

| | [More from Globe Ideas](#)[Submit to Globe Ideas](#)[Submit a Letter to the Editor](#)

## IDEAS

# College students' fastest-vanishing freedom? Curiosity.

In today's 'you-can't-think-that' campus climate, I wouldn't have dared follow my deep personal affinity for two novels by Black authors and made them the focus of my thesis.

By **Howard Axelrod** Updated January 25, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



Georgetown University Law School students covered their mouths with tape when former US Attorney General Jeff Sessions spoke on the topic of free speech on college campuses in 2017. WIN MCNAMEE

This past fall, news coverage gravitated, as it often does, to where the schadenfreude quotient was highest. Not only was Harvard's campus in turmoil after Claudine Gay's tepid response to the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, but Harvard also came in resoundingly last in a [free speech ranking of 248 colleges](#) by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), which gave it a speech climate rating of "abysmal."

The schadenfreude attention, not to mention the chatter from all quarters about campus culture and about the country's culture more broadly, has only intensified since Gay's resignation. But the more significant news on campus, perhaps because it is more subtle, is something the culture wars' searchlight has continued to drift past.

It isn't about free speech policies or DEI initiatives or why certain faculty members have been hired or fired or pressured to resign, though those factors all contribute to the pressure mounting on students. The significant news on campus is what the FIRE 2024 report humbly called "comfort expressing ideas," and what I would call, in consideration of how those ideas might be pursued, freedom of curiosity.

According to the report, which surveyed more than 55,000 college students across the country, students feel little comfort expressing their ideas not just at the schools ranked lowest, or worst, for free speech but at the schools ranked highest too. Fifty-four percent of students at the five freest schools reported "worrying about damaging their reputation because of someone misunderstanding what they have done or said," but that wasn't much better than the proportion at the five most restrictive campuses — 57 percent. About 25 percent of students at all schools said they "feel a 'good deal' or a 'great deal' of pressure to avoid discussing controversial topics in their classes," and about 20 percent of students reported "self-censoring often," which itself seems like an instance of self-censorship, given that only 50 percent of students at the bottom five schools and 44 percent at the top five schools reported "feeling comfortable expressing their views on a controversial political topic" in a common campus space.

As the director of the creative writing program at Loyola University Chicago (ranked 193rd in the survey, 111th in comfort expressing ideas), I'm aware that self-censorship in speaking can insidiously become self-censorship in thinking and writing, blocking students from curiosity before questions, which are the foundation of intellectual and creative inquiry, even have a chance to form. In my classes over the last few years, I've noticed a growing unease among students when we discuss essays that touch on race and gender. Respect for their fellow students, a prerequisite for productive classroom discussion, has become an inadvertent censor, contracting into a self-consciousness that actually makes discussion more difficult. The default search in conversation now seems to be for consensus, not difference of opinion, and the default guide has become social fear, not curiosity.

So, I do what I can, asking students about things that have given them pause in their day — things that have raised enough of a question in their minds for them to pay attention and thus are likely to win the attention of their classmates. I also introduce them to authors who approach race and gender in complex personal ways, like James Baldwin and Adrienne Rich, and I show how these authors persist in asking questions far beyond the “enlightened” party line, not just of their day but of ours. Further, I point out how their curiosity makes for more incisive thinking and more honest writing.

But I'm just one professor, fighting a culture that has made more than half of college students afraid of being misunderstood, and I fear that the kind of open intellectual experience I had in college is no longer possible. In 1995, I wrote my senior thesis about “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison and “Jazz” by Toni Morrison, two novels I first read in professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s seminar on African American literature at Harvard. I can't imagine a white student writing about those novels now. A student with conservative leanings would likely be skeptical of a Black professor and his course materials, vigilant against some hidden critical race theory agenda. One with progressive leanings would likely be anxious whether their writing exposed white privilege or white fragility, and whether their love of the novels by two Black writers was a form of cultural appropriation or virtue signaling.

But in 1995, encouraged by Gates, I wrote about how Morrison and Ellison transpose jazz, the greatest American and African American art form, into the European form of the novel. My thesis was concerned with the social and racial context of Ellison and Morrison's work, but that context wasn't what had motivated me to write about it.

What had motivated me was a deep personal affinity for the novels, one I didn't fully understand at the time. I wanted to be a writer, to find the language for the unformed inside of me, to make music of the part of myself I'd hidden underground because the context of my own life was inhospitable to it. And both novels illuminated, by smuggling not just an inner life but a whole cultural tradition into the novel, that possibility.

Nowadays, at every door along the way, my curiosity would have to face a kind of you-can't-think-that bouncer. I probably would just write my thesis about someone more like me — white, male, Jewish. What a loss.

I know it may sound naive and old-fashioned to call for a return to curiosity. But curiosity is a back door for students to slip past the heightened rhetoric of the culture wars and return to their own minds. Ready to help them are writers of artistic genius, like Baldwin, Rich, Morrison, and Ellison, and professors of generosity, like Gates, who knew to encourage me to follow my affinities, however unlikely or inchoate or socially unsanctioned.

That was the greatest privilege I had as a student. Not my race, not my gender. It was my intellectual freedom, my freedom of curiosity. And I didn't even know I had it or how easily it could be lost.

*Howard Axelrod's most recent book is ["The Stars in Our Pockets: Getting Lost and Sometimes Found in the Digital Age."](#)*

 [Show 16 comments](#)