



News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

Dec. 1

Free Speech and Punishment at Hopkins

Johns Hopkins University students are protesting once again about Justin Park — but this time it's on his behalf. Park was the Hopkins junior who posted Facebook invitations to Sigma Chi's ["Halloween in the Hood" party](#), which prompted protests from black students who accused him and the fraternity of racial insensitivity. Last week, the university's Student Conduct Board suspended him until the spring of 2008, drawing criticism that the punishment was excessive and that Hopkins may be ignoring its student policy designed to "protect the university as a forum for the free expression of ideas."

Park is still attending classes and is appealing the decision today; Hopkins officials said they could not comment on either the disciplinary action or the appeal. Park [was also ordered](#) to complete 300 hours of community service, read 12 books and complete a reflection paper for each, and attend a workshop on diversity and race relations.

"I don't think anyone was expecting something this drastic," said Lars Trautman, a junior and [Sigma Chi](#) fraternity member. Hopkins has barred the fraternity from hosting social events until January 2008 for its role in publicizing and hosting the party. Trautman said that the fraternity expelled Park partly because some members agreed that the posting was insensitive, but also because its members wanted to quell the controversy. "We thought maybe a semester suspension. But when they came back with three, we were just shocked." Trautman has argued that the language Park used in the invitation can be heard on any number of television or radio stations.

To support his friend, Trautman created a Facebook group, "We Support Student Rights (JHU Doesn't)." Other students [started a Web site](#). Trautman said that the Facebook group has more than 600 members, with the majority stating that the punishment was harsh and excessive. A minority are concerned about censorship of speech.

Free speech advocates are also rallying around Park. "If Johns Hopkins was a public university, what they did to him would be illegal," said Samantha Harris, director of legal and public advocacy for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. FIRE sent a [letter to Hopkins](#) supporting Park's right to free speech and questioning the university's actions in light of its stated policy protecting free expression.

"The crucial issue is that this student gets his life back and that his academic career not be ruined over a joke

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that some people found offensive,” Harris said.

Shortly after the incident, Hopkins released a [civility policy](#), passages of which also upset FIRE. “If JHU were a public university, its requirement of civility and its ban on ‘rude’ and ‘disrespectful’ behavior would be laughably unconstitutional,” FIRE wrote in [the letter](#).

[The Black Student Union](#) had met with Park after the Halloween party and later held multiple protests over the issue. Its members were angry about both the invitations that Park had written and the general theme of the party. Leaders from the group did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Dennis O’Shea, a Hopkins spokesman, said that he could not comment on the Park case, and added that the university has had a longstanding policy against harassment. The new statement on civility coincided with the release of a Johns Hopkins [report](#) on the status of women at the university and had nothing to do with the Sigma Chi incident, he said. A committee has been selected to carry out the new policy, and O’Shea acknowledged that its members will have to address the dilemma of protecting students against harassment while not squelching free expression.

“There is a difference between expression of opinion and harassment,” he said.

— [Paul D. Thacker](#)

Comments

Language

If it is ok to say certain expressions, because they are heard on radio and TV everyday. More accountability should be placed on media outlets, because the theme of this party was definitely offense. Is the issue protecting free speech, or this naive student for making the comments?

Un Known, Remove from TV and Radio, at 9:05 am EST on December 1, 2006

Party Invitation

Racism is alive and well. It’s just a little more covert than it was in the past. Often it masquerades as humor. Anyone doubting this should look up Moris Dees’ group Southern Poverty Law Center who monitors bias crimes throughout the US and produces an Intelligence Report. <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intpro.jsp>

In fact, the University might do well to look into their Teaching Tolerance program.

Rita McWilliams, Dr., at 10:01 am EST on December 1, 2006

Lighten UP

Come on folks, as a nation we need to lighten up with the political correctness. These KIDS had a party, no different than a pajama party we had here on campus during homecoming week. Was it in poor taste? Who died and who is now the “Politically Correct” police? I believe that African-Americans need to start to demand that their leaders focus on issues like teen pregnancy, education, violence, drug abuse, prison rehab, equal access to higher education for those who qualify, AIDS, and other issues particularly those dealing in health of African-Americans. Too often our African-American leaders are quick to jump on issues like this one, or the “Cramer” dude who said some offensive things to his audience, or the big flap over the Confederate flag that flies on the state house grounds in South Carolina. Going on the news to demand

apologies for this behavior and reparations instead of equal access to housing, health care, and education makes for good press because it inflames old issues and feelings and keeps our people from focusing on issues the leaders are reluctant to handle or are simply not qualified to address. Lighten up, focus on building not tearing down. We can continue to divide ourselves by ethnicity, but it's time we all join one race — the HUMAN race.

Politically incorrect, at 11:05 am EST on December 1, 2006

free speech on campus

IHE has reported on many difficult campus issues where students' right to free speech conflicts with campus policies against harassment and intolerance. It's a tough question. Still, I'm uneasy describing FIRE simply as a free speech group, associated as they are with a narrow band of religious right critics of universities as bastions of secular humanism. It's not so much about freedom all the time as it is about attacking the notion of a tolerance policy.

HL, at 11:10 am EST on December 1, 2006

“The Dictatorship of Virtue”

About fifteen years ago New York Times correspondent Richard Bernstein took a year's leave of absence to visit college campuses to report on several incidents that involved harsh punishments for faculty or students for alleged insensitivity towards minorities or women. They were incidents where someone took offense but no offense was intended and they resulted in suspensions or firings. He categorized them as part of the Jacobin period for a political movement whose origins were the protest movements of the 1960s which is why he titled his book “The Dictatorship of Virtue”.

There have been a whole rash of new incidents that illustrate that the problem still exists.

1. As reported in this article, Johns Hopkins suspended a fraternity for its “Halloween in the Hood” party. A member of the fraternity who advertised the party in facebook was suspended from the school for a year and ordered to do 300 hours of community service, read 12 books and write reports on them (which books and who determines them) and to undergo diversity training in diversity workshops.
2. At Duke, on what were almost certainly false allegations of rape, three students have been indicted and suspended from school, the lacrosse team season was cancelled, 88 professors signed a letter condemning them, the school administration never publicly criticized the outrageous violations of due process, and the lives of three clearly innocent students were severely damaged.
3. At Dartmouth the president of the university very publicly condemned a student for writing an article in the Dartmouth review criticizing a native American student for taking offense at displays of the “Indian” symbol that used to be the school mascot.
4. At DePaul University, some racist and anti-semitic graffiti was written on the walls of one of the dorms. Since the graffiti also included a statement attributing authorship to the College Republicans, it is believed by the school's chief investigator of the incident and the entire executive team that it was an attempt to implicate the College Republicans.

A group on campus, the DePaul Conservative Alliance that has pretty much the same membership as the DePaul Conservative Alliance, had staged a protest against affirmative action that antagonized some portion of the campus. They claimed that the protest constituted harassment and demanded that the conservative students be punished.

Though the actual perpetrators were never found, the graffiti hoax was viewed by the campus administrators as payback. Yet the campus has never been informed that the incident was in all probability a hoax, and the school has used the incident to justify renewed efforts to combat hate on campus. In a sane world you would think that the school administration would want to assure its African-American and Jewish students that there were not a bunch of bigots running around campus. But far from it, they informed the campus and the local media that the affirmative action protest had contributed to the climate that led to the graffiti.

5. At Columbia University a talk on immigration by a member of the Minutemen group that actively opposes illegal immigration was invited to speak by the College Republicans. He was prevented from speaking by a group of students who rushed the stage and halted the talk. The entire scene was made public by a video that was widely distributed on the internet. The Columbia administration while deploring the action has shown obvious reluctance to identify and punish those responsible. This stands in stark contrast to their prompt suspension of the school's hockey club for inserting the phrase "Don't be a pussy, play Columbia hockey" in a flyer recruiting people for their team.

6. At Ball state, a couple of students threw a pie at David Horowitz as he attempted to enter a room to give a speech at Ball State.

7. At a Halloween party at the home of the university president, a student dressed up as a suicide bomber conducted mock beheadings and posed with a smiling president of the university. Reportedly she had jokingly remarked to him "How did you get by the security".

If you go to the website of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education you will find a wealth of similar stories. They reflect an academic culture that is more concerned with preserving political and social narratives than in telling the truth. They also demonstrate administrative priorities at campuses that is more concerned about buying protection from accusations of insensitivity than protecting the individual rights of the members of their communities. When "bearing false witness" is ignored in favor of false accusations that preserve the narrative of a campuswide culture of racial and gender oppression, there is a problem. We ignore it at our peril.

Jonathan Cohen, at 11:10 am EST on December 1, 2006

Harrassment?

"There is a difference between expression of opinion and harassment," he said.

How can sending out invitations to a party through the Facebook be construed as harassment?

Should Johns Hopkins publish guidelines for acceptable Facebook party invitations, so that other students can avoid being suspended for three semesters?

Matthew, at 11:10 am EST on December 1, 2006

what other ideas do you want to suppress

"Un Known" I don't get it. While the school is arguably correct that the First Amendment doesn't apply to them – no matter how silly their actions are – you seem to be arguing that the government (likely the FCC) should fine or suspend the licenses of media outlets because of the ideas that they convey. Do you really feel that some ideas are so dangerous that you are unable to meet them with your own arguments?

Dr. McWilliams, There is no indication that any of the students involved committed any actual crimes, nor is there any indication that the party or the invitation caused someone to commit any crimes. (Oh, by the way, I

am a supporter of the SPLC in money and time.)

Larry, at 11:10 am EST on December 1, 2006

Ridiculous overreaction

Given that a private institution can have whatever silly policies they deem necessary, they are still obligated to follow their own rules. Suspending a student for a web posting that “offended” is a ridiculous overreaction. If you’re offended by the web site, DON’T LOOK AT IT! Did the offender demonstrate bad taste and poor judgement — yes. Is that worth a suspension, no.

Bringing the word “harrassment” into the discussion is also troubling. How can a web site harrass anyone? Has some malicious computer genius figured a way to make the web site pop up unwanted on the computers of the hypersensitive?

Time to send another check to FIRE.

Robert Griffith, at 11:11 am EST on December 1, 2006

Political Correctness as Brand Management

I have some reservations about FIRE. The group’s free-speech commitment is genuine and applied evenhandedly. On the other hand, its board skews heavily to the right and, more importantly, its “feeder system,” if you will, somehow works mostly to attract reports of censorship of conservative viewpoints. I don’t think the bias is intentional. It’s just that cases like “Halloween in the Hood” get forwarded to FIRE, whereas cases like (say) the massive attempt to prevent Michael Moore from speaking at Utah Valley State College barely register on FIRE’s radar. I mention this because even though FIRE is a good organization, staffed by good people who do good work, its website creates a false impression that feeds into the myth of “liberal PC academia.” Also, FIRE has a habit of overgeneralizing. Consider, for example, Mr. Cohen’s claim above, that FIRE’s free-speech cases “reflect an academic culture that is more concerned with preserving political and social narratives than in telling the truth.” Well, yes and no. First, there are thousands of campuses across the country, and I’m not sure that a few dozen cases like the one at JHU can be said to reflect anything so broad as an “academic culture.” Second, if the sort of PC nonsense we see at JHU “reflects” anything at all, it reflects not “academic culture” generally but quite specifically an ADMINISTRATIVE culture. The culprits are usually housing and “student life” officials, not faculty. Third, those housing, student life, and administrative officials strike me as concerned less “with preserving political and social narratives” as with keeping students sheltered and happy, and of course with preserving the institution’s public image (which, as Mr. Cohen points out, is bound up with “political and social narratives” of racial harmony). It’s not about mind control (JHU’s administration doesn’t care what students actually believe) but about image control, about brand management. Most of FIRE’s caseload is not the result of the “left-wing PC takeover of the universities.” It’s the result of colleges and universities adopting a business mentality and prioritizing PR over free speech. Such a phenomenon can hardly be characterized as “left wing.”

Eveningsun, Small Public College, at 1:00 pm EST on December 1, 2006

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