

# E 309 planned differently from original departmental proposal

I read with interest and great surprise Darryl Ewing's article "New elective composition course to become requirement in Fall '88" (*Texan*, Feb 21). As usual, those of us in the Department of English who teach rhetoric and composition found out about the latest curricular changes from the newspaper. Since there is very little communication about such changes within the department, and since newspaper articles can only convey a small amount of general information about them, it is difficult for one to evaluate such changes unless one is a faculty member sitting on the committee proposing them.

Nevertheless, both instructors in the department and members of the University community in general need to examine and evaluate as carefully as possible the various effects of such basic changes as the drastic revamping of the University's writing courses. The information in Ewing's article, though partial, enables us to see certain obvious effects and pose questions about other possible effects of instituting the latest version of the English department's writing program.

The most outstanding effect is that the new writing course, E 309, will be a *required* course rather than an elective one. We do not know why. Another effect is that the course will not be a sophomore course, but a freshman course. Again, we do not know why.

These changes are especially surprising — and all the more significant — because the proposed new

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writing courses discussed and approved at the department meeting Sept. 18, 1985, were *elective sophomore* courses. The changes nullify the department's Sept. 18 vote approving the new writing requirements, because the faculty then approved very different courses from the single course which has evolved.

Those of us who have followed closely the development of a new writing program are especially puzzled that E 309 is being proposed as a required course because the department has repeatedly emphasized that a major reason for revamping the writing program has been that the department cannot staff a required freshman course. For example, in a Sept. 19, 1985 article, the *Texan* reported that Charles Rossman, assistant professor of English and member of the E 346K committee which eventually came up with the new writing program voted on Sept. 18, "said that the number of faculty members needed to teach the 4,000 freshman students taking E 306 this semester was a 'fundamental' factor in the department's proposal." One wonders why the department can find enough instructors to teach 4,000 freshmen E 309 but not enough to teach 4,000 freshmen E 306.

In addition to the questions of departmental approval of the new course and of its staffing, we need to consider the question of the course's content. In the original proposal of the E 346K committee, the three elective sophomore courses were titled "Topics in Writing," "The Writing Process" and "Thinking and Writing." According to Ewing's article, Joseph Kruppa, associate professor of English, has said that E 309 will involve topics such as "great books" and popular culture. Kruppa's statements about the course's content seem to fit into only the "Topics in Writing" category. It remains unclear whether any of the variants of E 309 will address the kinds of problems that the courses in "The Writing Process" and "Thinking and Writing" would cover.

In Ewing's article, Alan Gribben, associate professor of English, claims that "E 309 will give students a stronger writing background than E 306," but Ewing does not say why Gribben believes this. Gribben also says that "E 306 had a flatly designed approach. There was only one way to teach it and we all did it."

But many of us who have taught E 306 would question whether E 309 would be any better, at least until we had seen some hard evidence. And we would also challenge Gribben's statement that "E 306 has a flatly designed approach." It is true that there is a syllabus for E 306, but it is also true that there is a good deal of flexibility built into it. A few hallway conversations

with the instructors of E 306 classes would have made Gribben very much aware that teachers take many different approaches to E 306.

At any rate, any comparisons between E 306 and E 309 at this point are dubious at best, for one cannot compare a proven course with a flexible syllabus to a brand new course that has no prospectus.

Finally, the implementation of E 309 appears to involve important changes in the operation of the Department of English Writing Lab. According to Gribben, the Writing Lab will be giving "crash courses" to help students overcome writing deficiencies.

It is not clear, however, what kind of pedagogy is to inform these courses. If these will be complete courses involving all aspects of the writing process, they may be valuable. If their purpose is merely to cram grammar into writers' skulls so that they can pass an objective placement test, their value is questionable.

These are but a few of the effects of the proposed changes in the writing program of the English department. These effects alone, however, constitute good reason for the University community to consider whether the proposed changes will genuinely enhance the writing abilities of students, or merely express the philosophical or aesthetic preferences of the department's administrators.

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