

CofC professor suspended after fight over syllabus takes a philosophical turn



Paul Bowers [Email](#) [@paul_bowers](#)

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Few people who know Associate Professor of Biology Robert Dillon were surprised to hear he had rankled his superiors at the College of Charleston again this semester. A prickly Presbyterian with a pronounced contrarian streak, he has picked his fair share of fights in his 34-year career.

But even Dillon said he was surprised when a quibble over a course syllabus ended with college leaders barring him from his own classroom partway through the spring semester and placing him on unpaid suspension starting in the fall.

You can certainly disagree with me — many people disagree — but you can't fire me over a philosophical disagreement," Dillon said.

The issue sprang from a syllabus Dillon wrote for his Biology 305 genetics lab. According to internal emails provided to The Post and Courier by Dillon, college leaders wanted him to include a list of "student learning outcomes" for the course, in keeping with the latest accreditation standards from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.

Dillon said he felt a bullet-point list of objectives would reduce his class to the regurgitation of facts as opposed to an engagement with the scientific method.

So in lieu of such a list, he included a lengthy 1896 quotation from Woodrow Wilson on “the business of a university” that concluded, “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.”

Dillon’s department chairman sent him an email Jan. 19 calling the Wilson quote “lofty” but “not very specific.”

Dillon refused to make his syllabus more specific, and the fight escalated. On Feb. 18, Provost Brian McGee wrote to Dillon that his objectives were “gravely deficient” and reassigned other instructors to take over teaching his classes.

Finally, after numerous warnings and an inquiry by an investigative panel, McGee told Dillon on March 18 he would be suspended without pay during the fall semester.

“I must point out that much has changed in higher education in the past 34 years, even if your approach to teaching has not,” McGee wrote in a memo.

College of Charleston spokesman Mike Robertson declined to say whether the emails provided by Dillon were authentic and declined to say whether Dillon had been suspended. “We can’t comment on a personnel matter,” Robertson said.

According to Dillon, C of C leaders come down with a case of “reaccreditation fever” every few years, expending faculty time to meet the latest benchmarks and devise new standardized testing methods to prove the effectiveness of their programs.

Colleges must be accredited to participate in federal financial aid programs and to ensure the degrees they offer are accepted by certain employers.

C of C English professor Simon Lewis said many faculty members are starting to chafe against the push for accountability.

“Sooner or later, somebody was going to say, ‘No I’m not going to do that,’ ” Lewis said.

Dillon still has a chance to recant. According to a memo from McGee, he will be allowed to submit a revised syllabus for a chance at returning to the classroom in fall 2017.

But when asked if he would take that opportunity, Dillon was quick to answer.

“No, no. The die is cast,” he said. “I didn’t start this fight, but it is an important one, and we will see it through.”

Reach Paul Bowers at (843) 937-5546 or twitter.com/paul_bowers.