



## JOINT PRESS RELEASE

# International Students and Professor Sue Florida Over Unconstitutional and Discriminatory Law Blocking Them from Academic Labs

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**Miami, Fla.** — Two Chinese students at Florida International University and a professor at University of Florida are filing a lawsuit in a federal court to combat Florida’s discriminatory law, SB 846. Signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis in 2023, the legislation unfairly restricts international students from China, Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, Russia, and North Korea from being employed as graduate assistants to conduct academic research projects.

These two students from China are pursuing their doctoral degrees, at Florida International University one majoring in computer science and the other in materials engineering. Working as graduate assistants in labs for their supervising professors is fundamental to their doctoral studies, to gain research skills and hands-on experience, to contribute to scholarly paper publications, and to complete their degree requirements. Because of the law, their graduate assistant positions have been terminated and puts their academic career in peril.

The third plaintiff, Professor Guan, a renowned agricultural economist at University of Florida, can no longer recruit the best postdoctoral candidates to work on his research projects due to the law. One of his main projects is on citrus, the most important agricultural crop in Florida, but is facing existential threats due to outbreaks of the decimating citrus greening disease.

The plaintiffs are represented by the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, the Chinese American Legal Defense Alliance (CALDA), and Perkins Coie LLP, in coordination with the Chinese American Scholar Forum.

Today’s lawsuit argues that SB 846 will codify discrimination against people of Asian descent in violation of the Constitution. It will also cast an undue burden of suspicion on anyone seeking to study whose name sounds remotely Asian, Russian, Iranian, Cuban, Venezuelan, or Syrian. Gov. DeSantis has argued that this law is necessary to protect Florida from the Chinese Communist Party and its activities. But this misguided rationale unfairly equates Chinese students with the actions of their government, and there is no evidence of national security harm resulting from international students from China studying in Florida.

“This law is unfair, unjustified, and unconstitutional,” said **Daniel Tilley, legal director for the ACLU of Florida**. “Everyone in the United States is entitled to equal protection under our laws, including citizens of other countries. The discriminatory policies pushed by the DeSantis administration will not go unchecked.”

The discriminatory effects of SB 846 are no different from those of the new “alien land law” that Florida adopted at the same time in May 2023. They single out average people from seven countries and blanketly treat them as spies or agents of their governments. This dangerous new law recalls similar efforts over the past century to weaponize false claims of national security concerns against Asian immigrants and other marginalized communities. These racist policies have greatly exacerbated violence and discrimination against Asian communities living in the United States.

“Xenophobic policies toward China stoke racial bias, and all Asian Americans will feel the stigma and the chilling effect created by this Florida law,” said **Clay Zhu, attorney and co-founder of CALDA**. “We will not back down.”

This Florida law has not occurred in isolation. More than a dozen states are following suit and have adopted or are introducing similar legislations that target people from China and other countries on residential property ownership and cross-border academic exchanges.

“Discrimination on the basis of national origin has no place in our society,” said **David A. Perez, attorney of Perkins Coie LLP**. “Laws based on discrimination, like SB 846, do not advance national security or promote academic freedom. We look forward to defending our clients’ constitutional rights and academic freedoms.”