



Newton’s Laws of Motion for Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS) with the Transformative Magnetism of Moral Courage*

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Abstract

At their core, anti-learning systems that enable systematic abuses of power over time can be thought of as systems that fundamentally refuse to learn and correct themselves, even in the wake of causing egregious harms (although they may say otherwise). This discussion illuminates several key qualities of such malignant systems, as well as describes the incipient transdisciplinary science and corresponding emerging movement aimed at Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS). It further explores whether for all the duplicity, dysfunction, and destructiveness characterizing such ecosystems, there may nonetheless be something analogous to laws of nature governing them; if so, there exists potential to harness such forces to engender systemic transformation. The analysis closes by exploring examples of mobilizing this playbook into action.

Keyphrases

Learning health systems, political systems, abuses of power, darvo-maniac corruption.

Contents

[Recognizing Anti-Learning Systems](#)

[Characteristics of Anti-Learning Systems](#)

[Newton’s Laws Applied to Anti-Learning Systems](#)

[Lights, Camera, Action!](#)

[Our Collective Duty for Collaborative Action](#)

[Citation](#)

[Affiliations](#)

[References](#)

Recognizing Anti-Learning Systems

At *Guardians* 2024, I described observing (as well as advocating for and with survivors of) abuses of power at myriad institutions in society, including the university where I work and myriad other universities ([Guardians 2024](#); [Rubin 2024](#)). One clear example involved *Armies of Enablers* at universities and academic medical centers enabling the mass sexual assault of hundreds or even thousands of students and patients; in each instance forming a pattern, the whole system seemed to align to gaslight those being systematically abused as well as to delay truth and justice ([Guiora 2020](#)). Indeed, a story in *The Washington Post* ([Svrluga 2022](#)) about mass sexual predation at UCLA reported that “It is also one of several massive settlements in recent years by universities to resolve sexual abuse complaints against doctors, in many cases with plaintiffs claiming that university officials failed to take action over years. Allegations have rocked schools including the University of Michigan, Pennsylvania State University, Ohio State University, Michigan State University and the University of Southern California.” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. remains well known for the famous quote that “Justice too long delayed is justice denied.” in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” ([King Jr. 1963](#); [King Jr. 1998](#)).

I have previously argued that mass sexual predation, mistreatment of employees, violations of patients’ rights, stifling of free speech, quashing of questioning, condoning campus antisemitism, promoting racism, fostering plagiarism, and other such systemic abuses of power represent similar monsters all surreptitiously wearing different masks ([Rubin 2024](#); [Rubin 2025a](#)). Of all things, a scandal at my public high school over a quarter century after I gave my valedictorian speech drove home an important point for me: even after all the leadership had changed, the same abuses of power persisted ([Aiello 2022](#)). These were system problems demanding system solutions. In a statement that may be erroneously ascribed to Dr. W. Edwards Deming ([IHI 2015](#); [Deming 2025](#)), “Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.”

I had often wondered whether there might be laws of nature that could describe such ecosystems in which abuses of power surreptitiously run unchecked ([Ocepek et al. 2025](#); [Rubin 2025b](#)). I questioned whether this phenomenon had to be inevitable. Philosopher and social critic Eric [Hoffer \(2025\)](#) once proffered that “Every great cause begins as a movement, becomes a business, and eventually degenerates into

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a racket." I had been developing a complementary type of cynicism. At least at universities at the leadership level, I was keeping myself entertained (laughing, so as not to cry) by developing a hypothesis I termed the Seinfeld Rule. It was a comic fusion of what seemed like rampant hypocrisy, a lack of self-awareness, and a system of kakistocracy where to quote a movie before my time, Harper released in 1966 (Goldman and Macdonald 1966; Cavershamragu 2011; Castro 2017), "The bottom is loaded with nice people... Only cream and bastards rise." In 2022, a previous University of Michigan (UM) President was fired for violating a rule he introduced just the previous summer (Jaschik 2022; Mahani 2022). He was so wrapped up in the rule, that he announced a zero tolerance policy for violations of it, likely while he was violating it (Dodge 2022). Once I saw that pattern, I could not unsee it. So many wielding power at myriad universities were comically surreptitiously behaving in ways that were actually antithetical to what they ostensibly espoused. The sad view would be looking at such a phenomenon as being Orwellian, Kafkaesque, or Randian. But an approach that would engender laughter in the spirit of films such as *Idiocracy* (Judge and E. Cohen 2006) would be the Seinfeld Rule, finding humor in such paradoxes. It presented a much-needed distraction from the harm caused by this hypocrisy.

For more than a decade and a half, much of my career has been about advancing Learning Health Systems (LHSs), in which people and the system itself share a cultural commitment (and sociotechnical infrastructure) to continuously learn and improve as a consequence of every experience (Olsen et al. 2007; Rubin et al. 2018). LHSs are anchored in a set of shared consensus multistakeholder "LHS Core Values" that bond together the incipient LHSs movement globally (Learning Health Community 2012; Rubin et al. 2018; McGinnis et al. 2024). Considering principles that underpin learning systems, I have termed systems that covertly violate such principles (often while paying ostensible lip-service to them) to be anti-learning systems. In turn, I recognize an imperative to bring together the smartest and most passionate people to collaboratively catalyze a multistakeholder movement and a corresponding transdisciplinary science aimed at Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS).

Characteristics of Anti-Learning Systems

At their core, anti-learning systems that enable systematic abuses of power over time can be thought of as ecosystems that fundamentally refuse to learn and correct themselves even in the wake of causing egregious harms (although they may say otherwise).

While far from a perfect framework, seven D-words help categorize such anti-learning systems:

1. **Destructive:** Such systems do massive damage and harm to people and institutions, albeit often out of sight for a time.
2. **Dysfunctional:** A simple Google search for the adjective **dysfunctional** reveals an AI description of a dysfunctional family that applies to such systems as well: "A dysfunctional family is a system where conflict, poor communication, neglect, abuse, or addiction are common, preventing members from feeling safe, heard, and able to thrive, often characterized by unclear boundaries, emotional unavailability, and unhealthy roles (like scapegoat or hero) that create lasting stress and mental health challenges, even if the family seems 'normal' to outsiders."
3. **Demoralizing:** Those harmed within the system are left feel-

ing hopeless. The tragic example of the survivors of the Michigan State University doctor who sexually assaulted hundreds of gymnasts and other patients, whose efforts to report were thwarted and undermined, illuminates this problem (Carr2019; Cohen2020; Haxel and Mencarini 2017; Stack 2019).

4. **Dehumanizing:** Within such ecosystems, survivors of abuses of power in systems are treated as less than human, or at least of lower status than those wielding power and those enabling the abuses.
5. **Delirious:** Groupthink, gaslighting, and incentive structures that reward monoculture engender a system in which "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" is covertly and subconsciously normalized (Mieder 1987).
6. **Duplicitous:** Those in power frequently utilize gaslighting and double-speak, often paying lip-service to principles that resonate with the "LHS Core Values" while surreptitiously doing the polar opposite. There is a *The Wizard of Oz* (Langley et al. 1939) like quality to those wielding power in such systems. Indeed, transforming them requires brains, hearts, and (moral) courage coupled with pulling back the curtain to expose that the emperor has no clothes (Wikipedia 2025b).
7. **Doomed:** In addition to being destructive, such systems over time are simultaneously self-destructing. Those in power play what I have previously described as a harmful game of "Musical Chairs for Darvomanics" ultimately collapsing the system on itself (Rubin 2024).

Newton's Laws Applied to Anti-Learning Systems

There is a famous anecdote about Sir Isaac Newton discovering the force of gravity when an apple fell on his head while sitting under an apple tree. In August 2024, I was pacing the halls of the Rayburn House Office Building, seeking an opportunity to politely but directly confront the then University of Michigan President, in an effort to persuade him to listen to voices that had been marginalized for too long in spite of repeated efforts to be heard. I found myself contemplating how a potential force of nature (an unlikely tornado) might be needed to shake up the status quo. I pondered whether analogies to physical laws of nature could explain any of this (Walberg 2024). One simplification of Newton's Laws of Motion states (Helmenstine 2022):

First Law A body in motion remains in motion or a body at rest remains at rest, unless acted upon by a force.

Second Law Force equals mass times acceleration ($F = M * A$).

Third Law For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of these three laws. Taken together, they have enabled the study of motion and interactions of the smallest and largest objects imaginable, on planet earth and in outer space. As the basis for classical mechanics, these laws proved foundational to prediction, measurement, and scientific study of physical phenomena, which in turn enabled engineering, invention, and improvement.

With Newton's laws in mind, pondering the national and global politics of the day and what I had observed vis-à-vis systemic abuses of

Table 1: Summary of the Laws of Motion for Mechanics, Politics, and Power

Author, Year, Domain	First Law	Second Law	Third Law
Newton 1687 Mechanics	A body in motion remains in motion or a body at rest remains at rest, unless acted upon by a force.	Force equals mass times acceleration ($F = M * A$).	For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.
Brians 2013 Politics	Political objects in motion tend to stay in motion.	The relationship between a candidate and his or her political force is the product of campaign funding and personal likability or appeal to the press.	For every political action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.
Rubin 2025 Power	One seeking to amass power, who is in motion toward an ideological extreme, remains in motion unless acted upon by an opposing force.	The ordering $F > M > A$ means that in seeking to amass power, calling one's opponent a fascist (F) rings louder than mocking one's opponent's mass (M), which in turn rings louder than considering one's opponent's articulated arguments (A).	For every action aimed at amassing power, there is a disproportionate and opposite overreaction.

power, I formulated the following hypothesis. A draft corollary for Newton's Laws of Motion for Abusers of Power in Anti-Learning Systems could read:

First Law One seeking to amass power, who is in motion toward an ideological extreme, remains in motion unless acted upon by an opposing force for courage, transparency, accountability, and/or restraint. Correspondingly, systems in place to entrench such power remain in place (at rest) unless acted upon by an opposing force for courage, transparency, accountability, and/or restraint.

Second Law The ordering $F > M > A$ means that in seeking to amass power, calling one's opponent a fascist (F) rings louder than mocking one's opponent's mass (M), which in turn rings louder than listening to, learning from, and thoughtfully considering one's opponent's articulated arguments (A).

Third Law For every action aimed at amassing power, there is a disproportionate and opposite overreaction.

This hypothesis is nowhere near as crisp or insightful as Newton's, but makes for helpful heuristics. I was contemplating this model of power dynamics in August 2024. Thinking about national and global politics over a year later, the Third Law especially seems to ring even more true.

While I developed the Newton's Laws of Motion for the CAPITALS analogy independently, after the fact, I made a good faith effort to search for previous literature. I sought to identify whether previous scholars had published anything similar. The best example I found is from an article published in *Political Science & Politics* in late December 2013 by Craig Leonard Brians (2013) titled, "Three General Laws of Politics and Government in America (with Apologies to Sir Isaac Newton)". Brians, an Associate Professor of Political Science in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences at Virginia Tech at the time, wrote (Brians 2013): "Following the structure embodied in Newton's Laws of Motion, I propose three general laws of politics and government in America: (1) political objects in motion tend to stay in motion, (2) the relationship between a candidate and his or her political force is the product of campaign funding and personal likability or appeal to the press, and (3) for every political action, there is an equal and opposite reaction (i.e., 'Craig Leonard Brians Law of Unintended Political Consequences')."

I had hoped to reach out to Professor Brians to discuss similarities and differences between our formulations. Sadly, in the process of searching for his contact information, I found some sad news. Professor Brians tragically passed away at age 51 in November 2013, over a month before his thought-provoking paper was published posthumously (Elliott 2013). I would have really liked to have met him. Although I had not read Professor Brians' paper prior to my own insights, it is nonetheless fair to say that my formulations, while not as eloquent as Brians' (or as Newton's) move the analogy from politics to power. In this context, I observe that incentive structures underpinning power seem to reward moving to extremes rather than engendering deliberation. With that theme running across all three laws, a concern is raised that while structures in place that preserve power may remain at rest, thoughtful citizens in the middle seeking healthy collaboration may get no rest.

Corresponding to inertia in Newtonian mechanics and politics, when it comes to power and the dynamics of human behavior, polarization as well as structures maintaining the status quo and the entrenched system seem to persist. Indeed, I have observed firsthand how incentives in a large organization such as a university too often reward those who defend the institution and its powers that be at the cost of doing what may be right for its mission or for stakeholders it harms. To the extent to which force drives acceleration in physics and in politics, when it comes to power, outrage seems to snowball faster than reason. If for objects physically interacting, every action engenders an equal but opposite reaction, when it comes to power, too often actions are met with overreactions in the opposite direction, rendering finding compromise and common ground increasingly challenging over time. Table 1 summarizes these laws of motion.

Lights, Camera, Action!

A complementary way of thinking about how to harness these laws of motion can be summed up by the classic phrase: "Lights, camera, action!" (Wikipedia 2025a). In essence, those who wish to do something aimed at Combating Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems (CAPITALS), need to call out the problem and shine a light on it (lights), zoom in and zoom out to understand the systemic nature of the problem (camera), and ultimately do something aimed at addressing the problem (action). As one contemplates such

an approach, they should correspondingly consider the postulate that “You are what you protect!”

In January 2022, the termination of the then President of the University of Michigan (UM) for his own hypocrisy, coupled with further revelations vis-à-vis a recent Provost who had abused his power, as well as a case of mass sexual predation by a faculty doctor, all led me to see systemic abuses of power demanding system solutions (Kozlowski 2020; Welle 2021; Mahani 2022). Sadly, this pattern held at other universities (and public and private institutions) nationwide and worldwide (Svrluga 2022; Henry 2025; Wertheim 2025).

A critical first step in even endeavoring to shine a light on the problem is to step back and listen. Listen to anyone willing to share their experiences. Such listening is so critical. Indeed, the *L* in LHSs may as well also stand for *Listening*, as such listening is a foundational precursor to meaningful and collaborative learning. Here are several deidentified and anonymized samples of what I first heard when I reached out to anyone who wanted to share their experiences, and trusted me to share them with:

- “... a lot of people saw stuff, said nothing, and just did their jobs, figuring that the big shots knew what they were doing.”
- “I want to work for an organization in which lowly data entry clerks feel it’s okay to ask hard questions about their work environment. I realize that Josh and I are coming at this matter from almost opposite ends of the hierarchy, but that’s sort of the point.”
- “... I have observed instances of bullying and abusive behavior over the years and recently experienced it myself. What became clear in every instance is that there is no real protection or recourse for those that are being bullied and/or abused and because the abusers bring in money, recognition, and rankings their behaviors are tolerated and even supported. Many of those perpetuating this abuse have been doing so for years, are well-funded, and their behavior is common knowledge across campus.”

Such active listening transcended simply hearing from other stakeholders within the university. It initially included connecting with survivors of sexual assault (by faculty doctors) and other systemic abuses of power at UM and at other universities nationwide, and eventually, worldwide. Two such individuals are UM alum and former professional football player turned activist Jon Vaughn, and former gymnast and survivor of Michigan State University’s infamous Dr. Larry Nassar (turned activist), Trinea Gonczar (IHI 2015; Believed 2018; Siemaszko 2021). It also entailed reaching out to and speaking with those proposing potential solutions. For example, in searching for books about organizational culture early on, I came across author Dan Cockerell who rose to high ranks at Disney. His bio (D. Cockerell 2020) states, “His last 9 years with the company, he was successively Vice President of Epcot, Vice president of Disney’s Hollywood Studios and eventually Vice President of the Magic Kingdom.” We spoke about transforming organizational cultures and he sent me several of his books including *How’s the Culture in Your Kingdom?: Lessons from a Disney Leadership Journey* (D. Cockerell 2020) and *Hardwiring Magic* (L. Cockerell et al. 2021).

Internally at UM, as I synthesized what I was learning, I made concerted and repeated efforts to diplomatically reach out to anyone in a position of power who might be able to do something to help, or even who in turn might actively listen to what I had to say and potentially do something positive with it. Coupled with such internal outreach, asking questions and raising different perspectives becomes critical.

Too often, however, in anti-learning systems where abuses of power are enabled by *Armies of Enablers*, questioning is surreptitiously quashed (Guiora 2020). In an email I sent in October 2025, I noted potential solutions related to this issue. In one paragraph of that email, I wrote the following:

“Within our transdisciplinary basic science department, I have previously suggested four complementary approaches to addressing these concerns. First, when offering opportunities for questions (which should be more robust), we should accelerate to the front of the line anyone challenging the perspective shard by the speakers. Second, when assembling a panel of more than several speakers, we should work to ensure genuine diversity of perspectives represented on the panel (and recognize how this differs merely from having people of different intersectional identities or stakeholder types); also, we should bring a parallel approach to who plans and leads/facilitates any such event or initiative from the outset. Third, we should convene more debates as well as more working meetings where people with genuinely different vantage points and experiences both respectfully share their truly diverse perspectives and work collaboratively to find common ground. Fourth, in doing all of this and in facilitating such authentic viewpoint diversity and civic engagement, we should also clearly stand for something and state so (and act/do so) with moral clarity (in the case of our department, among other things, I turn to the seminal multi-stakeholder consensus ‘LHS Core Values’ for person-centered Learning Health Systems and the disruptively transformative vision they embody). Further, I note that all of these synergistic and complementary approaches are themselves interconnected with the Learning Health Systems (and Learning X Systems) paradigm and practice.”

Our Collective Duty for Collaborative Action

Often just as important as listening is being there for the person who is surviving and often persevering through systemic abuses of power. Simply helping someone to realize that they are not alone can move mountains. In turn, advocating for and with such individuals mobilizes change and ignites transformation. On this journey, I have been privileged to have met and to collaborate with (and to call my friends) some of the most extraordinarily courageous, intelligent, compassionate, and resilient human beings. Indeed, their moral courage is contagious and magnetic (Li 2022). Many through no fault of their own have been put through hell and back, yet their overarching goals become supporting fellow survivors while working tirelessly to ensure that one day nobody has to endure such abuses again (and in the meantime, to ensure that no survivor has to endure such abuses alone).

My efforts to empower them and to help make their voices heard have taken us to the halls of US Congress, to executive agencies such as the US Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime, and to venues for reaching future generations from schools to podcasts (Li 2022; Koestner 2024). I have learned more from such amazing people than I will ever be able to express, but I hope my own efforts have in some way made their voices and their stories heard (Koestner 2024).

As it was being written, this manuscript evolved into telling a story, or perhaps a number of interconnected stories. As a consequence, it utilizes the word “I” more often than should be the case. However,

234 CAPITALS is a “we” story and not an “I” story. The “I” in capitals is “ignite”
 237 and to do so takes the work of a village, not of an individual. A key
 240 challenge related to advancing CAPITALS involves inspiring, mobilizing,
 243 and empowering brilliant and passionate individuals to work on this
 246 effort together, to collaboratively ignite transformation in anti-learning
 249 systems; the problem is that such systems are often fundamentally
 252 designed not to do so.

My mentor, World War II veteran, patriot, entrepreneur, and phil-
 243 anthropist (the late) Joseph H. Kanter was fond of paraphrasing the
 246 Talmud. He would say that *it is not our responsibility to finish, but it is our
 249 responsibility to start* (Rubin 2018; Joseph H. Kanter Family Foundation
 252 2020; The New York Times 2020). CAPITALS is at its incipient phase.
 255 However, with what US President Abraham Lincoln once termed, “the
 diligent will to persevere,” the CAPITALS transdisciplinary science and
 corresponding fledgling global movement can gather sufficient mo-
 mentum to become an unstoppable force for system transformation
 (Friedman 2021). Harnessing Newton's Laws of Motion for Combating
 Abuses of Power to Ignite Transformation in Anti-Learning Systems
 (CAPITALS) represents a collective path to building and sustaining such
 indefatigable momentum. The transformative magnetism of moral
 courage (Rubin 2024; Rubin 2025a; Rubin 2025b) can serve as the
 powerful force propelling such collaborative efforts forward as well as
 bonding them together.

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