



Cut your commute.

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/bal-md.hopkin30nov30,0,7509090.story>

From the Baltimore Sun

Race debate shifts to free speech

Rally at Hopkins backs suspended student, calls penalty excessive

By Sumathi Reddy
sun reporter

November 30, 2006



A campus debate over race relations is evolving into one on free speech as a group of [Johns Hopkins University](#) students protested yesterday what they believe is the school's excessive punishment of a student for posting a "Halloween in the Hood" party invitation online.

The students, who have launched a Web site and petition drive in support of suspended junior Justin H. Park, say the university is caving in to public pressure to protect its image, rather than protecting one of its own.

"This is a violation of the school's moral obligation for free speech on campus," said Lars Trautman, a junior who joined more than 30 students waving signs at a rally yesterday.

Park is appealing a punishment that suspends him from the university until January 2008, during which time he can't come onto campus, he confirmed yesterday. He must also complete 300 hours of community service, read 12 books and write a paper on each, and attend a workshop on diversity.

The 18-year-old of Korean origin, who grew up all over the world, declined further comment yesterday.

The dispute springs from an invitation Park posted on the Facebook Web site to a Sigma Chi fraternity party Oct. 28. The invitation described Baltimore as "the hiv pit" and encouraged attendees to wear "regional clothing from our locale" such as "bling bling ice ice, grills" and "hoochie hoops."

A university official asked the fraternity to take the posting down, but a similarly racially offensive version appeared shortly after, according to a summary of findings from a university investigation.

Park's friends have said parts of the invitation were taken from a skit by black comedian Dave Chappelle.

About 10 members of the Black Student Union attended the party and took pictures of a skeleton pirate hanging from a noose, a display they viewed as symbolic of a lynching, given the context of the party.

But a report by the university's Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action concluded that the skeleton pirate was meant to represent the Pirates of the Caribbean film and not a lynching.

Yesterday's protest comes on the heels of a letter sent to the university by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. The Philadelphia-based group asked the university to rescind all sanctions against Park and remove any record of the incident from his file.

"The severe, life-altering sanctions imposed upon Park are grossly disproportionate to any supposed violations of university policies," the letter reads. "The Facebook invitations represented the fraternity's attempt to humorously and hyperbolically advertise a themed party."

Samantha Harris, the group's director of legal and public advocacy, said the group was contacted by Park, who provided them with relevant materials.

"Park himself has stated that the invitation 'was so ridiculous that I thought nobody could take such a thing seriously,'" the letter said.

Harris said the Hopkins incident is a "particularly egregious case" of a university trampling on a student's right of freedom of expression. Even though Johns Hopkins is a private institution, its policies protect a student's right to free expression, she noted.

She said a Student Conduct Board's finding that Park's conduct constituted harassment and intimidation was "laughable."

"Johns Hopkins promises its students freedom of expression," she said. "So to then turn around and jeopardize a student's entire career for engaging in freedom of expression is extremely hypocritical."

Though yesterday's rally was not sponsored by any one group, many of the participants were Sigma Chi fraternity members. Park had posted the Halloween party invitation as the fraternity's social chairman. He has since been expelled from the fraternity, which the university has placed on social probation until January 2008.

After the party, the campus erupted in a racially charged debate. The Black Student Union launched several protests, expressing outrage at the invitation and party and saying the event highlighted a broader problem of race relations on campus.

The local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People also held several protests on campus.

Since then, university officials have announced plans for a number of steps to improve the climate on campus.

Students at yesterday's rally described themselves as the "silent majority" on campus.

A Facebook group called "We Support Student Rights (JHU doesn't)" lists more than 600 members. Another Web site (<http://savejustin.org>) details the dispute.

Holding up signs reading "Justice for Justin" and "Where's the Free Speech?" many of the students said they were friends of Park.

James Parker, a senior and Sigma Chi member, was collecting signatures for a petition calling for a fairer and more balanced review of the case.

"There's nothing fair about these proceedings," said Parker. "For posting an offensive Facebook invitation, he's

expelled until 2008, which doesn't seem logical or fair. This kind of satirical invitation is one of hundreds of things you can find on Facebook. I feel like Justin and the frat are being singled out."

Other students said they were neither Sigma Chi members nor friends of Park. But they said they felt compelled to support the cause.

Igor Chudinov, a junior, said the invitation was obviously a "joke."

"For the university to interfere because of a joke is just inappropriate," he said. "It goes to show you that Hopkins will do anything to protect its reputation. That's not a way a university should treat its students.

"Considering we pay more than \$40,000 a year to go here, that's not the treatment we expect, especially for something as trivial as a joke."

University spokesman Dennis O'Shea said: "The students that were out there today have every right to express their opinion."

.....
sumathi.reddy@baltsun.com
.....

Copyright © 2006, [The Baltimore Sun](#) / [Get Sun home delivery](#)

> [Get news on your mobile device at www.baltimoresun.com](http://www.baltimoresun.com)