

ENGLISH 306 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

According to Section V of the AAUP "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," "The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process." The recent history of English 306 at the University of Texas at Austin reveals much about the status of this principle at the largest and most prestigious university in Texas.

English 306, "Composition and Rhetoric," is the first-year writing course for UT's undergraduates. The Liberal Arts Catalogue describes it as "A composition course that provides basic instruction in the writing and analysis of expository prose; includes an introduction to logic and the principles of rhetoric." Each semester about 55 sections of the course are taught (in groups of 25 students) by a large cadre of graduate students plus a few members of the regular faculty (usually no more than three in a given semester). The course is required of all undergraduate students (approximately 60% who do not place out or transfer credits for an equivalent course taken elsewhere. The course is administered by a duly constituted departmental committee—the Lower Division English Policy Committee (LDEPC), with its Chair the Director of lower-division English—whose charge is to set policy, administer the course, and make such changes in its syllabus as

seem wise and appropriate to its members. The Department, meeting in plenary session, reserves the right to reject any action of the LDEPC.

At fairly regular intervals over the years, the LDEPC has determined that the then current version of E.306 was not accomplishing the course's aim of improving student writing, and so would create a new syllabus or recommend a revision of the curricular goals. In 1989-90, the LDEPC, acting in accord with such precedents and within its delegated responsibility, reached such a conclusion. It then outlined a revised syllabus, focusing on argumentative and exploratory writing about the issue of difference, which it described to the faculty at a regularly called departmental meeting on May 8, 1990. The Committee stressed several points: that the current version was not working well; that the revision in no way altered the curricular goals of E.306; that a support system would be available to assist the teachers of the course; that faculty teaching the course would remain, as they had always been, free to create their own versions; and that graduate students, after they had taught the course once, would be encouraged to create their own variations on the standard syllabus. After extensive and open discussion, it was clear that a large majority of the faculty present felt that the LDEPC was acting within its provenance and according to its charge. As at all such meetings in the past, no motion was offered, no vote was taken, and tacit endorsement of the committee's actions resulted.

Shortly after that meeting four or five English Department opponents of the course revisions, having lost the argument

within the academic forum, launched a media and letter-writing campaign (aimed at students, parents, and influential alumni, among others) attacking the large majority of the Department in highly charged language. In a series of articles, advertisements, and media appearances, proponents were accused of being radical, ideological, biased, propagandistic, intolerant of alternative viewpoints, antithetical to academic freedom and free inquiry—while opponents represented themselves as dispassionate, unbiased, politically neutral, principled upholders of objective standards. At the same time the small minority who had taken their cause outside of academia maintained that "the entire episode was tainted by evasions of departmental procedures and unheard of secrecy by its proponents" (NAVIGATOR of the National Association of Scholars [Fall 1990]: 8)—a charge that was news to the Department. One departmental opponent of the course (in a letter written on July 9, 1990, to a member of UT's powerful Liberal Arts Foundation Council, a copy of which was subsequently obtained through the Texas Open Records Act and published by The Daily Texan), attacked the department's "radical literary theorists" for their "character assassination and intimidation," politicking of courses, and destruction of "my academic career." He then urged the following actions: 1. "the English department should be placed in receivership indefinitely;" 2. it should be split into two entities (one for "the radical theorists," one for "the remaining traditional scholars [who] would [then have] the freedom to offer a true literature and writing program"); 8. "barring the

accomplishment of these steps, the two University-wide required English courses (both writing and literature) should be abolished, thus ending the necessity of hiring additional English professors at the rate they have been recruited from the most radicalized (but prestigious) graduate programs across the nation." 4. the replacement of the current Dean of Liberal Arts by one "with nerve and determination to oversee the recruiting policies and decisions of the English department."

Dean Standish Meecham of the College Liberal Arts had both privately and publicly assured the LDEPC of his enthusiastic commitment to the revision before they began to develop it. On July 28, 1890, however, acting in concert with Joseph Kruppa, Chair of the English Department, the Dean wrote to the English faculty that the new E.806, which was scheduled to begin in the Fall semester, would be postponed for one year. The Dean wrote in part: "I will continue to support strongly, as I have during the past months, the concept of English 806 as a writing and rhetoric course with a unified curriculum centered on the themes of diversity and difference, an idea which I believe to be imaginative and exciting." The Dean's decision, then, was a tactical retreat to "ensure the best course possible."

What had moved the Dean from his position as a staunch supporter of immediate implementation? No one outside his immediate circle can speak with certainty; but the only official event widely known to have occurred between the Dean's last public pronouncement of support and his memo to the English Department was a hastily called weekend meet-

ing to which the Dean and Chair were summoned by UT's President and Provost. As far as can be inferred, the latter were reacting to hostility directed toward the new E.806 from outside the University. As far as is known, neither official has ever spoken to any of the members of the LDEPC or seen either the draft syllabus or any of the new course materials.

The immediate consequences of the postponement (or cancellation, as it increasingly seems to be) were as follows: the withdrawal from the course of the eight to ten faculty members who, excited by the revised version, had volunteered to teach it; cancellation of the week-long orientation for its teachers that had been arranged for August 1890; the continuation of E.806 in a version that the professionals in whom the Department had vested its confidence have deemed a failure; and a growing sense of frustration and despondency on the part of the departmental faculty that it no longer "has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas a curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction."

Several important events relating to this matter have occurred since the Summer of 1890. The Department held a meeting on September 14 in order to discuss what it considered unwarranted and unprecedented interference in its authority. It took the unusual step of voting (and by secret ballot, which made it even more unusual) to affirm its endorsement of the actions of the LDEPC, which it did by a vote of 46-11 (with three abstentions). A week later, the graduate students, in whose name some of the objections to the course were made (since they

teach the bulk of the sections and would have to do so initially under a new uniform syllabus) passed the same motion 52-2. The votes made no difference to the opponents of the course or to the Administration. Despite repeated requests, no assurances were forthcoming that the Department was free to determine the content of its courses; no one in the central Administration would meet with the LDEPC or the Director of lower-division English; the Department was denied permission even to field-test sections of the course during the Spring 1891 semester; and on several occasions the President and Provost have said that the Department had to satisfy the Deans of those colleges (such as Engineering and Natural Sciences) who allegedly object to the revision of E.806 and who seem to have acquired veto power over the contents of first-year English.

In early January, the Dean of Liberal Arts announced his resignation as of the end of the Spring semester, less than two years after taking office. Though he cited personal reasons, it seemed to many that lack of support from the central Administration for what he was trying to accomplish may have been a factor; and the E.806 situation seems to have been one source of conflict. Subsequently, the Director of lower-division English, frustrated in her attempts to do the job for which she was hired, filed with the national office of the AAUP a formal grievance, claiming that both academic freedom and faculty authority have been abrogated, and requesting that they conduct an investigation of the situation. In the latest action, the LDEPC, citing the Administration's refusal to allow them to fulfill their professional re-

sponsibilities (i.e., to prepare and implement the new syllabus), have resigned en bloc. In consequence of all that has occurred, the Department is now saddled with a first-year course that three thousand students take annually but in which it has no confidence. Under such circumstances, the Department may find it extremely difficult to find anyone willing to administer the course or to serve on the LDIFC. Further, the Department must create next year's program without any assurance of having authority over the program and with a strong sense that it must somehow satisfy the hidden agendas of various people (many unnamed) who have the ear of the Administration but who have never tried to enter into a dialogue with the Department. It seems that many constituencies within and outside the University have a voice in determining freshman English—everyone except the professionals in the field and those who teach it.

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**REPORT OF THE
NOVEMBER
NATIONAL COUNCIL
MEETING**

I want to give a short report of what I felt were the most interesting and/or important issues discussed at the meeting of the national council. What follows is not in any way to be seen as representing anyone's opinions or biases other than my own.

To me, the most interesting aspect of the Committee A report was to hear that in light of the Supreme Court decision

that instructed the University of Pennsylvania to release previous confidential tenure material to the KEOC, Committee A is considering a recommendation to liberalize the circumstances under which tenure and promotion material would be available to the person being evaluated. They are also considering recommending to the AAUP that this information be made more available to other relevant bodies both within and outside the institution.

The council also discussed at some length the implications of what can only be called a fight between faculty at the University of Texas at Austin over a revision of the first year composition course relying heavily upon the text of Supreme Court decisions as reading materials. So much animosity and controversy was generated in this fight that the President of the university took it upon himself to put the course on hold. The council suggested that the progress of this controversy situation be watched carefully since both academic freedom and governance issues seem to be involved.

As part of the Committee F report, a question was raised about the formula for calculating dues levels which currently depends equally on the average salary of faculty in the US and the Consumer Price Index. Such a formula guarantees continually rising dues. The council voted to instruct Committee F to consider some alternative formula that would stop the ever increasing AAUP yearly dues (which at least in Texas with mandatory conference dues is fast approaching the magic number of \$100).

We were informed of the intention to move the national offices of the AAUP back to Dupont Circle in two years.

Committee C has produced a report on Mandated Assessment of Educational Outcomes. I think there was general agreement that mandated assessment as practiced in many states is in conflict with the philosophy of the AAUP and members of the council felt the recommendations of Committee C did not go far enough in expressing that conflict. I personally feel that this mandated assessment movement is a very serious attack on the Academy which needs to be resisted.

Membership in the AAUP is slowly increasing but the council was enjoined as are all members, to work harder on increasing membership even further.

Barbara Bergman, President of the AAUP, has worked hard with a committee to draft a statement on Reform of Intercollegiate Athletics to be presented to the membership for their reaction. This report was presented to the council for its adoption. This led to a lively discussion during which it became evident that the opposition to some of the wording of the report by members of the council was too serious to be resolved at the meeting. The report was sent back to the executive committee (and by implication the committee that drafted it) for further work.

That is a very brief overview of current national council activities. Since I believe I must represent to the best of my abilities the wishes of the membership of District V, let me request from you or your colleagues any suggestions or opinions on these or any other issues you think the national leadership of AAUP should address.
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