



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78712-1164

Office of the Chairman
Department of English
(512) 471-4991

February 15, 1985

To: Members of the Department of English

From: W.O.S.Sutherland, Chairman

I have been informed by the Dean that each Dean in the University has been instructed to "take steps to waive the English 346K course requirements for students currently subject to catalogues containing the requirement and for all students who may enter the University under those catalogues in the 1985-86 academic year."

The effect of Vice-President Fonken's instruction is (1) to relieve students now enrolled of the E.346K requirement. (2) to allow us time to see how the ends which E.346K was to accomplish can best be achieved. The implementation of the requirement for all colleges has been postponed.

From the outset the course and requirement have offered difficulties. We were given to understand when the Department approved the course in 1978 that the new requirement (specifically E.346K) would call for less staff than the old. Yet the legislation that appeared on the University Council floor differed markedly from that passed in the Department. It called for every student to take the course -- at this point roughly 7500 a year. There is no way we can be assured of enough qualified staff to teach this course in our expanding university.

The concept of the course, variants in which students would be taught to write in their own disciplines, has been undermined by the logistics of registration. Students take the sections that fit their schedules, and short of a re-registration there is no way to rearrange them. As a result, the basic premise upon which the course was built has been, by force of circumstance, lost.

Another point of grave concern is the grading in the course. This is a course which perforce must be taught primarily by Lecturers. Factoring out the sections taught by regular faculty, over 84% of the students last Fall made "A" or "B." These are not students taking a course in their major. They are not selected. They come in at random. Clearly, this is a course whose standards we do not understand or are not willing to enforce. Perhaps some other reasons operate as well. In any case it is not a course that we should offer on the mass scale the requirement calls for, not at least until we have a clearer notion of standards.

When the new English requirements were adopted, there was a parallel requirement to E.346K moving up through the Vick Committee. That proposal, the Substantial Writing Component requirement, was to accomplish the same purpose as E.346K; so when the University Council approved both programs, it actually adopted two requirements to do the same job. While E.346K is in abeyance, the Substantial Writing Component courses will continue. We have offered several seminars for instructors in other departments undertaking SWC courses, and we will be happy to continue to offer support to that very important effort. I say this for those who are concerned that students will not have classes in which writing is a central concern. They will.

I am sorry that the story about the postponement broke first in the newspaper before I could inform the department. I did inform the Executive Committee, but since I was uncertain what exactly would happen, it seemed best to wait until we had the facts. Now I have the letter that tells us what the decision is. I asked that whatever was decided, we be informed at the first possible minute, for the decision will have a drastic effect on staffing, not just for next year, but in light of the waiver, I would judge for several years to come. This creates a situation in which the whole faculty must lend its assistance.

Most of us had looked for a new departmental structure next year; indeed, the Dean had recommended a Division of Composition which would have separated E.346K and the temporary staff from the more traditional courses and the regular staff. That new structure would have solved the internal strains within the department. But, considering the uncertainties of E.346K, the mainstay of that Division, it seems irresponsible in the next difficult budget year to establish a new and costly administrative entity based on a course that does not have our complete confidence. What the department needs most at this time is a breathing space to reconsider the purpose of the requirement and how it can best be fulfilled. That is what the administration has given us.