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Memorial Session: Reflections on Dudley Dillard's Career

Abstract

"A tribute to economist Dudley Dillard is presented."

Keywords

career, education, college, Dudley Dillard, economic, lecture, teacher, class, test

Comments

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In fall 1955, I entered the University of Maryland as an 18-year-old freshman. I was as naive about higher education as anyone could possibly be. No member of the Briggs family had ever graduated from college. I had no idea what to expect when I enrolled in Economics 4, "Economic History of Europe and the United States." I knew what history was but not what "economic" meant. I certainly had no idea that there was a field of study called "economics." This particular course covered events from the days of feudalism in Europe to the spread of the industrial revolution to the United States in the late nineteenth century. The course was required of all students in the College of Business and Public Administration, so there were about 15 sections offered that term. There were no faculty names associated with any of the sections, only the word "staff" appeared in the course listing book. It was simply random luck for me that Dudley Dillard had assigned himself to teach the particular section in which I was enrolled. It was the only undergraduate class he taught. For me, this class was a rendezvous with destiny, to borrow a phrase.

We met in a bleak underground classroom in the bowel of an aged building called Taliaferro Hall. For this class, the room was filled to capacity—about 65 students. In his appearance, Professor Dillard was the archetypical example of what I imagined a professor might look like. Not only did he always wear a shirt and tie, but he often wore a double-breasted suit even though they had been out of style for at least a decade or so. He also wore rimless glasses at a time when they were out of date and had not yet come back in vogue (as they would the next decade). Although he was always immaculately neat and clean-cut, he appeared older than he actually was.

From the moment he started to lecture, it was clear that he was a no-nonsense teacher. He was very formal but not stern. Indeed, he was the exact opposite in his tone and his demeanor. He was gentle and soft-spoken. His voice was slightly high-pitched, but, nonetheless, he was firm and concise in the delivery of his lectures. Since he seated us alphabetically, I sat in the first row, right in front of his lectern. He took the roll every class meeting from a seating chart. On occasion he would give "pop quizzes" on the last lecture or on the reading assignment for the current day's

class. You could not get behind. On the regular tests, he expected you to know everything—as I found out the hard way when I got a C- on the first hour exam. My grade of "68," however, was high when compared to the grades received by my classmates. His standards were high, and there was no doubt that he expected us to meet them if we wished to pass. I should add that he graded his own exams.

I soon learned from the grapevine that he was also the chairman of the department. To a novice freshman, such a title did not translate as being an administrative post but, rather, as a symbol of authority. It was not interpreted as being a good sign for those of us in his class. Economics, in general, had a reputation among us students as being "weed 'em out" courses. We were the untrained neophytes; the men who taught us were the drill instructors, and, in the case of me and my classmates, we had drawn the commandant of the corps himself.

He seldom deviated from his prepared lectures but had a very subtle—perhaps the better word is intellectual—sense of humor that, at times, he interspersed in his presentations. On one occasion, I remember him discussing the issue of wage and price flexibility in market economies, and he ad-libbed that "perhaps the only real example of a rigid economy is a dead Scotsman." Otherwise, he usually stuck to his script, which was always logical and comprehensive—a combination of broad evolving trends and of precise and detailed examples.

But, it was a personal event that happened outside his class during that same first semester of my college life that led to my lasting endearment for this fine man. Namely, on the weekend before the second hour exam in his class—an examination on which I desperately wished to excel since, as I mentioned, I had stumbled on the first one—I severely injured my left shoulder in a fraternity football game. I was hospitalized over Saturday night and, when I was released on Sunday, my arm was taped to my shoulder, and I had to wear a sling for six weeks. Even the slightest movement of my arms caused excruciating pain. As I am left-handed, it also meant that I was going to have trouble writing. As Professor Dillard's tests were always essays, I sent to see him on Monday (the test would be on Tuesday). Even though he was the chairman of the department, I had no trouble being admitted. He was genuinely concerned about how I felt, and he offered to let me take the exam later (but this would have been after Christmas, because

in those days the fall term did not end until late January). I had done a lot of preparation for the test and did not want to postpone it. Hence, I asked him if I could begin the test with the class but, because of my difficulty in writing, could I have some extra time to complete it. I said I would walk up to his office with him and I would finish the test there if he would allow me to do so. He immediately asked me if I had another class scheduled at that next hour that I would have to miss? I said yes, but I could cut it. He said, "No, I do not want you to do that." So, he counteroffered that I could start the test with my class and, if I did not finish on time, I should stop, go to my other class, and then return to his office to complete the test. In other words, he was saying that, having seen all of the test questions, I trust you not to look at your notes or the text or to talk to anyone else for that hour that I was in the other class—and, of course, he had to assume I would go to the other class. I simply could not believe that this man could have such faith in a person he really did not know. I agreed to the terms but immediately swore to myself that I would finish that test within the regular time period. I intended to do well on the test, and I wanted no doubt about whether I earned the good grade. The next day, I took the test and, with much painful struggling, finished it on time. When I turned it in, he asked me again if I was sure I had had sufficient time to finish it, and he renewed the offer to come in later that afternoon. I assured him I had had adequate time and thanked him for his trust. When I got it back, I had a solid "B." In those days and in that class, that grade was considered quite an achievement.

Our paths did not cross again until my senior year. I had majored in economics and had decided to go to graduate school. As I had such fond memories of Professor Dillard from my freshman year, I went to the departmental office and asked to see him. As usual, I was told to go right in. As busy as he must have been, he never kept me waiting or told me to make an appointment or to come back again. On that day, as on numerous other visits to College Park over subsequent years, I was immediately ushered in for a talk. I asked his advice about graduate schools. I told him that I wanted to study the human side of economics—its workers. I said I wanted to specialize in labor economics. He, of course, cited the usual elite schools, but he also asked if I had ever seen a factory, been around working class communities, or if I knew anything about unions? I said no to all three questions. He then

suggested that I consider universities such as Michigan or Michigan State where I could live in an industrial environment while I studied. I did not know the difference between the two universities so I applied to Michigan State where I was subsequently accepted and graduated with a masters and doctorate in labor economics. I also told Professor Dillard that I wanted to be a college teacher. If that is the case, he said, I should take a course in philosophy during my last semester at Maryland. I did so, and I still treasure that exposure to the wider world of ideas. If he had told me I should have taken more math or statistics (as too many contemporary advisors would say), I probably would not be here today. I was not interested in data manipulation; I was interested in understanding human phenomena.

I mention these personal vignettes in order to add still another dimension to the high esteem that most of you who knew Dudley Dillard as a professional colleague and personal friend undoubtedly have for him. As I said, over the years I often dropped by his office if I was in College Park. We also talked whenever our paths happened to cross—at meetings of the Southern Economic Association or the American Economic Association, or at several meetings of the AFEE Board of Directors that he attended as a past president during the term I served on that board. He always asked about my career and my work, and we always gossiped about the Maryland economics faculty—the old members I knew and the new additions of whom he always boasted. Our last conversation was at an alumni reception following the 1990 Maryland homecoming football game. It was the first time I had been back to such a game since I graduated in 1959. I did not expect Professor Dillard to be there, but, faithful always to the University of Maryland, he was. We talked for over an hour, and he personally introduced me to the new president of the university.

I would say more but I hope I have conveyed, as best as words can serve me, the warmth and affection I have felt for him for more than 30 years. I could never bring myself to call him "Dudley"; he was always "Professor Dillard" to me. I am sure I had little if any impact on his life, but he was a major influence on mine. And, given the way he treated me, I am certain that there must be many others whose lives he touched in memorable and personal ways. For them and for me, I can only say we will always miss his presence.