

Politics jeopardize writing skills

It is essential that the student body be informed of the consequences of recent changes in the University's English composition course offerings. Some very poor decisions were made at the March 17 meeting of the University Council that will deprive nearly every undergraduate student on this campus the opportunity to learn valuable writing skills.

Sadly enough, the whole corrupt issue has been kept relatively silent — until now. The latest outline of the proposed changes came out March 6, and was handed out (believe it or not) at the door to University Council members.

It maintains that E 346K will be removed as a catalog requirement, that the teaching of freshman E 306 will continue for the time being (but with plans to remove it eventually) and that as a consolation prize, three pilot sections of a new freshman English course (originally intended to be a sophomore level writing course) will be introduced in the fall.

What does this mean to the student? It means that once you have successfully completed freshman English, there will be almost no other composition courses available to you. Worse than that, there are no plans to introduce any more composition courses for at least five years.

It may come as no surprise to you to find that the origin of this inexcusable planning error is departmental politics. The history of the problem dates back to spring 1984, at which time there was a serious conflict in the English department.

On one side were the tenured faculty, most of whom want an English department that teaches *only* literature. On the other side were some regular faculty members and a large number of lecturers, who were in favor of teaching practical writing skills. Those same lecturers in fact made a proposal to increase the number of sections of E 346K (Writing in Different Disciplines) to meet the needs of the students.

The problem was voting rights. The tenured faculty, fearing that the lecturers, because of their greater number, would "take over" the department, exerted pressure on the Dean of Liberal Arts office to keep this from happening. The results were the immediate firing of all 48 lecturers, followed by the temporary suspension of E 346K.

Now, the final removal of E 346K has been announced. The reason that this valuable course is no longer available is not the lack of demand on the part of students or concern about the necessity of the course. Rather, the reasons are political.

One of the core problems in this issue is that the administration of our English department feels it no longer has the responsibility to teach the students how to write. The Dean of Liberal Arts announced, at the Feb. 17 meeting of the University Council, that one of the goals of these reforms was to "reduce English department responsibility for substantial writing course requirements."

Well then, just *who* is going to assume this responsibility? It's not very likely that professors in different departments can be recruited just to teach technical writing. To achieve this goal the University would *have* to hire more professors — English professors.

The elimination of practical writing courses also

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creates some serious flaws in our University's education requirements. The administration is eliminating all but a handful of the courses that once offered instruction in practical writing skills.

Still remaining, however, are the substantial-writing-component requirements. Just where, exactly, do they expect us to have learned the writing skills necessary for these courses? Austin Community College? Correspondence courses?

I'm sure I'm not the only one who has discovered that these substantial-writing-component courses expect from the very first day you walk in that you already possess proficient writing skills. How can the University expect us to know what they haven't taught us? If in fact they think freshman English is all we need to prepare us, they are mistaken.

Aside from freshman English and creative writing courses, how many writing courses would you guess, are currently offered by our English department? Five? Ten? Try three.

How many students, then, can these three courses accommodate? E 325M (Expository Writing) has four sections of approximately 20 students each, E 379C (Article Writing) has two sections of approximately 40 students and E 367L (Conference Course in Technical Writing) is available to fewer than 10 students. In other words the English department is teaching expository writing to about 130 students after freshman English.

Let's consider some of the areas that require above-average writing skills on an almost daily basis: architecture, business, communications, education, engineering, law, the liberal arts (including social sciences) and natural sciences. Now consider the number of undergraduate students at the University who fall into at least one of these areas. Of a total 36,633 undergraduates, 35,534 are enrolled at least one of these programs as of fall 1985. That's 97 percent, guys.

Even if you include all restricted journalism courses, all of the restricted business communication courses and one technical writing course offered to electrical engineering seniors only, there just aren't enough writing courses to go around. A conservative estimate would be about enough for 3 percent of the undergraduate population to study writing at any one time.

It would seem to me that a "top 10" university such as ours should stop at nothing in its goal to turn out the most literate, well-rounded, knowledgeable graduates that it is capable of producing. If our administration continues to give first priority to the personal whims and desires of departmental leaders, it will be the students that suffer; indeed, they already have. Until something is done to resolve the problem, our university's English department will remain deficient in an area that no student can afford to miss.

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