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Johns Hopkins initiates new distribution policy

Administrators argue restrictions are 'content-neutral'

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MARYLAND — New policies created by Johns Hopkins University regarding where student publications can be distributed are raising concern among some students and advocates following an incident where newspapers were removed from residence halls last spring.

The Carrollton Record, a conservative student newspaper at the university, published an article last May criticizing another student organization's event featuring a porn star. Copies of the paper were later found missing from distribution spots. Administrators said they removed about 300 issues from residence halls because the paper was not properly approved by the residential life department, as required by university policy. Another 700 copies also went missing at other spots on campus and are still unaccounted for.

Editor Jered Ede later said he believed the university removed the issues because of content. But Dennis O'Shea, spokesman for the university, maintained that officials never intended to pass judgment on content and that the removal was simply due to policy. This summer, administrators created new guidelines for distributing campus publications.

"The university recognized when the incident erupted in May that the [distribution] policy, though it existed, was not clearly worded and was not well understood on either the student side or the administrative side," O'Shea said.

While university officials say the change was only a matter of clarification, Ede maintains that the school's distribution guidelines were "basically non-existent," until the incident with *The Carrollton Record* occurred last spring.

Under the new policy, publications can only be distributed in pre-designated areas, including the library, academic halls and residential dining facilities.

"I think that this [new] policy is very much content-neutral," O'Shea said.

Greg Lukianoff, president of the advocacy group Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, disagreed, saying it is especially important to keep in mind how the new policy came into being.

"They come up with a policy that's "content neutral," but one that's a direct outgrowth [of a situation where] they didn't like an article written," Lukianoff said. "It represents a pretty dangerous trend in campus censorship."

Lukianoff said restricting the distribution of publications to certain areas in campus is another way of limiting the rights of the student press.

"There's the idea that we can't hand out newspapers where we want, but how is that reasonable, how does that make sense?" he said. "It's saying, 'sure you can have free speech but only in this little area here.'"

Ede also said the new rules are problematic because there is not one entity or individual charged with enforcement of it.

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"The scariest part is that the university will have the power to arbitrarily remove papers from distribution when they deem it's no longer acceptable," Ede said.

O'Shea said that the varying distribution points around campus provide that there is not one person or office that has control, though the list of pre-approved areas is maintained in a central location.

Lukianoff said he sees the university's actions as part of a growing trend in which administrators ban "free speech" whenever the material is offensive to certain individual or groups.

Controversial topics printed in student newspapers are meant to provoke important discussion, he said, and should be part of the campus experience.

"I don't see how this helps [a university] function as a marketplace of ideas," Lukianoff said. "Universities have taken a paternalistic approach on what students can or cannot read."

Ede said the newspaper will comply with the new regulations, but will pay close attention to how the policy is implemented. He said he is also looking at his legal options to address the additional 700 copies of the newspaper that are still unaccounted for. Newspaper theft is illegal in the state of Maryland.

By Marnette Federis, SPLC staff writer

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