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## New Allegations, Similar Response



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NEWS



President Morris and other SLU admins fielded questions from a group of over 200 students. PHOTO CREDIT: ALDEN TIMM '25

New York City law firm Wigdor Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) filed a lawsuit against St. Lawrence University and Ernesto Morales, who is an assistant professor and co-chair of the university's Public Health Department, last Wednesday, April 5. Wigdor LLP represents a faculty member identified as Jane Doe, who alleges that Morales sexually assaulted her in April of 2022. Doe also claims that SLU did not correctly investigate the incident while continuing to employ Morales.

On the day the firm filed the lawsuit, partner at Wigdor LLP Jeanne Christensen stated, “No female employee should be forced to work for an employer who fails to protect her from sexual violence.” She added, “We look forward to holding St. Lawrence responsible for its failure to protect our client from her horrific experience and its ongoing refusal to comply with the law and attempt to right this wrong.” Christensen further argued that the lawsuit may have a large repercussion for the future of U.S. academia, emphasizing that “SLU now has the opportunity to set the standard for other institutions.”

The Hill News reached out to Christensen, who provided exclusive comments over the phone. She said, “SLU hired outside lawyers to serve as the ‘investigators’ of Ms. Doe’s claims, but who pays the outside investigators? St. Lawrence pays them,” stated Christensen. “Did Ms. Doe participate in the selection of the outside law firm? No. Did Ms. Doe pay the outside law firm? No. Who receives the reports and case updates from the outside law firm about the investigation? SLU, through its Title IX coordinator. Who is privy to what is considered ‘confidential information’ from the investigation? SLU, through its Title IX coordinator. Who has ongoing access to the investigators throughout the process [which here is over a year]? SLU, through its Title IX coordinator.”

Christensen also questioned how SLU’s outside investigators could act in an equitable manner, adding that “law firms, through lucrative fees, are incentivized to perform work for the colleges and universities that hire them in Title IX investigations, to be re-hired in subsequent investigations. In the same way that private arbitrators are hired and paid for by companies to adjudicate disputes between employees and employers, thereby creating an inherent conflict of interest. Outside law firms hired as ‘investigators’ to resolve Title IX complaints also have an inherent conflict of interest. In the process, the investigators are supposed to be neutral and objective [according to the St. Lawrence website section on Title IX reports, the Title IX coordinator is supposed to ‘maintain neutrality and offer equitable process to both parties’]– but how is this possible if you are being retained and paid by the university and your law firm wants to be retained and paid in subsequent matters?”

To maintain a neutral position on the matter, we also reached out to Kim Zimmer, who represents professor Moralez. Originally, she agreed to grant us a phone interview, however, over the following week we received no communication.

On April 6, a day after the lawsuit was filed, SLU President Kathryn Morris issued a statement to the students, faculty, and staff via a campus-wide email. She wrote, “Last night, the university was named in a lawsuit related to [an] alleged sexual assault... We trust that members of our community will understand the importance of due process for all parties involved as the case proceeds through the legal process.” President Morris further added that matters like this may “take months and sometimes years to resolve, and you should not anticipate hearing more from me about this matter because by practice we limit what we share regarding pending or active litigation. The University will respond to the complaint in court.” She closed out the email by emphasizing that “sexual misconduct is unacceptable, both on our campus and everywhere. Since my arrival at the University, we have taken action to reaffirm our commitment to a safe campus community for our students, faculty, and staff.”

Morris, who began her presidency in Fall 2021, issued a similar statement more than a year ago related to a previous instance of sexual assault at SLU. In an October 13, 2021, email to students, faculty, and staff, Morris stated that “sexual misconduct is unacceptable, both on our campus and everywhere. That sexual misconduct occurs on our campus is abhorrent and violates the norms, expectations, and obligations of our Laurentian community. We must and we will do better.” In August of 2022, in the wake of the sexual assault case in October, SLU hired Lindsey Cohen as its full-time Title IX coordinator and Sexual Wellness Educator.

In an April 6, 2023, personal email sent from Cohen to us, she spoke of the impact of the Spring 2023 lawsuit on SLU, saying, “I recognize the weight of this on campus. I hope if anybody needs emotional support they will reach out to counseling or the Advocates.” She continued, “Sexual misconduct impacts many students and employees, directly and indirectly, and sexual misconduct wherever it takes place is never ok.” Cohen plans on expanding Title IX training for professional staff and students alike. She said, “Starting next year, all student organizations that receive Thelmo [Thelomathsian Society] funding, athletes, and Greek Life members will receive Title IX/Sexual Wellness training each year, every class year. I have provided Title IX training in-person to approximately 70 percent of employees (with other employees completing training online). This year and beyond I have emphasized in-person training as a better form of communicating our Title IX process.”

However, student frustration with the university’s responses to this and previous instances of sexual misconduct was apparent over the weekend. On Easter Sunday, SLU students organized a protest march starting outside of the Sullivan Student Center and ending at the MacAllaster House, President Morris’s residence. An Instagram post by The Nine Coalition, a group dedicated to ensuring that victims of sexual assault are heard and supported, encouraged students to bring posters and signs, some of which read, “Hold rapists accountable” and “We believe survivors.”

At the protest students were able to voice concerns, one of whom questioned Morris’s reasoning for not sharing more information with students during her April 6 email. Morris apologized to the student. She said, “This is a learning community, and we all learn, and I learn as well, and I have most definitely learned from you all this week. It would have been better to [give] more information about what we did back then to protect the student community. I regret that I did not do that.”

Another student suggested to the administration led by Morris that “the more you talk to students, the less disinformation will spread.” The lawsuit was publicized two days before a group of admitted students and their parents visited campus. The protesting student added, “It’s important to have communication with incoming students, they should know about the situation.”

Morris was not sure whether the incoming class should be regularly updated on the situation, saying, “I do not know where things will be in August and whether it will even be relevant to them. We have to use our judgment at that point and time.” She pointed out that “they’re joining a community with a history, and [that] history has deeply affected all of the students who are currently here.”

The protest lasted just over an hour and a half, and the video recording can be viewed in full on “The Hill News” website. Towards its conclusion, President Morris and SLU staff made it clear that they will not be defending any claims made against Professor Moralez, only those that were filed against the University itself.

While walking back to campus after the protest, several students mentioned parallels with the rally that took place in October 2021. They pointed out similar responses from university administration, both in person and over email.

3 days later, SLU hosted a Title IX forum in the Winston room. This event lasted just over two and a half hours and sought to give students an elevated voice regarding the campus climate post-lawsuit. The full video recording, like the Sunday protest, can also be viewed on “The Hill News” website. President Morris opened the forum by once again expressing regret regarding her initial email response to the lawsuit. “I admitted it on Sunday, and I admit today, my response Wednesday morning was not as good as it could’ve or should’ve been.” she said.

Throughout the forum, several students cited personal experiences where they felt that SLU had mishandled Title IX related cases, but the case regarding Jane Doe and Professor Moralez was predominantly discussed. One student accused the university administrators of using the phrase “due process” to dodge questions, claiming “it felt like they kept using due process as an excuse. The administrative panel kept explaining what it was as a response to questions about their conduct.”

Another student questioned the event in its totality. “I just wanted to comment about the forum in general.” they announced. “There have been times during this forum where questions have been asked and the responses were breezed over, [they have] been replaced by what seems to be scripted responses. There were important questions about victim blaming and one about actions to be taken [by the university] that got glossed over. I hope these questions will be revisited.”

Morris responded to this statement by admitting that part of her response was in fact scripted. “Just speaking for myself, I did have a script for my opening response, [but] otherwise I want to be straightforward and speak for myself.” Morris then reassured the student that notes were being taken during the event, and that those questions would be revisited at a later time.

The forum and protest both highlighted the discontent the students have regarding SLU’s response to past and present incidents related to sexual misconduct. However, there was a general sense that both parties recognize that this is no time for division.

Students were encouraged to see so many of their peers come together for a common cause. While the protest and forum may have been focused on the administration’s involvement in the perceived issue, they also seemed to understand that overcoming these institutionalized problems will take a collective effort. As President Morris herself stated, “We must, and we will do better.”

Sexual assault remains a prominent issue at many universities across the U.S. It remains to be seen how the ongoing case will be handled, as well as how its results will affect SLU and other communities within academia.



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