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## Students' Free Speech Campaign Reaches Around the World

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# Students' Free Speech Campaign Reaches Around the World

By getting people to share what they're thankful to be “#Free2Think” about, students launch an international human rights campaign



Sean Donnellan is just one of 200 RWU students, faculty and staff members who speak out in the "#Free2Think" campaign  
Credit: Courtesy of RWU Scholars at Risk

February 5, 2015 | Kevin Terbush '15

**BRISTOL. R.I.** – The energetic bustle of a group of students snapping photos drew Josh Avila’s gaze as he climbed the steps to the Dining Commons one day last December. Holding up a sign upon which was written “#Free2Think about our constitutional rights,” the student struck a contemplative pose for the picture, then wiped the slate clean and handed it to the next student.

This was different from how students typically use the landing in the Commons – stumping for club membership or bringing attention to a cause – and Avila was intrigued. Recognizing the sign-maker as his friend Ashley Barton, Avila asked what they were doing.

It’s an original campaign called “#Free2Think,” Barton explained, launched by students in the Roger Williams University Scholars at Risk course to spotlight the importance of free speech via individual messages about what type of expression is most essential to its creators. An idea that blossomed from the mission of Scholars at Risk – to advocate on behalf of imprisoned scholars without a voice around

the world– their campaign has students, faculty and staff members write what they are thankful to be “free to think” about on a whiteboard, take a picture with their slogan and post it to the [RWU Scholars at Risk Facebook page](#).

Avila, a senior legal studies and political science double major, picked up a marker and deliberated for a moment before jotting down: “#Free2think that everyone in this country has the right to be happy, to experience love, and to be happy in love.”

Now his turn to raise his message for a photo, Avila smiled for the camera as his image was captured to join nearly 200 other RWU students and faculty who have shared in the movement. From serious to playful, some of their messages ranged from “#Free2think about my education” to “#Free2think about choice.”

Little did any of them know that through their portraits, they would become the faces of a social media movement that quickly spread from Rhode Island and around the world.

### **How the Movement Started**

An outgrowth of the creative writing department’s former PEN Collaborative course, the Scholars at Risk seminar tasks students with strategizing and executing written campaigns and social media outreach to raise awareness for imprisoned scholars in countries where they were jailed for expressing their beliefs. Via their targeted efforts, students in this class have helped free a [Cuban journalist](#), an [Egyptian blogger](#) and a Turkish peace promoter, and are currently working on the case of an Ethiopian professor.

Last year, students devised a social media campaign that depicted several RWU faculty members silenced by duct tape covering their mouths, said Barton, a senior creative writing and legal studies double major and co-creator of the “#Free2Think” campaign. That one caught the attention of the [national Scholars at Risk foundation](#), which used the photos to represent the organization internationally.

With the success of that endeavor, a few RWU Scholars at Risk members – accompanied by Professor Adam Braver, who leads the course – were invited to the New York City headquarters of Scholars at Risk to help develop a new ad campaign based around a new idea they had. Arriving to meet with Robert Quinn, the national director of Scholars at Risk, the students and Braver presented mockup posters for their initial plan for #Free2Think.

At first they had thought about featuring only college professors in the campaign, Barton said. But a brainstorming session with the national coordinators determined that it should encompass everyone from faculty members to students, and anyone around the world who desired to share what they want to be free to think about. But to be successful, this campaign had to balance a serious issue with humor and a thoughtful approach.

“One thing we wanted to achieve was to not have people look really glum,” Braver said. “We wanted them to laugh and to share their opinion however they wanted.”

And to create something that would take minimal effort to participate, added Caitlin Holton, senior creative writing major and co-founder of the campaign. Just write your thoughts in marker on a whiteboard, have someone take your picture and upload it with the hashtag “#Free2Think.”

“The new design is easy to get people to do,” says Holton. “And once we started showing examples, people came up with more ideas.”

With every picture taken of an RWU community member, awareness was raised of the importance of free speech as well as the unjust imprisoning of scholars around the world for expressing their beliefs. After receiving an astonishing 200 photo submissions in the first month, the RWU SAR members knew they were onto something. And over the next few weeks their Facebook page continued to blow up with new #Free2Think photos.

### **#Free2Think Goes Global**

As the movement spread campus-wide at RWU, the national Scholars at Risk organization chose to incorporate the [#Free2Think campaign into their international social media efforts](#).

“The campaign makes freedom to think personal, and forms a bridge to students, scholars and universities who lack freedom and security,” explained Quinn. “I also admired the fact that through this campaign, RWU students are showing their fellow students that they can do something to help scholars in other parts of the world fight for that freedom.”

Since Scholars at Risk disseminated the campaign internationally, #Free2Think portraits have been submitted from citizens as far as Europe, Africa and Asia.

The fact that supporters must continue to stand up for the right to free expression received a stark example with the terrorist attack upon France’s *Charlie Hebdo* magazine office, where the editor and four cartoonists, along with five others at the office, were slain for publishing images that the gunmen found blasphemous to their religion. The violent retaliation upon creative expression in Paris this January brought home the importance of freedom of expression for many, and the world took up the cry “Je suis Charlie.”

The relevance of this incident to their work motivated the co-creators of #Free2Think to keep repeating their message.

“Our voice is the most powerful thing we have in the world,” Barton says. “If there are limitations on voice, then we can’t grow.”

For Avila, participating in the campaign caused him to pause and reflect – even for a moment – why free speech should be cherished in this country, and worldwide.

“This country, while it has its faults, it has great principles that we can teach other people,” Avila said.  
“Human beings should have the right to express how they feel and what they think.”

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