of technology. While the Great Good Place has excellent wireless access and numerous existing Ethernet ports and electrical outlets, it is not intended as a space for technology. The UWF Libraries had recently renovated the fifth floor to create the SkyLab, a high-tech student learning space that offers a multitude of hardware, software, and other technological applications. Furthermore, as the survey indicated, students were not enthusiastic about TVs at the library. These factors supported Dr. Oldenburg’s strong sense that technology often serves to inhibit conversation and face-to-face connection. Since it was our intention to foster communication and discourse, we purposefully avoided the inclusion of additional technology in the space. Patrons can (and do!) bring their laptops and mobile devices into the Great Good Place for various uses, but there is no fixed technology present in the room.

The Great Good Place opened in August 2011, and has become an extremely popular library destination. We held a grand opening celebration, where Dr. Oldenburg provided a brief presentation of his work and the “third space” concept. Employees from throughout the university who were familiar with the space before the renovation have expressed amazement at the transformation and have given a wealth of positive feedback about the space. Students and faculty alike have expressed their gratitude that the UWF Libraries was able to convert the space for use by the entire university community.

As with any popular space on campus, we quickly began to get requests to reserve the Great Good Place for various functions. However, since the purpose is to provide a common, public space, we have purposefully limited “reservations” to events that are open to the public and benefit from participation by a widespread segment of the campus population. The library has other spaces that are reservable for limited types of use by contacting the Administrative Assistant for the Libraries, so there has been no significant reaction to the limiting of reservations for the Great Good Place, nor was there a need to create any new policies or procedures.

Since its opening, the Great Good Place has hosted a number of events that encourage conversations and collaborations. It has been used for graduate student receptions, and a number of classes have held their end-of-semester poster sessions in the space, with valuable interaction from students and faculty both inside and outside of the class or discipline. Most recently, the UWF Women’s Studies Program held a series of brown bag luncheons with various speakers from across campus for Women’s History Month. Beyond these types of formal, scheduled events that are cleared in advance and coordinated with library staff, we have seen several inventive uses for the space. In addition to the faculty/faculty and student/faculty interactions we had hoped to see, we have seen university administrators use the space as a common ground with both faculty and students. The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the largest college on campus, frequently holds open office hours for students.
and/or faculty in the Great Good Place. All of these events, both formal and informal, are usually advertised to the wider university community, but have been enhanced by the interaction with the passersby and other “random” members of the university community—exactly the types of interactions we had hoped to foster!

A comparison of statistics from year to year to demonstrate the decline of interactions at the Serials service desk is difficult to determine due to differences in the granularity of the statistics collected, but even with rough equivalents, a clear picture emerges. During the 2007–2008 fiscal year, when the first staff vacancy went unfilled in Serials, the Serials service desk saw an average of 112 requests per week. The following year saw a slight increase to 122 transactions per week, the majority of which were directional questions or referrals to other service points. In 2009–2010, the average number of weekly transactions took a sharp dive to 91. During this year, distinction was made for the first time between in-person, phone, and reshelving transactions, which had previously been lumped together. Of the average 91 weekly transactions, 60 were in person. Over half of these were directional or referrals. The last few months that the service desk was open, the number of transactions plummeted to 26 per week.

Conversely, recent head counts of the Great Good Place every 3 hours reveal that on an average week, 220 people can be found using the space. Despite the imprecise nature of head counting a space that is not equipped with a door counter, it is clear that the space is utilized far more as a gathering space than it was as a service point for the Serials department. Overall, the finished design of the space has been a hit with students, faculty, and staff, and head counts and feedback from users indicates that the repurposing of this space has been incredibly successful. As we envisioned, it has truly become a “great good place to meet, talk and linger.”

When Steve Jobs was designing the offices for Pixar Studios on the grounds of a former Del Monte plant in Emeryville, California, the original architectural design called for three separate functional buildings. Designers, engineers, and executives would be housed in separate offices. Jobs scrapped that plan, instead opting for one big, open, airy space, with the central purpose of enhancing collaboration. Jobs reportedly tweaked all aspects of the building’s design, from mailboxes to bathrooms, with an eye to bringing people together in a serendipitous fashion. While following Steve Jobs’ design choices at Pixar, where he purposefully centralized the location of bathrooms to ensure that staff from all divisions were brought together, might not be a realistic, the idea of fostering consilience through building design was brought to life at the University of West Florida. As libraries strive to become centers of knowledge creation, space becomes increasingly vital to the success of our endeavors.

REFERENCES

4. Ibid., 93.
6. Ibid., 24.