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# Entire Writing-Course Panel Quits at U. of Texas

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Austin, Texas -- An acrimonious debate over a required freshman writing course at the University of Texas took an unexpected turn last week when the entire committee charged with revamping the course resigned.

Committee members had been working for nearly a year to design a new course in which students would base their compositions on recent court cases involving topics such as affirmative action and civil rights.

The course, English 306, quickly became the target of faculty critics who contended that it was an attempt to indoctrinate students. Nonetheless, the course, with only a few changes, gained the approval of the English department last fall and seemed well on its way to being put into effect.

Last week, however, committee members voted unanimously to resign, citing a lack of commitment from the university's upper-level administration as well as widespread misunderstanding about the course.

In a letter to the English department's chairman, Joseph Kruppa, committee members accused the administration of being indifferent to their efforts to revise the course.

Course proponents said they believed the administration was disturbed by the barrage of critical coverage the course had received in national newspapers and magazines. It has frequently been mentioned in articles about what some in higher education believe is a trend toward "political correctness" on college campuses (*The Chronicle*, November 21, 1990).

The university's president, William H. Cunningham, issued a prepared statement last week emphasizing Texas's commitment to multicultural education. He added in an interview that he opposed the committee's suggestion that the course be offered on a test basis in the spring because he felt there had not been enough time to debate the proposed changes.

"When a drastic change is being made in a required course, I think the rest of the faculty have a right to take part in the discussion, and I don't think that process had been completed."

English 306 is required of freshmen, but about 40 per cent do not take it because they score high enough on a standardized test. The revised English 306 was initially slated to be offered last fall, but the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Standish Meacham, decided to postpone it one year to allow for further debate.

Because of the furor over the course, the administration also took the unusual step of having the course reviewed not only by the English department, but also by broader campus groups including deans of colleges other than liberal arts. Some of those deans reportedly had objected to the changes, as did some influential alumni.

Mr. Kruppa, the chairman, said he understood the committee members' frustrations and reasons for resigning. "They felt they had acted legitimately as a course committee, had drawn up a new syllabus, and then were constantly blocked and frustrated in their attempts to implement the syllabus."

Mr. Kruppa said he would appoint a new committee to consider future course revisions, but he added that he had no idea what direction it would take.

Reaction to the committee's resignation was as sharply polarized as the debate over the course had been. Members of the National Association of Scholars, a national organization that opposes what it calls the politicization of the curriculum, had denounced the course, and saw the committee's resignation as a victory.

"Needless to say, we are pleased," said Glenn M. Ricketts, research director of the Princeton, N.J.-based association. "As far as we were concerned, when the changes were made, English 306 ceased to be English in any recognizable form and became contemporary emergency sociology."

Such comments infuriate proponents of the course, who say the course is about argumentation, not indoctrination. The revised course would have required students to read court decisions -- including dissenting opinions, they say -- and to write thoughtful, carefully reasoned compositions about them.

The members of the now-defunct committee met with graduate students in English last week to explain why they had resigned. The freshman course is taught mainly by graduate students, and many of the approximately 40 persons who attended the meeting expect to teach it next fall.

Several students said they were annoyed that the content of the course had been all but lost in the heated rhetoric that the controversy had generated.

"What troubles me more than anything else is that the U.S. Constitution is considered dangerously leftist," said Christine Caver, a graduate student and an assistant instructor in English. "I'm afraid we're going to be reduced to writing about elementary-school topics."

"In a composition class, you have to write about something," she added. "If we can't write about the Constitution, what is safe?"