

English department polarized over E346K

Thanks, sincere thanks, to *The Daily Texan* for opening space so generously to the civil war in English over composition. I am sure that many colleagues in other departments are already tut-tutting the unseemliness of our quarrel in public, perhaps even damning us for giving the Texas Legislature additional excuses for budget cutbacks. But some of them may not know that we in the English Department have no other forum than the *Texan*. Dean Robert King ruled out of order our perhaps excessively democratic department senate form of governance at the beginning of this academic year, placing all power of decisions in the hands of a chairman and an executive committee elected the previous year. We have had no meetings of the department this academic year, none. Our opinion on any of the myriad of questions confronting us has not been solicited, even by questionnaires. Except for the small circle of those serving on the executive committee and their confidants, none of us knows what is going on until we read it in the *Texan* or receive, after any given event, a terse but foggy memo from the chairman, Professor Sutherland.

In an unusual exception to this rule, some of us recently were given the right to vote, up or down, on a new form of departmental governance — not discussed in advance, of course, and in an election with a sharply limited franchise. A surprisingly small number of votes were cast; we were informed that the plan had passed. In this new system, the dean appoints the chair, after an unspecified amount of consultation with the department. The chair — a head, really, in the style of the '30s and '40s — makes most of the important decisions. The only check on the chair's power is an elected executive committee, heavily dominated by full professors, whose salary-increase recommendations are to be made by the chair — who is also authorized to add by personal appointment a few additional members to the executive committee. The discussions of the executive committee are to be held in strict confidence when evaluation of individuals is involved, but we are promised summary reports on other business conducted.

But let me turn away from the governance problems in the background to the immediate question of the suddenly reduced composition requirement. Two members very much of the inner circle, Wayne Rebhorn and Larry Carver, have written remarkable disingenuous letters to the *Texan* arguing, respectively, that the junior-level E 346K is unstaffable and in the light of "writing component" courses in other disciplines really unnecessary, and that those like Professor Jim Kinneavy defending the retention of courses dedicated primarily to writing are anti-literature and pro-"mechanics." (Professor Carver — may his memory of the fact endure! — stoops also to this sneer about Kinneavy: "And if the course uses one of his textbooks, so much the better.") Piddle, dust in the eyes. Professor Rebhorn knows that be-

Neill Megaw Guest Columnist

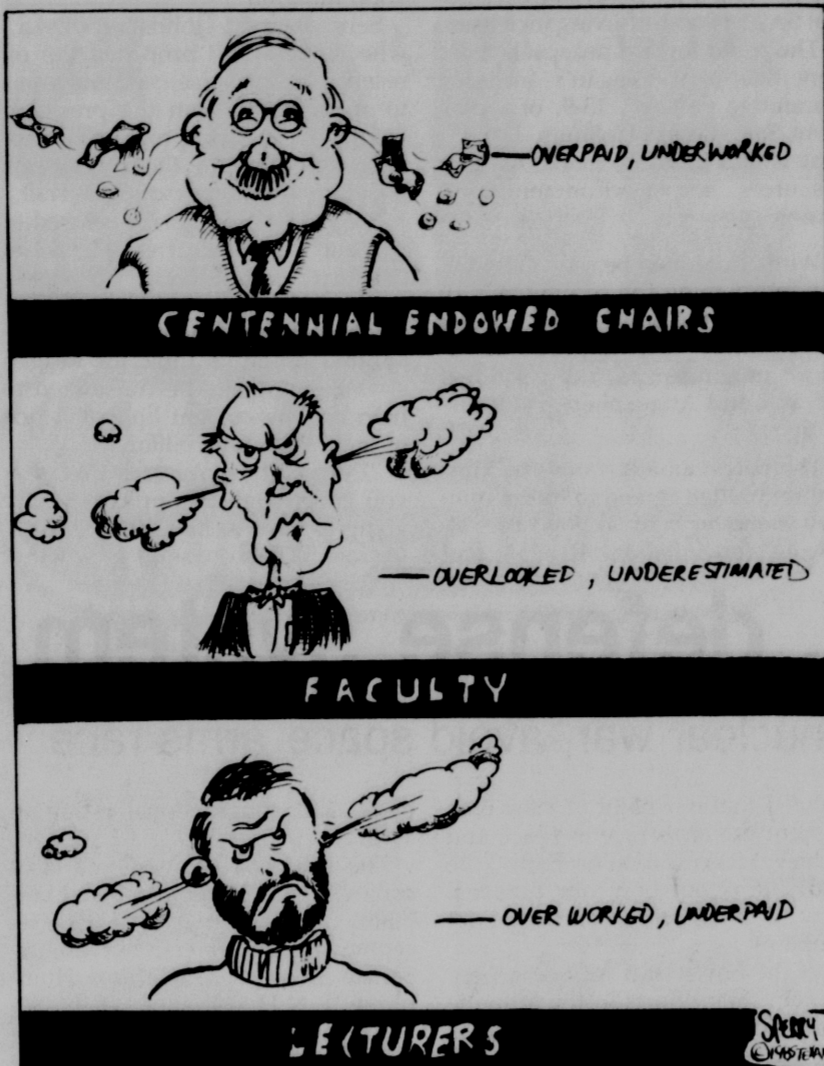
fore we began offering 346K, we managed very handily the staffing of 307, 308, 310, 317, and various advanced and foreign-language special versions of these. And he knows also that, whatever theoretical case can be made for distributing the responsibility for teaching composition across the entire university faculty regardless of discipline, faculty members in other departments have repeatedly told us that they simply do not have the training in this highly demanding work to do the job well. In a coloratura descendant ornamenting his main theme, Rebhorn argues that 346K must go because anything less than a composition course for each major subject would be unsatisfactory; but he knows quite well that this question was raised and dismissed as absurd several years ago when the department voted for the divisional approach (one 346K each for the sciences, social sciences, and humanities). Professor Carver's argument that writing can be taught in combination with literature — or with history, chemistry, or anything else, Professor Rebhorn might add — fails to address the more important question of whether it will be.

Neither of their letters mentions the fact that many lecturers who have served us long and loyally and expertly will be fired if 346K is "suspended" and no other writing courses take its place. Neither of their letters so much as glances at another, quite different reason, for criticizing 346K: that, by deferring the second half of the 6-hour composition load by letting minority students desperately in need of more training in standard or "book" English flunk out before reaching the upper division. Neither of their letters suggests even faintly that the decision about dropping 346K was made by procedures differing in any respect from received good practice in the formulation of departmental programs. Neither of their letters mentions the clearly expressed wishes of the Vick Committee, the Faculty Senate, the University Council, the Board of Regents, or the Centennial Commission.

An excellent proposal for resolving the dispute, at least on an interim basis, had been made by Professor James Sledd. He asks, why don't we keep the 346K and all those older freshman and sophomore courses as well, but as electives? And why not limit the number of sections to those that can be handled by our present staff and budget? That would dispose of one of the threats both to our marginal lower-division students and to our lecturers, and would put paid to the bugaboo of a major increase in staff and budget next year. And it would give us time for additional consideration of just which course should be required and just how large a staff and budget the English department needs to do the job everyone wants us to do.

Megaw is a professor of English.

THE GREAT SCHISM OF THE UT SCHOLARS



English lecturers highly skilled, hard-working

It was distressing to read Alan Gribben's response (*Texan*, Feb. 20) to Jim Skaggs' earlier statement on behalf of the English lecturers. If Skaggs' piece was not the product of mature reflection, it did express the pain and anger the lecturers must feel at losing, at one stroke, their course, their students, and probably their livelihood. To exhortate the English lecturers as "contemptuous" and "self-interested," and to hint that certain faculty members have a vested interest in the writing courses and/or "grudges against the department" is to indulge in the very bickering Gribben professes to dislike. And, more seriously, to misrepresent the nature of this past few years' quarrel which the *Texan* has carried in some detail.

Though it may be too late for them now, the English lecturers have a very strong case for being

David Wevill Guest Columnist

heard out. They are not parasites, hangers-on or amateurs. They are qualified, dedicated, professional teachers, some with many years' service in the department, and experience which would make them hard to replace. It is through their efforts that many students become English majors and later enroll in the literature courses the regular faculty teach. While the nucleus of an English department should, by rights, be a strong literature faculty, the fundamental and extended work of English, in a large state university like ours, is to teach and promote literacy — basic reading, writing and comprehension skills, the power to compose in one's own language.

It is this work that the English lec-

Students should not suffer for departments mistake

Once again I am amazed at the magnitude of a mistake by UT officials. The cancellation of E 346K as a requirement is enough to amaze and infuriate any student who was subjected to the requirement. Where was the planning? What were the administrators thinking when they created the requirement in the first place? They should have been aware of the great number of students who would be required to take the course. They should have been equally aware of the number of teaching positions they would have to fill and the great amount of money it would cost.

The class was created to help students with writing skills that pertain to their fields of study. This has failed. A very few students are actually enrolled in sections of the class that pertain to their majors. I, for example, am majoring in public relations but I am in the arts and humanities section of E 346K. This is due to the fact that all other sections were closed and I needed the class to graduate on time. The exposure to the arts is nice, but I would much rather be putting all my writing efforts into another journalism course.

The fact remains that each student must take an upper division course that contains a "substantial writing component" but this course is required in the specific college of enrollment. As a communication major, E 346K will not fulfill this re-

Tami Dorsett Guest Columnist

quirement for my degree. The lack of planning really shows as the burden for this plan was placed on the English department. Every student who entered the University would be placed in the English department's hands for longer (one semester) than usual. The English department was not prepared. We as students should not have to pay for the thoughtless lack of foresight on the part of the administrators.

The decision to change the E 346K requirement comes too late in the semester for most students to do anything about it. Dropping the course is one alternative, but it is too late to add another class. The time for refunds has come and gone. This, too, was thoughtless of the administrators.

Students have enough trouble meeting degree requirements without haphazard changes from administrators who lack the foresight and ability to run a university of this size. The decision to abolish the requirement has been made and there isn't much that we students can do. I am beginning to wonder about the qualities of "A University of the First Class."

Dorsett is a public relations junior.

turers have carried out so hard and so well for several years, often against the grain of their own personal training and interests in literature and more esoteric fields.

The lecturers cannot be called selfish for wanting to keep their jobs. I imagine most of us do. Nor does wanting to keep their jobs contradict their caring for their courses and their students. Professor Gribben's own self-interest seems to lie in Harvardizing the English Department, in "overtaking the 10 top-ranked English departments in the nation." May ivy grace our limestone and our accents change. But the groundwork necessary for that is exactly what the lecturers have been doing, here, *in situ*, amid local needs and conditions, not in terms of some Platonic, ideal, national grid or plan. I, too, am for excellence. But excellence which takes account of the specific conditions in

which we do our work. Excellence comes from the source, not emulation.

If a course has problems, let us discuss it, not postpone or scrap it. The demise of E 346K, and the dismissal that follows of virtually all our English lecturers, is both graceless and senseless.

I think we in the English faculty might ask ourselves just what our recent actions mean, and whether something better and more sensible can't be done than to sacrifice a generation of dedicated teachers, their livelihood, and the courses they teach, to a narrow sense of expedience and personal ambition. The department is not an abstraction we should worship and serve. It is ourselves and who we are and what we do.

David Wevill is an Associate Professor of English

Stir students' interest

We would like to reiterate a point made in a three-year study of college and university curriculums reported in *The New York Times* (Feb. 11). The report declares that "there is no defensible reason why English departments should alone bear the responsibility for literacy in the American college and university." Despite the fact that we are the largest English Department in the country, we do not have anything like the staff to teach all the conceivable courses involving instruction in literacy at the University. And even if we had the staff, it would be a bad idea if we did so. The teaching of writing is the responsibility of the entire professoriat. It is not just that the professors of history, anthropology, botany, psychology and electrical engineering have the knowledge to teach writing in their disci-

plines, but that students will take much more seriously what they are taught in English courses if they know that such skills will be demanded in other departments, that they will be expected not just to take machine-graded tests but to write papers and to take essay exams. Rather than expect the English department to take up the burden every time the question of literacy arises, the University ought to ask all of its departments to do so. Then complaints like Babcock's that he is not being taught "to write reports as an electrical engineer" (*Texan*, Feb. 25) would never arise.

Warwick Wadlington
Department of English

Decision at bad timing

Aside from the ill effects, opposition and otherwise outraged (to say the least) response that

nas resulted since English 346K was demoted to an elective, I wonder if Dr. Sutherland and his executive committee thought about what effect this announcement would have on students currently enrolled in the class. Mid-semester is an odd time to tell a student he could have signed up for some other class. Such effects are: a dramatic loss of interest and motivation in the class, a drop rate of approximately 30 percent as has been experienced in my class, and a tremendous loss of respect for those heading the English department. As a matter of opinion, it does not surprise me at all that a decision like this was made. After all, if the University were to educate each student to his or her potential, the student body may figure out the antics that some administration try to slyly foist upon them.

Edwin Restrepo
Finance/Accounting

Lower division classes cannot be remedial

Professor Kinneavy, in his "Guest Column" (Feb. 20), has been most unfair to his colleagues. I say this is not because his position lacks merit, but because he has failed to argue for it. Thus, he has obscured from the *Texan*'s readers the fact that the whole issue of writing courses is part of an academic debate among experienced and dedicated University teachers.

When he writes that "the logistical and financial problems, particularly in the English Department, have been aggravated by obstacles placed in the development of the program by administrators who do not believe it," he has understated the situation. *Teachers* of the writing courses — faculty, like myself, who regularly teach freshmen, have taught Kinneavy's syllabus, have observed the teaching of others, and have served on the Freshman English Policy Committee while it was under his stewardship — do no longer believe that courses "devoted to composition as their major focus" teach any of the things that make good writing possible. The disbelievers are not a "clique"; we are the overwhelming majority of the department's, and probably the University's faculty.

The academic debate is this: Is the teaching of writing best accomplished by regarding "writing" as a subject matter — as a course content of "skills" such as those of mechanics, persuasion, etc? Or, is "good writing" best cultivated by teaching a discipline-specific subject matter, the valued concepts, research procedures, and the vocabulary which will provide the "knowledge" stu-

Wayne Lesser Guest Columnist

dents must make intelligible and persuasive in their written assignments?

After nine years of the first (Kinneavy's) alternative, we have concluded that is an approach properly consigned to the high school or junior college. Putting simplistic generalizations about the "forms" of writing before the problem of having something substantial to write about (putting the cart before the horse), courses with composition as their major focus do nothing to help the student appreciate the level of discourse and spirit of inquiry making university education different from trade school education. Such courses eschew the cultivation and expression of an attitude toward knowledge. Instead, they value the arbitrary application of writing formulas.

The focus of E 306 and E 346K on remediation affects the quality of class discussion, the nature of the paper topics, the grading of papers, the commentary on the papers, and indeed the very way teachers and students relate to one another. In fact, it is in regard to this last point — what teachers think of students and what students think of teachers — that courses designed to avoid a disciplinary subject matter prove most unacceptable for a university education. The proponents of these courses, citing the egregious writing errors students commit before they learn what it means to have something to write about, conclude that

our students suffer from an incapacitating and irremediable lack of intellectual ability. We emphatically disagree. Students can and will rise to meet the obligations of a discipline-based curriculum.

E 306 and E 346K are presently constructed on the false idea that university students, like children, are in need of basic socialization. Unable to express, and perhaps to reconsider, in the context of disciplinary study who they are and what they want to become, these students must be taught the "basics" of intellectual toilet training. They are not individuals, each of whom has accepted the challenge of discovering how his or her education is all of a piece, yet specific with regard to individual temperament and talent.

Now to the particular debate about E 346K. This course was intended, among other things, to meet our objections to remedial writing courses. It was to have a discipline-specific content more fundamental than that of each discipline's required research procedure and sanctioned vocabulary. For research procedure and vocabulary are necessarily taught by each discipline in its upper division courses; they cannot be taught better by someone outside the discipline; and they will invariably have been grasped satisfactorily by any student making passing grades in his or her major.

A look at this semester's syllabi for the course will clearly indicate that no one — regular faculty or lecturer — has yet identified such a

"fundamental" content. As a result, the present course merely repeats the generalizations about clear writing taught to students throughout the curriculum. The course does, to be sure, expose students to important discipline-specific reading. But this function is more properly that of the individual discipline — the site of substantial discussions of the discipline's subject matter. The course merely duplicates that University's essentially remedial freshman English program. Even worse, it is a pale version of courses with a "major writing component" and 325M, the English department's rigorous advanced expository writing course, which draws its students from all disciplines.

My point: there is no academic debate about the need for students to write better, and there is no desire on the part of the English department to remove itself from a central role in the teaching of writing. The debate is about how to integrate the teaching of writing into the general curriculum, such that the University is not guilty of substituting a junior college function for its general requirements. The University's administration, I am happy to say, is no longer asking that the burden of proof rest on those wishing to teach writing around a discipline-specific content. The burden is now on the proponents of the present E 306 as well as E 346K courses, who are at long last being challenged to make these courses something other than remedial.

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