

## **(Updated) Interactions with the Department Chair**

This document was prepared to offer a full and respectful reflection on the communication and procedural dynamics that occurred during my probation. It aims to support understanding of how expectations were perceived and experienced from the student's perspective.

In the Winter 2025 quarter, I was placed on academic probation following a notice issued on December 23, 2024. After negotiation, the Chair of the department, Prof. Peter Littlewood, would supervise my progress during this period. I initiated contact with him and met with him three times during the quarter, in hopes of clarifying expectations and working toward recovery.

However, all three meetings left me increasingly confused and distressed. The expectations appeared to shift informally, while communication remained indirect and ambiguous. The second meeting was rescheduled twice, and the third began with the Chair arriving nearly 20 minutes late. The tone of interaction ranged from vague to perfunctory. Feedback was often contradictory, and what seemed like flexibility would later be framed as fixed requirement. This document provides an overview of those interactions, and how they contributed to the challenges I faced — both emotionally and academically — during the probation period.

### **1. First Meeting (January 13, 2025)**

This meeting was requested by me, and followed a brief email exchange. My intention was to discuss my current academic status and how best to demonstrate progress during my probation period.

I came prepared with extensive materials — including detailed research notes, prior coursework, and a former research proposal written under a different advisor. My hope was to present the academic groundwork I had laid and to seek guidance on how best to move forward. I spent approximately 30 minutes walking through this material, explaining how I had been trying to realign my research direction after a long period of institutional instability.

However, midway through my presentation, the Chair interrupted and asked sharply:

**“What is your goal of this meeting?”**

Then continued,

**“You were placed on probation because your supervisor is concerned about your progress.”**

The tone shifted — from discussion to judgment.

Without soliciting further input, the Chair verbally imposed a new expectation: that I produce a complete thesis proposal and a structured research timeline within the current quarter. These were not presented as suggestions or collaborative goals, but as unilateral terms. I was caught off guard, visibly hesitant, and unsure whether these demands aligned with where I was in my research process.

During the conversation, the Chair proposed a new goal — that I write a full thesis research proposal and produce a structured timeline for future research work. These expectations were introduced verbally and abruptly. I did not agree to them. In fact, I was visibly hesitant and unsure, still trying to understand what was being asked of me and whether it aligned with where I was in my research process.

In the middle of my hesitation — while I was still visibly uncertain and had not expressed any agreement — the Chair ended the discussion with:

**“I will send you an email.”**

This was not a recap or mutual resolution, but a move to prematurely conclude the exchange and frame my silence as consent. In his follow-up email, he listed a set of expectations as if I had already accepted them — using phrasing that implied mutual understanding where there had been none.

I had brought extensive research notes and past coursework to the meeting, including an older research proposal written in a different context. These materials were intended to provide background on my ongoing effort to reorient myself academically — not as evidence that I was ready to draft a full thesis proposal. Ironically, they were apparently misread as proof that I was in a position to produce new work under strict deadlines — when in fact they reflected the fragile, exploratory stage of long-term recovery and realignment.

The original probation letter included no requirement for a proposal, and no updated documentation was ever issued. I was never asked to sign, confirm, or formally acknowledge this new expectation. Yet this mischaracterized follow-up email — based on a meeting that ended with ambiguity and my own indecision — would later be used as the sole basis for my dismissal from the program.

During the same meeting, I informed the Chair that I had enrolled in a General Relativity course that quarter, in addition to continuing my independent research. I asked whether this course enrollment was appropriate given my probation status. The Chair gave no clear response — neither affirming nor advising against it. I interpreted this as tacit approval, or at least an indication that it was not a point of concern.

## **2. Second Meeting (March 4, 2025)**

This meeting had originally been scheduled for an earlier date, but was rescheduled twice by the Chair. By the time of our second meeting, I was still in the early stages of reconnecting with my advisor and working through background literature. I had not yet completed a formal proposal. Emotionally, I was under immense stress and trying to interpret the direction of the probation process based on limited guidance.

The meeting itself became especially difficult and confusing. Several things were said by the Chair that left me disoriented:

- He mentioned, somewhat abruptly, that he was currently teaching PHYS 335, a departmental-level course. I could not understand the relevance of this statement to my situation, and it added to my sense of disconnection during the conversation.
- He emphasized that he had a close personal relationship with my advisor, saying he “knows him very well” and had “worked with him for many years.” I was unsure whether this meant my advisor had already agreed with his judgment, or that I should not try to seek support from him separately.

During our meeting, I **shared two research directions** I had been exploring: one involving single-spin coupling in superconducting circuits, and another focusing on Majorana zero modes at oxide interfaces. These were not random or last-minute ideas, but rather concrete starting points I had developed through independent study.

When I clarified that I no longer intended to pursue the first topic, the Chair asked who would be my advisor if that were my thesis topic. This exchange seemed to focus more on assigning responsibility than on fostering meaningful academic development — and it ultimately left my core research interests unaddressed.

The Chair responded by mentioning a related article and promised to send it to me — a gesture that I interpreted as a possible step toward mutual exploration. However, **no such follow-up occurred**. This subtle breakdown in follow-through, though small in form, reflected a pattern: verbal gestures were offered, but concrete collaboration never materialized.

During the conversation, I asked whether there might be reimbursement options available to support my participation in the APS March Meeting, for which I had already registered. The Chair responded that, since I had not made sufficient research progress, I was **not eligible** for any funding and would need to cover all expenses out of pocket. The response felt curt and dismissive, and reinforced the impression that no institutional support was available unless I already met unstated standards.

I then inquired about TA assignments or other sources of funding for the following quarter, hoping to understand how I might sustain my enrollment and continue contributing. Rather than offering information or discussing possible paths forward, the Chair responded by suggesting that I consider taking a **leave of absence** — a suggestion that felt abrupt, and disconnected from my clear efforts to remain in the program. I had never expressed a desire or intent to leave.

At one point during the conversation, overwhelmed by the pressure and ambiguity, I began to cry. The tone of the meeting felt unsympathetic, even hostile — as though my presence was a burden unless I could independently finance or justify my progress. The overall dynamic was evaluative yet indirect, leaving me unsure of what was actually expected of me.

There was no written clarification of benchmarks, deadlines, or consequences. I left the meeting even more uncertain than before, and deeply anxious about my standing in the program. I did not receive any further notice or feedback afterward.

### **3. Third Meeting (March 13, 2025)**

This meeting, too, was rescheduled from a prior tentative date. A few days beforehand, I received an email from the Chair with a calendar invite — but with no explanation of its purpose, no agenda, and no indication of what would be discussed. The lack of context added to my anxiety.

On the day of the meeting, the Chair arrived nearly 20 minutes late. I was continuing background research and trying to regain academic momentum. I did not believe I was yet ready to finalize a thesis proposal. During the conversation, I shared this honestly:

**“I don’t think it has come to the point to settle on a thesis proposal.”**

He expressed clear dissatisfaction, and the tone of the meeting became tense.

At one point, I brought up a broader issue: the pattern of long-term neglect and information control I had experienced under the DGS (Director of Graduate Studies). I shared how this persistent pattern had affected my progress and eroded my trust in the system. The Chair responded that he had limited time and needed to attend another meeting soon.

I then handed him a compiled set of written documents — evidence and analysis I had prepared in detail, documenting the procedural irregularities and systemic challenges I had faced. He assured me:

**“I will read this carefully.”**

At that moment, the conversation softened slightly. I said to him:

**“It’s nice to chat with someone like you who is really understanding.”**

Then, I asked again about my standing for the next quarter. He replied:

**“I will try to convince the Dean of Students to put you back to Good Standing.”**

This seemed like a hopeful statement at the time. I left the meeting believing there was still room to recover — that the materials I had submitted would be reviewed, and that I still had a chance to re-stabilize my academic trajectory.

However, only two days later, I received an official dismissal letter — citing lack of proposal submission and referencing the January 13th meeting as the origin of that expectation. No prior warning was given. My advisor was not notified, and I was given no opportunity to respond or appeal.

In this same meeting, the Chair also criticized my enrollment in the General Relativity course, calling it “not wise.” This contradicted our first meeting in January, when I had proactively informed him about the course and received no objection or advice at that time. The delayed judgment added further confusion to an already inconsistent evaluative framework.

#### **4. Reflections on the Chair’s Role and Process Breakdown**

Across these three meetings, a consistent pattern emerged: expectations were introduced informally, shifted without documentation, and were not followed up in writing. The Chair rescheduled meetings, arrived late, offered vague or contradictory feedback, and declined to provide concrete guidance. His communication style alternated between evaluative distance and procedural evasion — creating an environment in which I could not reasonably understand what was expected of me or how I was being assessed.

At no point was I formally warned that my academic status was at risk. No rubric, benchmark, or deadline was ever provided in writing. Yet my entire standing in the program was ultimately determined by how the Chair interpreted these interactions — in private, and without input from my advisor or from a departmental committee.

What I experienced was not a fair or accountable probation process, but a unilateral evaluation loop, dominated by one individual’s shifting expectations and refusal to engage in open clarification.

I offer this reflection not to seek sympathy, but to document what happens when power is exercised without structure, transparency, or meaningful recourse. I hope this account will serve as a basis for honest institutional reflection — and for better protections for others in the future.

**Submitted respectfully,**

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