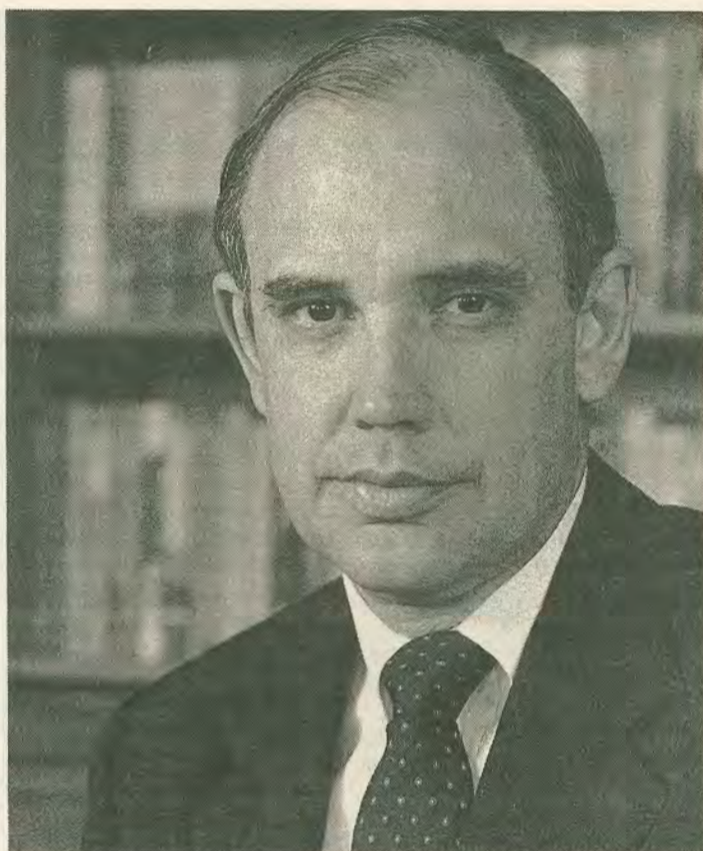


Personal & Professional



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Linda Brodkey of the revision panel: "All we did was change the means for meeting the already stated curricular goals."



LARRY MURPHY, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

President William H. Cunningham: "All undergraduate students are affected by major changes in required core courses."

U. of Texas's Postponement of Controversial Writing Course Kindles Debate Over Role of Outsiders in Academic Policy

Modern Language Association and AAUP express concern over how university handled the case

By KATHERINE S. MANGAN

AUSTIN, TEX.

When administrators at the University of Texas postponed a revised freshman writing course, did they cave in to pressure from outside critics, or did they act responsibly to insure healthy debate?

That question is at the center of a dispute that has attracted the attention of national higher-education groups, as well as writing instructors across the country.

The Modern Language Association and the American Association of University Professors say they are concerned about the way the university has handled the matter. They question whether people outside the English department were given too much authority to dictate whether and how the course would proceed.

At issue is a freshman writing course, English 306, "Writing About Difference," taught mostly by graduate students and required of some 3,000 students each year.

Focusing on 'Difference'

In May, an English-department committee, concerned that the course was not meeting its goals of teaching students how to write clearly and compose effective arguments, prepared a revised syllabus that focused on the theme of "difference."

The new course would ask students to read anti-discrimination court cases and related essays and, after examining all the arguments, write their own analyses of the arguments.

Opponents of the course, including local members of the National Association of Scholars, contended that students in such a class would feel pressured to take liberal stances on such controversial issues as gay rights and affirmative action because of what they perceived to be the left-wing

bias of the course. The critics took their case to the news media over the summer. In a paid advertisement in the university's student newspaper, they charged that the English department had decided "to turn the university's only required English composition class into a course on racism and sexism."

'Political Correctness'

After a number of national news reports and editorials—in which the course was called everything from radical to an example of "political correctness"—the dean of the college of liberal arts, Standish Meacham, announced in July that the course revisions would be postponed a year, until fall 1991.

The delay, he said, would provide time

to clear up misunderstandings about the course.

Since Mr. Meacham had been a staunch supporter of the course, several members of the English department speculated that he had been pressured by the university to shelve the course. President William H. Cunningham denies that.

In any case, Mr. Meacham announced in January that he would resign as dean at the end of the spring semester. Although he cited personal reasons, many here believe that it was due in part to frustration over the controversy.

Then, faced with the task of having to persuade a skeptical campus—some call it misinformed—the entire committee that revised the course resigned this month

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(*The Chronicle*, February 13). The members also asked the A.A.U.P. and the M.L.A. to look into what they viewed as unwarranted interference in a departmental matter.

In the spring issue of the M.L.A. newsletter, Frances Smith Foster, who heads the association's Committee on Academic Freedom, Professional Rights, and Responsibilities, writes that the Texas case raises "serious issues of academic procedure and freedom."

'The Right to Comment'

"Clearly, faculty members have the right to speak out publicly on university issues," she writes. "Clearly, too, citizens have the right to comment on the work conducted in a public university. Unfortunately, the character of the debate on the Austin campus and throughout the state suggests that incomplete, inaccurate, and distorted information may well have contributed to decisions affecting the course."

Linda Brodkey, an associate professor of English who headed the revision committee, agrees. She says that although English 306 is required of all freshmen, she does not feel the committee should have to report changes in a course syllabus to people outside the department if the purpose of the course remains unchanged.

"It wouldn't concern me at all if

we had changed the goals of the course, but we didn't," she says. "All we did was change the means for meeting the already stated curricular goals. I don't think professors should have to check with other professors every time they change a text."

President Cunningham argues that the proposed changes were drastic enough to warrant a full debate. "All undergraduate students are affected by major changes in required core courses," he said in a prepared statement. "It is essential, therefore, that the entire university community has ample opportunity to review proposed changes in such courses." In an interview, Mr. Cunningham also cited the continuing discussions outside the College of Liberal Arts about the merits of the course.

The chairman of the English department, Joseph Kruppa, says the department will soon discuss how to proceed with the matter.

One administrator who remains unconvinced the new course was a good idea is Herbert H. Woodson, dean of the College of Engineering. When the course changes were first proposed, he asked a standing committee in the College of Engineering to consider whether the revised course would meet the writing needs of his students and, if not, whether the college could offer a substitute course.

The deans of at least three other

colleges have also expressed doubts about the course, and at least one other is said to be considering a substitute course.

Alternatives Sought

After Ms. Brodkey made a presentation to the colleges, the committee in the engineering school decided it could not support the new course, Dean Woodson says. "They were of the opinion that that is not how you teach writing," he says. "If it was going to cease being a writing course and become something else, we wanted to look at some alternatives."

Michael Starbird, associate dean for academic and student affairs for the College of Natural Sciences, believes that outside administrators should be permitted to evaluate a required course. "It's very healthy for there to be a lot of in-

volvement from other colleges, but usually this is done in a very congenial frame of mind."

Alan W. Friedman, a professor of English, thinks that rather than being the subject of healthy debate, English 306 has attracted unwarranted intrusion from people outside the department. "It seems that many constituencies within and outside the university have a voice in determining freshman English—everyone except the professionals in the field and those who teach it," he says in a magazine article he is preparing on the controversy.

Supporters of the course argue that most of its critics have not seen the syllabus and are reacting to reports that have portrayed the course incorrectly.

"What concerns me is that people were so distracted by the topic that they lost sight of the fact that

this is a writing course, not a course in racism and sexism, and a better writing course at that," Ms. Brodkey says.

Robert Kreiser, associate secretary of the A.A.U.P., says "there are definitely grounds for concern" about the way the course has been handled. The A.A.U.P. has written a letter to President Cunningham expressing those concerns. Mr. Kreiser says the association is waiting to see what the English department decides to do before it takes further action.

Mr. Kreiser says it is common for a required course to be reviewed by other colleges and departments. But, he adds, such scrutiny generally does not take place when the stated purpose of the course is not being changed.

"It becomes impossible to run a university when every course revision is subject to second-guessing by people outside the areas of specialization," he says. ■