

Management

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Third Spaces in Academic Libraries

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What Is a Third Space?

This is a good question, and one that libraries have been considering for years. At the Edith Garland Dupré Library on the campus of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, we have been thinking about this concept and exploring how it shapes the way we engage with knowledge, community, and creativity. What we have provided here is not presented as an exhaustive or overly authoritative report but instead provides enough information to illustrate our thought process and highlight the types of research that guided, and continues to guide, the development of our programs.

The American Library Association (ALA) has endorsed the concept of a third space—a place differed from home and work where individuals seek conversation, neutral ground, and a sense of connection.¹ Common examples of third spaces include coffee shops, bars, and churches. Libraries, too, can serve as third spaces, offering an environment that fosters relaxation, focus, and community engagement.

James K. Elmborg has written extensively on the evolving role of libraries in response to social and technological changes.² He argues that libraries must go beyond mere marketing strategies and physical renovations to create a unique user experience. Unlike commercial entities such as bookstores or cafes, libraries are distinguished by the presence of librarians—professionals who actively shape the space to facilitate engagement, knowledge-sharing, and personal growth. According to Elmborg, libraries should function as inclusive spaces where users can feel comfortable, connect with others, and work toward a more equitable and just society.

In another study, Elmborg et al. explored the idea of academic libraries serving as both physical and intellectual third spaces, or spaces of the mind.³ They emphasized that academic libraries play a crucial role in helping learners develop their academic voices. The authors argued that the ability to express oneself authentically within an academic setting is a liberating experience that fosters deeper self-awareness. Their research introduced initiatives that reposition librarians and professors, not as rigid authority figures, but as guides who help students navigate their academic journeys. By creating a supportive environment, these projects encourage students to relax, focus, and engage with their intellectual development in a more meaningful way.

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Student Perceptions of Library Space

Philbin and Nichols conducted a survey of nearly 300 students to assess how library spaces are perceived and used.⁴ Their findings highlighted the need for a balance in library design—students desire spaces that support a variety of activities, from studying to socializing. The researchers also examined the effectiveness of recent library renovations in meeting student needs. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, they suggested that libraries should integrate remote technologies such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and GoToMeeting more effectively into their physical spaces to support hybrid learning and collaboration.

To better support our students, we strive to understand their perceptions and use of the library by collecting and analyzing data from various sources. The findings provided by the Office of Institutional Research offer valuable insights into our student demographics:

- Total enrollment: 14,386 students
- First-time freshmen: 3,064 students
- 45% minority, 59% female, 39% first-generation students
- 24% of graduate students are international
- 58% of undergraduates transferred from a two-year college

Additionally, formal and informal surveys led by the Head of User Engagement gathered direct feedback on library services and spaces in 2023. The findings from these surveys inform much of the information shared here. By reviewing these studies alongside institutional data, we can assess how to better serve our students and other users—ensuring the library continues to be a vital and welcoming third space where everyone can relax, focus, and connect.

Relaxation

Stress relief activities play a crucial role in helping individuals navigate the intense demands of academic life, particularly during high-stress periods like finals week. Dupré Library offers a range of events aimed at easing anxiety and promoting relaxation. These efforts are coordinated by the Head of User Engagement, in collaboration with the Head of Research and Access Services.

One such initiative, coordinated by the Head of User Engagement, is the partnership with massage therapy students from local training programs. This includes outreach to the Sports Rehabilitation program at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Through these collaborations, student massage therapists provide free massages to library users during the week of final examinations. These sessions offer a soothing break from the stress of studying and can help reduce muscle tension, improve circulation, and boost overall well-being. Additionally, events like *Puppies and Popcorn*, which bring therapy animals—including miniature horses—into the library, are made possible through a partnership forged by the User Engagement Librarian and Pet Partners, a local pet therapy volunteer organization. These visits offer comfort and emotional support, giving students the chance to interact with gentle animals in a calming environment. Research has shown that such interactions can reduce anxiety and improve mood, creating a peaceful respite in the midst of hectic study schedules. In conjunction with these group events, the library also offers stress-relief activities for those seeking quieter, solo experiences. Puzzles and coloring stations engage students in meditative and calming activities that help clear the mind. Puzzles promote problem-solving while offering a distraction from academic pressures, and coloring allows individuals to tap into their creative side, providing a relaxing outlet for stress.

To further support student wellness, cozy, quiet spaces have been designed to minimize external stimulation, fostering mindfulness and introspection. Two of these areas, known as the Dupré Dens (Figure 1), provide a sanctuary away from the noise of daily life, with comfortable seating and a soothing, calming atmosphere that encourages students to recharge—whether through leisurely reading, quiet reflection, or simply taking a moment to decompress. The Head of Research and Access Services and Head of User Engagement played a key role in identifying these spaces, purchasing bean bags, and helping to enhance the aesthetics by creating visually appealing backgrounds. This thoughtful design allows students to escape the stress of their studies and find a peaceful retreat within the library.

Incorporating these activities into the library's offerings is not only about stress relief—it's also about supporting the overall well-being of students. Whether through therapeutic massage, therapy animals, or quiet spaces for individuals and small groups, these programs create meaningful opportunities for students to restore balance and prepare to meet their academic challenges with renewed energy.

Focus

Focus-generating activities are essential in fostering an environment where students can work effectively, engage deeply with their studies, and stay productive. Peer-to-peer tutoring programs in library spaces are invaluable resources for academic success, offering students the opportunity to work with their peers in a collaborative, supportive setting. These tutoring sessions provide a space where students can reinforce their understanding of course materials, clarify concepts, and receive guidance on assignments, helping them stay on track during critical academic periods. Having the Writing Lab in the library is also a key element in helping students generate focus and work effectively. Whether students are drafting papers, refining essays, or working through revisions, the Writing Lab provides tailored feedback that helps them stay on track and enhance their writing skills. Librarians offer readily available research support for students, providing expert guidance on tasks such as developing research questions, locating and evaluating scholarly sources, and organizing their work. Access to both peer and expert support enables students to sharpen their focus and enhance the depth of their academic work.

The library's study spaces are designed to cater to different needs and preferences, helping students to concentrate in a way that best suits their style. Noise levels are thoughtfully managed through the library's strategic layout, with quieter spaces becoming more pronounced as you move toward the top floor. The higher you go, the quieter the environment, providing the perfect backdrop for students who need uninterrupted focus for deep study. To further expand study space options, the Head of Research and Access Services coordinated with the Graduate School to open up the



Figure 1. The Dupré Dens feature cozy bean bag seating and a vibrant mural created from book jackets of titles available in the library's collection.

Graduate Computer Lab as additional study room space. Additionally, the Head of Research and Access Services worked closely with the Head of User Engagement to communicate the availability and usage policies of these study rooms to students. On each floor, individual and group gathering spaces are available, including private study rooms and carrels for students who need a more isolated setting to work (Figure 2). These spaces, along with mobile whiteboards for flexible use, provide students the freedom to brainstorm, collaborate, study, and engage in active learning within an environment tailored to their needs.



Figure 2. Open-concept study carrels designed to minimize visual distractions while maintaining a sense of openness. Each carrel features a partial enclosure that blocks peripheral views, helping students stay focused without feeling isolated.

Connect

In the library, fostering a sense of connection is a key component of creating a welcoming and engaging community for students, staff, and visitors. By incorporating activities that revolve around diverse cultures and special interests, the library creates opportunities for individuals to come together, share their passions, and learn from one another. These events not only enhance the library's role as a space for academic study but also as a hub for cultural exchange, creativity, and activism.

The main way the library has fostered connections is by embracing the diverse identity of the university community through a variety of engaging events. These events are organized by the Head of User Engagement, with questions and additional support answered by the Head of Research and Access Services. One popular event is anime watch parties, where fans gather to eat ramen while watching episodes of popular anime series and discuss themes, characters, and plot twists. Music jam sessions, featuring various genres, bring together students and community members to play instruments, sing, and improvise. These musical gatherings create a relaxed, creative space for individuals to connect through sound, whether they are seasoned musicians or beginners, fostering collaboration and building community through shared rhythm and harmony.

Themed events offer a sense of camaraderie, creating a space where shared enthusiasm and passion can thrive. The Head of User Engagement organized food tastings focused on special diets based on health, personal beliefs, or dietary restrictions. Through thoughtful planning, these tastings offered students the opportunity to experience diverse dietary styles while encouraging dialogue about health and nutrition. The library has also embraced the interest in paranormal activity by hosting ghost hunting events, coordinated by the Head of Research and Access Services. To create a truly atmospheric experience, the Head of Access Services arranged for staff and extended library hours to allow the paranormal activities to take place after hours, when the night setting adds to the mystery. These events combine a sense of adventure with local history, as attendees explore local legends and try their hand at ghost-hunting techniques. It's an exciting way for people to connect through curiosity and thrill-seeking, offering a unique break from traditional academic pursuits.

Finally, the library has served as a platform for exhibitions on human rights, including events focused on vital issues like voting rights. The Head of User Engagement worked with the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities as well as the Institute of Museum and Library Services to bring programming to the library. In collaboration with the Head of Access Services, they set up, installed, and made space available for these impactful programs. These exhibitions highlight the importance of human rights activism and education, offering community members the chance to reflect on global and local challenges. By displaying powerful stories and facilitating discussions about equality, justice, and activism, the library connects individuals who are passionate about making a difference in the world. Whether through the arts, food, music, or important social causes, these activities create a vibrant and inclusive environment in the library, helping to foster connection and collaboration across diverse interests.

Library of Things

The Library of Things plays a pivotal role in supporting the concept of the third space at Dupré Library.⁵ As discussed, the third space concept refers to environments that foster social interactions and collaboration outside of work or home. These spaces are designed to be flexible, inclusive, and comfortable, providing individuals with the resources and environment they need to relax, focus, and connect. The Library of Things broadens the concept of what a library can offer by providing a wide range of nonbook materials that foster both personal and academic exploration, transforming the library into a dynamic and versatile community hub.

Among the items available in the Library of Things are medical models, which serve as valuable tools for nursing students, healthcare professionals, and others interested in medical fields. These models provide hands-on learning opportunities, encouraging interaction and collaboration in a way that traditional textbooks cannot. In a similar way, school supplies such as calculators, engineering supplies, and art materials support students in their academic endeavors. Alongside discipline-specific materials, other items such as projector/laptop stands and presentation remotes can help students with a variety of courses. These educational resources not only break down barriers to learning and access but also introduce students to materials that can enhance their academic pursuits.

In addition to these more traditional items, the Library of Things includes kitchen supplies, such as baking and cooking tools, which allow individuals to cook for themselves or others. This enhances the library's role as a facilitator of connections, turning it into a place where people can share cultural traditions, learn new skills, or simply come together to enjoy a shared meal. The collection also includes board games, offering a fun and engaging way to build connections within the library's community. These games encourage socialization, teamwork, and friendly competition, making Dupré Library a place where people can unwind, relax, and interact while having fun. The inclusion of stuffed animals caters to visitors in need of comfort and relaxation, promoting a sense of joy and emotional well-being in the library.

Perhaps one of the most dynamic aspects of the Library of Things is the wide range of technology available for loan. Webcams, microphones, ring lights, projectors, and projector screens enable individuals and groups to engage in virtual meetings, presentations, creative projects, or even content creation. These tools facilitate collaboration and creative expression, making the library a hub for content creators, educators, and anyone looking to produce digital work. By providing access to these items, Dupré Library supports both personal development and community engagement, creating a space where ideas can be shared, technology can be explored, and connections can be made.

The Head of Research and Access Services oversees the policies for the check-in and check-out of these materials, managing fines and overdue procedures to ensure the smooth functioning of the collection. Meanwhile, the Head of User Engagement promotes and develops materials for the Library of Things through grants and donations, continually enhancing the collection and expanding the library's offerings. All these resources, when combined, enhance Dupré Library's role as a third space—an adaptable, welcoming environment that nurtures learning, creativity, and community.

Closing Thoughts

The library has evolved far beyond its traditional role as a place for books and quiet study by supporting the third space concept and becoming a dynamic, inclusive, and multifaceted environment that promotes relaxation, focus, and connection. Through a range of activities and programs, including stress-relieving events like music jams and ghost hunting, alongside focus-boosting initiatives like peer tutoring, study spaces, and research support, the library creates an environment where students, faculty, and the community can connect, collaborate, and recharge. These programs encourage meaningful interactions, offering individuals opportunities to engage with their passions and interests while also providing the support they need to succeed academically.

The Library of Things exemplifies this third space concept, offering an impressive collection of resources that cater to a diverse range of needs—from medical models and school supplies to technology for content creation and even kitchen tools for shared culinary experiences. By providing access to these materials, the library empowers individuals to explore, create, and collaborate in ways that go beyond the traditional confines of academia. Whether through hands-on learning, group activities, or personal projects, the library serves as a space that adapts to the needs of its community, offering both practical resources and an environment that nurtures personal and collective growth.

Ultimately, the library is much more than just a physical space; it's a third space, a community hub where people can relax, focus, and connect. Whether through leisurely reading, engaging in special interest activities, or accessing resources that support personal and academic development, the library plays an essential role in enriching the lives of those it serves. It remains a cornerstone of the campus and community, continually evolving to meet the needs of its diverse users while fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

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