

A 'University' Perspective

An award-winning teacher indicts the UT education factory

Editor's note: These are excerpts from a speech delivered by Texas Excellence Teaching Award recipient Kate Frost, professor of English.

Kate Frost
GUEST COLUMNIST

Since this is my "last lecture," I'd like to tell you what it's been like being a clerk at this University.

I teach three undergraduate courses each term, usually two upper-division Renaissance classes and one section of E316K — all of this on Tuesdays and Thursdays. ... In between, I hold office hours, do departmental advising, teach one course each summer, and three times yearly, help run centralized registration and adds/drops at the Erwin Center. I hold no UT office nor do I sit on important committees.

What time I have I spend on research. I write books and articles on 17th century literary history and I read scholarly papers, about four each year, at national conferences — the expenses of which I mostly absorb myself. ... I also win teaching awards: In the past six years I have won four University teaching awards, in addition to three citations by *Utmost* magazine's "Best and Worst" poll. If you look at the UT budget, you will see that I am at the bottom of the English Department's pay scale for professors of my rank. I have come to the conclusion that in my department, in my college, in my University, undergraduate teaching does not count.

What's wrong? Certainly it isn't for lack of folks saying out loud and in print that teaching counts, and it's not for lack of folks criticizing the University when evidence to the contrary comes to light.

Item — December 16, 1969: *The Daily Texan* castigates the University's lower-division English courses as objects of "continuing indiffer-

ence and neglect."

Item: In 1977 (this is a quote from *The Daily Texan*), "The University of Texas Faculty Senate adopted recommendations Monday calling on UT faculty to rededicate itself to undergraduate education."

Item: March 2, 1979, again *The Daily Texan*, quoting Robert King, then dean of the College of Liberal Arts, "It is time to redress the balance between graduate and undergraduate education." Graduate programs, he maintained, would not be cut out, but would shrink so that "more regular faculty [will participate] in the teaching of undergraduates."

This is 1990. Have things changed? I don't think so. ...

Tenure-track faculty are not committed to undergraduates, especially to lower-division undergraduate teaching. They can't afford to be. It doesn't pay in salary, promotion or respect. It doesn't pay because this University is not institutionally committed to undergraduate teaching.

I have to speak about what I know, and what I know is the teaching of reading and writing, albeit on an advanced and sophisticated, that is, University level. ... I am very proud of my success in these classes, I am even prouder of my students' successes, as the grade sheets will truthfully report. ...

Once upon a time at this University you could get a lot of help, experience, and training in the art of writing, and I taught most of the courses offered: three freshman-level courses, one of which trained students to write about

literature, an intermediate expository writing course, generally aimed at sophomores and juniors, an article-writing course, an editorial course, a technical writing course aimed at engineers and business folks, and a whiz-bang expository writing course, still called 325M.

Everybody took a lot of writing. But you see, the teaching of writing is labor-intensive, since one good teacher can work with a maximum of about 25 students (the ideal is 15, really). And so teaching of writing got to be very expensive. That was the first problem. Lots of courses, lots of students taking lots of courses, lots of money going to the teaching of writing.

Second problem: Nobody who was anybody in the English Department wanted to teach writing. In the words of one of our research-oriented scholars: "Composition stinks!"

Now, why does the teaching of writing — one of the most exciting occupations I can think of — have such a gamey smell?

Historically, most English departments have taught writing as the core of their endeavor, balanced with courses in literature. Many colleges and universities still adhere to this practice. But most faculty who teach writing have published not about composition but about literature. And publication gets raises, tenure, promotion at the University of Texas. ... It is very, very difficult to concentrate on deconstructing D.H. Lawrence or on investigating the implications of Shakespeare as a radical Marxist feminist when you've got 50 undergraduate essays to grade, all of which begin: "Beowulf is definitely a hero."

The teaching of writing takes excruciating time, effort and heart. But our University demands that its teachers give those three preci-

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A University Perspective: Students real losers in publish or perish struggle

our commodities to the burgeoning paper trail on which it builds its reputation. ...

I found myself increasingly surrounded by non-tenure-track faculty as the number of students admitted annually to the University grew and grew. If we couldn't get regular faculty, we had to get grad students, and when we ran out of them we began hiring our own Ph.D. graduates — the job market had dried up across the country, and they were already trained and all too willing to teach. Soon there were more non-tenure-track faculty in the department than there were "real" faculty. And they cost money. And they could vote in our department meetings. And, oh brother!

So the English Department fired them — 48 out of 53 lecturers — and dismantled the writing program. Today we have left, basically, only three writing courses in the department: English 306, English 309, and the advanced course, English 325M, with the occasional offering of an article-writing or editorial course. I wish I could teach them, but I can't if there is no infrastructure to help me.

Let me explain: At one point in time — the famous days of E346K, that course that everybody was required to take and that wasn't offered — the English Department, in its attempt to spread the workload across the University — basically attempted to wipe out freshman English. There were then instituted upper-division courses which would fulfill a major writing requirement. You take these courses now. I'd like to know how much real writing you are learning. I'm told that last fall the administration promised more support and assistance for these courses in the form of increased funds for teaching assistants, but so far the other shoe hasn't dropped. Do you really think it will? ...

I did a little checking recently: This spring the University offered 57 sections of English 306 — all, 100 percent, were taught by graduate students. The University offered 27 sections of English 309; only one of those sections was taught by regular faculty, poor, lonely soul.

In 1986, Professor [William] Sutherland in the University publication *On Campus* maintained: "The English Department is interested in teaching writing." Well, you could have fooled me! We have abrogated our responsibility to teaching, and you the students are paying for it — as usual.

Now, the reason I'm dwelling so long on this situation is twofold, first because I witnessed the disembowelment of the writing program here and secondly because the winds, I think, are changing a bit. Both the English Department and the College of Liberal Arts are under new and, one hopes, more enlightened managements. I have reason to believe that the commitment within these bodies to the teaching of writing — albeit a commitment by a minority — is serious and growing.

But given the track record of this University, I have my doubts. Nevertheless, the natives are restless. Perhaps the increasingly militant demand of students for the education they deserve and for which they are paying will join the energy of the minority who are rebuilding the writing

program, and together they shall prevail. Perhaps.

Last Thursday I asked each of my classes what they would say if they were in my shoes tonight, and I got some pretty sharp answers. I can't address them all tonight, but I'd like to emphasize some of those criticisms because they point to the larger problem that underlies poor undergraduate education.

The first and loudest response I got was this: too much, too big, too many. This University is too big; this University admits too many students; this University has too much bureaucracy.

Their words, not mine: "Every year the administration admits a huge body of undergraduates but never provides the money and the people to teach them as they should be taught."

"Here we are seniors in English, which supposedly has classes where you can read and write and get to know your professors, and we're stuck in huge upper division classes with students who are only trying to get their GPAs up so they can get back to business."

Why, they ask, does the University admit so many if it can't or won't give them an education? One answer: The University gets paid by the head — not what's in the head, or what they put in the head, but just by the head. ...

Biggest gripe of all: Just plain bad teaching by professors who don't care — who turn their backs on the students and mumble the class away at the blackboard; who read out loud in class the entire text assigned for reading the night before; who leave all conferences to their TAs and disappear into their research. ... Over and over I hear: "This place just doesn't give a rip about teaching." Period.

When I interviewed my classes, I suggested that students who didn't wish to speak out might visit me in my office, and a number did. They spoke of poignant, painful issues that accompany poor teaching, issues like open misogyny, open contempt of student opinion.

And some spoke about what it's like not to be white and middle-class at this University. It didn't make for easy listening.

In a state and a world that is rapidly changing from white to darker shades, our record of minority hiring of faculty and recruitment and retention of student body is abysmal. If you've been reading the paper at all in the last several days, you need no more comment from me.

In my own department, our record is flat zero right now for black faculty. If we're lucky and our recent offer is accepted by a Chicano scholar, the number of Chicano faculty will grow to four in fall 1990 — which brings us up to par with where we were 10 years ago. That's progress? ...

Dean Standish Meacham of Liberal Arts has announced his commitment to solving this problem in the long run. I am not so convinced about the help he will get from the University, however. If you are concerned about how we're going to hack it in a multicultural society, you'd better give him all the support you can, because he's going to need friends, believe me.

Always, again, why do we initiate programs, reforms, change, only to find that the same thing had been attempted years before and been stymied by the University? ...

Do you know how universities got started? It certainly wasn't with the Boards of Regents and presidents. And it wasn't with the faculty either.

Back in the cold and damp Middle Ages, universities began with students who had to get together. They had to get together because, first, there just weren't a whole lot of books to go around and they had to share, sometimes sharing just pages. The second thing was that it was a whole lot more conducive to study if you got together in one building, one room, and had a fire to keep you warm. ... But the students got there first.

The universities belonged first to you. And from this moment on in this talk I am going to use the word "university" in its correct sense: a community of students, taught by professors, and assisted by administrators. Is this the university you see around you? Folks, you wuz robbed!

What's the problem? First of all, it's not research. I know because research is my life. Teaching makes me alive.

The problem is research valued to the exclusion of teaching, or real education. The pattern set for higher education today has caused this institution to become a research institute for government, business, industry and the military. Our faculties, even in the humanities and in my own department of English, hope to establish positions as the indispensable brains of our interlocking bureaucracies. Since undergraduate teaching does not serve that purpose, most professors confine their teaching, when they can, to higher levels. ...

A quote from the annual report of the standing committees of the general faculty, section A.6, Faculty Welfare Committee:

"The procurement of research grants becomes almost an end in itself until the time for serious study and attention to both the onerous and enjoyable tasks of teaching are reduced to the vanishing point. ... We feel ... there is a general degradation in the quality of teaching and that the undergraduate students are not being trained or educated as well as they should be."

Wow! Wonderful! A call for change! Folks, that report was dated 1976-77.

Have things changed? In *The Daily Texan* of Nov. 6, 1989, the administration "denied that the University uses research as the primary criteria for hiring professors or raising their salaries."

Yet a memo to a certain Liberal Arts department — for once not English — from its Salary Committee, dated the previous December (1988) states: "First of all, we give highest priority to scholarship." (This is quoted from the first section of the memo.) Section Four states: "We believe that earning or winning research grants ... is one measure of scholarly endeavor and recognition."

Only when we arrive at Section Five do

we hear: "Teaching is a subject which we are unwilling to divide into explicit categories, partly on the grounds that we all labor in the same vineyard, partly because quality is difficult to evaluate objectively, partly because quantity is also difficult to assess. ... Most teaching awards carry their own economic benefit." (You couldn't prove that by me.)

Teaching excellence and a dollar will get you a cup of coffee at this institution.

Have things changed? Well, in 1983, the same year that this institution's fling with MCC got it a \$15 million endowment for faculty in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, 30 new faculty for Computer Science and Microelectronics, ... and \$5 million for the next two years of lab equipment, undergraduate faculty in the English Department finally got telephones for their desks. That same year, the dean of Liberal Arts publicly stated that this institution will never provide the money to hire tenured professors to teach writing. Yes, "composition stinks."

In universities governed by rich, white males and staffed at the top by scientists, technologists, businessmen, and rogue humanists, the education of masses of undergraduates is never a top priority, and undergraduate education is the best place to start cost-cutting and fee-raising. You read *The Daily Texan* — tell me what you have seen just in the last week about library fees and tuition hikes. ...

Well, you students are commodities to this institution — you have been bought with its reputation as the premier seat of education in the state of Texas, and you will be sold to the highest bidder to act out your lives as cogs in the economic wheel.

I quote our chief officer — this is from *The Strategic Plan, 1990-95*: "Higher education in Texas has begun to realize that its role and mission must include being a catalyst for economic development in its respective communities and regions." I put to you that the word "communities" means not Lubbock or Alice, but MCC and Sematech.

But what can four-year students do about a five-year plan that doesn't include them? Well, you can get off your duffs and take back your University, for one thing.

There are 38,000 of you and you've all got parents, sometimes several sets, and they pay taxes. Do you realize what kind of a voice you have? Do you realize how visible you are and can be? ...

I was tempted in this speech to talk long and windily about the nature of education. Instead, I'm going to say one short thing: I am convinced that the state of Texas as it is now embodied in this institution does not want its children educated. It wants them certified.

Educated children ask questions. Educated children change things. Educated children rock boats. And that's what I think education is: boat-rocking. You start by rocking your own, now and through the rest of your life. Your teachers here, your good teachers, give you the tools and the heart to rock that boat: They teach you to take charge of your own intellectual life and destiny. That's what it is to be educated: You give yourself the power to learn,

grow, and change, and your professors help and witness.

Can you rock this boat? That's for you to answer. When I asked this of my classes, some students said, in effect: I'm only one person. Wrong: you are 38,000 people. Some students said: This is never going to change. It's inevitable. Well, if it's inevitable, I guess, you'll just have to relax and enjoy it. But I hope you realize what is being done to you. ...

Take back this University.

In closing, I would like to reaccept this award. I asked my classes to give me the names of good teachers, and these are the 56 people they named — there are many, many more unnamed, unthanked, and God knows unrewarded.

I haven't edited the list, except to identify where possible which of these people is in the bottom half or bottom quarter of their salary rank. And the list is in no special order — with one exception, for I have placed at the top the name of the best teacher/scholar in this University, a person I admire and emulate:

Master teacher list:

Ernie Kaulbach, assoc. prof., English 1/2; Paul English, prof., Geography; Thomas Hubbard, asst. prof., Classics; Sue Rodi, lecturer, English; Clarence Lasby, prof., History; John Kroll, assoc. prof., Classics; Stanley Zimic, prof., Spanish/Portugese; Laurette Tuckerman, asst. prof., Mathematics; Joseph Malof, prof., English 1/2; Pehr Smith, asst. instructor, Art; William Guy, prof., Mathematics; John Hughes, asst. prof., History; Linda Schele, prof., Art; James Kinneavy, prof., English; Thomas Philpott, assoc. prof., History 1/4; Richard Jones, prof., Chemistry; Julie Drawbridge, lecturer, Zoology; Alan Campion, prof., Chemistry; Leslie O'Bell, assoc. prof., Slavic Languages 1/4; Kristen Kern, asst. instructor, English; Ingrid Edlund-Berry, assoc. prof., Classics 1/4; Daniel Slesnick, assoc. prof., Economics; Robert Solomon, prof., Philosophy; William Muehlburger, prof., Geological Sciences; Mary Baker, prof., French/Italian 1/4; Don Graham, prof., English 1/4; Harold Wylie, assoc. prof., French/Italian; Janet Bromstedt, asst. prof., Drama; Wahneema Lubiano, asst. prof., English; Edward Nather, prof., Astronomy; Edward Robinson, prof., Astronomy; Denise Schulze, asst. prof., French/Italian; Ruth Buskirk, lecturer, Microbiology; Joe Feagin, prof., Sociology; Mark Gifford, teaching asst., Philosophy; Millicent Marcus, prof., French/Italian 1/4; Janet Meisel, assoc. prof., History 1/4; Carol Mackay, assoc. prof., English 1/2; Kurth Sprague, assoc. prof., American Studies 1/4; James Thompson, prof., Physics; Kurt Heinzelman, assoc. prof., English 1/2; John Pearce, assoc. prof., Electrical Engineering; Robert Hardgrave, prof., Government; Charles Chiu, prof., Physics; Robert Divine, prof., History; Steven Cook, asst. instructor, Physics; Clarence Lasby, prof., History; Niles Hansen, prof., Economics; Brian Dreith, lecturer, Art; Richard Jordan, assoc. prof., Art 1/4; Howard Miller, prof., History; John Kolsti, assoc. prof., Slavic Languages; Michael Adams, senior lecturer, English 1/2