

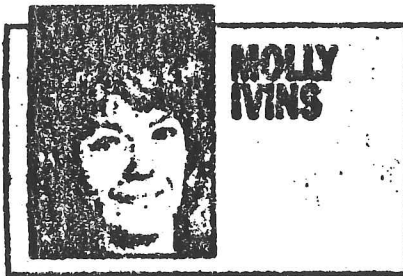
Austin academics are people with NOT ENOUGH TO DO

AUSTIN — "The reason academic politics are so nasty is because the stakes are so low." (Various attributions.) The latest flap at the University of Texas at Austin offers more depressing evidence for this pithy theory.

Such a tempest in a teapot. What a squall, what an uproar, what a mighty brouhaha. Such grandiose posturings and eschatological pronouncements — and all over a plan to change an English course.

There are people running around declaring that the fate of Western civilization hangs in the balance, or that the eternal struggle between Good and Evil is here exemplified. All manner of other bombast and piffle spews forth daily — over this silly English course. One is tempted to inquire forlornly, "Hasn't anyone here got any sense?"

How a bunch of presumably bright people got themselves into this pluperfect knot passeth most understanding. It started when Swedish Meacham, a historian by trade, was named dean of the



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College of Liberal Arts and noticed a not-very-astounding fact.

By the year 2000, the majority of students in Texas public schools will be black or brown — this long-predicted nugget of information comes as no surprise to anyone who follows education in Texas. It follows as night the day and that even the University of Texas — notoriously poor at recruiting minority students as it is — will soon have many more of them on campus.

It also follows that it behooves the university to do something about making minority students more comfortable in university life. Their discomfort is hard to miss — there are only a few hundred of them on a campus with 33,000 students and incidents of

racial harassment erupt with depressing regularity.

In the immemorial fashion of academia, assorted committees went to work on this problem and the Lower Division English Policy Committee began considering a revised curriculum for the required course English 306 in the fall of last year. English 306 is supposed to teach students composition and to improve their writing skills.

As a matter of pedagogical technique, it was felt the course could use an overhaul anyway and that a good approach would be to assign the kids some nice meaty questions and have them argue the merits of the case.

Specifically, it was proposed that students be given readings from various federal court decisions in civil rights cases — including *Painter vs. Sweatt*, the 1948 case that integrated UT's own law school — and then use the majority opinions, the minority opinions and arguments by plaintiffs and defendants to form their own opinions, and then to support their arguments with evidence. I suppose this comes dan-

gerously close to "relevance," that dread buzzword from the '60s.

In any case, it was enough to touch off alarm bells on the daffy right. Mistaking the reform of English 306 for one of those apocalyptic struggles, a la Stanford University, over whether the inclusion of non-Western points of view in a core curriculum will mean the end of the World As We Know It, the National Association of Scholars sprang into action.

The NAS, and its local chapter, the Texas Association of Scholars, is to academia what Accuracy in Media is to journalism — a bunch of ideological zealots who run around questioning everyone else's objectivity.

In fact, both NAS and AIM are supported by the right-wing Scaife Foundation, which subsidizes several other right-wing groups, including the Heritage Foundation, Freedom House and the Committee on the Present Danger (you recall the present danger — that the Soviet Union

is going to take over the world any second now because the United States spends so little money on weapons).

Well, with that all hell broke loose.

A philosophy professor philosophically denounced English 306 as "Marxism 306" (federal court decisions?) and a government professor said it amounted to "indoctrination in bigotry."

My personal favorite is this poor man Alan Gribben, who believes the English Department is under "domination by a highly politicized faction of radical literary theorists" (and God only knows how much damage a radical literary theorist might do) and actually proposed that the English Department be placed in receivership.

TAS collected 56 faculty signatures on a petition, a "Statement of Academic Concern" over the fate of 306, and had it published in the *Daily Texan* — an ad paid for the TAS.

With that, President Bill Cunningham and the administration

took alarm over the controversy and pressured Dean Meacham to delay the new course, which he obligingly did. They all appear united at this point in the hope that when the new English course is explained slowly and carefully (presumably in words of one syllable) all hands will come to understand that it is not a Communist Plot, but instead a useful way of teaching English composition as well as a handy forum for getting students to think about the issues raised by the fact that we live in a culturally and ethnically diverse society.

While my faith in the wisdom of the public at large is almost unbounded, my faith in the ratiocinative powers of faculty members is not.

Does anyone understand what causes so many academics to have this curious penchant for dramatizing the trivial? Not that the fact we live in a multiracial society is trivial, but must the slightest attempt to deal with that on a campus always look like the third act of an Italian comic opera?