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Johns Hopkins suspends student for Facebook Halloween party advertisement

Advocacy group Foundation for Individual Rights in Education sends letter to university

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MARYLAND — Advocates are calling the suspension of Johns Hopkins University student Justin Park a serious threat to students' rights after he was disciplined for posting a controversial Halloween party advertisement online.

Last month, Park posted an advertisement on the social networking Web site Facebook.com for the Sigma Chi fraternity's "Halloween in the Hood" party. An administrator from the university's Greek Affairs office asked Park to remove the posting after several students said it was offensive. Park complied, but later put up another ad after receiving inquiries whether the party would still take place, Foundation for Individual Rights in Education Director of Legal and Public Advocacy Samantha Harris said. The Halloween party took place on Oct. 28.

A letter from the university sent to Park after the party described the ads as containing "offensive racial stereotyping," and that students also reported seeing "offensive decorations" at the event. After an investigation by the university, Park was found guilty of violating the university's anti-harassment policies and was suspended for one year. As part of his suspension, the university required him to complete 300 hours of community service, read 12 books and write a reflection paper on the materials. Park was also required to attend a workshop on diversity and race relations.

Harris said punishing students for online postings is a growing problem at the college level.

"College regulation of off-campus activities is a sort of problematic trend because college students are adults," Harris said. "Monitoring Web sites is sort of inconsistent with the status of college students as adults."

Harris also said Johns Hopkins' policies, similar to those found at other universities, go well beyond the legal meaning of "harassment" to the point where students are being punished for what would normally be constitutionally protected expression. She called the university's action against Park "disproportionate" and said that the university is arbitrarily defining what is offensive.

"If the administration is not bound to the legal meanings of the term, they have a tremendous amount of discretion," Harris said.

And while Johns Hopkins is a private school, its own policies give its students the right to free expression, according a **letter** FIRE sent to the university.

Dennis O'Shea, spokesperson for Johns Hopkins, said the university has not determined whether to respond to FIRE's letter and that he is unable to comment on Park's case.

Park, who could not be reached for comment, appealed his suspension Dec. 1 and is awaiting a decision from the university.

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