

University of Illinois hit by ‘trafficking’ lawsuit; Chinese students say it ignored sexual abuse by staff to safeguard future revenues

Two Chinese women have filed a lawsuit against the University of Illinois, claiming it deliberately overlooked their allegations of sexual violence and harassment by one of its professors in order to safeguard future revenues from the Chinese student population.

Xingjian “Vina” Sun says she experienced rape, sexual assault, violence, and threats of future violence from Professor Gang “Gary” Xu, head of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the Urbana-Champaign campus (UIUC). Xing “Ely” Zhao says she suffered harassment, attempted assault, and threats of violence.

The women reported on multiple occasions to university officials, but the university failed to apologize or support them.

“It felt like the university brought us to campus not for an education but for Professor Xu’s personal pleasure and profit,” said Zhao.

The University of Illinois relies on revenues from Chinese students – who pay higher tuition fees than domestic students – so much that it has taken out a \$60 million insurance policy against a drop in Chinese enrolment.

Sun and Zhao are represented by international law firm McAllister Olivarius, which specializes in cases of discrimination and abuse. It recently settled a \$9.4 million case against the University of Rochester for discrimination and retaliation.

“The University of Illinois acted to protect its reputation, not the safety of the female students once they arrived on campus. We allege that the University knowingly created an environment that invited sexual abuse so that it could reap financial rewards. For that reason, we have included claims of trafficking and violating the Gender Violence Act as well as breach of contract in our suit,” said attorney Alison Wilkinson of McAllister Olivarius.

Sun, who enrolled as an undergraduate in 2012, alleges that Professor Xu raped her repeatedly, beat her with his fists, feet and a rolling pin, and attempted to hit her with his car when she tried to escape one of his attacks. She says she was slammed into walls and pushed down a flight of stairs by Xu, who she says also told her that her parents would be killed if she reported him.

Zhao, a PhD candidate, alleges harassment, multiple assaults, and hundreds of hours of unpaid, uncredited work for Xu. She says that when she rejected sexual advances by Xu, her supervisor, he retaliated by refusing to help with her thesis.

UIUC allowed Xu to remain in post for months despite complaints against him. Eventually it allowed Xu to leave with a paid sabbatical, two extra years of salary, and a \$10,000 bonus if he agreed to keep silent to the press.

The suit by Sun and Zhao, filed against the Board of Trustees of the University on January 28, 2021, alleges that the University discriminated against them on the basis of sex and national origin and that that it broke its contract with them by mishandling investigations into Xu and permitting him to conduct a sexual relationship with his student. It also claims violations of the Illinois Gender Violence Act and state trafficking laws. Sun and Zhao seek damages for pain and suffering, unpaid wages, lost business opportunities, medical expenses, and attorneys' fees.

Notes for editors:

Interviews are available on request.

Audiovisual content of the plaintiffs and lawyers is available.

Full details of the complaint are here: <https://mcolaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-01-28-FINAL-UIUC-Amended-COC-Complaint-002.pdf>

For further information, contact:

Anna Stileman

Press Executive

astileman@mcolaw.com

US: +1 (212) 433-3456

UK: +44 (0) 203 048 5947

mcolaw.com