

# NEWS IN FOCUS

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BRETT CARLSEN/NYT/REDUX/EVINE



Rochester's board of trustees has commissioned an investigation into the institution's handling of sexual-harassment complaints against a professor.

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT

# Scientists sue University of Rochester over harassment

*Lawsuit alleges university mishandled complaints about cognitive scientist Florian Jaeger.*

BY ALEXANDRA WITZE

**N**ine researchers filed a federal lawsuit on 8 December against the University of Rochester in New York, its president Joel Seligman and its provost Robert Clark over their handling of alleged sexual harassment by a professor there.

Eight of the nine are current or former faculty members in Rochester's department of brain and cognitive sciences; the ninth is a former graduate student there. They allege

that Florian Jaeger, a cognitive scientist in the department who studies human-language processing, sexually harassed students and created a hostile work environment. The eight faculty members say that they were subjected to unlawful retaliation by university officials when they complained about Jaeger.

In their lawsuit, the researchers also allege that Seligman and Clark have had personal relationships with women who reported to them or to their direct reports, and that this "may have dulled their sensitivity to the perils Jaeger's

behavior posed to students and UR's reputation".

Jaeger's lawyer, Steven Modica, declined to comment on the specifics of the case. University spokesperson Sara Miller said that the university "is deeply committed to a safe and respectful campus for everyone, free of harassment or discrimination of any kind". She noted that a special committee is investigating the allegations — the third investigation that the university has commissioned on the matter since 2016. Miller said that the university is withholding further comment — including ▶

► on the allegations against Seligman and Clark — until the latest group releases its report, which is expected by 12 January.

The complainants filed their lawsuit last week because their window of opportunity is about to close. Beginning in late August, after the first two investigations had exonerated Jaeger, they lodged complaints with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC granted each of them the right to sue within 90 days, beginning on 11 September.

“Our only choice is to continue to move forward in order to put pressure on the university,” says complainant Jessica Cantlon, a cognitive neuroscientist at Rochester.

The case against Jaeger began to come together in early 2016, when he allegedly said in several faculty meetings that it was acceptable for faculty members to date students. Two professors in the brain and cognitive science department — Richard Aslin and Elissa Newport, who have left the university — led a group that gathered complaints about Jaeger. These include allegations that he had sex with students and sent unwanted photos of his genitalia to a female student. At least 16 women altered their academic course to avoid Jaeger, the complainants say in their lawsuit.

Two university investigations in 2016 concluded that Jaeger had not violated the

University of Rochester’s policy on romantic relationships between faculty members and students, and that he had not engaged in retaliatory behaviour against complainant Celeste Kidd, a developmental psychologist. In their filings with the EEOC, the scientists alleged retaliatory behaviour by university officials against some members of their group — such as going through their e-mails and discriminating against them in hiring decisions. The complainants went public with their allegations in early September, which led students and others to protest against the university.

Later that month, Rochester’s board of trustees appointed a committee headed by Mary Jo White, former chair of the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), to examine the original investigations and allegations against Jaeger that have arisen since. White’s group has since gathered information from more than 115 people, but not the nine who filed complaints against Jaeger.

In the lawsuit, the researchers say that they “have stated from the outset their sincere desire to cooperate with the Special Committee, but under conditions that do not negate their ability to pursue” legal claims against the university. “We would rather go to real court, to present both sides equally and fairly to a neutral party,” Cantlon says.

White has said that without cooperation from the complainants, she will rely on the interviews her group has conducted, plus interviews and documents from the two previous university investigations. “The Special Committee’s and Ms White’s only interest is to get to the truth,” the committee said in an October statement.

Much depends on what White finds. In the United States, “the legal standard for minimizing or avoiding liability is quite easy for employers to meet,” says Joanna Grossman, a law professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, who studies sex discrimination. “If they had appropriate policies on harassment and both established and utilized an internal grievance procedure, most courts would say the university did enough to avoid liability.”

She says that universities might have more of an incentive to treat sexual harassment strictly if they face public outcry that could harm their reputations. Already, more than 450 faculty members at universities in several countries have signed an open letter advising students against studying or working at Rochester.

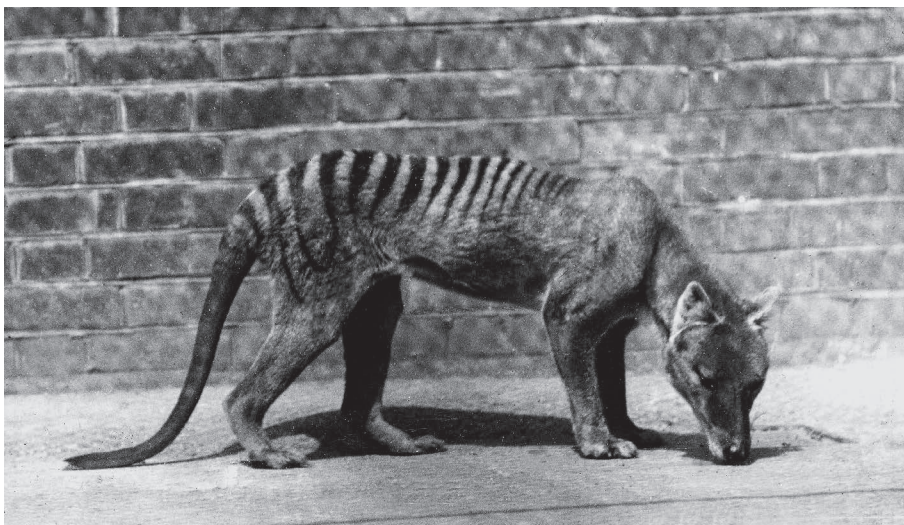
Jaeger is on administrative leave. The lawsuit is expected to take months to move towards any possible trial. The plaintiffs are asking for money to cover their damages, costs and lawyers’ fees, and any other relief the court might award. ■

## GENETICS

# Extinct Tasmanian tiger spills its genetic secrets

*Sequenced genome from preserved pup offers clues to the species’ disappearance.*

PAUL POPPER/POPPERFOTO/GETTY



Tasmanian tigers (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) died out in 1936.

BY EWEN CALLAWAY

**T**he last known thylacine — a species of marsupial predator that once ranged from New Guinea to Tasmania — died on 7 September 1936 in an Australian zoo. Now, the species’ complete sequenced genome, reported in *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, offers clues to its decline and its uncanny resemblance to members of the dog family<sup>1</sup>.

“They were this bizarre and singular species,” says Charles Feigin, an evolutionary developmental biologist at the University of Melbourne, Australia, who was involved in the sequencing effort. “They look just like a dog or wolf, but they’re a marsupial.”

Humans have been bad news for the thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), commonly known as the Tasmanian tiger. The species’ range shrivelled as early hunter-gatherers expanded across