

# THE ENGLISH WARS

By Rod Davis

Austin

EACH SPRING, as the Department of English at the University of Texas at Austin struggles with what seems to be a historic mission to insulate its professoriat from exposure to freshman and sophomore writing courses, a treacherous, sanctimonious, and hypocritical civil war — the kind favored in academia — litters the normally comatose corridors of Parlin Hall with more fatal back wounds and ethical corpses than a dozen good faculty dinner parties. The conflict may have different points of precipitation each year, but in the fall it always ends the same, as the tenure-track mandarins implement the classic strategy laid out by Mel Brooks in *Blazing Saddles*: "Gentlemen, we've got to come up with a way to save our phony baloney jobs."

In a department with over 150 regular and temporary faculty and 110 graduate assistants (largest in the country) and a \$3.5 million annual budget (highest at UT), this is not always a simple task; but it is always mastered. In 1983-84, the approximately 90 regular, or tenure-track, faculty siphoned off \$2.7 million of the departmental budget — 84% to teach only 25-30% of the 22,360 students processed by the department in the fall and spring semesters.

Who taught the other three-fourths, including virtually all the lower division writing courses? A combination of graduate assistants (\$.5 million in total salaries) and a new breed of untenured college teacher known as "lecturers," whose \$.89 million in salaries didn't even come from the department budget but was scrounged from unspent money elsewhere in the College of Liberal Arts.

This is an imbalance that would seem to require justification. The one offered by the English Department is that teaching students — 75% of whose entrance tests reveal a need for composition instruction — to write is a poor career option and intellectually suspect.

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Anyway, it should have been handled in high school.

At UT, as in a string of English departments from Tulsa to Oxford, the ticket to success — higher salaries, fewer classes, research junkets, suburban homes, and choice parking spaces — is not teaching but publication. Nor can one just publish anything, anywhere. The material must bear a genius for obscurity and, in the contemporary manner, utilize a jargon of criticism, as opposed to daily language, impenetrable by all but specialists.

In the wars of academia, this line of activity is known as "literary scholarship." It is distinct from and hostile to "composition," which may include anything from freshman writing to advanced exposition and nonfiction. Although more students are affected in a concrete way by composition instruction, more professors yearn for the literary life, and the professors call the shots. Over the years, literary scholars have dominated the curriculum and jobs at English departments at UT and other colleges through their control of recruitment and budgets. They can, to paraphrase Yeats, pass along their ideas with their power. And they do.

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***For the 5,000 freshmen who enter UT each fall, disproportionate funding raises a question of consumer equity.***

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So, to the more than 5,000 freshmen who enter UT (total enrollment: 47,000) each fall naively assuming they are paying for what they really need, the flight from composition instruction and the disproportionate subsidizing of "literary scholarship" in the English department raises at least a question of consumer equity. Those who show up this September, however, may take some comfort in knowing that the campaign last April and May to revamp the literary gerrymandering in the

department was among the fiercest to date. It didn't work, of course, but, as they used to say down at the Alamo, it got to where you could see which side of the line people stood on real clear, no matter what they said.

## *Sneak Attack*

ONE MORNING during the second week last April, as class-bound students struggled for footing in the crowded stairwells of Parlin Hall, the second-floor mailboxes of the faculty lounge were graced with a xeroxed notice from the newly-elected 11-member Executive Committee (EC). The subject was lecturers, whose growing presence — as teachers for the composition sections graduate students couldn't handle and the regular faculty refused — had become a serious irritant the last several years. The new EC, filled with ambitious young professors eager to establish power, decided the best way to avoid the professional embarrassments and liabilities of keeping around temporary, but *voting*, pseudo-faculty members was not to keep them around too long. All full-time lecturers (total 33) with more than three years service, the EC memo said, would be pink-slipped, except as part-time non-voting fill-ins. The problem would be solved by eliminating the workers.

Not every lecturer appreciated the mercy inherent in this sacking. For a start, only a year before the previous EC (different members) had gone on record stating that, whereas lecturers were valuable to the department's mission and whereas there ain't no way they were ever going to get tenure, and whereas they were doing a good job despite low pay and overwork (four sections per semester versus two, sometimes three, for regular faculty): why, lecturers were perfectly welcome to stay as long as they could take it and enrollment indicated students didn't catch on. Dean Robert King had also said as much and had admonished the department to treat its thralls more decently.

The new EC policy seemed to reverse that position. Kurt Heinzelman, associate professor of English and president of the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), described the new EC policy statement as a "vile and deeply cynical document," but even flattery could not make it palatable. A group of lecturers, (I, among them) joined by a coterie of regular faculty members, immediately undertook a month-long action to overturn, for the first time in recent memory, an EC decision.

**I**N THE 1960s, American universities filled with students who saw doctoral studies as the ticket to secure futures at hundreds of understaffed colleges, or at least as a good Vietnam draft deferment. By the late 1970s, this trend had clogged, for decades to come, the tenure slots of academia and produced an estimated excess of 40,000 Ph.D.'s in various disciplines.

Any standing army of the unemployed of that size cries out for exploitation, and it didn't take long for the nation's citadels of enlightenment to figure out they were in a buyer's market that would make the Korean textile industry jealous. The staffing patterns of universities began to change rapidly as administrators brought in temporary and part-time teachers at lower cost and less contractual obligation than for tenure-track hires. When enrollment boomed, temporaries could be added. When student levels dropped, temporaries were expendable. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, about one-third of the nation's 678,000 college teachers are now part-time or temporary, up from one-fourth in 1970.

UT caught on to the trend in the late 1970s, as enrollment began to climb, peaking in 1981 at 48,145. Departments like English, math, foreign languages, history, government, and engineering had to staff extra courses. But the UT administration didn't figure the enrollment boom would last and wanted to be, in President Peter Flawn's words, "flexible." Temporary faculty were hired, and in 1980 the rank of "lecturer" was formalized by the Regents as a one-year, non-tenured, renewable appointment. In 1983-84, UT hired 309 lecturers. They were treated in different ways in different departments, but nowhere did they do so much for so few to so many at such a bargain rate as in the English Department.

### *The Gathering Storm*

**L**ECTURERS have been called "the field hands of academe." Even if this is only partly true, it was obvious from the start that such creatures were just what the English literary bunch had been seeking. As far back as 1975, the scholars had interrupted their busy quarreling over each other's pet theories to bemoan the growth of enrollment in required lower division courses. Since fewer and fewer people were masochistic enough to endure the years of capricious grading, vassalship and cheap labor associated with graduate study in Institutional

Literature, replacements for graduate assistants had to be found. Things were getting serious: two-and-one-half percent of the freshman comp courses were being forced upon the tenure-track professors in 1975.

To this day, full professors at UT do not have to teach freshman composition. Other tenure-trackers can get by with one section per year and have teaching assistants to grade the papers.

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### *The lecturer problem is also a women's problem.*

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In October 1982, linguistics professor James Sledd, the white-haired, crusty radical whose lifelong opposition to department policies has made him a pariah among his peers ("Nobody buys Sledd's line that we're morally bankrupt," an associate professor shrugged), asked for an update on the division of the composition work-load. He learned that of the 5,197 affected students, 50% were taught by lecturers, 42% by graduate students, and 8% by tenure-track (including untenured assistant professors) faculty. The Literary Maginot Line was holding.

The Line extended around other terrain, too. Of the department's 85-member tenure-track faculty roster for 1983-84, there were 13 women (including seven who had not received tenure), three Hispanics, one Asian, and no blacks. At the lecturer and graduate assistant ranks, the percentage of women is about half, although blacks and Hispanics remain strikingly underrepresented. When Maxine Hairston, the only female professor, suggested the "lecturer problem" was also a women's problem (and a racial one, according to other faculty), she was properly harrumphed by her Anglo brothers.

In addition, the department had been graced — in complicity with the administration — by a plan, effective last year, to reduce the composition load by rearranging the nine hours of required English. Instead of two freshman writing courses (6 hours total) and one sophomore literature course (three hours), UT students now must take only one composition course in the first year and another course during the sophomore and junior year.

The ingenious aspect of this plan is that it factors in the projected 40-50% attrition rate of entering UT students.

Delaying writing courses to the junior year will reduce the number of students taking them and the number of lecturers teaching them. As Professor Sledd has pointed out, the plan also tends to reduce the exposure of entering minority students to writing courses, insuring that the current ethnic ratios of tenured faculty demographics will be maintained.

All things considered, the literary scholars in the department had such a comprehensive grip on the action by last year that they were like Ulysses, with no worlds to conquer. Sure, lecturers had begun to request a little more gruel, asking to be told in May, as opposed to late August, if they were going to be hired again the next September. They also asked for better ways of reviewing their classroom performance, so that when they were ranked against each other for the annual hiring slots, they'd know on what basis they'd cut their friends' throats.

But, as every student of *MacBeth* recalls, ambition is a funny thing. The spring of 1984 brought in a new chair, William Sutherland, as well as a new majority on the EC. Some of them spoke of a "vision" for the department; they wanted to get the unsightly problem of lecturers and composition out of the way so they could creep back into their offices, the ones with the witty cartoons and posters on the opaque doorglass.


Which is how they came on the plan to dump the dozen or so lecturer veterans and "gut" the freshman writing program. But as is the wont of hot young intellectuals, the new EC visionaries couldn't leave well enough alone. Although lecturers had adapted fairly well to their peculiar conditions of employment, what they could not adapt to was no conditions of employment. And so they did what no aspiring academics ever want to do, they took a stand.

### *The Insurrection of '84*

**A**IDED AND abetted by a few quislings from the regular faculty, including Hairston, Sledd, Neil Megaw, James Kinneavy, Robert Twombly, Kate Frost and others, the lecturers pushed a four-week campaign of meetings, meetings, and meetings, not to make their lot any better but to keep it from getting worse.

From the start, the lecturers and allies were accused of being "demagogues" (the verb "demagoguing" is still apparently reserved for the legislature) and of creating a "political" issue.

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While the lecturers saw their efforts to overturn the EC document as basically a job action, they were made to understand their perception was incorrect. As the EC and its friends made clear, what was at stake was nothing less than tenure and academic freedom. The mercy-killing of lectureships now took on all the attributes of a valiant sacrifice for the general good.

The EC had decided to move against seniority-accruing lecturers, it was explained, because of a 1947 policy of the AAUP, which states that any faculty member entering the eighth year of full employment must be granted tenure. The spectre of dozens of lecturers — who had done nothing more than teach — moving into tenured positions would cheapen the “high standards,” as one newly-tenured associate professor phrased it, of the tenure process itself.

Cheapening tenure would clearly be a danger to the intellectual life of this country. Tenure allows courageous academics to stand up to their bosses, their community, and their peers and say anything at all without subjection to the kinds of economic or social pressures the rest of us face in exercising free speech. Moreover, once an academic has — through honest work alone — attained tenure, virtually nothing, including a 20-year decline in student writing scores, can interrupt a steady devotion to career advancement.

Professor Jack Farrell, an EC member, suggested that because of their potentially harmful effect on tenure and academic freedom, lecturers ought to “rise above their self-interest” and consent to their own phasing out. Prof. Alan Friedman, who along with chairman Sutherland took the lead in the EC’s Drop Dead Offensive against lecturers, argued that keeping lecturers around might even be “anti-intellectual.”

Oratorical flourishes weren’t the only

marks of the EC putsch. The parliamentarian of the spring meetings, Alan Gribben, an entrenched literary tory, was ready to rule out of order any floor debate or motions that favored lecturers, even if it meant bravely reinterpreting *Robert’s Rules of Order*. Chairman Sutherland helped as best he could, changing meeting times and dates on short notice, and there was support on the floor from EC members, such as

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Associate Professor James Duban, who raised a “point of order” (to question whether lecturers could legally participate in the meetings) more often than Jimmy Hoffa invoked the Fifth Amendment. Duban said lecturers were voting on their own employment. They were, of course, and, by extension, on the employment standards and ratios of the entire department. In that sense, *everyone* was voting on his or her job — that’s why the fight got so bitter: which literary slots and which writing slots get pay checks from the State of Texas?

At the conclusion of the round of meetings on May 3, however, enough regular faculty and lecturers had joined forces to vote down the time-limit on lecturer service (and thus comply with the Regents Rules). Associate Professor Robert Twombly noted during the final arguments that the way to resolve the continuing problems of temporary faculty was “not to make life more miserable for those who are already here.”

A foolish thought. The EC met again the following week — after classes, favored back-stabbing time at UT — and voted to re-hire lecturers for this fall. At three-quarter time. That meant lecturers would not only lose 25% of their salaries but the right to vote on department matters.

To further punish lecturer audacity, the EC also took steps to weaken the entire composition program. It notified the head of the Writing Lab — which specializes in tutoring students with writing problems — that he shouldn’t expect to return in the fall.\* It eliminated

\*This was later rescinded after protests from key faculty members. The lecturer in question was invited back for another year as a “specialist” but took a job instead at IBM.

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the full-time secretary position in the freshman composition class, a classic bureaucratic signal of loss of power, and it re-instituted the policy of late notification of lecturers for fall hiring.

Each spring, the EC ranks lecturers according to its own mysterious and arbitrary standards and hires them in waves for the fall, sometimes calling lecturers as late as the first day of classes to offer work. Last year, Dean King recommended that the department notify as many lecturers as possible in May concerning their fall employment prospects, a practice entirely possible using enrollment predictions.

This year, chairman Sutherland honored that recommendation by taking two weeks' vacation at the end of May, delaying the notification of the first wave of lecturers until mid-June, the next group until mid-July.

Altogether, the summer's reprisals against the Spring Insurrection seemed comprehensive and pointed and ap-

peared to insure that the foes of Institutional Literature at UT had been vanquished. But as Hercules discovered, house-cleaning is without end.

The department's covert but widely-known strategy of underestimating its course load to justify the 3/4-time lecturer contracts (Sutherland admitted as much to a lecturer in June) backfired. Enrollment was just as high in September as the admissions office had predicted in May, and by the time classes started all the troublesome lecturers had been asked back at full-time.

This raised the possibility of another jobs wrangle in the spring, but the literary gang in the department is nothing if not persistent. On Sept. 6, two days after classes started, a group of 36 tenured English professors, having met surreptitiously, sent a letter to Dean King asking that lecturers be disenfranchised from most departmental voting, including especially the election of new

members of the Executive Committee. A bold and courageous demonstration of the professoriat's willingness to exploit tenure in any way possible to protect its own skin. King, meanwhile, has called for an examination of the structuring of the entire department.

What will come of all this? As usual, no one knows. Probably more infighting, bitterness, lost jobs and hallway skulking, not to mention the traditional neglect of student needs. One proposal making the rounds is to split the English Department into a Department of Literature and a Department of Composition-Rhetoric, and budget each according to its enrollment. A less clear-cut idea is to set up an autonomous Writing Center within the existing department. Either way, the power in the department would shift, and it might start meeting legitimate social needs instead of catering to limited, and comparatively expensive, private literary careers. □

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