

EDITORIALS

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VIEWPOINT

HAPPY TRAILS

Gribben leaves fight with honor

The departure of Alan Gribben has little to do with his politics, yet he is the victim of a fierce political battle waged in the Department of English over curricular issues. In 1987, Gribben, a Mark Twain scholar, cast the only dissenting vote in the department against a Third World and Ethnic Studies program for graduate students. After that vote, Professor Gribben became a pariah. Angry colleagues maligned him, and many of his friends abandoned him. Then came the real abuse.

When he opposed transforming the first-year composition course in rhetoric into a sensitivity seminar in "Writing About Difference," Gribben notified the public about the changes, effectively committing professional suicide. Faculty members began anew their attacks on his character, and the Department Chairman accused Gribben of being an "ultra rightist" in the *Houston Chronicle*.

But Gribben says his politics — though he has not been a particularly "political" person since he protested the Vietnam War at Berkeley during the height of the free speech movement — are "independent, moderate, and concerned for the welfare of my fellow beings."

He was not making a political statement when he voted against the graduate studies program or protested proposed changes in the E306 class. He opposed lumping together complex entities such as "Ethnic" and "Third World" population groups, adding that he thought it absurd that the faculty should think that these courses "inevitably resemble and reinforce each other."

Likewise, when after three years of ostracism from his departmental colleagues, Gribben criticized the proposed readings for the new E306 class, he did it out of reverence for the sanctity of the classroom. He felt the department would be dropping the traditional emphasis on style and grammar to make room for political content, and he feared the new class would treat style and form as incidental.

Why was Gribben hated so much for his defense of traditional academia and the study of British, American and European literature, which he had been teaching at the University for 17 years? He raised questions about the academic direction of the English Department, contributing to the discussion of academic merit. Why were his opinions of a subject he had taught for 17 years and in which he achieved honor dismissed as heresy?

The English faculty's insistence that Gribben stay out of their classrooms was merely a cloak for their message that he stay clear of their political bailiwicks. Ostracizing a person for thinking differently has no place in the university community. It only contributes to an impoverishment of intellectual and political debate.

On May 3, the English faculty unanimously approved a version of the E306 class. It includes an editing log to emphasize grammar, style and rhetoric, while carrying a broader selection of reading materials. Why couldn't they have done that a year ago? Gribben's opponents could have saved the University from embarrassment, the curriculum's integrity and at least one casualty in a faculty war.

Now a respected, tenured professor, who has taught at UT-Austin for 17 years, will leave the University because he opposed a group of intolerant ideologues.

Good luck, Dr. Gribben.

— Matthew Connally