

RICHARDSON NEWS

Established 1958

Lois Wetzel Brown
EDITOR

Dick O'Brien
CIRCULATION MANAGER

Sue Mathews
ADVERTISING MANAGER

English course under fire at UT

ACADEMIC freedom is a concept that is guarded jealously on all college campuses. A perceived threat unites faculty quicker than any other issue, with the possible exception of a discussion on salaries.

Traditionally, curriculum is an area that is left to the discretion of faculty and administration. Those of us on the outside might wonder from time to time about certain aspects, but generally speaking, we keep quiet. Rarely do we ever hear about disputes from within the education establishment itself. Controversy was common in the sixties but it was blamed on "the war."

In recent times we are beginning to hear more. Now it is being blamed on "multiculturalists," whose agenda is said to be to focus attention on the "plight of minorities, women and homosexuals" in our society. You might recall the flap at Stanford when traditional western classics were dropped from the humanities curriculum in favor of authors from certain third world countries.

Recently, a constituent called to my attention the controversy that has been smoldering at the University of Texas in Austin regarding the curriculum for English 306. It is not likely that you would have expected internal conflict over E306. It's a class that you and I took and all entering freshmen at UT are required to pass or pass out every fall. The focus is on rhetoric.

EACH year about 3,000 students are enrolled in more than 100 sections. They are there because they need instruction in "style, form, argument and organization." Students traditionally have been encouraged to write about subjects of interest to them.

A few months ago, the UT English Department, with the consent of Standish Meacham Jr., the dean of the School of Liberal Arts, announced that E306 would change for the future. Now it would have a central theme. All 3,000 freshmen would concentrate their reading and writing on a single subject. The textbook selected was "Racism and Sexism" by Dr. Paula Rothenberg. Dr. Rothenberg has been called "Marxist oriented." Her definition of racism was described by columnist William Murchison of *The Dallas Morning News* as "the subordination of people of color by white people."

There was considerable reaction on campus to this radical departure in focus for a subject that had traditionally been concerned with teaching the basics of writing and grammar — a subject in which 60 percent of the freshmen arrive on campus inadequately prepared.

Dr. Alan Gribben, professor of English, along with several other faculty members voiced objection. "Previously the students may have touched on issues, but they were learning something about

Fred Hill



AUSTIN REPORT

□ I, for one, am saddened that a great university like the University of Texas has allowed itself to be drawn into this controversy.

how to write an effective sentence. Now the subject matter is of paramount importance and incidentally, maybe, the students will learn something about writing essays," Dr. Gribben said.

HE was joined by 55 other faculty members from various disciplines who agreed. They published what they called "A Statement of Academic Concern" in the campus newspaper, *The Daily Texan*. In part, the statement read: "... We are concerned that the new curriculum for Freshmen English distorts the fundamental purpose of a composition class — to enhance a student's ability to write — by subordinating instruction in writing to the discussion of social issues and potentially, to the advancement of specific political positions."

The media seized upon the controversy. Columnists Molly Ivins of the *Dallas Times Herald* and Murchison wrote columns from different perspectives. One reader wrote to the *Austin American Statesman*, "This kind of instruction is not what hard-working Texans have in mind as college education for their children." Alumni and parents contacted the administration and the board of trustees. As a result, the change in E306 was postponed until the fall of 1991. People relaxed.

THEN, it was announced that the E306 would be taught from a "packet" of materials which would include excerpts from

"Racism and Sexism" along with other writings. Controversy soon surrounded the packet. English professors who objected were quoted as saying that information about the packet was being kept from them. "I did not receive a satisfactory response that in any way disclosed the nature of the packet," Dr. James Duban said.

The printer involved in the production of the materials was told not to release it except to people whose names appeared on a specific list. The controversy heated up again. Many of those involved denied any attempt at secrecy. A meeting was held Sept. 14 to reinforce that the majority of faculty still supported the controversial change. *Texas Monthly* and other print media were present.

Dissident professors were allowed to express their opinions. One professor told me it was the first time the proceedings had been conducted civilly without interruption and derisive laughter from the other side. They were told, "You professors are out of line to resist. Grammar and style should not be learned out of textbooks. Give them something they are really interested in and then they will learn."

The vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the change. All freshmen taking E306 will now focus on what is wrong in American society. It is said, "none of the materials focus on success stories of women and minorities." One spokesperson said, "students will walk away feeling that the only way one could succeed in life is through the courts. This is no way to leave 18 year olds."

ELECTED officials don't fare well when they involve themselves in the internal affairs of colleges and universities. There is too much of a tendency for politicians to demagogue on issues of this type. This is an issue that is best left to the people.

As parents, what type of an education do we want our children to have? I, for one, am saddened that a great university like the University of Texas has allowed itself to be drawn into this controversy. It seems to me, there are other ways to teach rhetoric than turning freshmen English into a required course on sociology. An issue of this type has the tendency to focus the attention of the public on an aspect of university life that is contrary to the ultimate mission.

I'm afraid that the exercise of academic freedom in this instance is going to ultimately hurt the university. Hopefully, legislators can be kept out of this one. They have a tendency to try to solve problems by manipulating funding.

Fred Hill, R-District 112, represents Richardson in the state House of Representatives. "Austin Report" appears regularly in the Richardson News. The views are his own.