

Tulane professor prompts philosophy through play at the library

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A recent exhibition in Howard-Tilton Memorial Library encouraged students to reflect upon their personal fears and empower others to do the same.

When Georgi Gardiner walks through Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, she doesn't just see a repository of books; she sees a canvas for questions, a stage for wonder and a space where scholarship can unfold through creativity and play.

Gardiner, an associate professor of philosophy and gender and sexuality studies in the School of Liberal Arts, is transforming the library into a philosophical art space where interactive installations invite students, faculty and visitors to engage with ideas in unexpected ways.

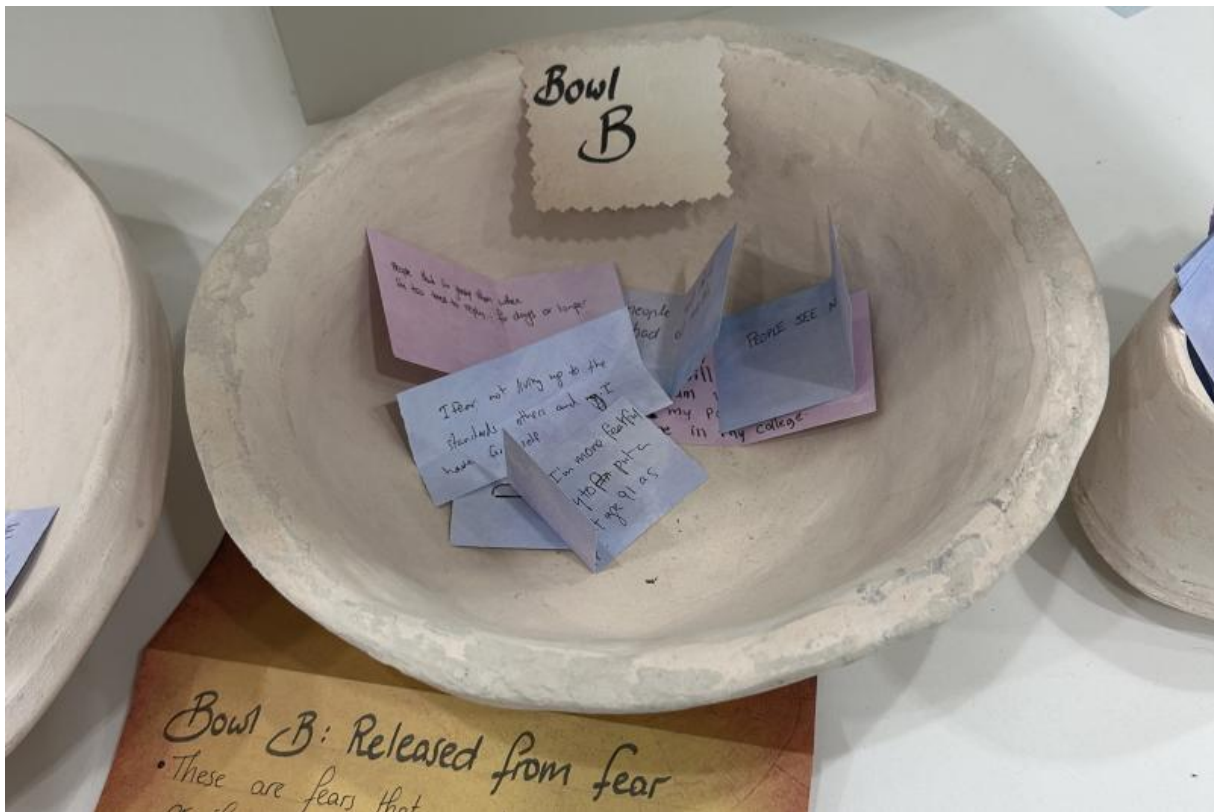
Her first exhibition, "The Cost of Fear," included two ceramic bowls. Visitors placed fears of being judged or mistreated by others into Bowl A. Anyone else could then move these fears to Bowl B, signaling, "You don't need these fears."

Gardiner developed the concept in collaboration with her students. "They sort of had an idea, and the next one built on it, and the next one built on it, and then another one created the bowls," she said. "It just was this amazing, emergent teamwork idea."

The installation extended beyond the bowls, with other props posing more questions, including "What does fear of harm, hurt or error stop you from doing?" and "What do you wish other people were less afraid of?". Another prompt invited reflection on what activities people would pursue if they weren't afraid of being bad at them.

The submissions were revealing, as students shared their fears surrounding relationships and their perceptions of themselves. When asked what they would do more if fear didn't hold them back, dancing emerged as the overwhelming theme. The pattern struck Gardiner as significant.

"This is one of the reasons I love second lines," she says. "At second lines, it really makes apparent that when it comes to dancing, we can reject the question of whether it's good dancing or bad dancing. There's just movement and joy in movement and bonding through community."



Bowls in the exhibit prompted respondents to share their own fears and encourage others who had shared their own. Gardiner collaborated with her students on the concept, embodying her teaching philosophy centered around interactive scholarship.

For Gardiner, interactive installations aren't just creative flourishes — they're fundamental to how ideas take root. Her approach stems from a conviction that scholarship extends beyond memorizing facts to encompass questions we haven't thought to ask yet and concepts for which we don't have words.

"For me, it's all about how much time people are spending thinking about the ideas in a fresh, new way," she explains. "How the participant is interacting is the artwork."

Gardiner's next installation this month promises to continue this collaborative, creative spirit. "Hermes," also developed from students' philosophical artwork, is an interactive sculpture that invites participants to share their favorite words and concepts for understanding themselves, other people and the world around them.

For students nervous about engaging with the installations, Gardiner offers reassurance rooted in her philosophy of education. "A university is a space where mistakes are particularly important. If you're not making mistakes, you're not being

open or ambitious enough.”



Professor Georgi Gardiner creates interactive exhibits in Howard-Tilton Memorial Library to encourage students to engage more with philosophical concepts.