

Language as Authority: Manipulation, Silencing, and Procedural Control

A Pattern of Chair-Led Manipulation and Unilateral Dismissal

This document is shared not as a personal complaint, but as a structural record for institutional awareness, peer learning, and future accountability. It supports the accompanying open letter by documenting specific mechanisms of unaccountable authority that led to my dismissal.

In most academic departments, the Chair holds a position of procedural oversight—not just over policy, but over people. This authority carries a duty: to act with fairness, transparency, and a commitment to due process. But when this position is misused, especially behind **closed doors**, through **vague directives** and **strategic silence**, it becomes a tool not of governance, but of erasure.

This document outlines a sustained pattern of Chair-led behavior that culminated in the administrative dismissal of a fifth-year PhD student (the author). It is not a personal attack. Rather, it is an evidence-based critique of how **language, ambiguity, and procedural opacity were used to control, pressure, and ultimately remove** a student without review or recourse.

I did not begin this process with distrust. I came to our first meeting prepared, hopeful, and ready to rebuild — and left feeling dismissed. Promises were made with no intent to follow through. Conversations ended without clarity. These are not the actions of someone engaged in support. They are the gestures of someone performing civility while avoiding responsibility. This document reflects not one moment of malice, but many moments of disregard — each small, but collectively devastating.

Professor Littlewood did not just act alone. His authority operated through an environment of implied consent — especially through those structurally positioned between power and vulnerability. Known as **“Delegated Disempowerment”**.

Patterns of Misconduct

a. Ambiguity as Leverage: Setting Expectations Without Consent

One defining mechanism of the Chair's authority was the strategic deployment of **verbal expectations presented as agreed-upon obligations**:

- In a key meeting, the Chair verbally outlined expectations (a thesis proposal within one quarter) without formal documentation, deadlines, or mutual agreement.
- He followed this with an email that rephrased the meeting as if mutual agreement had been reached—an example of **narrative entrapment**, where language is used to fabricate consensus.
- Later, these unverifiable expectations were used as the *sole basis for dismissal*.

This tactic, **imposing vague, retractable rules and later enforcing them as rigid criteria** — removes a student's ability to navigate, appeal, or even understand the standards to which they are being held.

When words are used as temporal buffers, assurances given with no intent of follow-through, language itself becomes a tool of delay and deferral, lulling the student into momentary hope only to enact harm quietly after. This is not miscommunication. It is a narrative strategy: to manufacture consent where none was given, and to foreclose dissent before it can be voiced.

b. Procedural Fog: Ambiguity as a Mode of Control

In all three meetings between the Chair and the student, there was a **consistent absence** of procedural clarity. Meetings were rescheduled, begun late, and conducted without stated purpose or documented outcomes. The student received no agendas, no follow-up notes, no formal timeline, and no written summary of expectations — yet was later held accountable for failing to meet those expectations.

This was not accidental. The absence of formal structure — no benchmarks, no rubrics, no accountability mechanisms — created a procedural fog in which power could operate unchecked. In such a fog, the student becomes disoriented, and the evaluator becomes unchallengeable.

Examples include:

- A meeting launched with no stated purpose, then abruptly turned into a **performance review**.
- The Chair repeatedly referenced unrelated matters while avoiding substantive engagement.
- Decisions were presented as open-ended discussions, but later reinterpreted as settled agreements.
- **Deadlines were never issued in writing** — yet their alleged violation became grounds for dismissal.

This fog of process did not merely obscure expectations; it created an environment in which interpretation replaced documentation, and judgment supplanted transparency. In such conditions, the student's silence could be redefined as consent, and the Chair's narrative would stand uncontested — because there was nothing on record to dispute it.

c. Disengagement and Withholding in Moments of Critical Need

Throughout the student's probation period, the Chair:

- **Withheld written feedback** on a detailed report outlining years of academic breakdowns.
- **Promised to review and respond**, but never followed up—violating norms of accountability.
- **Delivered dismissal with no warning**, despite previous verbal reassurances of support.
- **Excluded the student's advisor from the process entirely**, making the decision unilaterally.

Such behavior constitutes a pattern of **strategic silence**—a refusal to acknowledge dissenting narratives or respond substantively to student concerns.

d. Language as Psychological Manipulation: Control Without Confrontation

The most chilling aspect of my experience was not open hostility — but the way language itself was used to neutralize resistance, suppress urgency, and obscure accountability.

Professor Littlewood communicated in a manner that appeared thoughtful and measured. But beneath the surface, his words operated as **tools of psychological containment**, not engagement. Reassurance replaced responsibility. Politeness replaced clarity. Each phrase defused inquiry while subtly shifting the burden of interpretation onto me.

“I’ll send you an email.”

“Try to move forward.”

“I’ll talk to the Dean about restoring you to good standing.”

These statements sounded cooperative — but they functioned as delays, not decisions. The more uncertain the process became, the more composed his tone became. The ambiguity wasn’t accidental — it was strategic. It created the illusion of dialogue while ensuring I had nothing to act on.

The most striking example came in our final meeting. I had just submitted a comprehensive internal report documenting five years of institutional failure. His response was calm and sympathetic. He expressed understanding and verbally promised to “try to persuade the Dean to restore [me] to good standing.”

Two days later, without warning or follow-up, I received a formal dismissal letter. No acknowledgment. No explanation. Nothing. Looking back, it is hard to avoid a darker conclusion:

That statement was never meant to inform — it was meant to pacify. It postponed my alarm. It bought time. It kept me compliant, quiet, and unsuspecting in the final hours before my dismissal. It wasn’t a gesture of advocacy. It was **narrative control** designed to preserve the appearance of fairness while closing the door behind me. This is not a matter of poor communication. It is a **sophisticated exercise in gaslighting** — where ambiguity is weaponized, emotional responses are discredited, and the absence of transparency becomes a protective shield for authority. In such a system, even genuine distress can be dismissed as irrational. And that is precisely the point.

When I expressed distress, when I began crying during one of our meetings, he did not acknowledge it. Not with compassion, nor concern. The tears didn’t disrupt the conversation because they were never recognized as real. My emotional reaction was not seen as a sign of harm, but as a deviation from expected performance. It was rendered irrelevant. In many systems, emotion is treated as instability rather than as evidence of injury — reinforcing the silencing of those most harmed.

And perhaps most dangerously: This kind of manipulation doesn’t feel violent — it feels reasonable. That’s how it works. That’s how people disappear quietly.

e. Procedural Isolation and Closed-Loop Power

Most alarming is the **closed administrative loop** that enabled this dismissal:

- The Chair **made the decision, narrated the process, and blocked all channels of appeal**. One person acted as investigator, judge, and executioner — with no jury, no defense, no record. When a department chair becomes a closed circuit of discretion, due process becomes a performance, not a safeguard.
- The Dean deferred to the Chair’s discretion.
- No committee was consulted, no formal review conducted, and no response was made to the student’s documentation.

This is not merely bureaucratic miscommunication—it is **a breakdown of procedural fairness**, enabled by **unchecked discretion** and **the assumption that kindness equals justice**.

f. Time as a Weapon: The Institutional Use of Delay

In academic bureaucracy, time is not neutral. It is a tool — and when used asymmetrically, a form of quiet coercion.

Throughout this process, meetings were postponed without explanation. Emails were acknowledged but not answered. Responses to submitted documentation were promised, then withheld. Each delay widened the gap between concern and resolution — until decisions could be rendered unilaterally, under the guise of exhaustion.

These weren't regular, supportive check-ins. There were only three meetings in total during my probation period. The second, originally meant as a mid-point review, was repeatedly delayed and ultimately held just **ten days** before my dismissal. By then, it no longer served as a space for meaningful guidance — only as a procedural formality. What should have been an opportunity for course correction became a symbolic exercise, held too late to meaningfully intervene.

For the student, each passing day meant deeper uncertainty: Would the Chair respond? Would support materialize? Was there still a path forward? Meanwhile, the institution faced no such ambiguity. Its power remained intact, untouched by the clock.

This is how delay becomes a tactic. Not an accident of scheduling, but a form of attrition — where silence is not absence, but strategy. When time serves one side and erodes the other, process ceases to be fair. It becomes a countdown to erasure.

g. The Myth of Objectivity: When Judgment is Disguised as Policy

One of the most insidious features of institutional power is its ability to disguise subjective judgment as neutral enforcement.

In this case, the Chair's decisions — when to require a proposal, whether a student had made “sufficient progress,” how to define “professional conduct” — were not backed by rubrics, review, or documented policy. They were personal interpretations, rendered official only by position.

Yet they were presented as if they reflected “academic standards.” This linguistic sleight of hand makes authority appear unassailable. It transforms individualized preference into presumed objectivity — and ensures that decisions, however arbitrary, appear rational.

When a student's fate can turn on a standard that exists only in the mind of one administrator, “policy” becomes performance. And objectivity becomes a myth — convenient, unprovable, and devastating.

h. Elastic in Person, Absolute on Paper

One of the most disorienting dynamics in this process was the contrast between **conversational flexibility** and **written finality**. In meetings, the Chair consistently maintained a posture of openness — expressing support, acknowledging concern, and implying that options remained available. “I will try to persuade the dean to put you back to good standing.” Promises were made. Paths were suggested. Hope was sustained.

Then, without warning, the formal dismissal letter arrived — **abrupt, unilateral, and final**. All earlier flexibility disappeared. No reference was made to the discussions. No acknowledgment of the student’s submissions. No indication that any consideration had taken place.

This is not inconsistency. It is **strategy**. By offering verbal elasticity while withholding written commitment, the Chair maintained the illusion of process while preparing for erasure. The student was led to believe that dialogue was ongoing — until it was no longer needed.

The door appeared slightly open. It was, in fact, already locked.

Impacts and Consequences

The consequences of this Chair-led dismissal extend beyond one student:

- **Academic destruction:** Five years of research, documentation, and internal reporting were rendered void — without committee review, academic feedback, or independent oversight.
- **Immigration jeopardy:** My legal right to remain in the United States is tied to my academic standing. Administrative dismissal placed my immigration status at immediate risk without warning.
- **Emotional trauma:** The dismissal process carried out without prior notice, meaningful engagement, or due process — triggered prolonged distress, confusion, and a profound sense of institutional betrayal.
- **Systemic precedent:** The lack of response from senior administrators signals that this pattern: unilateral removal without appeal — is no longer an exception, but an accepted institutional possibility.

Any distress I experienced during this time was a response to the process, not a cause of it. It is crucial that emotional responses to structural injustice are not misread as evidence of instability.

Patterns in Summary

Behavior	Mechanism	Institutional Effect
Verbal directives without record	Manufactured expectations	No basis for challenge
Delayed or absent replies	Narrative control	Suppressed dissent
Emotional coldness	Psychological silencing	Reduced student agency
Unilateral decision-making	Power concentration	No peer oversight
Procedural ambiguity	Structural fog	Disoriented participation
Conversational flexibility, document finality	Performance of openness	False sense of agency
Subjective judgments framed as policy	Objectivity myth-making	Legitimated arbitrariness
Strategic delay	Temporal attrition	Passive disempowerment

Closing Reflection

When the most powerful person in a department can rewrite expectations, ignore documentation, and silence a student with a single letter—**that is not leadership. It is authoritarian discretion.** It operates politely, procedurally, and invisibly—but the consequences are real, and they are devastating.

This is how injustice survives: not through obvious cruelty, but through **procedural politeness**, plausible deniability, and the assumption that someone else is in charge. When power delegates both its authority and its consequences, no one claims to be responsible — and yet the damage is done.

This document is submitted in the hope that no other student will be erased behind closed doors, under the illusion that silence equals fairness, or that power exercised gently is not still power abused.

No one should be erased behind closed doors. But many already have — and many more will, if silence continues to be rewarded more than dissent. I leave this not as a complaint, but as a warning: what happened to me is not rare. It is just rarely recorded.

This is my record — not to relive what happened, but to ensure it is no longer misnamed as fairness.

Submitted by:

Yuxiang Pei

Fifth-Year PhD Student (Administratively Withdrawn)

Physics Department, University of Chicago