



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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Robert D. King, Dean  
College of Liberal Arts

Dear Bob:

Thank you for inviting Linda Ferreira-Buckley, James Kinneavy, John Ruskiewicz, and me to meet with you this Thursday. I am writing to you in advance of our meeting because, up to now, discussion of the proposed Division of Rhetoric and Composition has been dominated by issues of governance. While these issues are important, they have overshadowed other issues that we should be discussing as well. The proposed Division should give us the occasion to think in broad terms about the goals of writing instruction at Texas.

You have explained to us before that by directing E306 to the bottom two-thirds of incoming freshmen, we are devoting a large portion of our resources to teaching students who will not graduate from the university. Your point remains valid.

There are other curricular issues we should consider. Because the new curriculum for E306 stresses critical reading and argumentation skills, the assumptions for exempting students have become obsolete. The new curriculum reflects a national trend toward making argumentation the focus of first-year writing courses. I have been a consultant for three years on a major federal grant that in part examines the relationship between writing in high schools and writing in college. The findings of this project are supported by other national studies of writing, which show that the teaching of writing in high schools primarily concerns personal writing and writing about literature. Students are very rarely given instruction in identifying the claims of arguments, distinguishing the assumptions for rival claims, and producing arguments of their own that acknowledge the viewpoints of others. Since critical reading and writing abilities are necessary in academic writing, it is not surprising that many colleges and universities have decided to commit their scarce instructional resources to these abilities.

The present structure of E306 exempts about 35 per cent of students on the basis of a multiple choice test of grammar, mechanics, and usage. Let me offer an analogy to mathematics instruction. Imagine for a moment that calculus is not taught in high school. The math department tests incoming freshmen for low-level mathematical abilities and then denies the upper 35 per cent the opportunity to take calculus. In such conditions the teaching of a sequence of college courses in mathematics would be frustrated. A similar situation now exists for writing courses. We cannot develop a rational sequence of writing courses with the current policy of teaching only students in the bottom two-thirds of their class. I am also convinced that we are doing a great disservice to the students we exempt.

A matter of even greater concern is that we do not have the resources to administer the present lower-division program, staff undergraduate writing courses, and maintain the graduate rhetoric program. Since I came to Texas in 1979 we have lost John Walter, Steve Witte, Greg Myers, Maxine Hairston, Linda Brodkey, and now Jim

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Kinneavy is on modified service. We have added only Linda Ferreira-Buckley and Marjorie Woods. Woods is pressured to teach courses in medieval literature because of the loss of David Wallace and Rita Copeland. Our graduate rhetoric program has grown considerably during the past two years, and several students who have worked in literature are now moving into rhetoric. We will have the largest representation of graduate students at the Conference of College Composition and Communication in several years. It is extremely important to maintain a nationally prominent graduate program both for the proposed Division and for the English department. The majority of prestigious placements the department has made over the last few years at schools such as at Ohio State University, Ohio University, Indiana University, University of Iowa, University of Arizona, University of Illinois at Chicago, Clemson University, and Texas A&M University have been Ph.D.s in rhetoric and composition.

We are very thin everywhere. We used to teach three graduate seminars each semester, and now we are reduced to one or two which are overflowing. We used to teach many more upper-division writing courses than we can now offer. Of the group of rhetoric faculty you will meet with on Thursday, one is on modified service, one is a third-year assistant professor, and one is the chair of the graduate program in English. There are other faculty in the English Department who have made valuable contributions to both undergraduate writing and the graduate rhetoric program and who no doubt will continue to contribute. But there is no one else except John Trimble whose principal commitments are in rhetoric and composition. And even for those who are willing and interested in teaching writing may have few opportunities because of the demands of our bulging major and E316K.

I believe that the major obstacle the proposed Division of Rhetoric and Composition faces is inadequate resources; the Division cannot succeed with support at the present level. We all agree that a Division of Rhetoric and Composition must offer our students excellent writing instruction. To realize this shared goal, we should spend the next year planning a Division that makes the best use of University resources. In any case, we need to add faculty in rhetoric and composition. We need to begin by making an aggressive effort to hire this year.

Sincerely,

Lester Faigley

Copies:  
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