

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

*U. of Texas English Course Sparks Further Debate*

## TO THE EDITOR:

Katherine S. Mangan's discussion of how the "University of Texas's Postponement of Controversial Writing Course Kindles Debate Over Role of Outsiders in Academic Policy" (February 20) erroneously portrays the controversy surrounding English 306, "Writing About Difference," as a contest between a unanimous English faculty and the "outsider" college president.

In fact, significant dissent and debate have occurred within our Department of English. At least two outspoken opponents of the course—John Ruszkiewicz and Maxine Hairston—are U.T. professors of English who are nationally respected for their research and scholarship in English composition. Still other opponents from the Department of English have objected to the course in newspaper editorials and television appearances.

Thus, *The Chronicle* misrepresents the situation by suggesting that various U.T. administrators are unwarrantably opposing the collective will of the Department of English. Those administrators have, in fact, encouraged and benefited from faculty dialogue within and outside the English department.

*The Chronicle* also erroneously suggests that critics of the proposed English 306 are unfamiliar with the syllabus for that course. Indeed, the "Tentative Syllabus" has been widely circulated and studied. My own published analysis of the syllabus demonstrates that it affords hardly any attention to grammar and the mechanics of writing. Nor does the syllabus directly address techniques of editing. One should note that students taking English 306 are precisely those who, having failed to "place out" of the course, most need explicit instruction in writing. The manifest deficiencies of the new English 306 as a writing course merited serious attention.

I also take issue with the emphasis in *The Chronicle* on alleged threats to academic freedom originating outside the English department. As I stated last summer in an article in *The Daily Texan*, the English department's politically slanted and mandatory syllabus posed the real threat to academic freedom. Assistant instructors teaching the vast majority of the new English 306 sections would no longer be offered a choice of antholo-

gies from which to select prose models. Unlike the professoriate, these teachers would have to adopt uniform readings selected primarily to serve social and political agendas.

The ostensible emphasis in the new English 306 on "difference" had thus been undermined by a failure on the part of course advocates to recognize that even apprentice teachers often teach best with different materials and methods, just as different freshmen often write best about different topics. The new English 306, as part of its politicizing agenda, denied differences in point of view, imagination, and intellectual preference. This seemed an internal threat to academic freedom and a sorry precedent for a university community.

The U.T. administration should be commended for its attentiveness to the deficiencies in a proposed university-wide required course that stood to compromise students and teachers alike.

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## TO THE EDITOR:

Your recent article on the controversy at the University of Texas gives a misleading impression. You say that the "new course would ask students to read anti-discrimination court cases and related essays." I have examined the book that was ordered for that course: *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*, edited by Paula Rothenberg. Less than 20 per cent of it deals with court cases. The balance of the book, what you referred to as "related essays," consists of a miscellany of poetry and prose—all written from a radical perspective.

I have no problem with students' reading provocative left-wing materials; but unless such materials are to be taken as gospel, they should be balanced by more moderate views. I challenge anyone to look carefully at the text and tell me it is not a highly tendentious and one-sided set of readings. The editor tells us where she stands when she announces in her introduction that only white people can be racist.

The text includes, among other things, a radical feminist poem denouncing Barbie Dolls, an essay on eating disorders reprinted from *Ms.*

*Magazine*, and a protest poem entitled "Up Against the Wall." As a teacher of philosophy, I was especially interested in an article by the philosopher Ann Ferguson in defense of a genderless society. According to Ferguson, "There is good evidence that human babies are bisexual and only *learn* a specific male or female identity by imitating and identifying with adult models." She inveighs against the "patriarchy" and the family as serving "crucial roles in maintaining the capitalist system."

Again, I should not object to the propriety of including Ferguson's provocative article were it well written and balanced by other less *outré* points of view; but one looks in vain for a dissenting moderate voice. . . .

It is clear that the editor saw no need to avoid tedious pieces, full of jargon, or to provide a balance in viewpoints. A course ostensibly devoted to teaching students how to write well demands far better examples of writing than those found in the Rothenberg text.

When a few dissenting English professors and college administrators complained about the desirability of adopting Rothenberg's book, they were castigated by one member of the department as constituting an "academic firing squad." The dissenters have so far succeeded in putting the course on hold. . . .

I agree that we must be vigilant in our defense of academic freedom. But it is disingenuous to invoke the issue of academic freedom in a controversy over the propriety of changing a *required* freshman writing course into a Workshop on Sexism and Racism. CHRISTINA SOMMER'S  
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