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# Low essay grades show need to examine E306 format

Provisional freshmen may learn more about bureaucratic rhetoric than composition from the Department of English this summer. The department, which is often a source of comic relief, has once again provided another example of incompetence.

In a worthy effort to follow directives from the College of Liberal Arts to reduce grade inflation, the department adopted a new system to grade papers for English 306. The leaders at Parlin Hall have resorted to panel grading, a system not unheard of but nevertheless unusual. Three professors — James Kinneavy, Wayne Lesser and Evan Carton — are responsible for the grading of all E306 sections taught by assistant instructors.

Kinneavy — who heads Lower-Division English — has now come under fire from parents and the administration. Lesser, the associate

chairman of the department, sent a memo to his instructors saying that after they concluded the second group reading, "the overwhelming number of first essays are receiving grades ranging from C to F — with a majority of those below C."

As one instructor said, "Basically, the memo said only three papers deserved a grade higher than a C minus."

The associate chair may not have intended to say that the Department of English is setting limits on how many provisional students can receive passing grades, but it's not clear whether he deserves the benefit of a doubt. Sufficient concern about Lesser's pronouncement has been raised that Dean Robert King has had to form a committee, including outside members in order to avoid the appearance of an administrative "whitewash."

When the committee meets, it should further examine Lesser's pronouncements, grading criteria and the entire organization of the course. In the recent past, E306 has captured more headlines than the University has oil.

The committee should examine what the associate chair meant when he described the papers' "shortcomings of conception and content." Lesser stresses that the majority of writers receiving relatively high marks failed to "see the essay's most significant [sic] purpose or insight as the heart of the argument, as the ambition toward which each observation ought to contribute."

Most likely, Lesser is just trying to encourage undergraduates to make sure that, when marshaling arguments, all the flanks move in concert. But since the students are required to write on a narrow range of topics — including

an essay that posits the bombing of Hiroshima as an act of terrorism — then something more sinister could be taking place.

That is, the department's leadership could be judging students on their ability to draw conclusions deemed to have insight and purpose. Content decisions like this one have been made before in the department, so such desires would not be without precedent.

Even if Lesser was acting in good faith regarding the content issue — because of the department's past misdeeds — the outside committee should thoroughly examine the curricula as well as the methodology employed.

But committee members should also consider just how well the E306 course has been run within the Department of English. Proposals for a separate Division of Rhetoric and Composition need now more than ever a second look.