

# Professor leaves in wake of course debate

By A. Phillips Brooks  
American-Statesman Staff

Once considered a rising star in the ranks of University of Texas English professors, Alan Gribben distinguished himself — in Austin and nationally — as a keen researcher and Mark Twain scholar.

He expected to spend the rest of his career rummaging through the library stacks of the Harry Ransom Center and teaching American literature to graduate and undergraduate students in his classroom nearby.

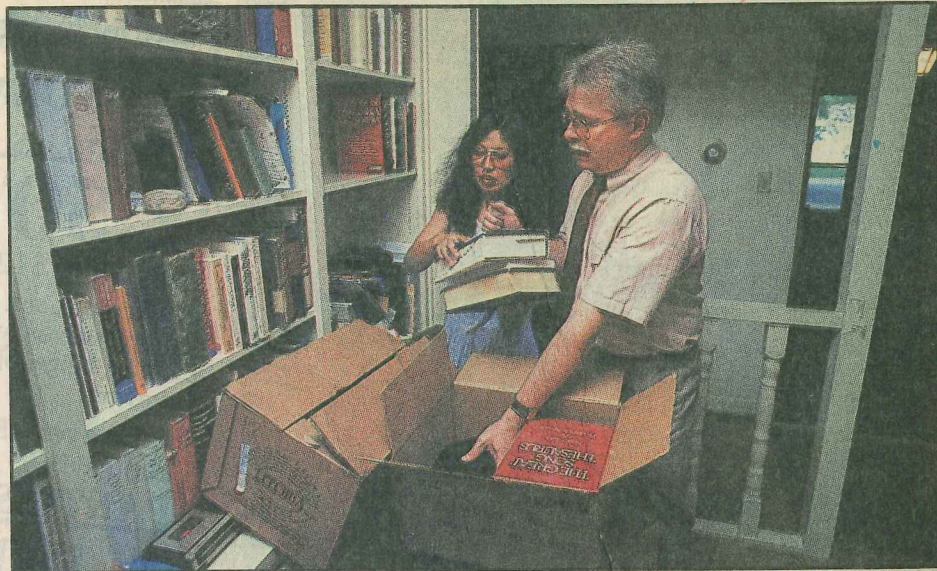
But after 17 years at UT-Austin, Gribben is leaving his tenured post for a less-promising job at a smaller institution.

Why would he ditch his job and perks at UT, snatch his children from a school they love, and pull his wife from a community she adores to take a job with a more demanding classload in unfamiliar surroundings?

"Suddenly, I made a vote," Gribben said, taking a break from the chores of packing up a house that has collected years of belongings and mementos.

"In December 1987 I held up my hand and made a vote against a program for ethnic and Third World literature. That was the end of my career here," he said.

Though Gribben resigned earlier this month to accept a position as the chairman of the English and Philosophy Department at Auburn University at



Staff photo by David Kennedy

Alan Gribben and his wife Irene Wong pack books for their move from Austin.

Montgomery, he said his departure is not of his own wishes. Gribben will begin his new teaching assignment in the fall. The 15-year-old Alabama college, an extension of Auburn University, has an enrollment of 6,000.

Gribben says he has been forced out by the "politically correct" fundamentalists at UT, who struck down his reputation when he opposed their movement to in-

Gribben is leaving his tenured UT post for a lesser one in Montgomery, Ala.

corporate women, minorities and homosexuals into the English curriculum.

The debate over political correctness — whether conservative viewpoints at college campuses are being quashed and their supporters punished by liberals, multiculturalists and radicals — is currently being fought on a national stage.

While most academic experts agree

See UT, A17

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Continued from A1

there are some cases in which students and professors found to be politically incorrect — voicing opinions against the liberal perspective — have been censored or discredited, several experts say Gribben and others like him are using such issues for their own advantage.

"It comes down to a question of free debate," said Ernst Benjamin, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors, based in Washington, D.C. "It's important to distinguish between a war of words and whether a person's rights have been violated."

Gribben's allegations became the focus of a national debate last year when the UT English Department decided to change a required freshman English course. Labeling the initial proposed revision of English 306 "Marxist in its interpretation," Gribben accused some of his colleagues of trying to politically indoctrinate students.

English 306, traditionally taught through the works of mostly Western European writers, was seen by a majority of UT English professors and instructors as being inherently unfair to minorities, women and homosexuals. In the proposed revision last summer, opposed by Gribben and others, students would have learned to write by reading about social and cultural diversity and civil rights issues.

That initiative collapsed in February with the resignation of the seven-member committee charged with developing the new class, despite an earlier vote of 46-11 by the 92-member English department to change the class. A compromise created by a new committee was reached this month.

Casting unanimous votes on May 3 to implement the newest version of the freshman English course in the fall, English faculty approved a course that retained its emphasis on grammar, style, punctuation and rhetoric, while broadening its reading materials to include topics of euthanasia, racism, discrimination, drug legalization and animal rights.

Although Gribben views the revised version of English 306 as a victory, he said he has been damaged in the process.

Gribben said a whispering campaign carried out largely by liberal professors has undermined his reputation at UT. Because of that,

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— Alan Gribben

he said, his graduate classes have not drawn the minimum number of students to avoid being canceled. Also, he said he has been overlooked for committee assignments, has been shunned by many of his colleagues, and has been the target of campus rallies.

Benjamin, who is familiar with Gribben's case, said Gribben's situation lacked the elements of those rebuked by proponents of political correctness. In bona fide cases, he said, professors and students have been censored, expelled, denied pay raises, or labeled racist, sexist or homophobic when they have expressed opinions contrary to those held by a liberal majority.

Examples of some of the cases in which students and professors were punished for their views include:

■ At the University of Connecticut, sophomore Nina Wu was ordered to move off campus and forbidden to set foot in campus dormitories after she allegedly posted a sign on the door of her dorm, which read: "People who are shot on sight — among them, 'preppies,' 'bimbos' 'men without chest hair,' and 'homos.'" Wu was allowed to move back on campus this year after threat of a federal lawsuit that the action violated her First Amendment rights.

■ At New York University Law School, a moot court was ordered to dismiss the question of whether homosexuals could be good parents because it was insensitive to gays and lesbians. The question was restored after a professor intervened and argued that the dismissal was inappropriate because law students would be called upon to argue such questions in real-life cases.

But Benjamin said far too many professors, including Gribben, cry wolf when they find themselves outnumbered in policy decisions affecting curriculum.

"Professor Gribben was in the minority and wasn't able to get his way," Benjamin said. "He feels uncomfortable, so he claims that the

debate is chilling and driving him out."

Benjamin and UT English department chairman Joseph Kruppa said conservatives, and

specifically the largely conservative National Association of Scholars, are blowing the issue of political correctness out of proportion to attack affirmative action and an increasing move toward diversity at larger and more prominent institutions.

Others disagree.

"It clearly appears that Professor Gribben has been driven out of the university by a sizable number of faculty with strong ideas," said Robert Oliphant, a professor at

William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, Minn., who is studying the trend nationally.

"There is little doubt he is a victim of PC (political correctness)," Oliphant said.

Said UT English professor John Ruskiewicz: "There is a dominant view in the English department and people are reluctant to speak out or go counter to the dominant view."

Looking around his Northwest Austin home at the huge boxes

filled with 17 years of remembrances, Gribben said he still has reservations about leaving Austin and UT.

"I am leaving with some gratification, knowing that students won't have to submit to strange teachings . . . But here I am putting my house up for sale in a soft market, uprooting my family from a community they love," he said. "I wanted to be a university professor for 30 years at UT. But I questioned a few sacred cows."