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# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## COMMENTARY

# Why I'm Sticking to My 'Noncompliant' Learning Outcomes

*By Robert T. Dillon Jr.* | MARCH 28, 2016

I'm a Phi Beta Kappa, an Eagle Scout, with an Ivy League Ph.D. and 34 years of experience teaching genetics and evolutionary biology at the College of Charleston, where I am a tenured associate professor. But in mid-February I received a 23-page memorandum from the provost, relieving me of my instructional duties effective immediately. A month later I was notified that I would be suspended without pay for the fall 2016 academic term.

At issue was a single paragraph in my syllabus for Genetics Laboratory 305L, which for some time has read as follows:

*Explicit Learning Outcome. "It is the business of a University to impart to the rank and file of the men whom it trains the right thought of the world, the thought which it has tested and established, the principles which have stood through the seasons and become at length part of the immemorial wisdom of the race. The object of education is not merely to draw out the powers of the individual mind: it is rather its right object to draw all minds to a proper adjustment to the physical and social world in which they are to have their life and their development: to enlighten, strengthen, and make fit. The business of the world is not individual success, but its own betterment, strengthening, and growth in spiritual insight. 'So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom' is its right prayer and aspiration."*

— Woodrow Wilson, 1896

Every 10 years, our college administration is gripped with a disease we longtime faculty members have traditionally referred to as "reaccreditation fever," now apparently called "reaffirmation." So the syllabus under which I had taught Genetics Lab for 34 years was judged "noncompliant" because my student-learning outcomes do not meet the guidelines of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. When I tried to engage my bosses in a dialogue that might resolve what seemed to be a difference in teaching philosophy, my dean accused me of playing "silly, sanctimonious games," the provost charged me with insubordination, and I was summarily relieved of my duties.

Woodrow Wilson has always been a hero of mine. I was born and raised in the Shenandoah Valley, about 10 miles from Wilson's own birthplace. Both of us were

Presbyterian professors. That Wilson in death, even as in life, seems to be so universally despised across the political and philosophical spectrum is strangely appealing to me. He must have been right at least some of the time.

But surely the student-learning outcomes posted for an upper-division biology elective in a mid-tier public college don't amount to the Treaty of Versailles. How could such an apparently minor disagreement escalate so far, so fast?

My chairman initially offered me several sets of "compliant" student-learning outcomes from genetics-laboratory courses at other institutions: "Manipulate the fruit fly as a genetic research organism, perform hands-on laboratory skills such as gel electrophoresis, graph data in excel software." I could easily have pasted any of those sets of bullet points into my syllabus and been done with it.

But such trivialities are not learning outcomes toward which I teach, and it would have been a misrepresentation of Genetics 305L at the College of Charleston to imply otherwise. Woodrow Wilson and I understand higher education to be, well, higher.

In the liberal-arts tradition, our business is to impart the right thought of the world, not drill our students in bullet-point lists of banalities. In science, right thought is rigorous, systematic, critical, and precise. In poetry, right thought is creative, sensitive, intuitive, and metaphorical. Four years of science plus poetry plus a liberal assortment of other disciplines might (we pray) teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

I do not deny the importance of course content. If a student (or an accrediting body) should be interested, the second page of my Genetics 305L syllabus shows that fruit flies are indeed manipulated in Investigations 3, 4, 5, and 6, and protein

electrophoresis is employed in Investigation 9. But "manipulating fruit flies" is no more the fit object of a liberal education than dumping asphalt is the object of road construction.

One would hope that chairmen, deans, and provosts at liberal-arts colleges would understand such a position — or at least allow a tenured faculty member to make his case before relieving him of his duties midway through the semester, to be replaced by adjuncts and temps of a more compliant character. But reaffirmation fever is upon us.

I have no direct information about the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. All that I know has been transmitted to me by nervous administrators. Last year our president hired a new associate vice president for institutional effectiveness and strategic planning" with reaffirmation by the commission as her entire portfolio, and the alarms have been sounding general quarters ever since.

Our department was immediately required to produce approved mission statements, goals, objectives, performance targets, strategies, and multiple measures to assess the expected outcomes. In September we received a memo from the new AVPIE&SP with the subject line, "Assessment of assessment — quality improvement process." This document featured a five-item list of "modifications to the assessment template and rubric necessary for continuous improvement of the institution's assessment processes," followed by a three-step implementation plan, with a-b substeps and deadlines for each substep marked in bold.

I have never been asked to change the way I teach Genetics Lab 305L. And more generally, at no time has anybody I know ever been asked to modify anything about the way we teach at the college, or conduct any of our other professional

activities, as a consequence of the reaffirmation, thank heaven. The commission does not seem to care about how we actually do our jobs, hence neither do our chairmen, deans, provosts, or the AVPIE&SP.

But apparently a team of accreditors combs through every syllabus of every class taught at every college or university in the American South, and any "noncompliant" reference to Wilsonian ideals that may be detected will threaten to bring an entire multiyear reaffirmation process to gear-grinding ruin and cannot be tolerated.

I don't know — this is entirely inferential on my part. Perhaps that particular quality-improvement standard was reviewed in one of those "interactive workshops to explain the template and revised rubrics" that somehow escaped my notice.

I'd like to think that I was otherwise engaged, applying my heart unto wisdom.

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