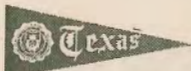


Civil Rights Is Theme for Writing Course



AUSTIN, Tex. — Beginning in the fall, first-year students in composition courses at the University of Texas will no longer write extemporaneous essays on whichever William Faulkner short story or Henry James essay their instructor picks from their textbooks.

Instead, their reading and writing will focus on landmark affirmative-action and civil rights cases, as a result of curriculum changes by the English department.

"We picked civil rights cases because they're real-life narratives, life stories that people can look at and relate to," said Linda Broadkey, an associate professor of English who headed the nine-member committee that formulated the changes. "We really felt that essays forced kids into feeling like they should agree or disagree with a particular author, but cases represent a range of opinions."

The committee's action came before two racial incidents on campus that led to the suspension of two fraternities and a number of subsequent protests.

'Before the Heat Began'

The chairman of the English department, Joseph Kruppa, said that the change was not a result of the incidents, but that they had helped reinforce the department's decision.

"We were thinking about this before the heat began on campus, but the two are not remote," he said in a statement. "As things happened, it seemed more appropriate."

While the changes have been warmly received by administrators and a number of English professors, other members of the department have criticized the plan. They say the

subject matter will politicize what should be simply a writing course, and could lead to grading on the basis of students' politics.

The committee decided to make the changes after concluding that the current course format, which allows instructors to choose their own text and class structure, was unfocused and ineffective. The course has been taught almost exclusively by graduate students, with about 50 classes of 25 students each.

'Floundering as a Course'

Ms. Broadkey said the graduate students, known as assistant instructors, who taught composition reported that they were having difficulty creating a coherent course from the essays and stories picked at random from composition anthologies.

"It became apparent that it was floundering as a course, and I think everyone in the department agreed it was floundering," she said.

In the fall, the course will have a standardized syllabus and a reading list that will include Paula Rothenberg's "Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Approach," an introductory sociology textbook, and several Supreme Court cases dealing with civil rights, affirmative action and rights of the disabled.

Students will study, for example, the Texas case of Sweatt v. Painter, one of several Supreme Court cases leading up to the 1954 landmark Brown v. Topeka Board of Education school-desegregation decision. Heman Marion Sweatt was a black man who sued the university here in 1946 after the law school denied him admission because of his race. The next year the state opened a "separate but equal" law school in Houston for blacks, but Mr. Sweatt refused to

attend. In 1950, the Supreme Court ordered the law school here to admit Mr. Sweatt.

Ms. Broadkey said the committee tried to choose cases in which the Court was sharply split between strong arguments on both sides, so that students would learn that laws can be interpreted in different ways.

Eight professors, or about 10 percent of the English faculty, have decided to return to teaching the class in the fall as a result of the changes.

But another English professor, Alan Gribben, has written to the campus student newspaper and to The Austin American-Statesman calling the redesigned class "the most massive attempt at thought control ever attempted on the campus."

Mr. Gribben, who estimates that about 15 faculty members hold deep reservations about the change, said he thought that it was an issue of academic freedom and politicization.

And John Ruszkiewicz, an associate professor of English who sat on the committee, strongly opposed the use of Ms. Rothenberg's work as a standard text, calling the book a "far left" view with no countervailing opinion."

Ms. Broadkey said she intended to take precautions to make sure the course did not swerve into indoctrination.

"One of the things I made clear with the assistant instructors when I met with them," she said, "is that this is not a course in identity politics. I said, 'If you don't feel you can do that, we'll definitely put you into another course where you can.'"