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Dear Editor:

Why was E 346K suspended? Was it because the course really had logistical problems or was it because some people would prefer an English department without serious courses in writing? If the former (as I prefer to believe), then the crisis in the department is regrettable but understandable; if the latter, we face the unhappy prospect of a group of individuals using logistical excuses to undermine and defeat ordinary university procedures for course development and approval. Unfortunately, Wayne Lesser's recent letter to The Daily Texan (March 6, 1985) leads to the latter conclusion.

His attack on both E 306 and E346K is familiar. His assertion that these courses are concerned with remedial skills such as "mechanics, persuasion, etc." suggests, by that very juxtaposition, that either he does not understand the courses or intends to misrepresent their focus. Perhaps more significant is an implication that classes in rhetoric and writing are interlopers in a Department of English--even though the discipline of English had its origins in departments of rhetoric and language. The first serious scholar of English literature at Harvard, for example, held a chair in Rhetoric.

Lesser is misinformed in some of his assertions about freshman English. For example, he holds Professor Kinneavy substantially responsible for the rhetorical focus of the current writing program when, in fact, that orientation predates the syllabus Kinneavy wrote. A description of E 601, the freshman writing class taught in the 1950s, includes this reminder to instructors: "Whatever the essay or book in hand, the English teacher will throw emphasis on its qualities as a piece of writing rather than as a source of information. . . particular content is secondary to matters of organization and expression." Kinneavy advocates a more sophisticated relationship between form and content in writing, but clearly he did not invent composition courses that focus on writing.

Nor is Lesser accurate in describing the current E 306 as remedial. "Rhetoric and Composition" is no more remedial in its purpose or content than our sophomore literature surveys--which also cover material students have encountered in high school, but at a higher level. Nor does E 306 differ in kind from E 325M (Advanced Expository Writing), which Lesser seems to praise. Many institutions do offer what

are called "basic writing" courses, but these remedial courses have about the same relationship to E 306 that Basic Math has to Calculus.

The fact is that E. 306 is the only course I know of in the English department to have been systematically and exhaustively evaluated and shown to be doing its job. The fashioners of Humanities 303 (exactly the kind of discipline-specific alternative to the regular freshman class Lesser would probably prefer) staunchly resisted such a study when they first proposed their course, preferring to rely on impressionistic evaluations. Now, four years later, the administrators of Hmn. 303 are still blaming logistics for the failure of that course to attract students. In fact, we are able to fill the discipline-specific Humanities classes only by refusing to allow students to register for the available sections of E 306 they clearly prefer. Despite these persistent enrollment problems, I believe that we are a department large and diverse enough to support both courses without conflict: Hmn. 303 *is* a reasonable and interesting alternative to E 306. Most students, however, do not elect to take it.

Like Professor Lesser, I teach literature classes--usually Shakespeare--and I value what students learn in them. But I also know that I am not teaching writing when I am discussing the politics of Coriolanus, the structure of Hamlet, or the images in Macbeth, nor would I want to add composition as a *major* responsibility to a course in which I am already expected to teach ten plays. I have found that merely requiring writing about the "great ideas" in these dramas does not automatically confer on my students the ability to develop significant topics, to argue them coherently, to arrange them effectively, or to address any subject with an unerring sense of purpose or style. I wish it did, but it doesn't. Over the years, I have regularly spoken with the students who have written the least successful papers in the Shakespeare class; almost inevitably I discover that they have, by one device or another, avoided freshman English or transferred into the University without taking our writing courses.

Such evidence is, I admit, anecdotal. But so are the impressions Dr. Lesser registers in his indictments of E 306 and E 346K. I agree with him that students should write in every course they take. I agree that studying literature makes students more sensitive users of the language. But I also believe in the special value and integrity of our writing classes. They represent our sincerest commitment to our most important clientele--our students. They are the very foundation of our profession, historically and intellectually.

Sincerely,



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