

STUDENT SENATE BILL 2019-1091

TITLE: Resolution Celebrating the Life of Huixiang Chen, Expressing Concern for Conditions Surrounding his Passing, and Requesting Reforms in Relevant University Practices

AUTHOR(S): Senator Savannah Lai, Senator Rebecca Ragan, Macey Wilson, Senator Zachary Amrose

SPONSOR(S): Chinese Student Association, APIDA Task Force Chair Vibhor Nayar, Senator Matthew Diaz, Senator Tyler Kendrick, Senator Mary Faas, Ashley Grabowski, Senator Logan Russell, Senator Kristen Jackson

WHEREAS, on June 13, 2019, Huixiang Chen, 30, a rising sixth-year University of Florida graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. in Electrical and Computer Engineering, tragically passed away [1]; and,

WHEREAS, Chen is known among friends for his strong academic rigor and for his kindness; he helped several incoming students have a smooth transition to UF; he was a cooking enthusiast; he was passionate about his research and always tried to deliver the most accurate information to his audience, consistently exhibited great integrity; and he strived for perfection; and,

WHEREAS, the passing of Chen, a friend, student, and colleague, is a heartbreaking and tragic loss for the University of Florida; and,

WHEREAS, Chen sent a suicide note to friends, lab colleagues, and his faculty advisor, Doctor Tao Li, a professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, also an author of the paper mentioned in Huixiang's note [2]; and,

WHEREAS, this note contains information allegedly indicating that Chen was subject to abuse and compelled to engage in academic misconduct by Dr. Li, to Chen's heartfelt dismay [2]; and,

WHEREAS, a Medium post entitled "The Hidden Story Behind the Suicide of PhD Candidate Huixiang Chen", posted on June 29, 2019, appears to contain this note and screenshots of Chen's conversations with a concerned friend [2]; and,

WHEREAS, the Medium post appears to contain disturbing evidence of Chen struggling with the perceived demands made by Dr. Li, including apparent threats, communicated by Chen, if he did not heed Dr. Li's demands which were at odds with Chen's morals [2]; and,

WHEREAS, international students are presented with unique challenges, including a fear of retribution stemming from the fact that international students' immigration status is often contingent on continued good standing with the University of Florida; and,

WHEREAS, such a perceived fear of potential retribution engenders a silencing effect among some international students, which may adversely affect their ability to speak up when confronted with challenges caused by the University and its faculty; and,

WHEREAS, in 2018, 3,471 graduate and professional students enrolled at the University of Florida were international students [3]; and,

WHEREAS, while Chen had allegedly expressed his intention to switch to a different faculty advisor, a lack of support for graduate students creates a barrier for graduate students to switch to a different advisor; and,

WHEREAS, the University of Florida currently does not employ a specialist who handles conflicts between graduate students and their faculty advisors; and,

WHEREAS, University of Florida Electrical and Computer Engineering Ph.D. students must identify a faculty advisor during their first year of study, with a preliminary program of study signed by that advisor submitted to the Student Services Office no later than the midpoint of their first summer semester [4]; and,

WHEREAS, University of Florida Electrical and Computer Engineering Ph.D. students are required to complete 90 total credit hours (with a maximum of 30 hours transferred from a Master's program) within the time limit of 5 years, thus placing pressure on students [4]; and,

WHEREAS, academic studies demonstrate that the prevalence of mental health problems, particularly those caused by work and organizational context, are higher in Ph.D. students than in the highly educated general population, highly educated employees, and other higher education students [4]; and,

WHEREAS, on July 1, 2019, after receiving concerns from Chen's friends, Graduate Assistants United (GAU) issued a press release asking the University to confirm that it is conducting an investigation into the conditions leading to Chen's death, including but not limited to alleged academic misconduct, unsafe mental working conditions, and the treatment of international graduate employees [5]; and,

WHEREAS, in response, University spokesperson Steve Orlando said in a statement to The Alligator that the University began to review Chen's death since his body was discovered on June 14, 2019, stating that "[w]e are deeply saddened by his loss," and that "[w]e hold our faculty members to the very highest standards of integrity, honesty, ethics and proper conduct toward and treatment of students" [6]; and,

WHEREAS, on July 3, 2019, President Fuchs emailed a statement to graduate students confirming that the University is investigating the incident [7]; and,

WHEREAS, on July 4, 2019, GAU issued a press release thanking President Fuchs for this email; reiterating GAU's belief that any investigation into the conditions surrounding Chen's passing must not be limited to academic misconduct, but also must fully investigate Chen's

allegations of unsafe mental working conditions, as well as the treatment of international graduate employees at the University at large; and requesting additional transparency regarding any resulting investigations and findings as permissible by applicable rules [8]; then,

THEREFORE, LET IT BE RESOLVED that the University of Florida Student Senate celebrates the life of Huixiang Chen and mourns his tragic loss, and further recognizes the profoundly positive effect he had on the University of Florida and his fellow students and colleagues.

THEREFORE, LET IT FURTHER BE RESOLVED that the University of Florida Student Senate expresses concern for conditions allegedly surrounding Huixiang Chen's passing, including but not limited to alleged academic misconduct, unsafe mental working conditions, and the treatment of international graduate employees.

THEREFORE, LET IT FURTHER BE RESOLVED that the University of Florida Student Senate respectfully requests that University administration recognize the unique challenges faced by students who may fear severe repercussions in retaliation for raising issues of academic misconduct, mentally unsafe working conditions, and the treatment of international graduate employees; especially international students.

THEREFORE, LET IT FURTHER BE RESOLVED that the University of Florida Student Senate respectfully requests that University administration take empathetic and proactive action to better serve such students, including but not limited to ensuring that international students do not feel the pressures of a silencing effect, potentially by hiring a specialist who handles conflicts between graduate students and their faculty advisors.

THEREFORE, LET IT FURTHER BE RESOLVED that the University of Florida Student Senate encourages international graduate and professional students to seek out the resources provided by the Counseling and Wellness Center, GatorWell Health Promotions Services, and International Center.

THEREFORE, LET IT FINALLY BE RESOLVED that the University of Florida Student Senate respectfully requests that any investigation into the conditions surrounding Chen's passing must not be limited to academic misconduct, but also must fully investigate Chen's allegations of mentally unsafe working conditions, as well as the treatment of international graduate employees at the University at large; and must be conducted as transparently as permissible by applicable rules.

Proviso: A copy of this resolution shall be sent to University President W. Kent Fuchs, Provost Joseph Glover, Chair of the Health Policy Committee Senator Gayle Harrell, Interim Vice President of Student Affairs Dr. Win Phillips, Dean of Students Dr. Heather White, Senior Director of Residence Life and Education Calvin Mosley, Director of Housing Tina Horvath.

[1] https://www.alligator.org/news/uf-responds-to-death-of-graduate-student/article_40bf05f4-a1fb-11e9-b01c-b7564fee4c8b.html

[2] <https://medium.com/@huixiangvoice/the-hidden-story-behind-the-suicide-phd-candidate-huixiang-chen-236cd39f79d3>

[3] <https://internationalcenter.ufl.edu/about-ufic/open-doors/international-students-2018>

[4] <https://www.ece.ufl.edu/wpcontent/uploads/GraduateGuidelines/GraduateGuidelines2018.pdf>

[5] https://www.facebook.com/1054939877977754/posts/2258654397606290?s=100001693741359&substory_index=0&sfns=mo

[6] https://www.alligator.org/news/gau-calls-for-investigation-following-student-death/article_95022000-9da6-11e9-b950-1f38576613ff.html

[7] <https://www.facebook.com/1054939877977754/posts/2260944020710661?s=100001693741359&sfns=mo>

[8] https://www.facebook.com/1054939877977754/posts/2260438064094590?s=100001693741359&substory_index=0&sfns=mo