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Set speech free at Hopkins

By: CHRISTINE McCURDY

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Did you know that Hopkins has been identified as one of the "worst of the worst" when it comes to the abuse of free speech on campus? That's right - Johns Hopkins University, the western hemisphere's first research institution, with a defined mission of "fostering independent and original research," has recently become the target of biting criticism from a national watchdog organization that monitors the endangerment of free speech and individual expression on campus.

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a non-partisan, non-profit educational foundation dedicated to protecting constitutional liberties on campus, Hopkins under President William Brody has demonstrated greater contempt for the rights of its students in the past two years than nearly any other university in the country. Indeed, Hopkins has earned one of just three spots on FIRE's "Red Alert" list - reserved for schools displaying "severe and ongoing disregard" for students' fundamental rights - and took home the ignominious title of FIRE's first ever "Censor of the Year" for 2006. FIRE warns of a dark future for "free, independent thought" at Hopkins if Brody refuses to eliminate the school's chilling civility code and renew the university's commitment to free speech.

There are several reasons why Hopkins has been condemned to "Red Alert" status.

Perhaps most significant was the suspension of 18-year-old junior Justin Park in November 2006 for an "offensive" party invitation posted on his Facebook.com page. In a clear (if perhaps misguided) attempt at intentionally un-P.C. ironic humor, Park's "Halloween in the Hood" invitation to Sigma Chi's holiday party asked attendees to wear "copious amounts of 'bling bling ice ice'" and listed rapper Ice-T as one of the party's hosts.

However, the administration quickly charged Park with "harassment, intimidation and failure to respect the rights of others." The outrageous punishment for a private Web site post: one-year suspension, 300 hours of community service, written reports on 12 books and diversity counseling. This original judgment, though later amended, was one of the most severe punishments FIRE has ever seen for a student engaged in pure speech. Park's case is just one of a handful at Hopkins, demonstrating how one's academic career can be severely threatened and even ruined by suffocating speech codes.

Worse still, in the aftermath of the "Halloween in the Hood" fiasco, Brody established a new speech code entitled "Principles for Ensuring Equity, Civility and Respect for All." The code declares that "rude, disrespectful behavior is unwelcome and will not be tolerated" and "every member of our community will be held accountable for creating a welcoming workplace for all." But what exactly is considered "rude and disrespectful" behavior? This lack of clarity not only leaves students hesitant to express any form of opinion or joke that may fall under this broad category of disrespect, but also allows the administration to apply the code selectively in order to silence any speech with which they disagree.

The civility code also means that Hopkins students are freer off-campus than they are at Homewood. Due to the subjective, vague determinations of "rude" and "disrespectful" speech, a policy such as this would be

voided in court as a clear violation of the First Amendment if it were to be government law. This dangerous ambiguity is exactly why the Student Council has expressed deep reservations concerning the code.

In last May's commencement speech Brody told graduates their responsibility "to assert fact and proclaim truth." But how does one do so in an environment that censors thought and expression?

Hopkins shouldn't be a school where free speech takes a back seat to paternalistic ideals of "civility." So what can Hopkins do to end its reign atop the "Red Alert" list?

It is imperative that the administration make a concerted effort to assure students that their right to free expression is cherished on campus. But before it can do this, the administration must publicly reaffirm its dedication to the ideals of free speech and discovery - the values upon which Hopkins was established in 1876.

The civility code must be repealed. It is not conducive to the very nature and mission of a research institution.

Hopefully, with continuing pressure from members of Student Council and public attention drawn by the efforts of organizations like FIRE, Hopkins will renew its commitment to free speech.

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