

Letters

November 26, 1990

Dear Colleague:

We are writing to alert you to a situation that has developed at the University of Texas at Austin concerning the syllabus that Linda Brodkey, Director of the Lower Division English Program, designed for English 306, the university's one-semester required freshman composition course. Brodkey designed the syllabus around the theme of difference, and envisioned students reading and writing about anti-discrimination lawsuits and engaging in critical thinking about social justice in the United States. Brodkey planned to implement the new syllabus this fall, so as to aid in its further development.

As detailed on the accompanying fact sheet, Brodkey's Dean directed her on July 23, 1990, to postpone implementation of the new syllabus, despite the fact that the new syllabus had been developed by following the standard procedures of academic

decision-making. The decision to postpone the course was motivated by protests from ultra-conservative faculty members and alumni, whose opposition appears to have been aroused by a very well-organized and well-financed campaign against the course, sponsored in part by the local chapter of the National Association of Scholars, a new right organization of academics.

We believe that this intervention in Brodkey's pursuit of her legitimate academic duties should not pass without response from her professional colleagues. It seems to us that an issue of academic freedom is involved here, especially as it pertains to the right of writing program administrators to design curricula and syllabi and the responsibility of colleges and universities to defend this right against pressure campaigns mounted by organizations such as the National Association of Scholars to influence curricular decisions. Moreover, we believe that the specific content of the course Brodkey proposed promotes a valuable ethical position. We wish to support Brodkey not only as a fellow academic, but as one who shares our belief in the preeminence of the defense of social justice as a

goal of liberal education.

We are hoping that you will agree with us, and will write letters protesting the decision to postpone the course to the following administrators:

- William H. Cunningham, President, University of Texas, P.O. Box T, Austin, TX 78713-7389
- Standish Meacham, Dean College of Liberal Arts University of Texas Austin, TX 78712-1105

We are also hoping that you will feel moved to copy these materials and pass them along to others who might be willing to write letters. Please send copies to Linda Brodkey, Department of English, University of Texas, Austin, Texas 78712.

Sincerely,

Patricia Bizzell
Professor of English
Director of Writing Programs

John Trimbur
Assoc. Professor of English
Director, WPI WAC Project

FACT SHEET:

A CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Fall 1989: Linda Brodkey, Director of the Lower Division English Program, initiates discussion of the need to revise and standardize the syllabus for English 306 (E306).

Winter 1990: Brodkey discusses direction of E306 as a course on "Writing about Difference" with department chair, Joseph Kruppa. Lower Division English Policy Committee (LDEPC) reviews texts for adoption.

March 1990: LDEPC approves adoption of Paula Rothenberg's *Racism and Sexism*, *Scott-Foresman Handbook for Writers* and packet of supplementary readings as course texts.

April 1990: LDEPC meets again. Again approves adoption of course texts.

May 1990: Brodkey presents direction of syllabus on "Writing about Difference" at open meeting of English Department.

mid-May-July 23, 1990: Ad-hoc committee of twelve faculty and graduate students designs syllabus for E306 "Rhetoric and Composition: Writing about Difference."

Brodkey, with Kruppa's approval, determines the Rothenberg text *Racism and Sexism* is not suitable for the course and decides to use an expanded packet of readings, including articles and court decisions, instead.

Standish Meacham, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, provides Brodkey with funds to expand the packet of read-

ings in lieu of the text.

First workshop on the new syllabus held for graduate teaching assistants.

July 9, 1990: Allan Gribben, professor of English, writes to Dallas resident Anne Blakeney, a member of the UT Liberal Arts Foundation Council, thanking her for her "offer of assistance in my effort to halt the new E 306 course." (Letter obtained by UT students Scott Henson and Tom Philpott through Texas Open Records Act.)

July 11, 1990: Without informing or consulting with either Kruppa or Brodkey, President William T. Cunningham replies to letter from Dallas resident Banett Vanetta asking him to stop implementation of E 306: "After careful consideration, the Department [of English] has decided that the course will not be modified this fall." (Letter obtained by Henson and Philpott through Texas Open Records Act.)

July 18, 1990: "A Statement of Academic Concern," paid for by the Texas Association of Scholars (TAS) and signed by 56 UT faculty, published as an advertisement in the *Daily Texan*. Ad urges English Department not to implement E 306. The name of the Texas Association of Scholars does not appear on the ad, and a number of its signers were not aware TAS had sponsored the ad.

July 20, 1990: Kruppa informed of administration's decision to postpone new

syllabus in E 306 at meeting with provost Gerhard Fonken and Dean Meacham.

July 21, 1990: Meacham, Fonken, and Cunningham arrange final plans to postpone new syllabus.

July 22, 1990: Brodkey informed of postponement.

July 23, 1990: Meacham makes public announcement of postponement citing need to "address concerns" and provide "additional time for planning and consultation." (Memo to the English Department.)

September 1990: Department of English overwhelmingly approves by secret ballot a vote of confidence in the LDEPC. Graduate Student Association overwhelmingly votes by mail ballot to affirm the vote of confidence in the LDEPC.

Brodkey consults with 1) department chairs of the College of Liberal Arts, 2) Council of Deans, and 3) UT Liberal Arts Foundation to explain proposed changes in E 306.

Current status: Implementation of the new syllabus postponed, pending further "planning and consultation."

Ten state universities comparable in size to the University of Texas at Austin are offering Brodkey's course as designed in the Fall.

SOURCES

Scott Henson and Tom Philpott. "E306: Chronicle of a Smear Campaign, How the New Right Attacks Diversity." *Polemicist*, September 1990: 4-7, 18.