

UT saves itself from sociological indoctrination



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As I recall, we were sitting here a couple of weeks ago, talking of plans by the University of Texas English department to organize its freshmen composition course around the theme of racism and sexism.

Yes, it was a lousy idea, but we can relax at last. The course, in its revised form, is off. The dean of liberal arts, Standish Meacham, noting strenuous opposition within the faculty, has shelved "Difference — Racism and Sexism" for a year's study. Cremation would have been a more fitting solution, but you can't have everything, as Dr. Johnson or Yogi Berra or somebody once said.

Physically or spiritually, I have been close to the University of Texas a long time, and seldom have I seen a campus controversy arise so quickly — or meet with such quick resolution. But, then, seldom have I seen my university poised to commit folly on a par with "Difference — Racism and Sexism."

In stygian darkness, a faculty committee was toiling over a syllabus to which 3,000 freshmen would have been subjected this fall. Were the students going to learn to write clear English — or to think Correct Thoughts? The new, improved English 306 sounded more like Indoctrination 101, a point made accidentally clear by the head of the committee drafting the course syllabus.

"I'm concerned about the message (the course postponement is) going to send out to minority students," said Linda Brodkey. "I'm afraid the message may be that the lives and intellectual histories of these students is of no interest to the university."

Somebody catch that cat — the one that just leaped from the bag. The primary purpose of retooling English 306, if I take Professor Brodkey's point, was to teach multiculturalism; to expose students to the viewpoints of groups singled out as deprived and misunderstood. Singled out by whom? By the English department itself.

Nobody denies, I hope, that educated people need to understand the various cultural strands that make up America. The argument is: Do you center an English composition course on the viewpoint — telegraphed in the course title — that it's time to write about great evils that society must combat and overcome? How does this make for objective thinking? Or for objective grading?

How indeed would students be graded — on their writing and logic, or on the faithfulness and facility with which they spewed the party line? I say again, this isn't education, it's indoctrination.

But cheerfulness breaks in. The University of Texas saved itself at the last minute from the leap into sociological indoctrination. It saved itself because courage and wisdom proved after all not to be lost qualities in academia.

When plans for English 306 were announced, a Mark Twain scholar on the UT English faculty, Alan Gribben, sounded the alarm in letters to editors. Other profs, in other schools and departments, were similarly exercised. Fifty-six of these, including Professor Gribben, signed and published a quarter-page ad in the student newspaper calling on the English department "to reconsider its decision to turn the university's only required English composition class into a course on racism and sexism."

The signers voiced concern that the course would subordinate "instruction in writing to the discussion of social issues and, potentially, to the advancement of specific political positions."

Such fears are not at all misplaced. Precisely this kind of subordination goes forward in other universities, notably Stanford, which recently plunged head over heels into multiculturalism.

The University of Texas, which likes to call itself a university of the first class, shows wonderful class in quashing "Difference — Racism and Sexism." Those profs — and they are numerous — who invite "white America" to take a guilt trip about its past and present will get no encouragement from what has happened in Austin. Others should be tickled pink. What happened in Austin, when concerned professors saw what they knew to be wrong, and stood up to be counted, could inspire beleaguered colleagues at other campuses around the country.

Hook 'em, Horns.