

editorials

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viewpoint

English proposal overlooks students

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TEXAN COLUMNIST

It never fails that a group somewhere is intent on making attending college more frustrating than necessary. Last spring the Texas Legislature opted to raise tuition rather than create alternate state funding sources.

Now a group of Ph.Ds in the Department of English is intent on requiring a course it won't teach. You be the judge of which group is better at policy-making, rednecks playing politics or our professors in Parlin Hall.

Last year the Department of English had in place a good nine-hour, required sequence, but it has rapidly dismantled the writing components of the program. Starting last spring, E 346K for writing in different disciplines was delegated to elective status, while removing technical and business sections. Sections for Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences were deemed acceptable for continued instruction.

Now the English faculty has overwhelmingly approved the elimination of the E 306 freshman rhetoric and composition course from the regular term, although still requiring the course. Since 40 percent of freshmen pass out of the course, the thinking of most of the department goes, it's easier to farm the course out to extension campuses. Easier for the department. About 4,000 students take the course annually.

Other excuses are that improving statewide educational standards will render the course unnecessary anyway, the funds for paying hired lecturers who teach the course are tougher to find and other universities don't do much to teach writing (so why should we?). There are several others depending upon who you speak to.

Not surprisingly, the third English requirement of a year ago, E 316K, a literature course, has remained unscathed, providing some insight into the department's motivations. Most English instructors would rather teach their first love, literature, preferably upper division.

The department is sending a clear message to students. If you're not liberal arts, you're not worth our time. If you don't have the skills to receive credit for E 306, go elsewhere. If you can't write, it's not our problem.

While attempting to reduce its responsibility to the university community, the department has lost perspective of the University's function. The recent war on mediocrity, tighter admission standards and splurging for Nobel laureates has given some the impression that the University is the up and coming Harvard of the South.

Despite these recent flirtations with excellence, the fact remains that the University serves a much broader function than swelling the academic ranks. The University is and always will be a state university with a wide responsibility to the state. Most students are studying in career-oriented majors. To neglect the language skills of those soon to enter the state's work force is a disservice to the state and taxpayers paying faculty salaries.

New educational standards may improve writing skills of incoming students, but not tomorrow. More important, writing skills are just that, skills, not a yardstick of intelligence. To delegate such a course to extension campuses compromises the University's control and ultimately quality of the course, something that may well come back to haunt instructors of upper-division literature.

And don't forget the plight of entering students who will be greatly inconvenienced in terms of cost and time, an issue that has thus far been pushed to the rear of the controversy. Granted, the English proposal leaves provisions for other writing courses, but it still ignores the students who have to fulfill the 306 requirement.

The proposal now has several levels of bureaucracy to transcend before being etched in stone. Hopefully, administrators and the Board of Regents will properly recognize the role of the University.

Educational excellence is a commendable goal, but the University has the capability for teaching brilliance and insuring competence. As one of the wealthiest schools in the country, the University can afford to do both.

Rubio is an not an English major.