

House subcommittee urges limits on TAs

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A House subcommittee for higher education appropriative matters recommended Monday to limit the number of teaching assistants to the number of fulltime faculty members at Texas' public colleges.

The committee has been hearing testimony in recent weeks on the controversial use of teaching assistants (TAs) at state-supported institutions of higher education. TAs are graduate students who finance their studies by teaching undergraduate courses.

Although the subcommittee proposal is aimed at giving freshmen and sophomores more exposure to fulltime faculty members and less to TAs, University of Texas acting vice president for academic affairs Gerhard Fonken said it would have little or no effect on the current system.

ACCORDING TO the recommendation, each department could have no more TAs on its roster than fulltime faculty members.

"That borders on being bizarre," said Fonken, who added that he couldn't think of any departments at

UT where fulltime faculty members were already outnumbered by TAs, though "it's possible that there is some department somewhere," he said.

One such department might be English, where 120 sections of a freshman composition course are taught by TAs.

The large number of TAs in the English department has been noted frequently by UT English professor James Sledd, a perennial critic of the TA system who testified before the subcommittee last month.

SLEDD SAID the use of TAs at UT is "grossly abused" and shortchanges undergraduate students who are not taught by full-time faculty members.

He also raised the question of "398T" courses which he claimed are no-work courses enabling TAs to satisfy — with less work — their academic requirement of nine hours of courses per semester.

Sledd said according to state funding formulas, the university receives money for teaching the 398T courses, though in many cases the

classes never met.

The subcommittee also recommended having the College Coordinating Board study methods by which the legislature might discipline institutions where such phony courses have been set up.

IN HER TESTIMONY before the committee, UT President Lorene Rogers defended the 398T courses, saying they gave beginning TAs a chance to take only six hours of subject matter courses (instead of the required nine) but at the same time receive supervision in their teaching

duties.

The subcommittee also decided there is no evidence to warrant creation of a South Texas system of colleges. A bill was introduced in the last session of the legislature creating a South Texas system with the campuses of Pan American and Texas A&I University but was later withdrawn.

Pan American University President Ralph Schilling told the committee the school's board of regents opposes merger with any system unless it is the UT system.