

English TAs criticized

Survey indicates inexperience

(Editor's Note: This is the concluding part of a series about the University teaching assistant issue. This article deals with whether TAs are qualified and given a fair chance to teach.)

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"Few teaching assistants (TAs) in the English department are good teachers, but on the whole TAs are not yet qualified to be teachers," Dr. James Sledd, English professor, said. "Furthermore, they are not even given a fair chance to be effective teachers because of an impossible workload," he added.

To make his point, Sledd quotes a survey of 138 TAs in the English department entitled, "Profile of Teaching Assistants and Assistant Instructors, Fall, 1975." A close analysis of the survey reveals that the TA system in English department is much abused, Sledd said.

Among the facts are:

- 10 per cent of the TAs had only bachelor's degrees.
- 64 per cent of all TAs in the profile had no college level teaching when they began teaching at the University, and more than 40 per cent had no teaching experience at all.
- One-third of the TAs had no training in pedagogy or had taken only a required three-hour course (398T) in teaching.

(These facts are important because a survey of TA duties conducted by the Measurement and Evaluation Center in spring, 1975, showed that TAs had full charge of their classes. Out of 500 TAs questioned, 326 TAs, representing more than 40 departments, said they controlled their freshmen and sophomore classes.)

Prof. Maxine Hairston, former director of freshman English, interprets the TA "profile" survey differently, however. She does not believe the profile is a "damning indictment" of the TAs. It shows the TAs having

respectable credentials with most having MAs. There is real effort to find qualified people with master's degrees, she said.

"Our MAs have a higher education qualification than what is required to teach in high school," pointed out Dr. Stanley Werbow, dean of the College of Humanities. There a person only needs a BA.

The factor that interferes the most with good teaching, many TAs say, is the workload. TAs are required to register for three courses and teach two classes.

The "profile" shows the average work-week for TAs teaching only one section of freshman composition is 24 hours. On the average, each of the TAs was teaching 1.75 sections in the fall, 1975. The University pays TAs for a 20-hour week.

Sledd said TAs cannot teach well when they teach two sections and take three graduate courses. They can be neither effective teachers nor adequate students.

Sledd also charges that the nine-hour course load rule was imposed to bring in vast sums of money for faculty salaries, a conclusion based on the remarks of a chemistry professor in a Faculty Senate meeting on Oct. 1, 1973.

Responding to a complaint by Sledd that the nine-hour rule was damaging TA teaching, the professor said: "The problem also involves faculty. For example, this nine-hour ruling which went into effect is responsible for approximately \$2 million in appropriations the University got this time that it would not have gotten before. I think you can imagine what would have happened to faculty salaries had this rule not been in effect."

The nine-hour course load was imposed to insure that TAs were "making satisfactory progress toward their degrees," W. Gordon Whaley, the dean of the Graduate School, said in 1972.

One way to evaluate how well a teacher is doing is to ask for the students' opinions. Two surveys of this kind have been conducted to see what students thought of freshman English instruction.

The first survey, conducted by the Division of Teaching Effectiveness in June, 1975, revealed more than three-fourths of the freshmen were pleased with the instruction they were getting in freshman English.

However, the second survey, conducted by the Measurement and Evaluation Center in spring, 1975, showed a much different student view; nearly 60 per cent of more than 1,500 students of all levels said they did not find freshman English at the University even moderately helpful.

Hairston concludes the two studies do not conflict. The second study (by Measurement and Evaluation) asks, "how much did freshman English help you," a different question from "did you think that you were well taught in freshman English," she said.

Sledd, who says trying to change the situation in the English department is like trying to milk a billygoat, believes that reform will have to come from outside.

He recommends the Legislature "decide whether this faculty is going to be a research faculty or whether we're going to give the undergraduates a decent education."

The second step is for someone to say to every member of the faculty in the English department, "You will, whether you want to or not, teach freshmen," Sledd said.

To see what truth there is to different claims, the Texas Legislature is gearing up to investigate the matter of TAs in all state colleges and universities. Speaker of the House Bill Clayton, after being contacted by Sledd last November, assigned the topic to two committees, which plan to begin hearings by mid-June.