

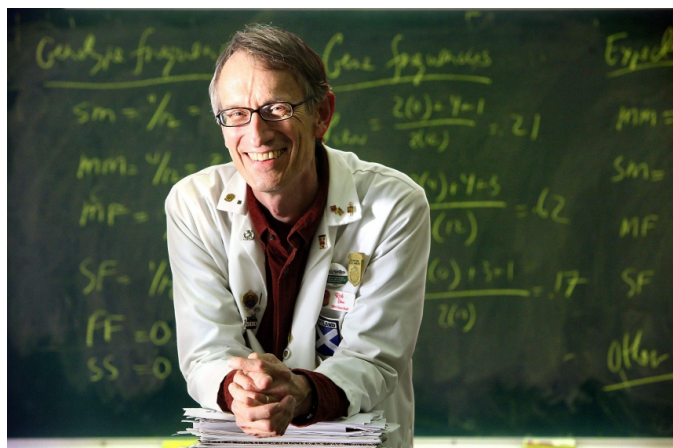
# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## FACULTY

# 'Silly, Sanctimonious Games'

How a syllabus sparked a war between a professor and his college

By *Steve Kolowich* | MARCH 28, 2016



Wade Spees, Post and Courier

When the College of Charleston told Robert T. Dillon, an associate professor of biology, that a quotation from 1896 wouldn't suffice as a statement of his course's learning outcomes, a battle of wills ensued. Now he is suspended from teaching and facing additional probationary measures — and planning an appeal.

So when the chair of the South Carolina college's biology department wrote to him in January and asked him to make a small change in his syllabus, Mr. Dillon was all too eager to refuse.

**R**obert T. Dillon believes in evolution, but he hates change.

Mr. Dillon, an associate professor of biology at the College of Charleston, stuck with chalk long after most of his colleagues had switched to PowerPoint. When his college's science professors moved into a slick new building with state-of-the-art teaching laboratories, he mourned the loss of his dingy old lab.

"As a general rule, I think of change as bad — I'm agin' it!" Mr. Dillon says, affecting a backwater patois.

The next two months unfolded like a comedy of manners in which a fight over a 147-word quotation became a dubious proxy for the war over the future of the college — and, indeed, the soul of higher education in the 21st century.

It began with Woodrow Wilson.

Before he was president of the country, Wilson was president of Princeton University, and before that, he was a professor. He was known as a keen observer of academe, and is widely credited for his insights on how the modern university ought to operate.

"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," Wilson said in an 1896 speech for Princeton's sesquicentennial celebration, "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."

He continued:

*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.*

Mr. Dillon, who grew up near Wilson's hometown, in central Virginia, liked that formulation. So when he was asked to define the desired "learning outcomes" for students in his laboratory course in genetics, he pasted the entire quotation and nothing more.

But antique manifestos were not what Mr. Dillon's bosses had in mind.

On January 19, Willem Jacob (Jaap) Hillenius, chair of the biology department, sent Mr. Dillon a note explaining that the Wilson quote did not meet the guidelines from the Charleston's accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, which is preparing to review the college's accreditation status.

"Although the quote from Woodrow Wilson is lofty, it is not very specific," wrote the department chair in one of a number of records that Mr. Dillon subsequently posted on his website. (The College of Charleston does not dispute the authenticity of the documents.) Mr. Hillenius asked that Mr. Dillon instead write "a brief list of student learning outcomes based on the content of your course."

Mr. Dillon resisted. He argued the Wilson quote was clear enough. "How many days are you guaranteed on this earth, Jaap?" wrote the biology professor. Then, in a reference to the Wilson passage: "Are 'SACSCOC guidelines' the best application of your heart?"

In his reply, Mr. Hillenius tried to steer the exchange toward the practical. He included some examples of "student learning outcomes" statements from other genetics courses. Those statements were written as numbered lists, and included elements like "Analyze and interpret the data collected in the laboratory experiments" and "Graph data in Excel software."

Filling out IRS forms is not a terribly lofty endeavor either, offered the department chair, but everybody has to do it anyway.

Once again, Mr. Dillon resisted.

"We are obligated to file our tax returns by rule of law," he wrote. "If we do not do so, we go to jail. Surely, you do not mean to suggest that generating 'student learning objectives' is as important as filing taxes?"

**M**r. Dillon describes himself as a "prickly guy," but it may be more accurate to say he is the antitenure crowd's straw man made flesh. In his 34 years at Charleston, he has received three official letters of reprimand, along with many negative evaluations from his supervisors and his students. (A sample review from RateMyProfessors.com: "Dr. Dillon likes to make you look like an ass for asking him a question. He will never help you and enjoys confusion. ... DO NOT TAKE THIS CLASS.")

That prickliness has cost him. Mr. Dillon, who studies snails, says he has not been promoted since getting tenure as an associate professor and has been shot down three times in bids for a full professorship. By his own reckoning, he has been marginalized — moved first from 100-student survey courses to 40-student lectures and, now, to labs with 10 to 15 students. He says about 40 percent of his students earn F's or D's, or withdraw before the semester is over.

Mr. Dillon's teaching methods run to the Kafkaesque. He refuses to answer students' questions with anything but questions. He says he sometimes purposely misleads students by making factually wrong statements in class, reasoning that students who did the reading should be able to correct him. (They rarely do, he says.) The professor is not interested in meeting students halfway; he believes it is more edifying to put them in a crucible and see if they are "critical, rational, mathematical, analytical" enough to intuit their way out.

"Isn't that horrible?" says Mr. Dillon. "For 14 weeks to have to walk in and make Rob Dillon happy? It's misery. It's like being boiled in oil. They have to walk in and make this crazy, wild, demanding, critical, nasty person happy. Horrible. Horrible."

At this, he chuckles. Mr. Dillon speaks with a lilting Southern accent and a bonhomie that belies his reputation. He does not deny that he can be a pain to his students and supervisors. He takes pride in being "a nail that sticks up," and makes no apology for spiking anyone in the foot.

"I'm a strange one, Steve," he says. "I really might be very different from every interview you'll do in quite a while."

**T**he next email in the records posted by Mr. Dillon came from Michael J. Auerbach, dean of the School of Sciences and Mathematics.

"I'll be brief and to the point," Mr. Auerbach wrote on February 9. "The college's accreditor, SACSCOC, requires that every syllabus for every course contain course learning outcomes that are approved by a department chair." He noted that Charleston has similar requirements written into its own policies.

He gave the professor an ultimatum: Provide an updated syllabus with a compliant learning-outcomes section, or face a disciplinary procedure.

"Rob," he wrote, "it's time to stop the silly, sanctimonious games, and do something for the common good."

Mr. Dillon did not budge.

"Perhaps the problem is one of formatting?" he wrote, and sent the dean the Wilson quotation again, this time broken up into a series of bullet points.

The professor insists that, were he to reduce the desired outcomes of his course to manipulating fruit flies, learning techniques of electrophoresis, and graphing Excel spreadsheets, it would trivialize the whole endeavor.

In fact, the accreditor has no formatting requirement for learning-outcome statements. Those come in all shapes and sizes, says Belle S. Wheelan, president of the commission.

To be clear, Ms. Wheelan does not think Wilson's century-old remarks speak eloquently to what students are supposed to learn in a genetics course. But her agency focuses on learning outcomes at the level of academic programs, she says, not individual courses. "One set of course outcomes," says Ms. Wheelan, "is not necessarily going to negatively impact the accreditation of an institution."

Mark E. Berry, a College of Charleston spokesman, says the college has no comment on the ramifications of letting Mr. Dillon keep his Woodrow Wilson quote.

"Accreditation requirements have changed over time, and the College of Charleston has responded to those changes," Brian R. McGee, the college's provost, says in a written statement. "However, the emphasis on identification of course-specific student learning outcomes is not new to our profession or the College of Charleston."

Charleston has its own rule about what professors need to list on a syllabus.

"Instructional staff members," it says, "are responsible for stating clearly and in writing the instructional objectives of each course they teach." Other professors seem to be able to follow the guideline without incident.

"None of us wishes to spend any more time urging you to comply with formal policy," Mr. Auerbach told Mr. Dillon in the February 9 email. He gave the biology professor until the end of the week to fall in line.

Mr. Dillon argued he was not being insubordinate; he just had a different philosophy. "I do not view the role of the college professor in the same way that most of my colleagues do," he wrote, "or any of my bosses ever have."

**M**r. Dillon received his first formal reprimand from the college in 2000, shortly after he was denied a promotion.

A student had complained about how the biology professor had treated her after she missed an examination to return home and care for her dying mother. Mr. Dillon allegedly told the student that it was his policy to write the make-up exams to be even harder than the original ones, and that her case would be no exception. When the student returned to the campus, the professor allegedly pushed her to take the exam quickly, saying it's what her mother would have wanted. He also allegedly asked the student her religious affiliation.

The professor's handling of the situation struck his department chair as inappropriate and callous. "It does not matter in the least that you do not feel that death is a tragedy," wrote Mr. Auerbach, who was then the chair of the biology department, in a scolding letter. "What matters is what the STUDENT feels."

Mr. Dillon describes himself as "a Puritan," or, if you'd like, "an extremely black, dark, double-predestination Calvinist." Put more simply, he believes in suffering. It informs his sink-or-swim approach to teaching, as well as his political crusade against those who want creationism taught alongside evolution in South Carolina's public schools. On the right-hand pocket of his lab coat Mr. Dillon wears a tribute to George Wishart, a 16th-century Scottish Protestant who spoke out against the papacy and, after a show trial, was burned at the stake.

Back in 2000, Mr. Auerbach warned Mr. Dillon that his treatment of his students put him on thin ice. Now, 15 years later, the ice finally broke. On February 12, Mr. Auerbach, as dean, wrote a memorandum to the provost about Mr. Dillon's latest

sin.

"Given the flagrant nature of the refusal to comply with policy and requests from supervisors, and the harmful position this places the college in with respect to its accreditation body, I recommend that the sanction not be oral or written reprimand," the dean wrote. "Instead, I recommend something more severe."

Six days later Mr. McGee, the provost, stripped Mr. Dillon of his teaching duties, effective immediately.

The severity of that response surprised Mr. Dillon. He had expected another slap on the wrist, not to be tossed from the classroom.

And that wasn't all. Mr. McGee also threatened to suspend Mr. Dillon's pay and kick him out of his office, his laboratory, and his institutional email account for the fall semester, pending an investigation, if the professor did not promptly make a case for why he should be spared such penalties.

"My argument is this: Think of the students," Mr. Dillon wrote back.

He sent the provost excerpts from messages that he said had been sent to him by students. One message praised the professor for making the student feel less insecure about his faith. Another said Mr. Dillon's "bluegrass and social commentary" would be missed.

Mr. Dillon asked that all the charges against him be dropped. "I have not changed the way I teach my class," he wrote in his plea, "nor changed the learning outcomes I expect from my students, in 34 years."

The disciplinary wheels began to turn. There was an investigation of Mr. Dillon's behavior by a three-person panel of faculty members. There were more emails, more memos, even a letter to Charleston's president from the American



Association of University Professors. Ultimately the provost did not change his mind. Neither did the dean, or the department chair.

In a March 18 letter, Mr. McGee informed Mr. Dillon that he would be suspended for the fall and face additional probationary measures through much of next year. It's not just accrediting bodies that have become vigilant about documenting student outcomes, wrote the provost, but also colleges themselves.

"Much has changed in higher education in the past 34 years," wrote the provost, "even if your approach has not."

**M**r. Dillon remains unenthusiastic about the idea of holding students' hands in class.

"I am not a teacher, I am a professor," he says. He believes today's students are too passive. They seem not to appreciate the virtue of being thrown for a loop, and would rather be spoon-fed information that they can then regurgitate on a test. And he resents that colleges and their regulators have agreed to indulge that expectation.

Still, the biology professor never guessed the fight over his Woodrow Wilson quote would go this far. He plans to appeal the suspension.

When Mr. Dillon approached *The Chronicle* with his story, he portrayed his conflict as a battle between timeless liberal-arts values and an advancing army of box-ticking bureaucrats.

He has since allowed that, practically speaking, little hangs in the balance of this particular quarrel. After all, he could have introduced his students to Wilson's wisdom elsewhere on the syllabus. The proposed change was merely cosmetic — which was, of course, one of the reasons he resisted it so strongly.

There is a famous saying in higher education: Academic disputes are so bitter because there is so little at stake.

It's known as Sayre's Law, for the late Columbia University political scientist Wallace Stanley Sayre. Over the years that bit of wisdom has been attributed to various luminaries, including Henry Kissinger. But according to the historian Arthur S. Link, another statesman got to that idea first, one who happened also to be a keen observer of academe.

It was Woodrow Wilson.

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