

Incompetence, not intrigue, killed proposed E306 revisions

The Modern Language Association must be kidding if it thought that only opponents of E306 went outside the UT community during the fight over its adoption. In its spring newsletter, the MLA pouts that the opponents "misrepresentation" in the media led to E306's tabling.

In reality, it was advocates for the E306 changes who took the fight outside the University and misrepresented the course and the ensuing controversy. The course failed from external pressure and its creators' own incompetence, but not from the opposition's misrepresentation. The course was bad enough — one need not bother to distort its bias.

The MLA's criticism should be taken with a heavy dose of salt. Their recent convention boasted such dissertations as "The Lesbian Phallus: Or Does Heterosexuality



Geoff
Henley
TEXAN
COLUMNIST

Exist?" and "Strategies for Teaching a Feminist Political Latin American Culture Course." The MLA favors aberrance and ideology, not scholarly discourse, and therefore has no authority in determining literary scholarship and its free exercise (writers may even hedge to use their celebrated style guide).

Parts of the proposed E306 did not even hold up to legal scrutiny. On Oct. 22, 1990, a UT law professor who examined the legal materials for the Department of English wrote President Cunningham about a correspondence he had with Barbara Bergman, president

of the American Association of University Professors. The AAUP's Washington office received a 15-page memorandum titled "An Interim Report on the Attack on English 306 and the National Association of Scholars" from an anonymous group called the Ad-Hoc Committee on Right-Wing Subversion of University Autonomy.

Apparently this committee thought the American Association of University Professors would be a receptive audience and act promptly to defend changes in E306. President Bergman did act promptly — she called the law professor to ask him what is going on, and asked whether the American Association of University Professors should intervene. In a nine-page memo, the law professor explained to Bergman that she "heard an extreme version of one side of a complex dispute."

The Ad-Hoc Committee on Right Wing Subversion of University Autonomy described E306, as well as academia in general, as under siege by everything from small student groups to macroeconomic policy. The authors blast everyone from Alan Gribben, UT English professor, to Jeane Kirkpatrick, former ambassador to the United Nations.

One easily sees how the law professor could term the ad-hoc committee's report as "conspiracy theory run riot." Most entertaining is the committee's "Political Analysis" of the E306 controversy. It asserts that the Reagan administration tried to purge radicals from the liberal arts by the following:

- "A massive divestment" of federal subsidies that "struck hardest at the liberal arts."

- "Expanded defense expenditures (complemented by increased corporate donations to business

and technical schools)" which "made sure there was plenty of money for those parts of the university still safely in business' hands."

Fortunately the memo landed in fair and wise hands. The law professor assessed the E306 essays, cases and legal materials (including the history and law sections of Paula Rothenberg's *Racism and Sexism*). "It was a truly dreadful book," he writes. "The legal materials proposed more recently are still not balanced, but they are substantively much better than the Rothenberg book."

The professor's comments on the course's law cases are just as poignant. "They are not properly edited, and there are basic vocabulary errors." Later he writes, "They include technical legal issues — procedural issues and governmental immunity issues — irrelevant to the main point."

E306 will remain a contentious subject. But as the professor also points out, opposition to its adoption "extends across the range of faculty opinion, from conservative through centrist and liberal to mild leftists."

E306's own creators should publicly defend on campus their own brainchild — when offered the chance, the most vocal faculty members declined to debate (one member accepted, and then reneged).

Faculty supporting the new E306 are painfully aware of their own incompetence and refuse to go toe-to-toe with their opponents. They only cower behind impotent advertisements, occasional sound bites and organizations like the MLA.

Henley is a government junior and head of Students Advocating Valid Education.