

TAs Shoulder 60 percent of workload

By JAMES SLEDD

(Editor's note: Sledd is a professor of English.)

In a recent letter to the American-Statesman, I questioned the argument that the faculty should "guide the destiny" of the University. I urged instead that we should think less about pay and privilege and more about the needs of students. "It is inexcusable," I wrote, "that professors at UT Austin play games to get out of the classroom while graduate assistants do much if not most of the teaching. It is criminal that the professors are still recruiting more assistants while the old ones can't get jobs with their new PhDs."

My letter provoked a little bundle of thanks from citizens and a couple of brisk denunciations from faculty. A stuck pig squeals. But while the Legislature is in session and the University is in the headlines, maybe even a professorial pig-squealing — like a presidential duck-pond — will prompt somebody to take a good look at a bad situation.

1) It is unquestionably true that graduate assistants do much if not most of the teaching at UT Austin. In the Faculty Senate on April 8, 1974, Prof. James E. Stice, director of the Teaching Effectiveness Center, stated that "some 1,400 TAs on campus" provide "very economical labor," being "responsible for more than 60 percent of the total contact hours taught in the University at the undergraduate level." The more violent of my faculty denunciators, a professor of classics and hence of unquestionable authority, estimates the number of the regular faculty at 1,600. Now TAs supposedly teach half-time. If 1,400 TAs teaching half-time have over 60 percent of the total contact hours with undergraduates, while 1,600 regular faculty have less than 40 percent, was not a late regent justified the other day

when he said to a Tavern audience, "It is a disgrace the number of full professors who will not teach undergraduate students?"

The TAs do provide "very economical labor." Although the faculty had a hissy, a year or two ago, when the Legislature asked fulltime members to carry a four-course load, the University happily defines halftime for TAs as two courses, so that a TA in English (for example), working halftime, teaches the same number of courses as a full professor working fulltime — and does it for maybe one-fourth to one-eighth the professor's salary. The TA is also required to take three three-hour courses himself. When I questioned the justice of this heavy burden for poorly paid young people, I got a remarkable answer from an eminent chemist in the Faculty Senate on Oct. 1, 1973. The requirement that TAs take three courses, he said, "is responsible for about two million dollars in appropriations the University got this time that it would not have gotten before. I think you can imagine what would have happened to faculty salaries had this rule not been in effect." "Very economical labor" by TAs is apparently very profitable

labor — for the faculty.

3) It's not so clear that burden-carrying by TAs is equally profitable for the students whom they teach. On Oct. 6, 1973, (as the Texan for that date will show), 15 TAs from the Department of Classics (what! surely not classics!) complained that their workload made adequate performance difficult and excellence impossible. "In setting these hour requirements," they wrote (and signed the letter), "the University administration has compromised both undergraduate and graduate education." TAs in English said much the same thing. The demands made on them, they said, "make it literally impossible for anyone to be both an effective teaching assistant and a serious, responsible graduate student."

4) Some efforts had been made, it is true, to lighten the burden on TAs, but not all those efforts were intellectually respectable. One device (it may finally have been forbidden in the autumn of 1973) was to allow TAs to register every semester for three hours of a course numbered 398T. That course was called Supervised Teaching for Graduate Students, and supposedly it taught TAs how to teach as wisely as regular

faculty; but sometimes it was pretty much a phony. And for every hour of registration in that course, the University got a nice fat sum for faculty salaries

5) That our new PhDs have trouble finding jobs is an old story now as anyone can learn by visiting the conventions of professional societies or — less painfully — by looking into the Index to The New York Times. Yet the established professors who taught these unfortunate victims of inflation and falling enrollments don't want to stop the "over expansion of American higher education."

They don't talk about fewer TAs but about more, and they don't like it when the president of Columbia says that we should reduce the "number of four-year institutions with their complex of graduate and professional schools" or when the U.S. commissioner of education says that many states "are opening more graduate schools than they need." Nobody likes to give up a good thing. It must massage the vanity to boss a bunch of TAs who run discussion sections and labs while the Great One somnifies a big roomful who would be better off if his lectures were printed and they could read them

themselves.

To conclude: after all the arm-waving it's still silly for classicists, physicists, zoologists or anybody else to argue that faculty should "guide the destiny" of UT Austin while enjoying an undefined privilege called "autonomy." American state universities don't belong to the academic community as a whole or to any one part of it — not to students, faculty, administrators, not even to regents. State universities ought to belong to the people who would like — I suspect — to give them a good shaking down.

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