

E306 questions go unanswered

Cunningham dodges inquiries

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UT President William Cunningham was questioned Tuesday at a University Council meeting about his role in postponing the revised English 306 course, but Cunningham refused to comment on conversations that transpired in several high-level meetings held before that decision.

But an English professor said Monday that he doubted the decision was made without influence from Cunningham and Gerhard Fonken, executive vice president and provost, who held a meeting in Cunningham's office on July 21 with Standish Meacham, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, and Joseph Kruppa, chairman of the English Department, about the course.

Scott Henson, economics senior and co-editor of *Polemicist*, asked Cunningham at the meeting to reveal the nature of that conversation, which was held three days before the postponement was made and announced by Meacham.

Cunningham said the July 21 meeting took place after a meeting held the day before on Friday, July 20. But Cunningham said he thinks "the content of those kind of meetings should be privileged and is privileged as far as I'm concerned."

Cunningham then said that the decision to postpone the implementation of the revised mandatory writing course was made by Meacham.

"The dean [Meacham] made the decision. The dean told me his decision on the next day, on Sunday [July 22], and it was announced on Monday [July 23]. It was the dean's decision. The dean made the decision," he said.

Fonken interjected after Cunningham's statement. "Mr. President,

point of order," he said. "I believe this is being recorded and this is not the appropriate setting for an interview." Cunningham allowed the questioning to continue.

Meacham restated Monday that he made the decision to postpone the course. Cunningham said he fully supports that decision in an interview after the Council meeting.

But Kurt Heinzelman, professor of English, said Monday that decision was likely influenced by Cunningham and Fonken. "Before the weekend, Meacham and Kruppa were ready to start the course, and after the meetings with Fonken and Cunningham, Meacham reversed his position," Heinzelman said.

"It is inconceivable that Meacham arrived at this decision to suspend E306 — which completely reverses his previous position — without considerable encouragement from Fonken and Cunningham," he added.

Fonken would not comment on the meetings when reached at his home Monday evening.

Heinzelman said he was worried about the lack of comment from the two administrators. "It's surprising and worrisome that Cunningham and Fonken won't speak on the record about their role in the matter," he said.

After the meeting, Cunningham did answer questions on other issues relevant to his involvement with the postponement of E306, including a document obtained under the Open Records Act by *Polemicist*.

The investigative alternative publication obtained a letter dated July 9 from a Dallas woman concerned about the course. In response to that letter Cunningham signed another letter dated July 11 which said, "After careful consideration, the Department has decided that

E306

Continued from page 1

the course will not be modified this fall."

Asked by Henson about the letters — written nearly two weeks before Meacham's announcement — Cunningham said "it was my mistake" that it did not say "the Department has decided that the course will not be modified this fall with the *Racism and Sexism* textbook."

The decision to cancel that textbook was announced by Kruppa on June 26.

But the letter from the Dallas woman never mentions the textbook, which Cunningham acknowledged. He said he didn't know the woman and that "Clearly, I was not involved in that decision [the textbook cancellation]."

Kruppa was on vacation from July 11 to July 18. After a recent conversation with Cunningham, Kruppa said Sunday that he accepted the explanation.

The decision to postpone the course is a highly unusual case of administrative interference with an academic department's ability to develop its own classes.

Kruppa said Sunday that "any

administrative intervention by the upper administration in the curriculum and syllabus functions of a department is regrettable and could constitute a dangerous precedent."

In the September/October issue of *Alcalde* — a UT Austin alumni magazine — Cunningham said in an interview with Monty Jones, the media relations coordinator of UT news service, "Determining the curriculum is fundamentally a faculty responsibility."

The new course, titled "Writing About Difference," was scheduled to begin this fall. It is designed to teach freshmen composition and rhetoric while heightening their awareness of race and gender issues. It generated national media coverage as some faculty voiced strong opposition, claiming it had been politicized.

Linda Brodkey, professor of English and chair of the Lower Division English Policy Committee, and other English professors disputed those claims. The committee received a vote of confidence Friday as the department faculty voted on a secret ballot 46 to 11 in favor of supporting the committee and its tentative syllabus. Three abstained from the vote.

With reports from Jenny Huang/Daily Texan Staff