

## WALTER WILLIAMS' CAREER AS A TEACHER, WITH A DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSES HE TAUGHT

Walter Williams retired after a 36 year career as a teacher, at five universities. While a high school student in Atlanta, he became such an expert on the Civil War, that several history teachers in his school invited him give guest lectures on the Civil War. It was then that he realized he enjoyed public speaking, and he decided to follow his mother's profession and become a teacher as well. He always felt that the best training he received for teaching was by joining the debate team in his high school, and again when he was in college. Learning to think on your feet, quickly analyze an argument, discuss and disagree without becoming angry, and finding the strong points and weak points on various topics is a great advantage for a teacher.

During his undergraduate years Williams took a class on the Civil War by eminent Civil War historian Bell Wiley of Emory University, and while a graduate student in history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he also gave lectures on the Civil War when he was a professor's assistant in a military history class. In early 1974, when a UNC professor suddenly died of a heart attack, soon after the beginning of the semester, the history faculty chose Williams to replace that professor, and to finish teaching his class on American history.

When Williams received high evaluations from students in the class, the UNC history department scheduled him to be a lecturer during the next academic year. This was a good development for Williams, because he wanted a year to write his dissertation. His advisor suggested that he should attend the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, so that he could get his VITA distributed and gain experience in doing job interviews. The advisor said that Williams would most likely not get a job offer, but it would be good practice for him the next year, when his dissertation would be completed.

Williams was shocked when he went to the meetings, when he received so many invitations to interview with faculty search committees, that he had to turn some of them down. One of these committees was from the University of Cincinnati. One of their most popular professors who taught a year long course on the Civil War had died, and they needed to find a replacement for the next year. When they advertised for the hiring, 253 people sent in their applications. Walter Williams did not think he stood much of a chance to get this job, because he had not completed his Ph.D. And besides, his dissertation was not even about the Civil War.

In the interview, he told the professors he was well qualified to teach a course on the Civil War, but what he really wanted to do was to teach a course on American Indian history. A few weeks later, early in the morning as he was doing research in the archives at Harvard University, the librarian came to his desk and gave him a message from the University of Cincinnati. They asked if he could come right away for an on-campus

interview. Walter replied that he was busy with his dissertation research, and he was not prepared for an interview. He did not even have a suit with him. The professor insisted that he must come right now, and be ready to give a lecture on the next day. They did not care how he was dressed.

He left Harvard immediately and took a taxi to the airport, where a ticket was waiting for him to board the next plane to Cincinnati. Right after he arrived, he was given a plate at the head of the table in a dinner meeting of the history department faculty. While they ate, they peppered him with questions about the Civil War. He answered every question they raised. They asked how he would organize the course. He said he thought a whole year on the Civil War was too long. He suggested the fall quarter should be titled "The Coming of the Civil War" to cover the period from the 1830 Indian Removal Act to the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Then the winter quarter should cover the war years from 1861 to 1865. And the spring quarter should cover Reconstruction after the war, and the gradual unraveling of freedom for black people, and the establishment of the system of Jim Crow discrimination. Instead of ending the class in 1877, when most such classes ended, Williams said it was the 1895 speech by Booker T. Washington that reflected the real end of Reconstruction and the end of the struggle for equal rights. He suggested the entire era should be taught as a case study in the history of race relations. Afterwards, several professors told him they liked his approach much better than the traditional way the Civil War was taught.

The next day he was ushered into a class of 200 students, and told to lecture. Some of the students laughed, because the 25 year old grad student, with his hair length down to his shoulders, hardly looked like a professor at all. Having no suit, Walter was dressed in his preferred comfortable style of a blue jean jacket, a bright paisley shirt, bell bottom jeans, platform shoes, and a big polka dot bow tie. But when he started lecturing, and spoke about American Indians in the Civil War for an hour, without any notes, the class applauded.

Williams found out later that the faculty had brought in many applicants, and the students were bored by hearing detailed analysis of troop movements in this or that battle of the Civil War. Professors said all the candidates looked alike, and sounded alike, in their lectures on the war, so they all sort of ran in together in listeners' minds. But, one professor later told Williams, no one could possibly forget the hippy guy in the blue jean jacket.

When professors asked the candidates what class subjects they could teach besides the Civil War, few offered interesting ideas. Those candidates were so focused on the Civil War, they knew little else. But Williams, in contrast, came in suggesting right away that he wanted to teach a class on American Indians, and talking about his experiences in living on the Eastern Cherokee Indian Reservation for a year, and his research for a book on Indians in the South. The contrast from the other candidates could not have been more stark. Williams offered them two specializations for the price of one, and thus he

got the job, over the other 252 applicants who probably knew more about the Civil War than he did.

True to his word, Williams developed the Civil War course in the expanded way he had described, and for the next ten years from 1974 to 1984, when he taught at the University of Cincinnati it was the most popular upper division course in the history department. He also developed a two-quarter class on Native American history, with one quarter focused on Indians of Eastern North America, and another quarter on Indians of Western North America and Mexico. That sequence also drew many students, as did his introductory American History class.

For the rest of his career, Walter Williams taught the history of Indigenous peoples of North America. He thought that when UCLA hired him as a visiting professor to teach this subject, that it would be the defining subject of his career. However, that was not to be, since in 1984 he was called for an interview by the Gender Studies faculty at the University of Southern California.

In a surprising development that was eerily similar to his sudden hiring at the beginning of his career, the USC Gender Studies faculty (who mostly taught Women's Studies) were looking to hire a man to teach Men's Studies. Some gay graduate students from USC had heard Williams give a speech on his research about transgender Native Americans, and they suggested Williams as a potential candidate. The Gender Studies faculty had been quite unimpressed when they brought in the leading scholars in the small new field of Men's Studies, and students were bored by their test lectures.

Williams got a call from USC asking if he could come for an interview. Williams protested he knew nothing about Men's Studies, and besides he had just left Los Angeles and was busy with the beginning of his spring quarter teaching, back home at the University of Cincinnati. Still, they insisted they would pay him handsomely if he would come back to California for an interview.

When he arrived, he gave a talk to the Gender Studies faculty. All but one were cisgender women, and when Williams started talking about his research about Native American cultures which recognize and accept more than two genders, it sort of blew their minds. None of them had ever heard of such a thing, so even though Williams was not really doing Men's Studies per se, but more theoretically on gender as a whole, they were excited. Then they took Williams into a large introductory gender studies class of 200 restless students, and he gave a lecture about gender roles among the gender-egalitarian and matrilineal Cherokee. The fact that he had lived on the Eastern Cherokee reservation for a year gave his words more credence, and the students were spellbound. USC made him a generous salary offer that was significantly higher than what UCLA had offered him, so he accepted. Once again in his career, he had gained a job over the mass of more qualified professors in that field, by offering something different.

Williams insisted on continuing to teach his specialty course on Native American history, but besides the introductory gender studies class that he would co-teach with a

women's studies specialist (which he enjoyed greatly, especially in learning more from his co-teachers about Women's Studies), he also would be teaching a seminar on LGBT Studies. In 1984, this was one of the first such classes to be offered at an American university.

Nevertheless, Williams continued his interest in race relations. When the riots that rocked Los Angeles after the police beating of Rodney King, Williams proposed a new course "Overcoming Prejudice" that would look at different forms of prejudice, such as racism, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ageism, and prejudice against disabled people. The focus of the class was on which strategies and techniques would be most effective in reducing that form of prejudice. Williams taught that class for several years.

In 1996, Williams was approached by Dr. Connie Rogers, a prominent scholar who had published extensively on cross-dressing males. Together, they designed a class on Transgender Studies, the first such subject to be taught in any major American university. They taught this together for the next decade, until Williams retired in 2010.

The last focus of Williams' teaching was a direct result of his research in Southeast Asia. When he won the Fulbright professorship and went to Indonesia, Williams taught graduate students who were already good in English. They were professors who were teaching English as a foreign language, but they wanted to know more about American history and culture to be able to better explain to their students the context of their teaching English language. Once Williams was exposed to the field he started thinking about more effective strategies to teach English. This quest was expanded when he was doing ethnographic research among Buddhist monks in Thailand. When Williams does research in an area, he always asks his local informants how he could best help them. The monks wanted him to help them improve their English. They wanted to speak better English so they could more effectively spread Buddhist messages among native English speakers. Williams did this in Buddhist monasteries across Thailand and Cambodia. In the process, he could see which techniques are more effective, and he decided to publish on this subject as well.

An overall analysis of Walter Williams' teaching career shows the role of accidental events which can change the whole course of a person's life. It also shows the important relationship between a professor's research and their teaching. In Williams' case, he is grateful to these accidents and coincidences which have so enriched his life. Active research, especially in learning about new and different cultural practices in various nations, is the most transformational change that can occur in a person's life.

The next best way to learn such topics is through good teaching by an effective lecturer. Walter Williams remains grateful for what he learned from his own mother who was a master teacher, and all the great teachers and professors he was lucky enough to encounter at every stage of his career. This website offers syllabi for classes he taught, as a means of assisting those who might wish to use them as a model for their own teaching.