



American Association of University Professors
South Carolina Conference

May 19, 2016

President Glenn F. McConnell
Office of the President
College of Charleston

Dear President McConnell,

I wanted to write as President of the American Association of University Professors, South Carolina (AAUP-SC), about the Robert Dillon case that now sits before you. It is not the place of our organization to intervene in faculty governance, so we leave the ruling on compliance with FAM VII.A.2 in the hands of your faculty working alongside you and the administration. We hope the issue can be successfully resolved in the best interest of all—for academic freedom, for shared governance, and for the best interest of our profession.

As the national organization and Provost McGee exchanged letters, I was happy to hear of your and Provost McGee's mutual respect for our organization. I know Provost McGee from our shared field of research and can speak to his hospitality in hosting us for a conference a few years back. The explicit support for AAUP was very heartening, and I hope to work with you in the future.

Cases like this give us small but not unimportant “decision points” along that path. The case has raised some serious questions of the status of the profession more generally, that need attention at the College of Charleston. Given this case has received national press attention among the professorate, it is an opportunity for university leadership to signal alliance with our professional norms. Even if in the particulars of the case there is “more to say” than we can see from the outside, the case has come to represent a culture of excessive compliance and standardization being forced into a classroom. And it additionally represents a set of procedures and use of those procedures in a way that might result in a punishment far out of line with the profession's best practices.

Provost Brian McGee has offered “an eight-count sanction, including suspension without pay for the fall semester 2016.” I especially want to highlight one paragraph of the Grievance Committee's letter in response. “Our committee was



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concerned that the sanctions imposed on [Dr. Dillon] represent a disproportionate response to [his] refusal to put course specific instructional objectives on [his] syllabus. Those sanctions also appear to violate AAUP and College of Charleston FAM (VII. B. 2.) due process guidelines which stipulate that separating a faculty member from ongoing academic responsibilities is only justified if there is a threat of immediate harm. These concerns, taken together, lead our committee to worry that these events create a climate that threatens academic freedom at the College more generally.”

That should be the key paragraph that weighs in the scale when making your decisions and response. Our national office explained how the processes at College of Charleston failed in several ways, but most importantly as it put the burden of proof on a faculty member rather than on the administrators directing compliance, and it proffered a punishment only applicable by the university’s own guidelines (and AAUP standards) in the case of “immediate harm.”

It is unclear at the state or national level of AAUP how a Woodrow Wilson quotation brings immediate harm. As Wilson’s name gets challenged at other universities for his views on race in his historical moment, it is important that we not stretch the meaning of “immediate harm” to mean that a quotation can imperil assessment of value, or students’ or other university stakeholders’ psyche. That buys into the worst tendencies of our era, to protect regimes of assessment or compliance, and make student feelings merely “safe,” instead of positing uncomfortable or provocative truths, as posited by those with experience in the fields of knowledge. I certainly do not think personally the Wilson quote is the best fit for a Genetics syllabus, but that point of view is something to share with Dr. Dillon over a cup of coffee in his office or in a department meeting, not as a grounds for suspension.

This leads to another issue: that despite the explicit respect for AAUP, some of the argument and language of the letters cuts against that high regard. The Provost has charged “insubordination” against “directives.” While I could imagine such language necessary at The Citadel, it certainly doesn’t befit a liberal arts college that is supposed to be a bastion of critical thought and challenge to untested authorities.

Further, Provost McGee seems almost proud that the *Faculty/Administrative Manual* at your institution follows AAUP policy only insofar as various

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“stakeholders” allow. While we certainly understand the budgetary and administrative constraints of running an institution, almost none of these can be said to *necessarily* or *directly* impair respect for faculty governance, due process & grievance procedures, what gets defined as “academic freedom” and who gets to define it, or the interference of assessment with faculty teaching practices. Those are all *primarily* the domain of our professional organization as it informs individual institutions, even as we leave other important matters *primarily* to those stakeholders.

If Governor Haley mandated that every faculty member list the job opportunities in South Carolina on each syllabus, would the university simply mandate this because she is a “stakeholder?” If a Trustee wanted an advertisement for his law firm to be made by every professor in the Political Science department, would the university form “directives” to see this through? These questions are of course meant tongue-in-cheek, but they do point out the precarious grounds that College of Charleston takes in turning assessment into directives and then departing from AAUP protections to challenge it.

Provost McGee also makes the case that the national and state AAUP would have specific knowledge and oversight of all the relevant policies in question for years leading up to this issue, and suggests that we lacked diligence in bringing these questions sooner than this particular case. I can attest that even from a state level, it is hard for me to know my own faculty handbook in these regards, let alone the dozens of schools I attempt to represent. Rather, moments like these bring awareness to problematic policies. If the tone and punishment had not been so severe, I am sure a faculty committee might have been organized to merely revisit the *Manual* and better protect academic freedom the next time such an issue arose. The state nor national AAUP would have been involved.

Provost McGee suggests that AAUP should merely press as far as what shared governance allows and what procedural actions are used to apply them. In this case, from my reading, the case looks fairly well made that these were the policies and the committee process has been utilized, so that some administrative response is necessary (but not suspension). On the other hand, the use of technicalities, the tone of directives and insubordination, and the harsh punishment all raise alarm as to what should be considered good shared governance or good implementation of policy by administration. Here, I am merely following the Grievance Committee and national AAUP’s viewpoint.



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McGee alleges “immediate harm,” but we have not presented with any such evidence and the organization knows this language can be broadened to include mundane examples of what gets called “insubordination”--raising good questions, challenging unjust or pernicious rules, and maintaining ideals in the face of what looks to others as “progress.” College of Charleston sets a dangerous precedent if it goes through with this decision and retribution, especially without an immediate call to change its policies from your office.

Provost McGee cites changing accreditation standards, but working at Furman University and completing SACSCOC evaluations every year, I can promise there is no such syllabus-management at our institution, and SACSCOC is happy that we merely assess our own intended outcomes as a prestigious liberal arts university. In other words, this militaristic language and punishment, as applied to the climate of assessment regimes, seems to dangerously impair academic freedom and, at least in my experience, be unique to your university.

The national office, in the able hands of Dr. Hans-Joerg Tiede, represents the official voice of AAUP. As a subset of that organization, I just wanted to suggest that we wish you the best as you make this difficult decision, that the professorate of the state cares about it, and we hope that out of this comes an even brighter day for faculty freedoms and respect for the profession. To us, this is a test case for external mandates and a culture of burdensome oversight and compliance, amidst already tight or declining budgets and support for a noble profession.

Although I am in Greenville, I have made it a point to visit as many institutions of higher learning as possible to speak with both administration and faculty about how we can bolster South Carolina as a beacon for the forward progress of knowledge and better interest of the populace in the southeast and the entire United States. The professoriate, working with students and those empowering them, are the central vehicle for that to happen. I hope we can work together to make that message heard. Especially in our current political climate, we could even make an impact with this issue as the “good Carolina” for higher education.

Sincerely,


Dr. Brandon Inabinet, Furman University
AAUP-SC President