



Lawsuit against Utah Tech administrators— Title IX breaches



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Lindy Blair | Sun News Daily

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[Title IX](#) is a federal law that protects faculty, staff and students from discrimination, sexual and non-sexual harassment and retaliation.

The specific details of this law change depending on the university, and each university may have a different statement surrounding [Title IX](#). [Utah Tech University](#) specifically states that the university is committed to maintaining a safe environment where everyone in the community is treated with respect and dignity.

What happens when a law designed to protect those in an educational setting repeatedly fails?

On Nov. 9, [ABC4 News](#) released a 42-page lawsuit that named administrative faculty and staff members at Utah Tech. The lawsuit stems from a series of Title IX breaches, but the final straw for the plaintiffs was a “gag gift” sent from former president Richard “Biff” Williams.

[The Salt Lake Tribune](#) reported that this gift included two homegrown eggplants and Williams’ record-breaking zucchini placed strategically to represent a phallus. Williams did not sign his own name on the gift. Instead, he signed the gift—without their consent—from three employees:

- Rebecca “Becky” Broadbent, general counsel
- Jared Rasband, senior associate general counsel
- Hazel Sainsbury, director of equity compliance and [Title IX](#) coordinator

Many of the incidents outlined in the lawsuit include inappropriate signage on the walls of an office, racially charged jokes and retaliation for reporting these incidents to Title IX.

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The [Salt Lake Tribune](#) met with the three plaintiffs, Broadbent, Rasband and Sainsbury, which is the first time the three spoke to a news source about their lawsuit against Utah Tech.

As the Title IX director, Sainsbury told [The Tribune](#) the gift had completely undermined everything she does at Utah Tech.

Sainsbury said: “What kind of victim is going to approach my office if they believe that I participate in these types of vulgar jokes? How would a victim feel [confident] in my work?”

Reporting cases of harassment is protected under this federal law, meaning they should not face retaliation for reporting breaches of Title IX.

However, after filing the [lawsuit](#), Broadbent was placed on leave and has been away from her office for nine months, [forced](#) to turn in her laptop and key cards. The university still has not made a statement about Broadbent.

Rasband told [The Tribune](#) he had to watch Broadbent get escorted off campus by two human resources officials with only a five minute notice of her suspension.

“She’s sitting there in tears, completely shocked and taken aback,” Rasband said.

In the article, Broadbent said during her leave, no one at the university checked on her, which has proven to be a very difficult time period.

“There’s a heavy burden for any complainant that brings forward concerns that they feel they have been subjected to misconduct,” Broadbent said.

Meanwhile, Williams, who is a defendant in the report, stepped down from his position at Utah Tech in January. After stepping down, Williams was able to live in the presidential home rent-free for six months, as stated in the [lawsuit](#), and was [paid](#) from Utah Tech until he obtained his position at Missouri State University.

The [lawsuit](#) reports that Broadbent spoke to Williams about her concerns; however, he was dismissive and attempted to manipulate and silence her about her concerns,

assuring her she was “loved and part of the family.”

Sainsbury told [The Tribune](#) she was subjected to racist jokes by administrators because “the institution was not prepared for someone like me to do the work so effectively... They’ve attributed malice to my work and compared me to a previous Black administrator that they found to be problematic.”

The Utah System of Higher Education is also named in the [lawsuit](#). This is because after the three plaintiffs reported their concerns, USHE intentionally avoided the policies, processes and timelines that should have been afforded to the plaintiffs as employees of public institutions of higher education.

Broadbent told The Tribune, “They [USHE] need to stop covering up bad behavior, stop paying off bad actors and start owning up to the need to provide proper oversight of presidents and their administrators.”

Jordon Sharp, Julie Chew, Tasha Toy, Travis Rosenberg, Tiffany Wilson and Henrie Walton declined to interview with Sun News Daily about the incidents of the lawsuit.

The [42-page](#) report states that Sharp and other team members of the University Marketing and Communications department shared a group chat, replying to the “gag gift.”

Jyl Hall, director of public relations and defendant in the lawsuit, said in a statement that UMAC is aware of the complaint filed against Utah Tech and is committed to working with all parties to reach a resolution.

Part of the [statement](#) said: “The University takes all allegations seriously. We have been actively following established university procedures to thoroughly review any concerns brought to the University’s attention, including hiring neutral third-party professionals to evaluate these complaints, and are taking necessary steps as appropriate.”

Nearly a week after [ABC4 News](#) released the 42-page lawsuit document, Courtney White, Utah Tech interim president, addressed faculty and staff:

This email was sent specifically to faculty and staff at the university, meaning students not working for Utah Tech still have not received a statement, which made some students discouraged by the consistent lack of integrity of the university faculty.

Savanna Romero, a senior English major from St. George, said, “It’s kinda sad to me that we deal with this as students, but the issues are a byproduct of immaturity because our highest faculty also don’t know how to act appropriately.”

The lack of accountability is a recurring issue the plaintiffs face. The Tribune reported that the three plaintiffs never pictured themselves in this situation, nor did they want to file the lawsuit.

“There just needs to be accountability,” Sainsbury said. “That’s what’s been missing out of this whole thing... We have great people at Utah Tech who have devoted themselves to our students, and they deserve a productive, safe place to work.”

The Utah Tech chapter of the American Federation of Teachers responded to this lawsuit Nov. 13.

The [press release](#) states the AFT “strongly condemns all such practices and actions by individuals or governing bodies, past, present and future... Any individual, regardless of position in the university or its governing bodies, who is proven to engage in a pattern of discriminatory, unethical, or illegal actions or who engages in continued behaviors that create a toxic, unsafe, and hostile environment—including retaliatory actions—is unfit to work at or on behalf of Utah Tech University.”

James Stein, associate professor of communications, is not connected to the lawsuit but wanted to voice his frustrations. He stated faculty was never informed of this incident, despite asking repeatedly what happened when Williams stepped down, as well as when Micheal Lacourse, provost and vice president of student affairs, was placed on leave.

The reason why Lacourse was placed on leave is still unknown, though it is said in the lawsuit he was verbally abusive to Sainsbury. In one meeting, Lacourse allegedly, “pointed a finger at Sainsbury and aggressively slammed his fist on the table, demanding to know ‘who do you think you are!’”

Stein said he was simply angry that this was happening, and believed he had an obligation to speak out for those who could not.

“As a person with ‘power’ in this university, it is my obligation to do more than just pretend none of this is happening because that is how we got here in the first place,” Stein said.

A month after Williams stepped down, White was named the interim president, and Stein said this should have been a more comprehensive search because of the pattern of behavior shown by the current administration.

“When we were looking for an interim president, we just went, ‘Who’s available?’ and it turned out to be somebody who is also named in the lawsuit,” Stein said. “Instead of doing a comprehensive search and unpacking why the president stepped down, and who would be a better fit to replace them, don’t you think maybe, perhaps, if we have this pattern of men engaging in inappropriate behavior, then we need a more diverse perspective on leadership?”

He said that the university needs to look elsewhere for the next president and the pattern of inappropriate behavior proves that.

“If the men in this community have proven that they are incapable of leading, then maybe its time for women to lead, for people who aren’t from this town to lead,” Stein said.

Rasband said the new president needs to be somebody with moral courage who will not be afraid to hold people accountable if their behavior does not meet expectations.

Broadbent said it needs to be someone who “is not part of the existing boys club [and will] hold people accountable to the values and the policies the university espouses, so when we recruit in students and employees it’s not a facade.”

A court date has not been released to the public. [Title IX](#) is a federal law that protects everyone from situations like these, and students can still [report](#) if they are being discriminated against or harassed.

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