

This message is shared not to assign blame to individuals, but to expose a structure of silent harm that has gone unchecked for too long.

Dear colleagues, students, faculty, observers, and members of the academic community,

I never imagined I would write a letter like this, and I do not write it lightly.

But I have come to believe that silence protects only the structures that harm — and transparency, however painful, is the only remaining form of integrity I have left to offer.

This message is not just a personal account, but an urgent call to expose a deeply entrenched system that quietly isolates, marginalizes, and dismisses students without accountability. It exposes a pattern of administrative negligence and unchecked authority within the Physics Department at the University of Chicago, where discretion has replaced mentorship, and silence has become a tool of control.

My name is Yuxiang Pei. Until March of this year, I was a fifth-year PhD candidate in the UChicago Physics Program. Throughout my five years as a PhD candidate, I experienced a systematic pattern of harm: mentor changes without transition support, public reprimands for minor issues, forced course registrations twice without justification, unsubstantiated plagiarism accusations without due process, repeated probation without prior consultation, and disproportionately high TA assignments without considering the cumulative burden. Ultimately, in my fifth year, I was dismissed without warning — based on a proposal requirement imposed without relevance to my actual research progress.

Over the probation period from mid-January to mid-March, the current Chair consistently delayed meetings and used vague, authoritative language that placed the burden of clarity entirely on the student. Despite verbal assurances of support, I was **abruptly dismissed within 48 hours** — without warning or dialogue. The initial expressions of support suddenly turned into swift and unchallenged removal, leaving no opportunity for clarification or review.

I was consistently subjected to unilateral, mandatory tasks that were imposed without proper procedural basis, but exploiting the discretionary freedom granted by vague and ambiguous policies. This sequence of events is not just a matter of individual hardship, but a manifestation of how administrative practices and informal power dynamics systematically disadvantaged students. Instead of receiving support and mentorship, I faced **escalating pressures and punitive actions** — all under the guise of procedural formality.

This letter is not a personal appeal, but a whistleblower disclosure — meant to expose a pattern of informal governance, misused discretion, and systematic harm under the current **Director of Graduate Studies (DGS)**, with complicity enabled through administrative deferral and performative oversight. The current Chair, demonstrated a consistent focus on maintaining administrative authority, often prioritizing formal control over transparent procedural fairness.

I'm writing not simply because of what happened to me, but because of what it reveals — a repeatable pattern of silent exclusion rooted in a specific structure of control. It has been heartbreaking to watch a department I once held in such high regard — a place of intellectual curiosity and collaborative spirit — transformed into a hollow bureaucratic machine, where discretion overshadows mentorship.

My experience is not an anomaly; it is the outcome of a system where power is exercised through selective enforcement and strategic neglect, leaving students to bear **the full weight of institutional failures**. Multiple students, when facing similar administrative issues, have encountered the same hardships and injustices. This is not just my personal struggle, but a reflection of systemic flaws within the governance structure. Many students, fearing their academic future or unable to withstand prolonged pressure, chose to remain silent. I have decided to speak out in the hope that this letter can serve as a voice for those who cannot or dare not speak for themselves.

The severity of the harm, and the quietness with which it was executed, demand nothing less than full clarity. Outlined in this report is a set of interlocking governance patterns that quietly determine which students succeed, which are sidelined, and which are silently removed. These are not isolated misjudgments — they are repeatable mechanisms embedded into the daily function of departmental power.

Four such mechanisms form the core of this report:

1. **Favor-Based Support:** how selective advising practices result in uneven access to academic resources and mentorship;
2. **Opaque Labor Control:** how TA assignments are used to reward obedience and punish dissent;
3. **Accelerated Removal:** how sudden disciplinary actions are executed based on interpretation;
4. **Institutional Silence:** how the system enables harm through quiet compliance.

Together, they form a system that erodes mentorship, concentrates discretion, and leaves no procedural record.

Attached below are documentation excerpts, diagrams, and selected records to support what is being claimed. I have also copied external parties, including media observers, in the interest of institutional transparency. If you believe in accountability, please take the time to read and decide for yourself.

Key Documents:

- (1) [ExhibitA Informal Authority Map.pdf](#) — A visual map of informal authority and suppression loops I observed.
- (2) [ExhibitB Five Years of Institutional Gaslighting.pdf](#) — Detailed record of DGS administrative inconsistency and passive complicity.
- (3) [ExhibitC Timeline of events.pdf](#) — A full [archive](#) of major events and selected email records in past five years shared for transparency.

Governance in UChicago Physics:

-- A Visual Map of Informal Control, Narrative Suppression, and Structural Attrition

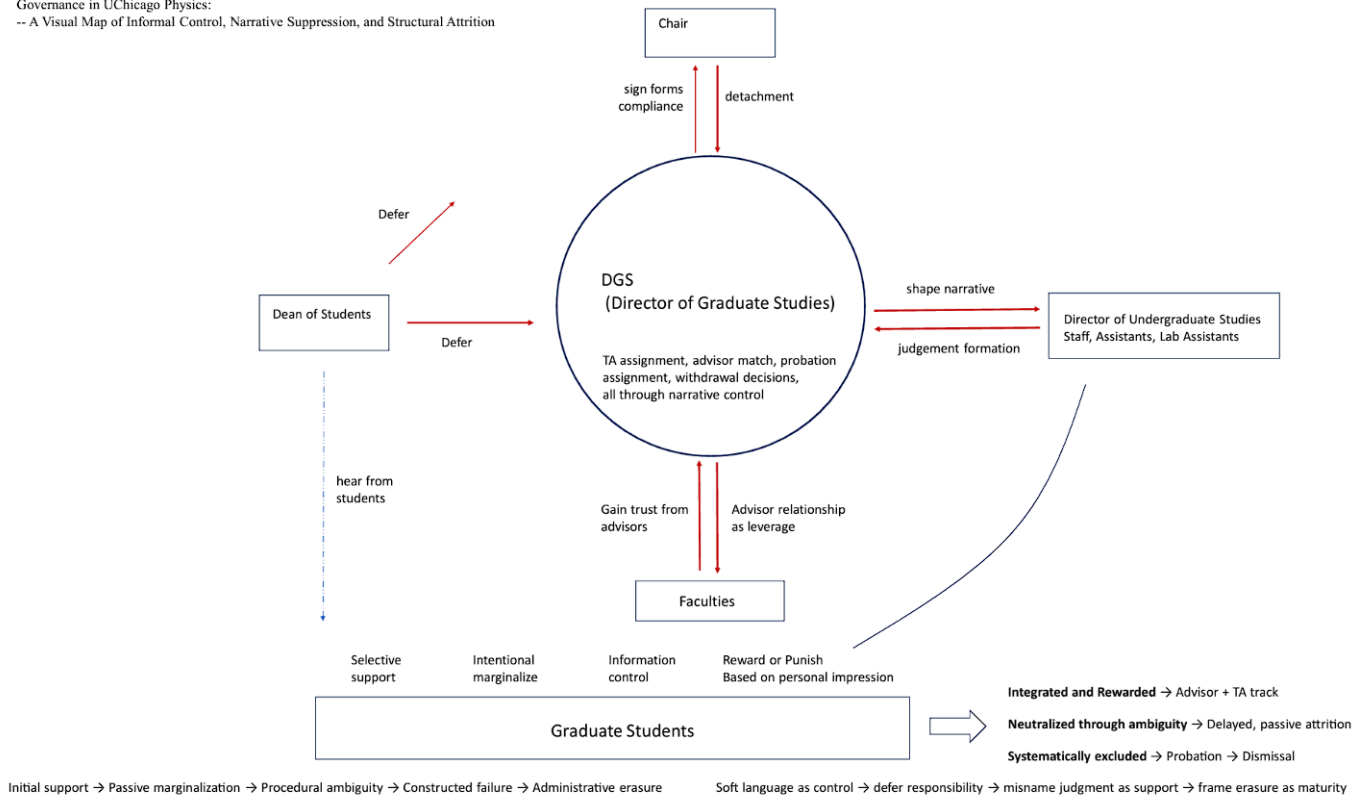


Figure: Informal Authority Map — A visual map of informal authority and suppression loops in UChicago Physics.

What follows is not just a testimony, but an anatomy: of how one mid-level administrator (the DGS), shielded by procedural opacity and silent assent, came to wield unchecked power over students' academic and psychological fates — and how the Chair, Dean, and staff ecosystem allowed it to happen. They are based on lived experience, internal records, email documentation, and structural analysis.

I. "Support" as Suppression: Gaslighting, Optics, and the Erasure of Help

The most concerning form of harm is not open hostility, but **the appearance of care without substantive support**. In my experience under the DGS, I did not receive the guidance I expected. Instead, I encountered a pattern where expressions of support were not matched by practical assistance, leading to confusion and a lack of academic clarity.

A clear pattern emerged where responsiveness from the DGS correlated not with student need, but with **administrative scrutiny**. In private, communication was minimal to nonexistent. Yet **when senior faculty or deans were involved**, the DGS actively engaged — not with students, but with those in power, often making unilateral decisions without my knowledge or consent. The support offered was situational, performative, and externally motivated.

Throughout my time in the program, there were no substantive discussions regarding my academic trajectory, expectations, or milestones. Yet, when administrative actions were taken — including probations and eventual dismissal — they were carried out **without prior consultation, feedback opportunities, or acknowledgment of my academic efforts**. The DGS's consistent deference to authority, failure to engage in two-way communication, and preference for procedural optics over actual student support created a structure in which harm was routinized, invisible, and unaccountable.

One particularly disturbing pattern was the strategic timing of punitive actions. Without any prior consultation, discussion, or warning, I was issued formal probation letter or abruptly received email warnings immediately before the winter holiday — a time when campus resources shut down, most faculty are unavailable, and students are expected to rest. The letter not only accused me of academic deficiencies never raised in prior conversations, but also imposed multiple **high-stakes "probation tasks"** that **had never been discussed or negotiated beforehand**.

The effect was chilling. It turned what should have been a time for recovery and reflection into a period of anxiety, isolation, and pressure. This was not an isolated instance — **for several years**, the specter of unexpected sanctions, opaque expectations, and **last-minute demands** has prevented me from experiencing a single holiday with peace of mind. These tactics, cloaked in administrative formality, inflicted not just logistical burden but deep psychological harm.

One of the most revealing episodes began not in a research context, but in an English training course — a course I had been **forcibly enrolled in by the DGS**, despite already having satisfied the university's language requirements in my first year. I objected to this placement, but was told it was mandatory. During that course, a language instructor raised a concern that my podcast draft lacked quotation marks despite listing sources — a formatting oversight in a non-credit support setting. I had no chance to revise or explain. The DGS **reached out to the instructor directly**, validated the concern as an integrity violation, and **unilaterally escalated it into a formal sanction**.

There was no hearing, no fact-finding, no due process. She acted entirely on her own: interpreting intent, assigning blame, and imposing punishment — **all within days**. Based solely on this incident, she placed me on a **formal academic probation** and designed an **extensive, high-stakes** remediation plan without any committee input or opportunity for appeal. What began as a formatting issue in a support course became, within days, a permanent academic sanction. This appeared to be more than just a lack of oversight; it reflected a pattern where procedural formality masked the absence of meaningful accountability, leading to decisions that lacked transparency and recourse.

Throughout these moments, the DGS consistently maintained the language of mentorship — *"This is to support your development"*, *"It is to help you"*. Yet behind those words, I was being stripped of academic standing, buried in unnegotiated demands, and systematically denied access to discussion. This is not support — it is institutional gaslighting: where the **language of care** is used to deny the **experience of harm**.

Over time, I began to internalize the message: that if I wasn't receiving help, it must be because I didn't deserve it. It was only after years of trying to meet impossible expectations that I began to see the pattern. This is the power of gaslighting — it doesn't just deny harm, it makes the harmed question whether harm is even occurring. Under the guise of mentorship, the DGS repeatedly reframed my valid concerns as personal failings, creating a cycle where I was led to question my own competence and dedication. In my experience, the lack of clear and consistent support led to feelings of self-doubt and isolation among students, as challenges were often framed as individual shortcomings rather than systemic issues.

In another instance, she cited my grade in a course as evidence of failure — without acknowledging that I had only submitted one assignment exactly in circumstances shaped by her administrative mismanagement. Rather than inquire, clarify, or advise, she used the grade as a rhetorical weapon — a means to belittle rather than support.

These moments revealed a recurring pattern where genuine difficulties were often treated as personal failings, with any minor misstep interpreted as a lack of competence or commitment. Rather than reflecting isolated administrative oversights, these actions appeared to follow a consistent approach that emphasized control over support. The environment shaped by the DGS was not overtly hostile, but rather characterized by a subtle and calculated use of authority — one where decisions were made without transparency, often leaving students feeling unsupported and marginalized.

It is concerning that a role fundamentally designed to support and guide students — the DGS — has, in practice, become a mechanism that inadvertently contributes to student disempowerment and isolation, all while appearing outwardly structured and procedurally sound.

II. Opaque Labor Control: The TA Assignment Pipeline

The DUS (Director of Undergrad Studies) exemplified another facet of informal governance, marked by subjective decision-making and an excessive focus on minor issues. This combination not only undermines professionalism but also gives the graduate program an air of arbitrariness that is both frustrating and counterproductive. Despite fulfilling all his stated requirements — including multiple meeting requests and a demonstration class — I was ultimately assigned the lowest-tier TA position. When I met with him to seek clarity, he stated that TA assignments were "completely based on my personal impression." He then abruptly ended the conversation and asked me to leave, saying I should go "before you get in trouble."

When I raised concerns about an inequitable TA assignment — one that placed the heaviest burden on me for yet another quarter — the DGS did not address the distribution itself. Instead, she refused my meeting request and suggested to the Dean, of delaying my own course enrollment, effectively punishing me for speaking up by **curbing my academic freedom** rather than correcting the underlying injustice. Worse still, without informing me, she contacted my advisor, citing my research status and workload **as leverage to justify denying my request**. The message was clear: if I resisted the assignment, my academic standing could be put at risk, including the timely submission of the fifth-year progress form — a requirement she subtly framed as a looming threat. My academic efforts, advisor relationship, standing in our department, are used as her leverage to suppress dissent and undermine proactivity.

In that moment, no constructive solutions were offered, and there was a lack of accountability regarding the TA assignment process. Instead, the response conveyed implicit consequences without addressing the underlying concerns. Rather than demonstrating professional neutrality, the interaction left an impression of a predetermined stance, highlighting not only challenges within the institutional framework but also the potential for power dynamics to inadvertently place undue pressure on students.

III. Accelerated Removal: Dismissal as Design

The accelerated removal process is not an accidental failure of policy but a structural flaw that allows for the swift exclusion of students deemed non-compliant. The DGS and the Chair demonstrated a pattern of interpreting vague phrases — like “no substantial progress” or “no proposal submitted” — as grounds for severe disciplinary action without prior consultation or due process. This interpretative freedom, enabled by ambiguous departmental policies, effectively weaponized procedural ambiguity to justify punitive measures. Such practices not only bypass due diligence but also expose students to discretionary harm without recourse.

This pattern raised concerns about the consistency and transparency of decision-making processes. Through this method, they seamlessly incorporate faculty input into the governance apparatus — creating a system where the **most severe disciplinary actions are justified** merely by claiming they have “reached out.” Beneath the appearance of mentorship lies a pattern of punitive governance — one that eliminates rather than supports.

These practices exemplify a textbook case of privilege abuse: they exercise disciplinary power without genuine engagement or confirmation from independent parties, relying instead on **subtle control and selective interpretation**. This process bypasses due diligence, allowing decisions to be framed as consultative while actually being unilateral and unchecked.

The dismissal was issued without prior notice or any formal review to discuss the decision. Two days before my dismissal, the Chair verbally assured me he would advocate for my reinstatement — recognizing my academic efforts and receiving my 80-page internal report on advising failures. That document was never acknowledged again. Within days, I was administratively withdrawn, the action was triggered by a moment of emotional collapse — an email written in psychological distress, repurposed as consent for termination by the Dean. My advisor was not consulted of dismissal action, nor informed in advance. This did not appear to be an oversight, but rather a swift and silent administrative decision. I have reason to believe I **must not be the first, nor the last** student erased in this smooth and consented process.

At key junctures, the DGS systematically withheld engagement — postponing, ignoring, or outright refusing my requests for dialogue — yet simultaneously coordinated with multiple power-holding figures out of view — a pattern that lasted for years. The resulting decisions were imposed unilaterally, without process or disclosure. While the department portrayed my dismissal as settled and irreversible, internal communications tell a different story: the DGS and Dean **quietly consulted** my advisor about continued supervision, underscoring how administrative authority operates through both formal declarations and **informal backchannels**.

Dismissal here is not the result of process, but the end-point of a pipeline — one that filters, isolates, and removes without leaving a trace.

IV. Institutional Silence as Strategy

Although the Dean of Students’ role appeared student-facing, her actual responses trivialized distress. When I raised serious concerns, her comments were limited to “everyone cries” or “don’t always talk about not sleeping” — as if emotional responses were the problem, not the departmental misconduct that caused them. By framing emotional distress as a personal flaw rather than a consequence of structural failure, the response became a form of indirect victim-blaming — reframing institutional harm as an individual weakness. In practice, she deferred entirely to the DGS and the Chair, taking no independent steps to assess or address the situation.

The Chair, meanwhile, never exercised any real oversight. He consistently accepted the DGS’s reports and recommendations without scrutiny — rubber-stamping decisions without inquiry and bypassing emails without supervision. Rather than actively evaluating the DGS’s actions, he appeared to **appreciate the performative nature** of her updates, treating them as reassurance rather than as issues warranting deeper review. The DGS’s consistent presentation of control and competence seemed to **satisfy his expectations**, allowing him to maintain a **comfortable detachment** from actual governance responsibilities. This passive endorsement enabled a system in which unchecked authority operated without accountability.

Even after my public disclosure regarding administrative inconsistencies and perceived issues within the department, the Chair appeared unaffected. This continued focus on maintaining formal appearances, despite the concerns raised, suggests a leadership approach that prioritizes stability over proactive response. It is this lack of critical self-reflection and engagement with constructive feedback that may inadvertently contribute to the persistence of systemic issues.

After I submitted a formal grievance to the Office of the Provost (Filed on May 6), I was told I was “withdrawn from the university” and thus ineligible to file. The reason given was that my “MS Active” status — indicating I am awaiting degree conferral — does not count as being enrolled.

This reasoning is logically circular: I was deemed ineligible to file a grievance because I was withdrawn, **yet the very grievance itself was to contest the withdrawal process**. By defining “Active Graduation Application” as not enrolled, the institution effectively creates a **self-fulfilling barrier**: students are blocked from challenging their withdrawal **precisely because they have been withdrawn**. This procedural loophole not only denies students the right to challenge potentially disputed administrative decisions but also sets a dangerous precedent: once a student is administratively withdrawn, they lose the fundamental right to appeal the withdrawal itself. This tactic effectively silences those who are most vulnerable, ensuring that their voices are never heard, regardless of the merits of their case.

When every layer of governance — from department to Provost — defaults to **procedural exclusion rather than substantive inquiry**, it becomes clear that silence is not incidental but structurally reinforced. This reflects a systemic culture where bureaucratic inertia and administrative formalism are deployed to obscure, rather than resolve, institutional failures.

What does it mean when every actor in the system — the Dean, the Chair, the program staff — claims their hands are tied? When no one intervenes, and no one scrutinizes how the departmental power operates? When a student's trajectory is altered without review, without recourse, and without hearing from them directly?

What does it say about governance when every form of responsibility gets routed through a single individual, and yet no one above them is willing to review that path? When procedural language masks personal discretion, and silence becomes the institutional strategy?

And what kind of academic environment is it, when the most consistent structure is not mentorship, nor oversight, but **shadow governance** — where power is exercised informally, without visibility, and every formal layer serves only to shield it?

Sincerely,
Yuxiang Pei
PhD candidate, 5th year (Administratively Withdrawn), MS to be conferred

This message is also shared with legal scholars and media observers who may see in this case broader patterns of procedural ambiguity and structural harm in higher education institutions.

This letter is shared for the purpose of advocacy and awareness. I respectfully request that any direct publication be preceded by further verification or follow-up to ensure accuracy and fairness.

This letter is not meant to persuade, but to inform. I understand that others may have different perspectives, and I am open to discussing these issues in a constructive and transparent manner. Once read, the silence becomes a choice.

Others may have experienced similar patterns, but lacked the position, protection, or platform to speak. I speak not only for myself, but for every student whose erasure was made to look like attrition. Let this not be buried as one student's misfortune — but recorded as a structure's legacy.

This letter is not an attempt to single out individuals but to call for the institution to critically examine the unchecked power dynamics within the Physics Department. Only through comprehensive and transparent reform can the University of Chicago truly embody the values of integrity and mentorship it claims to uphold.

I call on the academic community, institutional oversight bodies, and media outlets to critically examine how power structures within academic departments can silently perpetuate harm. The issue at hand is not just about one department, but about ensuring that higher education governance aligns with principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability.

I urge the University of Chicago to conduct an independent, third-party review of the governance structures within the Physics Department, focusing specifically on the discretionary powers of the DGS and the passive endorsement by the Chair. This review should include input from affected students and faculty to ensure that any findings are based on diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

Transparency must replace opacity, and mentorship must be restored as a core value rather than a rhetorical shield. Mentorship must not become a tool for suppression.

If you are a student, faculty, staff, or observer who has encountered or witnessed similar structures of informal exclusion, I welcome private accounts, structural observations, or collaborative documentation. Feel free to share this letter if you believe that academic integrity requires transparency, and reach out if you've encountered similar experiences. Silence should not be the final word.

If you recognize these patterns — whether in UChicago or elsewhere — you are not alone. This archive is only a beginning.

If you have experienced or witnessed similar exclusionary practices, please consider sharing your experience. Collective voices are essential to addressing systemic harm.

Legal Disclaimer:

This statement is based on my personal experiences and documented interactions during my time as a PhD candidate. I have made every effort to accurately present the facts as I understood and experienced them. Any interpretations or conclusions drawn in this statement reflect my personal perspective based on these experiences. I acknowledge that others may have differing perspectives, and I welcome an open, transparent dialogue to address these concerns.

I do not expect everyone to agree with my interpretation. But I hope you will examine the patterns — not the person. If you believe that integrity in academia matters, then this is a conversation we must begin.

Version 1.0 | Prepared May 2025

For contact or further documentation, reply to: physix2019@gmail.com

Full documentation archive under construction: [Public Archive 2025 for UChicago Physics](#)

YP Yuxiang Pei   Reply  Reply all  Forward    ... Tue 5/13/2025 18:30

[Update]

One day after publishing the whistleblower letter (17:10 pm, May 13, 2025), I was permanently banned from all university properties by the University of Chicago's Office of Legal Counsel.

I was accused of “unwelcome communications,” and warned I would be criminally prosecuted if I ever return to campus.

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YP Yuxiang Pei   Reply  Reply all  Forward    ... Tue 5/13/2025 22:00

[Update Comment]

Ironically, this response did not refute the structural concerns I raised — it confirmed them.

Rather than addressing the substance of my report, the institution responded by escalating punitive measures. The swift shift from administrative silence to legal threats illustrates exactly the pattern I described: a system where procedural authority is used not to ensure accountability, but to suppress those who question it. What was described as “shadow governance” is no longer abstract, it has now acted in full view.

I continue to call for independent oversight. Not because I am welcome, but precisely because voices like mine are being pushed out.

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