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Updated: Friday, January 12, 2007

Eye of the Tiger
Johns Hopkins' 1st Amendment

By Edward Delp | Indiana Daily Student | Friday, January 12, 2007

Imagine for a moment the following scenario.

You organize a party and invite all your friends. Then you receive notice from your school's administration that some people found the theme of the party offensive and ordered you to remove advertisements for it. You complied, but held the party anyway. Then a few days later you were informed that the party was in violation of university policy and you would be facing disciplinary action.

This might sound a bit far-fetched, but it is exactly what happened to Johns Hopkins University student Justin Park.

His original punishment for the "Halloween in the Hood" party included suspension for one year, 300 hours of community service, 12 books to read and a reflection paper on each and mandatory attendance to a workshop on diversity and race relations. This punishment has since been overturned, but the debate sparked still remains.

The question here is: Why would a respected institution like Johns Hopkins institute such a draconian punishment over what is essentially a free-speech issue?

University President William Brody said that this is an attempt to restore civility to Johns Hopkins and not an attempt to prohibit speech the school does not want to hear.

Oh, yes, it is.

Certain people within the university said they were "offended," and we certainly cannot have that.

This is the problem in academia today. In its zeal to keep people from being exposed to the "offensive," schools seem to be willing to trample on free speech.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education tracks such issues. Just for fun, I decided to see what FIRE had to say about schools in Indiana.

IU fared well in the reviews, but our neighbor to the north did not.

The FIRE profile of Purdue revealed an incident that didn't get much attention outside West Lafayette, but should have.

Back in 2003 the Stewart Christian Women's Cooperative Residence was initially denied housing due to its policy of membership based on faith. In a letter to university President

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Martin Jischke, FIRE CEO Thor Halvorssen said Purdue's policy denied members of the Stewart Cooperative House the rights to freedom of association, expression and religion.

To Purdue's credit, it changed its course and permitted the Stewart Cooperative House to retain its membership guidelines. However, like the incident at Johns Hopkins, this is something that never should have happened.

Institutions of higher education are supposed to promote the free exchange of ideas, but nowadays there seems to be a movement in academia to suppress speech that does not conform to a school's ideas of "inclusion," "diversity" and "tolerance." While universities are supposed to maintain an environment in which everyone can feel free to express his or her ideas, modern academia is twisting this concept.

Some speech may offend people and some may make people angry, but that is the reality of the freedom of speech.

Deal with it.

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