

CONFIDENTIAL REPORT OF INVESTIGATION

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
DEPARTMENT OF ELECTRICAL AND COMPUTER ENGINEERING
INVESTIGATION OF ALLEGATIONS REGARDING HUIXIANG CHEN

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I. SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

The University of Florida's Office of General Counsel retained GrayRobinson, P.A. to investigate allegation that Huixiang Chen ("Chen") was subjected to a hostile educational and work environment while enrolled as a Ph.D. student in the University's Electrical and Computer Engineering ("ECE") program. The investigation included 30 total interviews of 24 individuals and the collection and review of voluminous records. The Office of General Counsel fully cooperated throughout this investigation in facilitating witness interviews and providing all requested information and records.

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ECE Ph.D. program is intellectually rigorous and academically challenging. Chen enrolled in the Ph.D. program in the Fall 2013 semester and Dr. Tao Li agreed to serve as his faculty advisor. Chen was academically successful and productive throughout his enrollment in the program. As of the end of the Spring 2019 semester, Chen had successfully completed his written qualifying exam, oral qualifying exam, supervisory committee meeting, earned 134 credit hours with a 3.86 grade point average, and published numerous research papers. To graduate, Chen only needed to complete his dissertation and its oral defense.

On June 13, 2019, Chen committed suicide by hanging himself inside a room in Benton Hall. Prior thereto, Chen pre-prepared emails to Dr. Li and others explaining his decision to commit suicide and set them for time-release after his death. In essence, Chen's emails state that he chose death over the professional reputational harm that he would suffer as a result of the upcoming publication of his research paper at conference, because he believed the paper contained significant technical and data errors.¹ One week before Chen's death, Dr. Li told Chen that he did not have to present the paper at the conference, and they agreed that another Ph.D. student would do so. Ultimately, Dr. Li himself presented the paper at the conference.

All faculty and student witnesses described the ECE program's learning environment as supportive of students. Dr. Li's other Ph.D. students further described the program as flexible, not very strict, kind of relaxed, medium pressure, and not high pressure, and they described Dr. Li as an all-star coach, professional, supportive, fair, not too pushy, helpful, encouraging, patient, and "just a normal professor and did not do any bad things to us."

Similarly, Dr. Li's former students described him as a very good and careful mentor, respectful, nice, helpful, very positive and encouraging of students. Additionally, none of the faculty or student witnesses ever heard Chen complain about mistreatment or misconduct by Dr. Li, and Chen did not report any such complaints to his Ph.D. supervisory committee members, the ECE Department, the Dean of the College of Engineering or the Dean of Students.

As detailed below, this investigation has found insufficient evidence to substantiate the allegation that Chen was subjected to: (i) an educational environment with individual or systemic harassment that was so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively barred his access to an educational opportunities and benefits within the Ph.D program; or (ii) a work environment with harassment that was sufficiently severe or pervasive to objectively alter the terms and conditions of his employment as a graduate assistant and create an abusive working environment.

