

Author Catherine Price discusses smartphones' impact on connection, student life in conversation with President Fitts

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President Michael A. Fitts moderated a session with author Catherine Price at this year's New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

At a festival celebrating the pleasures of reading and in-person connection, author Catherine Price [made the case](#) that smartphones are quietly eroding both.

Price is an award-winning health and science journalist and author of "How to Break Up With Your Phone" and "The Power of Fun," as well as co-author of "The Amazing

Generation.” She made her comments in a wide-ranging conversation moderated by Tulane President Michael A. Fitts during the recent [New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University](#). The conversation drew on Price’s research, her books and her own experience as a parent navigating the digital age.

For Fitts, the conversation carried much resonance, as he framed Price’s ideas as deeply relevant not only to students' personal lives but also to teaching, learning and campus culture.

“Fun is critically important in many aspects of life, but also important to education,” Fitts said. “It's not sort of going off on a frolic and detour. It's fundamental to our enjoyment of life and, in many ways, success.”

Price, whose TED Talk on fun has been viewed more than five million times, offered a formal framework for what fun actually is: the merging of three states: playfulness, connection and flow.

Flow, she explained, is the psychological state of being so actively engaged in something that time seems to disappear—the opposite of the passive scroll. Playfulness is not silliness but rather a light-hearted attitude, a willingness to let go. And connection, she noted, requires presence.

“In order to fully connect with someone, you need to be present,” she said. “If you are checking your phone in the middle of a conversation, you're essentially alerting the other person that they're not worth your attention.”

Devices are designed to keep users distracted Price said, disrupting the user’s ability to form memories, sustain focus and experience genuine connection. She also pointed to physical effects, noting that the chronic stress and loneliness associated with digital overload can elevate cortisol levels, increasing the risk of heart attack, stroke and Type 2 diabetes.

“You could think about fun, which we often treat as frivolous, as actually important to us on a physiological level,” she said.

Fitts also noted that former U.S. surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murthy in a conversation with Fitts at Book Fest in 2025 described “an epidemic in loneliness in our society.”

Fitts paired that idea to broader concerns about student well-being, noting that “fun leads to better health, better connection with other people, and a more meaningful

life.”

The conversation also explored what schools and universities should do to address the issue of digital addiction. Price said the problem is not simply that students are distracted, but that they are missing formative human experiences. She lauded K-12 schools that have adopted phone-free policies, “The cafeterias are noisy again, the halls are noisy,” she said.

Fitts, who often points to the university and New Orleans’ relational culture as being foundational to the Tulane experience, underscored the importance of creating more opportunities for people to connect with other people one-on-one “outside of technology.”

“That, in a sense, will give them more fulfillment in their lives,” he said.

Price agreed and mentioned a new initiative at New York University called “IRL” that encourages students to get off their devices by making off-campus experiences and in-person gathering spaces more accessible and appealing.

Price said the issue is collective and pressing, requiring urgent action from families, schools, companies and policymakers.

“It really is our experience of our own lives that's at stake,” she said, “and what it means to be human.”