



Staff Photo

UT's Dr. James Sledd in his office.

'Most hated man'

UT professor has made enemies for speaking out

By LEE KELLY

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University of Texas English professor James Sledd describes himself as "probably the most hated man on campus," and he may be right.

Since 1967, the 63-year-old Sledd has made enemies with his attacks on what he sees as "inequalittes" in faculty workloads, "misuse" of teaching assistants and the "neglect" of undergraduate teaching.

He hasn't been content to play the role of campus gadfly, either. He's been before the Texas Legislature, letting fly with the same blunt language he uses on campus to press his campaign for academic reform.

Sledd's frank views on faculty workloads — a topic many academics feel outsiders can't and don't understand — makes his fellow professors and administrators more than a little uneasy.

The view on campus is that the legislature is trying to oversimplify the workload issue by putting professors on a 40-hour week. Teaching college isn't like working in a factory, the argument goes.

A supporter — he does have a few — says that he sometimes disagrees with Sledd's views, but applauds his courage.

"He speaks his mind at times when nobody else will," says Dr. John Durbin, UT associate professor of mathematics.

The animosity he's accumulated doesn't bother him, says Sledd. He's only interested in the issues, and typically he's got plenty to say about a UT system draft on workloads.

Dr. Ernest Smerdon, UT system vice president for academic affairs says it's "premature" to discuss publicly the draft and its implications.

Sledd isn't waiting for general release of the document to criticize it, though.

The UT system proposal was prepared in response to a directive from the last session of the legislature to the Coordinating Board and Texas' higher education institutions to develop policies and standard reports for academic workloads and services.

Sledd's lobbying of the legislature was, in large part, responsible for that directive.

Basically, the proposal, now being circulated among UT system administrators for comment, requires professors to teach three undergraduate courses

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ses. The current workload requirement calls for professors to teach four undergraduate courses.

But workload requirement exemptions favor researchers, administrators and professors who teach graduate-level courses at the expense of those professors who teach undergraduates, Sledd says.

The end result: Undergraduate teachers will have to teach three formal classes. That's a time-consuming job that won't allow them to pursue their own research, Sledd contends.

Even worse, undergraduate students will be cheated because the "shining lights" will be allowed to concentrate on research rather than classroom instruction, Sledd says.

"That research disservices the people of Texas," Sledd argues. Although research brings prestige and lucrative government and private grants, "it takes time, talent and attention from the 30,000 plus undergraduate students at this university. Do the children get (as teachers) the shining lights of this university? No, the shining lights are off doing their research."

"Who profits from this research?" Sledd asks rhetorically. "The people who do it. Academics want to be the brains of the bureaucracy."

"They demand an always larger share of the available rewards. And by research they get that larger share. Other agencies of the bureaucracy profit, too — governments, business, industry, the military. The big corporations get their basic research done, in considerable

part, at the expense of the ordinary taxpayer."

And if the rewards under the current system of priorities are in research, Sledd argues, then the professors who won't qualify for the exemptions will suffer as much, if not more, than the undergraduates they teach.

"To do any research, the undergraduate teacher must take time away from his family and leisure.

"Yet if he can't do any research, by their (UT administrators) own arguments, he can't teach well. Yet he's to carry the burden of teaching."

In Sledd's view, a more equitable workload would be to require all professors — "straight across the board, no exceptions" — to teach two undergraduate courses. That would give all teachers the opportunity to pursue their research and undergraduates the benefit of being taught by more full professors, he says.

Yes, it would cost more money because more teachers would have to be hired, Sledd says, "but it's a question of priorities."

Sledd says he'll work his own research — in English linguistics, literary criticism and studies of the works of Chaucer and Samuel Johnson — around a three-undergraduate-course workload he's requested. He wants to teach the three courses regardless of the requirements finally adopted by UT regents.

Regents are expected to get their first look at the system workload draft at a meeting later this summer.