

# 'Political correctness'<sup>①</sup> at heart of UT feud

By Kirby Moss  
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When University of Texas English Professor Alan Gribben first opposed creating a master's degree program in ethnic studies in 1987, he set a course that would lead him and the university into a debate of national proportions.

Forty-four professors voted for the program in ethnic studies and Third World culture. Gribben cast the lone vote against it. He made no comment, he says, but some of his colleagues felt his vote was a powerful statement.

Gribben said he was instantly labeled a racist.

"Within days, people in my department stopped speaking to me — even though minutes after the first vote I voted for the degree plan in a unanimous vote at the Ph.D. level," Gribben said recently.

Gribben's vote was seen by colleagues as not being "politically correct," and he has paid a heavy price for expressing his opinion, he said.

The term "politically correct" once referred to a liberal, multicultural

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She agreed to one later, but only because her committee members voted to do so.

Each year, about 3,000 students enroll in more than 100 sections of E306. Graduate student teachers and a few professors make up their own syllabus for each section. So,

it is not unusual to have, for example, students in 27 sections focusing on almost 27 different topics.

Brodkey said the revision was intended to give graduate student teachers a reference syllabus from which to work.

*Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study* by Paula Rothenberg was the initial book chosen for the course. Opponents said the book, which looks at forms of discrimination in America, was full of radical political views that had nothing to do with English composition.

Rothenberg's book was abandoned, Brodkey said, because the book alone was not diverse enough. It was not, she said, because Gribben and other opponents saw the book as an attempt by teachers to impose their own social and politi-

cal views on others.

English department professors are trying to form another committee that will take up the issue of E306. Former committee member Heinzelman said she'd give it another try, but only if the English department and UT administrators showed sincere support for the idea.

"We have not given up," said Brodkey, director of the Lower Division English program at UT.

Throughout the public debate about E306, the students seemed most confused.

Some students at UT say they are already writing about social issues and don't see a need for change. Others say the English curriculum should include a choice of traditional and non-traditional

readings, and finally some students say the Western European view of the world is the best view, so why clutter it.

Though UT's E306 fight is ended temporarily, it wasn't the first nor the last battle over a college curriculum.

Brodkey and members of the committee say that for college educators to act as though politics in the form of curricula and indoctrination has just landed on colleges campuses in the past few years is ridiculous.

"I suppose there was nothing political about reading" Western European writers such as John Locke or William Yeats, said Brodkey, sarcastically. "I suppose all of their works were just unquestionable truth and wisdom."

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tural view of life from within the university. But it has become almost a term of derision, now applied to a radical, intolerant view of the world and academia. Some educators believe that politically correct thinking is undermining the intellectual foundation of college education and curtailing honest debate through intolerance.

"Conservatives have picked up the term to label efforts on some college campuses to carry out multiculturalism," said Ernst Benjamin, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors in Washington, D.C. "Those efforts are turned around and now seen as a form of indoctrination."

One of the early battles over politically correct thinking occurred last summer when UT's English department tried to revise a required freshmen writing course. The effort — and the objection to it — gained national attention.

The class traditionally taught writing through the works of mostly Western European writers — a viewpoint some professors and students feel is inherently unfair to minorities, women and homosexuals. In the proposed revision, students would have learned to write by reading about social and cultural diversity and civil rights issues.

But the proposal to change English 306 slammed into a wall of opposition from Gribben and other professors and students.

The battle over E306, fought on a national stage, has left a well of bitterness. The English department committee working on the course revision has disbanded without forming a new course and blamed the administration for non-support. Gribben, fed up with his treatment for opposing the course, said he is leaving Austin, and Stuart Moulthrop, a member of the committee revising E306, is also leaving.

"I've already accepted the inevitability, a long time ago, of finding a new academic home," said Gribben, 49, who has taught at UT for 17 years. He would not say where he will be teaching.

Moulthrop said he will teach next fall at Georgia Tech in Atlanta.

"My move is in part due to the oppression of E306," he said. "I don't think the opposition had the best interest of students in mind."

The controversy at UT became heated because Gribben and others took what was a departmental debate and went public with it. They labeled the proposal the "indoctrination" of students, said Benjamin.

Had the revision been adopted, a freshman English course would have been officially standardized with reading materials from more liberal perspectives, and some scholars feared similar changes would quickly spread to campuses nationwide and wipe out traditional Western European studies.

"The revision came out of a concern that graduate students teaching the old syllabus could not teach it," said Susan Heinzelman, a committee member and senior lecturer in the English department. "There was no sound pedagogical reason for teaching as they were."

Four committee members — out of six voting — decided that readings used in English 306 sections should be changed. But to what? And to what extent?

One of the places the committee looked for guidance was the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, which three years ago adopted a required writing program that focuses on authors from various cultural backgrounds.

Although the Massachusetts program was implemented without much fanfare, recently some students and faculty have begun to challenge it, said Marcia S. Curtis, coordinator of the Basic Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts.

"I would prefer that all readings not be by white male, Anglo-European authors," Curtis said. "Students are very diverse and if they want to be writers we have to show them those writers who have similar backgrounds. It is rather daunting to hold up Shakespeare" as a realistic model to black and Hispanic students, she said.

Similar intellectual and political battles are erupting at other campuses, and are the first major challenges since the 1960s and early 1970s when students began demanding that universities update the old curricula.

But the change at UT met stiff opposition.

"The real issue there was not the diversity of the course," said Larry Carver, assistant dean in the College of Liberal Arts. "(The committee) wanted to change all 54 sections of the course without testing it out first. No one would have objected to a field test of 6 to 12 sections."

Linda Brodkey, chairwoman of the policy committee, said she didn't feel a field test was needed because she didn't believe the changes were a radical departure from freshman English.