



May 22, 2026

Ronald J. Daniels
Office of the President
242 Garland Hall
Johns Hopkins University
3400 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (president@jhu.edu)

Dear President Daniels:

FIRE¹ is concerned by reports of students erasing the Voice for Life student group's pro-life chalk messages on John Hopkins University's sidewalks. As an institution committed to free expression, JHU has a responsibility to cultivate a climate for robust debate, which cannot flourish amid unchecked vigilante censorship. We urge JHU to investigate and address the censorship of these messages and ensure students are free to share their opinions on controversial topics on an equal basis in public, open areas of campus.

This March, VFL members followed JHU's Chalking Policy² to express their opposition to abortion with chalked messages across campus. Those messages included, "We are the pro-life generation," "Women's rights begin in the womb," and "Dear lawmakers, protect the most vulnerable," alongside drawings of fetuses and links to pregnancy-resource websites.³ Other JHU students used the social platform Sidechat to share updates about locations of the chalk messages and coordinate erasing the messages.⁴ One student wrote, "Does anyone have chalk?"

¹ As you may recall from prior correspondence, FIRE has defended free expression and other individual rights on America's university campuses. You can learn more about our mission and activities at fire.org.

² See *Posters/Displays Policy*, Chalking, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIV., <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/policies-guidelines/posters-displays/> [<https://perma.cc/THP7-AE5K>]. This recitation of facts reflects our understanding of the pertinent information. We appreciate that you may have additional information and invite you to share it with us.

³ Rachel • SFLA Capital Area Regional Coordinator (@capital_sfla), INSTAGRAM (Mar. 9, 2026), https://www.instagram.com/p/DVrXyG6jhR3/?img_index=1 [<https://perma.cc/YY58-95Z3>]; see also Aneesh Swaminathan, *Students deface pro-life messages at Johns Hopkins U. amid free speech concerns*, THE COLL. FIX (May 11, 2026), <https://www.thecollegefix.com/students-deface-pro-life-messages-at-johns-hopkins-u-amid-free-speech-concerns/>.

⁴ Swaminathan, *supra* note 3.

Gonna go scribble over the fuckass pro-life stuff.”⁵ Another student wrote, “[Fresh Food Café] chalk is gone. Levering [Hall] chalk is partially scribbled over and around. direct your attention to Levering, I believe the central drawings are mostly still there.”⁶ Within two hours, many of the chalk messages were scribbled over or washed away.⁷

While JHU is a private institution not bound by the First Amendment, it independently commits to “support[ing] and promot[ing] acts of public expression on campus.”⁸ This commitment—and a reasonable student’s interpretation of it—are informed by First Amendment jurisprudence and Maryland contract law.⁹ JHU also prohibits vandalism of others’ protected expression on campus.¹⁰ VFL students cannot fully and meaningfully exercise their expressive freedoms (including JHU’s expressly safeguarded freedom to chalk on the sidewalk outside Levering)¹¹ if those opposed to the messages may simply destroy them hours after they are chalked.

While it is true that outdoor chalk messages are intended to be ephemeral compared to other forms of expression, the fact that chalk messages fade within a few days due to natural processes does not mean that their purposeful and rapid erasure by ideological opponents is not concerning. For comparison, the purposeful smashing or melting of an elaborate and expressive ice sculpture would be concerning despite the fact that the piece was eventually going to melt anyway. In both cases, the purposeful destruction of the work is a form of vandalism, which JHU should not allow to go unaddressed.¹²

That students or administrators may be offended by the messages, or that their removal at the hands of their opponents is less physically damaging to campus than other forms of vandalism, is no reason to allow this crowd-sourced silencing to continue unchecked.¹³ Higher education

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Guidelines for Students in Support of Free Expression Through Protests and Demonstrations*, General Guidance, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIV., <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/policies-guidelines/free-expression-guidelines> [<https://perma.cc/9U3R-XTSN>].

⁹ *Harwood v. Johns Hopkins Univ.*, 130 Md. App. 476, 483 (Md. Ct. Spec. App. 2000) (“The relationship between a student and a private university is largely contractual in nature.”).

¹⁰ *Student Policies & Guidelines*, Open Space Policies, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIV., <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/policies-guidelines/university-student-policies/#open-space> [<https://perma.cc/D7W4-DR4Q>].

¹¹ *Posters/Display Policy*, *supra* note 2.

¹² The contractual relationship between a student and private university goes both ways: just as universities must honor their commitments, the students must honor their own. JHU should vindicate its authority over its student body when they breach this contract and, in so doing, infringe on the benefits conferred to policy-abiding students. The expressive freedom to chalk in designated facilities is one of these benefits. *See Posters/Display Policy*, *supra* note 2.

¹³ After all, the “bedrock principle” of free speech is that it cannot be sanctioned “simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.” *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397, 414 (1989); *see also Chiles v. Salazar*, 146 S.Ct. 1010, 1021 (2026) (“Sometimes, [speech] can be misguided, offensive, or cause ‘incalculable grief.’

depends on “wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth out of a multitude of tongues, rather than through any kind of authoritative selection.”¹⁴ This is especially true of political expression, which lies at the core of the value of the American ideal of free expression.¹⁵ Protection of political expression is especially necessary in times of intense disagreement on matters of public import, including the state of reproductive health and the bioethics of abortion. This is undoubtedly a sensitive issue where disagreement is often contentious, but as the Supreme Court explained, “As a Nation we have chosen . . . to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate.”¹⁶

Just as a student who may object to a poster’s message might post their own poster, or a student who disagrees with an op-ed might submit one promoting opposing views, students who object to VFL’s chalk messages may write their own nearby on chalkable space on JHU’s campus. Permitting the swift erasure of messages one opposes, in contrast, simply invites a “race to the bottom” in which all are incentivized to be the quickest to destroy their opponents’ expression. Should JHU staff witness this kind of activity in the future, they should step in to prevent it. Our nation’s free and democratic society relies on citizens’ belief that while they may not be on the winning side of every political or social issue, they have a fair chance to speak out and make their arguments. FIRE therefore also calls on JHU to make clear to students that the proper answer to speech they oppose, regardless of the medium, is “more speech,”¹⁷ not censorship, and that destroying other students’ written messages is itself a form of vigilante censorship, not protected “counter speech.”

To this end, we recommend that you adopt and use FIRE’s “Free Speech at Freshman Orientation” materials, which aim to teach incoming students about their expressive rights from the start of their time in college,¹⁸ or engage in similar programming designed to educate students on the subject. FIRE would be happy to assist JHU with putting such a program in place, as we have done at other colleges and universities, free of charge in accordance with our mission.

FIRE requests a substantive response to this letter no later than the close of business on May 29, 2026, confirming JHU will address the destruction of VFL’s chalk messages by taking steps to educate its students about the principles of expressive freedom and ensuring that future episodes of vigilante censorship will be investigated and addressed. We look forward to hearing from you.

But either way, the First Amendment protects the inalienable right of every individual to decide for himself ‘how best to speak.’”) (internal citations omitted).

¹⁴ *Keyishian v. Bd. of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589, 603 (1967) (cleaned up).

¹⁵ For “core political speech,” the First Amendment’s protection is “at its zenith.” *Buckley v. Am. Const. Law Found., Inc.*, 525 U.S. 182, 183 (1999) (quoting *Meyer v. Grant*, 486 U.S. 414, 422 (1988)).

¹⁶ *Snyder v. Phelps*, 562 U.S. 443, 461 (2011).

¹⁷ *Whitney v. California*, 274 U.S. 357, 377 (1927) (Brandeis, J., concurring).

¹⁸ *Free Speech at Freshman Orientation*, FIRE, <https://www.fire.org/research-learn/free-speech-freshman-orientation>.

Sincerely,



Garrett Gravley
Program Counsel, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Rachelle Hernandez, Vice Provost for Student Affairs
Amy Beltran, Interim Director for Student Conduct