



## How K-12 book bans affect higher education

Submitted by Josh Moody on February 10, 2022 - 3:00am

Culture war battles have long been fought in colleges and K-12 schools alike, with ideological opponents clashing over free speech, academic freedom and even the [politics of fried chicken chains](#) [1]. But a renewed battle over books has some in higher education worried about students' college readiness as school boards across the U.S. remove challenging texts from the K-12 curriculum.

Some worry that it isn't just high school students who will suffer but also those in lower grades, who may have their passion for reading stifled before they can fully explore the literary world.

"If you want to get kids excited about reading, you let them read whatever they're interested in, and kids are interested in the things that are in banned books," said Kathy M. Newman, an English professor who heads the [Banned Books Project](#) [2] at Carnegie Mellon University. "They're interested in sex, they're interested in sexuality, they're interested in race and racial controversy."

But parent groups across the U.S. have made waves, and headlines, by protesting the inclusion of certain books in public school curricula. Academics also point to concerted efforts by conservative political groups such as Moms for Liberty, which has [ties to deep-pocketed conservative donors](#) [3]. Oftentimes, critics note, the books being challenged—such as *Gender Queer: A Memoir* or *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*—have racial or sexual minorities at the center of the narrative. Compounding this issue, academics say, is manufactured outrage over critical race theory allegedly being taught in public schools.

### Understanding the Battle

According to the American Library Association, more than 330 book challenges were reported to its Office for Intellectual Freedom in the three months spanning Sept. 1 to Nov. 30, 2021. That's more than double the 156 challenges reported in 2020. The ALA noted by email that not every challenge is reported, meaning these numbers essentially represent a mere fraction of the requests to remove or restrict materials from U.S. libraries and classrooms.

Though ALA numbers suggest book challenges are on the rise, academics who study this issue believe it's the amplification effect of social media that's novel, allowing like-minded parents and political groups to latch on to shared outrage.

"People have always challenged books, but only in the social media era can you get lots of people who are not in that locale interested in the book that you're challenging," Newman said.

Emily Knox, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who studies how books are banned, points to racial anxiety as a source of many recent challenges. Many of the books under attack at the K-12 level, she explained, are works from diverse authors that offer a view of marginalized and underrepresented people. To many white parents, these books represent a different understanding of the country they grew up in.

“In many ways, it’s a reactionary worldview,” Knox said. “Although it is conservative in the sense of ‘this is not how I was taught that the world is, I am trying to conserve the history that as I understand it.’ What the books they are challenging often do is challenge the status quo—they challenge the idea of the default protagonist being a white man. These books are really centering people who are not normally centered when it comes to works of great literature or history.”

Kal Alston, education professor and dean of academic affairs at Syracuse University, noted that some of the books being challenged have been recommended reading for Advanced Placement classes in high schools, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* or *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. (*Alston’s first name has been corrected in this paragraph.*)

“These are texts that have been used for multiple decades in high school literature classes,” Alston said.

She worries that advocates, backed by shadowy organizations, are seizing on controversies around critical race theory—which is not taught in public K-12 schools—as a way to demand control over the curriculum and, subsequently, the narrative in U.S. education. These demands, she feels, will limit students’ exposure to new ideas and the development of critical thinking.

“I do think that were we to follow this logic of ‘parents should control the curriculum,’ we’d end up in a worse place for students coming into college, because it’s not just critical thinking that’s imperative for college student success but also independent thinking,” Alston said.

## Teaching Banned Books

When a Tennessee school board removed the acclaimed graphic novel *Maus* from its middle school curriculum, citing mild profanity and one nude image, the news reverberated around education circles, prompting outrage and driving up sales of Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

Scott Denham, a professor of German studies at Davidson College, was among those angered by the news. But rather than rant about it on Twitter, where he first learned of the controversy, he decided to offer a free course for affected students, a class that officially starts next week.

“They have created this anti-Semitic structure by making it hard to teach the Holocaust,” Denham said of the McMinn County school board’s decision to drop *Maus* from the curriculum. He added that he believes such a move is an extension of white supremacy and Christian nationalism.

He’ll now teach *Maus* to students in the district interested in learning the history of the Holocaust, the structure of Holocaust narratives and how graphic novels and comics work as a literary genre.

As part of the Banned Books Project at CMU, Newman also teaches an undergraduate class where her students research challenged books, developing and publishing a digital history about these controversies. She describes the topic as “a place where culture and politics come together.”

Students often come in with varied exposure to challenged books, Newman said. She recently taught Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—two frequently challenged books—which about a quarter of her students had read in high school. She said students are more likely to be exposed to such books in elite or private high schools or by activist librarians.

Teaching controversial books can be challenging, but Knox sees growing pains as a vital part of learning.

“Part of the educational process is to encounter things that are difficult,” Knox said. “That process starts by being exposed to new ideas. And that really does need to happen as you move through grades. Part of being prepared to be an undergraduate, prepared for what society needs and what it means to be a good citizen, is that you are exposed to these ideas, which you may or may not agree with but are ideas that help you think more carefully and with more nuance and empathy with the world. That’s part of the problem with removing these books.”

## **Fallout at the College Board**

The controversy over the K-12 curriculum is also playing out within the ranks of the College Board. Todd Huston, the Republican speaker of Indiana’s House of Representatives, recently resigned as senior vice president for state and district partnerships at the College Board amid a Twitter campaign that called out his role in pushing Indiana legislation that would bar teachers from promoting “divisive concepts” and possibly cost educators their teaching license for doing so.

Opponents have [decried the CRT backlash–inspired bill](#) <sup>[4]</sup> for “forcibly hollowing out Indiana’s school curriculum,” arguing that it undermines both local control of schools and limits discussion of challenging topics.

The College Board declined to provide a response to questions about how challenges to books that are recommended reading for AP classes might affect college readiness. College Board president David Coleman announced Huston’s resignation in an email to employees, which made no mention of the controversy surrounding the Indiana bill and praised his prowess as an employee and leader.

“Todd Huston recently let me know that the demands of both his role here and his elected position are not sustainable, and he wants to devote more time to his work in the Indiana House of Representatives. Todd leaves the College Board with a number of extraordinary achievements in delivering our mission. At the same time, Todd shined as a leader internally—widely admired as a great boss,” Coleman wrote in an [email to employees](#) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Huston’s office did not respond to a request for comment, but he did provide a statement to the

*Indianapolis Star* [6]: “Since taking on the role of House Speaker, I’ve contemplated how I could best balance the tremendous level of responsibility required in my substantial role at the College Board and as a public servant. Ultimately, I decided to leave the College Board family.”

## What Lies Ahead

Knox believes that U.S. society is at an inflection point as demographics shift and racial minorities become the majority. The current curriculum fight isn’t going away any time soon, she suspects, adding that thorny issues such as how to teach the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection haven’t been addressed.

“This is just the beginning of this true struggle that we are going to have, I suspect for many years to come, over what our society looks like and how we teach our history,” Knox said.

And Knox has additional concerns about the message sent to students, particularly those who may be marginalized, and the issues it could pose for them as they find themselves. She thinks about the pain of being a Jewish student in McMinn County or part of another affected group.

“What do these challenges say to the kids who have these identities?” Knox said. “So if your school is banning *Gender Queer*, sure, you can get it online, but what does that say about the adults in your community? What are they saying about you if you happen to be a nonbinary kid?”

But as parents, teachers, school boards and political organizations grapple with a way forward, Newman encourages concerned observers to remember the power of their own voices.

“If people don’t like the decisions that school boards are making, sadly, one of the answers is that people have to get more involved in local politics,” Newman said. “There’s probably no worse political job in the world than being on a school board. It almost never pays, it’s hundreds of hours a month, it’s thankless. But these controversies point to the political importance of local control, and school boards are a great place to get involved in politics. More people should do it.”

## Academic Freedom [7]

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### Links

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/03/06/rider-dean-steps-down-over-chick-fil-slight>

[2] <https://bannedbooks.library.cmu.edu/>

[3] <https://www.salon.com/2022/02/08/whats-behind-the-right-wing-book-ban-frenzy-big-money-and-a-long-term-plan/>

[4] <https://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/2022/01/13/indiana-critical-race-theory-bills-danger-students-teachers-education-sb-167-hb-1134-op-ed-opinion/9172448002/>

[5] <https://popular.info/p/update-college-board-parts-ways-with>

[6] <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2022/02/08/todd-huston-college-board-crt-education-indiana-statehouse/6709937001/>

[7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/academic-freedom>