

Dear all,

Please forgive the abruptness of this message, since this might be my last voice in our University.

While this began as a personal matter, it raises broader questions about procedural fairness, institutional silence, and unchecked authority — issues that affect more than just one student: often without notice, until it's too late.

My name is Yuxiang Pei, a fifth-year PhD student who was recently administratively dismissed from the Physics program, **based solely on the individual discretion of our current Chair, Professor Peter Littlewood**, following a process that has left no room for appeal, clarification, or review.

I was dismissed for not submitting a thesis proposal within one academic quarter: an expectation that was not formally documented or agreed upon, but verbally communicated under pressure. The Chair's follow-up email introduced a new set of expectations: including a research proposal and structured timeline, in a tone that implied prior agreement. However, at no point during the meeting did I explicitly agree to these requirements. These expectations later became the sole basis for my dismissal.

I did not submit a proposal — not out of neglect, but because the process lacked the clarity and support necessary to move forward responsibly. During one of our meetings, I shared two possible directions. The Chair questioned my choices by asking, “Who would be your advisor if this were your thesis topic?” and mentioned a related paper he would send me — which I never received. There was no structured follow-up, no academic feedback, and no written expectations. Under these conditions, I did not believe it was appropriate to submit a premature proposal, especially when my advisor and I had not yet finalized a clear research direction. What I needed was engagement, not silence.

However, our Chair might have interpreted my actions not as caution or integrity, but as defiance. It seems that a student who does not conform quickly to his expectations, or fails to communicate in ways he deems appropriate — deserves dismissal. Students required to find a new advisor were expected to produce a full thesis proposal within the same quarter, or face dismissal without warning. Professor Littlewood rarely raised his voice. He didn't need to. His authority came not from pressure, but from the way he framed every situation as settled before it began. Questions became misunderstandings. Doubts became delay. Silence became agreement. He did not impose decisions; he narrated them into inevitability.

His one-on-one conversations rarely offered actionable guidance. Instead, they delivered unspoken judgments, shifting expectations, and a sense that **“being granted a meeting”** was itself a kind of favor. When a student is made to feel grateful simply for being acknowledged, the power dynamic is already distorted. In such dynamics, the advisor's presence replaces responsibility, and the student is expected to interpret absence of clarity as a test of maturity. What seems like attention becomes a prolonged deferral — of guidance, of support, of institutional care.

I once trusted him, and still hope to even now. In my early years, I enrolled in two of Professor Littlewood's courses. In hindsight, aspects of how he organized and adjusted those classes hinted at something deeper: pressure was imposed, then lifted — turning control into a performance of kindness. Over the course of three meetings with Professor Littlewood during my probation period, I encountered a mode of communication that felt perfunctory, tense, and disconnected from the work I was doing — the second meeting was postponed twice and ultimately occurred just ten days before my dismissal, leaving little time for constructive follow-up. In our final meeting, I submitted a detailed internal report outlining five years of repeated breakdowns in support and oversight — including extensive documentation of how the DGS's persistent neglect and mismanagement had derailed my academic progress. Professor Littlewood acknowledged receiving this, assured me he would review it carefully, and expressed sympathy for the time and opportunities I had lost. That very meeting ended with his verbal assurance that he would support **restoring me to good standing**.

Two days later, without warning or reply, I received his formal dismissal letter. He did not engage with the materials I submitted — in fact, he never acknowledged them again. No clarification, no reflection, no further communication. The very person who claimed to be hearing my concerns had already decided to erase me from the institution. It felt as though the priority was not to resolve concerns or review the facts, but to swiftly close the matter — without acknowledgment or transparency. I was not met with inquiry, only erasure. He mastered the art of appearing fair while closing doors. His words sounded objective, his tone calm, his pace measured — but behind that civility was a refusal to engage. He listened without absorbing. He acknowledged without responding. He acted, then never looked back.

The dismissal letter was issued without prior warning, without a chance to speak, and without my advisor even being informed during the process. It was not until two weeks later did I know that our dean simply defers to the Chair's academic decision, and the Chair himself dominates the process. Furthermore, the process has functioned like a closed administrative loop: The Chair has shaped the narrative to the Dean, the Provost, and others without my input, and, **refused all further clarification or communication**. Even when my advisor reached out to him after my dismissal, he responded only vaguely: out of what felt like mere formality.

In retrospect, I now recognize that the Chair's statement — "I will try to persuade the Dean to put you back to Good Standing" was not an expression of support, but a tactical misdirection. It delayed my ability to interpret what was actually occurring: that the decision to dismiss me may already have been made. The illusion of advocacy muted my urgency, numbed my instincts, and allowed the dismissal to arrive without immediate resistance. This was not miscommunication. It was **cognitive control** — exercised through performative empathy. The Chair's assurance was a carefully timed move: to keep me compliant, unalarmed, and too confused to fight back when the dismissal arrived. It delayed my protest, and preserved his image. He didn't push me out with confrontation. He smiled, nodded, and closed the door behind me. That's not leadership. That's **gaslighting under the cover of professionalism**.

It remains unclear how such a dismissal — based entirely on a single narrative, **could proceed with no inquiry, no oversight, and no record of dissent**. Whether through silence, deference, or informal alignment, the system allowed it to happen. That itself is worth reflection.

I exhausted every formal channel available to me — including the Dean of Students, the Ombuds Office, direct written appeals to senior administrators, and a formal grievance filed by the Graduate Students United (GSU). At every level, I was either told that no mechanism exists to challenge a departmental decision once the Chair declares it final — or, upper-level administrators declined to engage at all. This decision, though framed as academic policy, was **endorsed by divisional leadership** — suggesting that the erosion of due process may now be quietly accepted as precedent. When accountability is absent at the highest levels, students are left defenseless.

This has been a shocking and disillusioning experience: to see all of a student's multi-year effort and commitment erased by one individual's private interpretation, without transparency, dialogue, or due process. I have reason to believe I **may not be the first, nor the last**, to be quietly removed through a process that lacks transparency and accountability. What I experienced was not a simple misunderstanding — it was structural indifference, procedural betrayal, and the quiet violence of institutional self-righteousness. They rely on institutional ambiguity to avoid accountability — not by slamming the door themselves, but by ensuring it closes quietly behind them, all while claiming it was never in their hands, under a mask of "This is unfortunate, but beyond my control." Few questioned him — not because they all agreed, but because his language left no room for disagreement. To speak against him was to appear emotional. To hesitate before complying was to look unreliable. He never needed consensus. Just enough silence. Since releasing two detailed letters on April 2nd, I have not received a single acknowledgment from the Chair or divisional leadership — despite the transparency of the concerns and the clarity of the documentation shared. The silence is not incidental. It reflects a deliberate refusal to engage.

I am grateful to the Dean of Students, Bahareh Lampert, and the OIA team, whose recent responses have been kind and humane. But here I must still speak about the process in which a Chair could remove a student — unilaterally, opaquely, and irrevocably. This is not just about me. It's about any system that allows dismissal without review, erases dissent through silence, and treats process as performance. When students begin to speak up, sometimes the most polished authority suddenly appears more active, more present, more generous. But performative presence is not accountability. What remains is not just disappointment. It is the broken promise of an institution I once believed in.

The following documents are provided not as accusations, but as a form of academic transparency — to allow others to independently assess what occurred when due process was not only overlooked, but rendered structurally impossible.

Key Documents:

- (1) Language as Authority: Manipulation, Silencing, and Procedural Control – A documented account of Chair-led manipulation, expectation-setting, and unilateral dismissal through procedural control. This document traces not just decisions, but the language through which decisions disguise themselves as dialogue.*
- (2) (Updated) Interactions with the Department Chair – a written account of my three meetings with Professor Littlewood, originally prepared for internal review, and now shared for transparency.*
- (3) (Updated) [Communication Timeline.pdf](#) — includes a timeline of major events and selected email records showing delayed responses, miscommunication, and procedural ambiguity during my probation and dismissal process.*

Supplementary (Optional or Available Upon Request):

- (1) Practical Advice from the Erased – A list of lessons I wish I had known sooner: about documentation, verbal ambiguity, institutional silence, and survival strategies in systems of asymmetrical power.*
- (2) [Academic CV](#) to give context on my academic efforts and background, in case it is helpful. [Letter to Dean of Students](#) with personal background and academic path.*
- (3) Systemic Misconduct and Misuse of Authority – A structured report on patterns of psychological and institutional harm under the DGS, framed as "support."*

Attachments are provided for transparency and to support institutional learning. They are not personal attacks but documentation of patterns and structural concerns.

To my fellow students:

I've had the chance to work with some of you, and I truly treasure those experiences.

I hope none of you ever face what I've gone through. But I also hope you know: if it happens, you may find no system designed to hear you. And I hope one day that changes.

Why not today — and why not through our collective effort?

Sincerely,

Yuxiang Pei

PhD candidate, 5th year (Administratively Withdrawn), recent MS graduate

If anyone reading this believes there might still be a pathway forward: academically or institutionally — I would deeply appreciate your thoughts or guidance. I am currently trying to preserve my immigration status while securing a new path. Any possibility, however informal, creative, or outside usual procedures, would mean the world to me.

If any faculty or department believes there is a mechanism I have not yet explored, I am deeply open to guidance or referrals, even for terminal projects or transfer.

Even a short note could make a difference. I am reachable at yuxiang@uchicago.edu active for the next 30 days, or at physix2019@gmail.com. My phone number is +18729041298.

This message is being shared with leadership from the College Office to ensure transparency and institutional awareness. This message is also sent to physics students, faculty, and administrative leadership, and I welcome anyone interested to circulate further. This message is shared with institutional leadership and relevant external observers in the interest of transparency and systemic learning. If you are Bcc'ed, you are receiving this because I believe you care about academic integrity and institutional fairness. I welcome your thoughts in confidence.

Even now, I believe this University has the capacity to reflect, to improve, and to protect students better.

Even if no immediate resolution is possible, I still hold hope that this letter might plant a seed: for a future system that listens, that improves, and that honors the dignity of every student.

This is not a call for blame, but a call for awareness and repair. If this letter reaches even one reader who has the ability to challenge institutional complacency or spark a broader conversation — then it will have been worth sending. I understand that others may interpret these events differently. My aim is not to assign blame, but to invite reflection.

This message, along with attached documents, is publicly [archived](#) for transparency and as a resource for future students seeking to understand how academic power operates.

This message contains personal and institutional concerns. I respectfully ask recipients to treat its contents with discretion and care. Please contact me directly for clarification or further information.

This message is currently shared within the Physics Department and relevant administrative leadership. I believe transparency, even in a limited circle, is a crucial step toward institutional learning and accountability.

If you are a faculty member, staff, or student reading this — I ask not for intervention, but for reflection. Ask what kind of processes you would want in place if this had happened to someone you mentor, someone you care about. Even if no action is taken today, perhaps one conversation will begin. And from that, something better can grow.

I continue to pursue formal remedies where possible, and share this letter to provide context, not to preempt any official process.

With recent University commitments to student experience and oversight, I hope this letter can contribute to a broader reflection on how policies are implemented and whose voices are heard.

As President Alivisatos reminded us on March 14, this University is guided by its commitment to academic integrity and student support. I still believe that. But in my case, those values were not violated by policy — they were bypassed by silence. If this letter can serve as one small nudge toward institutional reflection, then it will have done its part.