

# Documenting the teaching assistant mythology

By JAMES SLEDD

Prof. Leslie Willson has said, in his guest viewpoint of Sept. 10, that I "have tarred and brutalized teaching assistants and campus graduate programs with inaccurate claims and allegations that are false." Perhaps it will be amusing to determine which of us is actually in the ranks of "ad hoc rhetoricians who have littered the landscape of the columns of public print with enough trash."

Willson begins by saying that the Texan has blundered in giving the title of 398T as "Supervised Teaching for Graduate Students." Course schedules show, however, that that has been the standard title for the course since its inception. German does indeed use a different title now, but its course was introduced as "Supervised Teaching for Graduate Students in Germanic Languages," and that title or an abbreviation has to my knowledge been used at least a dozen times in the schedules of courses there.

Willson next denies the connection between 398T and "the

legislative course load requirement," saying that "398T was inaugurated in the fall of 1966" but that the course load was imposed in 1972.

If Willson had bothered to ask me for a copy of my written testimony to the Legislature or for copies of the numerous documents with which I supported it, he could have read the following statement by the chairman of the Graduate Studies Committee in the English department, under the date Oct. 13, 1972: "Last spring the Graduate Studies Committee approved by mail ballot the establishment of E.398T: Supervised Teaching for Graduate Students in English — to be offered for the first time this fall." Quite plainly E.398T was inaugurated not in 1966 but in 1972, the year Willson says the course load was imposed.

Willson could also have read the minutes of the Department of English for Feb. 23, 1972, where the proposed 398T is discussed under the heading "Problems Relating to Work-load Rules;" he could have read the department's minutes for April 11, 1972,

where the proposed course was attacked as "a fraud if it is called a course" and defended as "a legal fiction" though admittedly "a non-course;" he could have read a statement by a member of the committee charged with the development of E.398T (a TA, incidentally), who says that he objected to the course because it "had no content, no texts, no class meetings, nothing," that "no attempt" was made in the committee to discuss those objections, "much less to answer them" but that "the committee spent some time speculating about how many hours of teaching credit" faculty could claim for teaching the nothing-course; etc.

If Willson had wanted still more evidence about E.398T, he could have found among my documents statements by TAs in English that the three hours of E.398T were phony and that "senior people high in the department's administration" repeatedly assured them that they had "no need to worry" about overwork because E.398T would be only a "paper

course." Willson could even have read page 21 of the Austin American-Statesman for Dec. 1, 1975, where the chairman of the English department was quoted as saying that "the powers that be" encouraged the use of 398T as a "dodge" so that "busy faculty could get credit for teaching the course." Quite plainly again, E.398T

## guest viewpoint

was for some time a phony course and was known to be a phony course.

What then has Willson established?

For one thing, in essence he repeats his statement to the Graduate Assembly on April 28, 1975, that 398T "was first introduced as a tax dodge, but it never succeeded in getting benefits for teaching assistants in regard to income tax." I need only add here that a course may be introduced for one purpose but later used for another — and that education seems unlikely to prosper if courses are introduced as tax dodges.

For another thing, Willson argues that the Germanic version of 398T is and has been honest. There is a discrepancy between his account and the course schedules. Willson says that 398T in Germanic languages was reduced to 198T in 1968 and that 198T "remained until the fall of 1974;" the course schedule

reverts from 198T to 398T, not in 1974, but in the fall of 1972. I am quite ready to admit, however, that Willson knows his department better than I know it, that there may be a simple explanation for the discrepancy and that Germanic languages may be altogether innocent. I am quite ready to go still further, as I did in my commentary on the

documents that I gave to the legislators, where I wrote (after commenting on the English department's assurances of a phony course): "I don't know to what extent similar arrangements were made in departments other than English." I have no intention whatever of suggesting that the whole University has done what at least one of its departments has, just as I have no intention of suggesting that abuses at this University could not be matched at others. My primary target is a nationwide system, the educational bureaucracy, not individual people or departments or universities.

I am not prepared to admit, however, that the abuse of 398T has been limited to the English department; and again my evidence for abuses elsewhere would have been available if Willson had bothered to ask for it. For ex-

ample:

1) Despite Willson's assertions, a check of course schedules for the first 12 departments listed alphabetically in the schedule for 1966-67 shows that different departments introduced 398T at quite different times, that some departments first listed it later than 1968 (the year Willson says it collapsed as a tax dodge), that on the other hand 4 of the 12 departments did not list 398T in the spring of 1972, but that all 4 did list 398T in the following autumn — the semester when English first gave the course.

2) As late as May 12, 1975, the Graduate Student Council, reporting a Universitywide survey made in 1973-74, asserted (page 21) that the 398T courses are frequently "jokes."

3) In the Faculty Senate on Oct. 1, 1973, I said that TAs in English were overworked by the requirement that they take nine hours while teaching six. An eminent scientist replied that the English department could correct that situation by creating "a new course on teaching" and counting its hours among the nine that TAs had to take. The im-

plication is that "a new course on teaching" would be abnormally easy. The same scientist remarked that the nine-hour requirement was very helpful to faculty salaries.

4) Willson himself uses a significant plural when he admits, "I know that the course has been abused in some areas of the University."

So far as I can tell, then, nothing much remains of Willson's argument. The crucial fact is not that 398T was at first intended as a "tax dodge" (to quote Willson once more). To the extent that one can argue from chronology, the crucial fact is that in December of 1971 the regents met their responsibility under legislation of that year by establishing a minimum four-course teaching-load. They provided, among other things, that a faculty-member who taught one graduate course (a graduate course may have as few as five students) would get credit for teaching not one course but one and a half. Within five weeks, the dean of the Graduate School announced a requirement that all graduate assistants "must be registered for at least nine semester hours ... 298T may be a part of the nine-hour

minimum." 398T, remember, is listed as "Supervised Teaching for Graduate Students;" in the English department alone, it has enrolled as many as 105 students at one time; and a TA in English has bitterly described his experience in it: "As soon as the requirement went into effect, I registered for the course, paid my fees and ultimately received my automatic three hours of credit. Not once did I meet anybody, fulltime faculty or teaching assistant, who taught that course for which I registered, for which I paid and for which I received three hours credit."

I will conclude by joining Willson in the hope that efforts will be made "to increase the relevancy of 398T;" some, happily, have been made already. Though I am not optimistic, after studying Willson's outburst, about the accuracy of the promised "year-long study," I do most earnestly wish that the University would at last provide accurate information concerning the extent of the obvious abuses of the TA system.

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## more firing line

### TA mess not epidemic

To the editor:

Is it too much to suggest that Prof. Sledd appears decidedly parochial in the matter of 398T? Surely he must know that the failures

concerning the present controversy over 298T courses for graduate students here at the University (The Daily Texan, Sept. 8, 1976). Although the quote he ascribed to me



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