

Syllabus would cloud UT's E306

By Alan Gribben

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A Sept. 2 Public Forum by Professors John Slatin and Linda Brodkey presented familiar defenses of the proposal to reshape the required freshman composition course at UT Austin. Accord-

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ing to them, E306 students will produce eight essays, and thus it will be "what it always has been — a writing course." A grammar book will be employed, they say, along with court cases and articles on issues of social "difference." The new course merely mandates that students write "about things that matter."

Given such soothing assurances, what generated the controversy over this proposed reconstitution of freshman English? The answer lies in what proponents of the revamped course prefer not to mention.

They conveniently overlook, for example, their original choice as the only textbook sanctioned for graduate student assistant instructors who staff most sections of this huge course: Paula Rothenberg's slanted social sciences reader, *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*, which portrays the United States as having completely failed women and people of color. The textbook implies that a Marxist class analysis of American society is essential for combating its evils.

Even the packet of readings that eventually replaced the Rothenberg text (following protest) made no attempt at balance. There is, for example, not a single success story of individual females or minorities among this assemblage of condemnatory essays, guilty confes-

sions and briefs of legal decisions.

What else is missing from the new version of freshman English?

Lacking is the former practice of selecting its readings as models of exemplary prose style. Instead, the emphasis now rests entirely on inherent political messages.

Gone is the traditional focus on grammar and style, as Professor James Duban illustrated in a previous Public Forum essay analyzing the new E306 syllabus.

Removed is the once-valued privilege for assistant instructors of choosing their preferred reader from among a list of possibilities, enabling them to tailor their teaching strengths to a favorite textbook.

Lost is the students' option to explore the craft of writing in numerous contexts. For 15 weeks the new course obliges them to grind out essays solely on topics of American oppression. If some students write more impressively on other subjects, too bad.

Departed is instruction in any form of writing other than argumentation, since the political activists whom courses like this are supposed to create will possess no need for experience in writing description, narration, exposition, close analysis or other forms of composition not directly attacking the status quo.

Absent, too, are the expertise and factual data that disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, government, law and psychology bring to these same social problems that beset all countries, not just the United States (another perspective ignored in this course).

The charge was made again in this recent column that I and others favor an impossible ideal — a politically neutral

English course that in reality only reflects my own political views. Let us assume for a moment that all academic enterprises are ultimately political, as radicalized faculty in the humanities seem so fond of insisting these days. In that case, the political vision of the classroom that I can subscribe to is one in which truly free debate is possible, in which balanced views of our society are supplied in the assigned readings, and in which instructors and students have some choices regarding topics and approaches.

UT-Austin is moving decisively toward curriculum innovations that will ask its students to be more familiar with the diverse cultures that populate our nation and our shrinking world.

The E306 proposal mistakenly substituted for the teaching of writing skills the argumentation of social issues that concern us all but are best studied under qualified, specially trained instructors in appropriate fields. Freshman students will have numerous chances to study notions of "difference," but only one course in which to review punctuation, sentence structure, paragraphing, transition, tone, organization, audience and other non-political techniques of expression. Our UT faculty and administrators should now proceed to implement a more logical curricular revision indicating their commitment to the goal of offering a fuller education in world citizenship, independent of the required course in basic English composition and rhetoric.

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