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Ousted biology professor suing College of Charleston after syllabus fight

Paul Bowers Aug 2, 2016

Piece by piece, Associate Professor of Biology Robert Dillon has been moving the contents of his lab at the College of Charleston into his West Ashley home — much to his wife’s chagrin, he said, as his research focuses on freshwater snails.

Dillon will not return to his lab or the classroom this fall after he locked horns with college leaders in the spring in an obscure battle over a course syllabus. Dillon said he intends to retire on Aug. 15. He is also suing the college and Provost Brian McGee, saying that the college defamed him and denied him due process.

“The Defendants had no right to require Plainti to add trivial banalities to the wording of his syllabus,” Dillon wrote in the lawsuit, filed July 21 in Charleston County. A college spokesman declined to comment on the lawsuit.

College leaders wanted Dillon to include a list of “student learning outcomes” on the syllabus for his Biology 305 genetics lab, in keeping with the latest accreditation standards. Dillon refused, and instead inserted a lengthy Woodrow Wilson quote that read, in part, “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.”

Supervisors warned Dillon in the spring semester that his behavior was insubordinate and wrote in an email that he was playing “silly, sanctimonious games.”

But to Dillon, the syllabus battle represented a broader debate about academic freedom and the nature of higher education. He said the school had caught “re-accreditation fever” and was diminishing the work of teaching to a checklist.

Dillon fought back after the school barred him from class partway through the spring semester, garnering letters of support from the American Association of University Professors. By late May, Dillon had exhausted the college’s grievance process.

According to a memo from McGee, Dillon could have re-submitted a revised syllabus for a chance at returning in the fall of 2017, but Dillon declined. Now, Dillon said, he has been “constructively discharged” after 34 years at the college.

Even before this year's dust-up, Dillon was no stranger to controversy. A staunch defender of the scientific consensus on evolutionary theory, he often sparred with state lawmakers who sought to downplay evolution in biology textbooks. Dillon also maintained a teaching style that the Chronicle of Higher Education recently described as "Kafkaesque" — although he prefers the term "Socratic." He answered all student questions with further questions and he said he intentionally included misinformation in some lectures, reasoning that any student who had read the assigned text could call him out.

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