

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH MINUTES

March 21, 1980

The meeting was called to order at 3:00 p.m., Mr. Moldenhauer presiding.

Mr. Moldenhauer announced that the Dean had responded to the resolution adopted at the February 29 meeting. That resolution read, "The English Department will undertake to seek up to five highly qualified Assistant Professors for appointments beginning in Fall 1980." In a March 19 letter to the Chairman the Dean wrote:

"The English Department may recruit for four, and only four, regular tenure-track positions for 1980-81. These positions are in the areas of Technical Writing, Creative Writing, Linguistics/Philology, and a person to handle the so-called 'Q' courses. All of these appointments will be at the Assistant Professor level."

Mr. Moldenhauer explained that some of the panels studying various aspects of freshman composition would report at today's meeting. After discussion of reports by all the panels, a task force will be assembled to coordinate the proposals for departmental deliberation and votes at a later date. No formal votes would occur at today's meeting.

ADMISSIONS AND REGISTRATION

Mr. Lesser reported for the Admissions and Registration team. He said that a memorandum about its proposals had been distributed to the Department prior to the meeting. He added that the team had decided not to contest the UT Administration's policy on the size or character of admissions to the University. Instead, in framing proposals the team decided to emphasize to the Administration its responsibility to the students it does admit.

Proposal #1: That April 22 be designated as the cut-off date by which incoming freshmen must accept or decline the University's offer of admission.

Mr. Kruppa wondered if such a proposal could be approved. Mr. Duban replied that Albert Meerzo, UT Registrar, was sympathetic to the need of a cut-off date for admissions and encouraged the Department to execute such a proposal through the proper channels; Mr. Meerzo seemed confident that it would be approved. Mr. Lesser explained that April 22 was the date chosen because it is past the date by which freshmen must accept admission to private schools within the state; April 22 should give ample time for a student's decision.

Proposal #2: That students seeking admission to the University include the results from the required placement test in English in their application for admission.

No discussion on this proposal.

Proposal #3: That the present English placement test (ECT) be replaced by the Test for Standard Written English (TSWE).

Mr. Lesser explained that when the team agreed upon this proposal, it thought the TSWE was a written test; actually, the TSWE is a computer-graded test of usage and syntactics. The intent of the team was to require a test that would tell the department something it didn't already know from the verbal portion of the SAT. Ms. Hairston suggested that a writing sample would be very helpful in placing students at their proper level; if any change is made, it should be to include such a sample.

Proposal #4: That the present summer school version of E306 and E307 be abolished. In its place, the department will offer a twelve-week version of E306 to be panel-graded.

Mr. Lesser said that provisional students admitted into the University during the summer session are required to take certain courses, among them both 306 and 307. These students are then required to take sophomore English in the fall semester. Mr. Lesser believes that what actually happens is that these provisional students are given watered-down versions of freshman composition and rhetoric; this occurs because students are rushed through the course material and the instructors feel pressured to grade leniently (the entire class is made up of poor students; one failing grade can expel a provisional student from UT). Ms. Hairston noted that this proposal creates logistical problems for students: they are required to register for 12 credit hours--how can they make up the three credit hours lost through the proposed change? Mr. Walter believed that this proposal would create problems with the summer budget; an instructor would have to be paid for twelve weeks instead of six. Mr. Kruppa was concerned with the logistics of the organized class: would the students meet every day? Mr. Kinneavy thought the proposal was good and that it should be given a careful look; the logistics could be overcome. Mr. Kinneavy added that the results get worse each year. E306 and E307 as taught in the summer last only five weeks, and the provisional students enrolled in these courses need more time to mature in their thinking and writing. Ms. Dwyer sympathized with the teachers of these students but felt that the department should bear in mind the spirit of the provisional student program. The department shouldn't try to crowd these students out of UT. Mr. Byerman reported that the population of the provisional student program has changed significantly over the last few years. Originally, the program was designed to attract to UT both minority students and students from rural areas whose high school preparation did not meet UT admission standards. Presently, however, the majority of the program's participants are white, middle-class students from Dallas and Houston who didn't do their work in high school; it's an easy way for them to get into UT. This proposal represented an effort by the team to "toughen up" the course. Mr. Wimsatt reminded the department that E306 for provisional students is not a special course; its standards should be the same as those for all E306 classes. Mr. Westbrook observed that many of the problems cited here are University problems and not the department's. The responsibility of the department is limited to reporting its findings to the proper group in charge of provisional students. These students are being tested, Mr. Westbrook believed, and the policy is designed to make them prove themselves capable of UT work by meeting harder standards than those required of the average student. If the department says that the faculty is not being firm in its grading, the problem is defined as essentially ours; but the department can't ask the administration to fund a new program simply because we grade leniently in the present program.

Proposal #5: That classes in Freshman English be reduced to 17 students.

Mr. Walter asked if the team had considered the logistical implications such a proposal might involve. Mr. Lesser replied that the team had not because another team would be discussing logistics of staffing and because the team wanted to express an ideal which compared favorably with the Dean's desire to lower the student-teacher ratio. Mr. Lesser further explained that 17 was the number agreed upon because it allowed the faculty member to compensate for extended office hours, inherent in teaching a freshman course, by reducing the number of grading hours required per week. Ms. Hairston objected to the team's conceptualization of grading methods; research on grading points out that very heavy annotation is not necessarily productive of improved student writing. Mr. Lesser acknowledged her reservations and admitted that there was disagreement within the team on this point.

Proposal #6: That the department create a remedial program in English for which a student will receive 3 hours of course credit, but which will not count toward the fulfillment of the 9 hour General Requirement in English.

Mr. Gribben questioned the justification for giving course credit for a remedial course. Mr. Lesser replied that formula funding doesn't fund a non-credit course. Mr. Gribben suggested that students be asked to pay for the course; he cited examples where this arrangement has worked elsewhere. Mr. Lesser wasn't aware of such situations, but he believed that students were more likely to feel that they were being helped if they received credit for a course.

DEGREE REQUIREMENTS

Mr. Garrison reported for the Degree Requirements team. The team chose to concentrate its energies on the logistics of varying the number of required hours and on the educational advantages of different kinds of courses in meeting the requirement. A memorandum reporting the team's research and recommendations had been distributed prior to the meeting. Mr. Garrison warned that the team's logistical projections of changes in the requirement would probably be an underestimate of the real consequences of change. For example, the team's research indicated that a change from 9 hours to 12 hours would increase the minimum required sections by 100 per semester (assuming a standard class size of 25, no increased enrollment, and an exemption rate of 25%). Pedagogical considerations the team discussed included which hours to require and in what proportion: (a) rhetoric-based reading and writing; (b) writing about literature; or (c) reading and writing for discipline-specific models. Mr. Garrison noted that these areas will overlap with areas of concern of other teams (especially, staffing, format, and content), but the Degree Requirements team had tried to concentrate in areas not covered in other reports. The recommendations provided by the team represent different ways of dealing with the logistical and pedagogical problems of the English requirement, and the report was intended to inform and define helpful areas of debate rather than to advocate a single set of solutions.

Proposal #1: The department should retain the 9 hour requirement at least until changes in format and staffing provide some solution to the problems in coping with the enrollments we already have in our lower-division courses.

No discussion.

Proposal #2: The department should experiment in a purposeful and controlled and carefully reported way with the content, format and sequence of possible required courses. Such experimentation could include:

- (a) Trial sections of required 325M: permit a controlled group of random non-exempt freshmen to bypass one of the lower-division courses provided they take 325M some time after they have completed 60 hours.
- (b) Trial sections of discipline-specific writing courses, such as those described in Professor Kinneavy's proposal, as a substitute for 307/308.
- (c) Trial sections of a coordinated two-semester sequence for freshmen or sophomores focusing on western literature (similar to 603) and/or focusing on English literature (similar to 312): permit a controlled group of freshmen or sophomores to take one of these trial sequences instead of 307-314K. (Sophomores in such a trial section would already have 306; freshmen could complete their requirement with 310).

Mr. Moldenhauer asked what advantages would be gained through upper-division sequencing of 325M. Mr. Garrison said that 325M was a successful course due to the maturity of the student and the student's growing realization of the need for a writing course; such an upper-division requirement may be more beneficial to the student than a lower-division requirement. Mr. Rebhorn wondered if the two-semester western literature sequence for freshmen or sophomores presumes that the student has credit for 306. Mr. Moldenhauer said he deduced from the proposal that the 306 prerequisite for 307 would be eliminated for this experimental section, but 306 would be a prerequisite for 310.

Proposal #3: The English Department should consult with faculty from other colleges in planning experimental sections of writing courses oriented toward specific disciplines, and should consult faculty from other departments in the College in planning courses focused on great books.

Much discussion centered around the term "experiment." Mr. Garrison explained that the team intended to set up a real experiment, including control groups; the criteria of evaluation of the experiment would be how well students write. Mr. Wadlington noted that it would be difficult to devise a single neutral test for both students trained to write about literature and students trained to write about Scientific American. Mr. Garrison agreed that the test must be carefully structured and evaluated and this was the team's intention.

Mr. Westbrook wondered about the team's suggestion that large discussion sections might be a solution to the staffing problem; does any evidence exist that such sections work well? Mr. Kinneavy answered that he had done a bibliography on this subject, and all large sections of English at UT were eventually abandoned. He did not know whether these sections were abandoned because they didn't work or because the coordinator lost interest; the evidence is inconclusive. Mr. Garrison explained that the team intended that the best lecturers be given the large sections, and discussion sessions and grading would be done by TAs. Mr. Graham observed that one potential problem of large sections is the unavailability of classrooms to seat 200; only 11 such classrooms exist on campus and demand is very heavy. Mr. Rebhorn asked if permission from the general faculty is necessary to implement large sections. Mr. Westbrook said that all that is needed is approval of the Dean. He observed, however, that high-quality English education costs more than the administration is willing to spend and that the department is being forced to find a compromise. Mr. Garrison agreed and said that the team's report represents such a compromise.

EXEMPTIONS

Mr. Ames reported for the Exemptions team. The team's report was distributed earlier, Mr. Ames said, and the department will note that many of the recommendations overlap with those of other teams.

Proposal #1: A major problem in placement is that so many examination scores reach us near the beginning of the Fall semester. We believe an earlier deadline for freshmen testing should be insisted upon; that entering students who expect to take English 306 or 307 in the Fall must submit test scores early in the Spring semester. (A specific deadline should be set.) Those who do not meet this deadline can be assigned freshman English the following Spring.

No discussion.

Proposal #2: We recommend that the ECT be continued for English 306 placement or exemption, if the test can be administered in time to meet the early deadline. Only if there are serious obstacles to this early use of the ECT do we recommend that the verbal SAT scores be used instead. The SAT is taken by most students as part of the general admissions procedure. Besides, it does correlate highly with ECT scores.

Mr. Ames expected that this proposal might be altered by the proposal made by the Admissions and Registration team to substitute the TSWE for the ECT.

Proposal #3: At the present time with an ECT (or SAT) of 550 we exempt from English 306 roughly 25% of 6,000 entering students. That is, exemptions run to about 1500. Lowering the exemption score by 5% would increase exemptions by about 300--to a total of 1800. Lowering the score by 10% would pass through another 300. That is, lowering the score by about 30 points would increase exemptions from 1500 to 2100 students. Our conclusion is that such a reduction would not be a great administrative convenience. More important, even this slight lowering of cut-off scores would deprive the students of skills they really lack and would not be in their best interests. We recommend that the cut-off of 550 for exemptions from E306 be retained.

Mr. Kinneavy said that the UT cut-off score of 550 was slightly below those of many comparable institutions. Mr. Lesser was concerned that lowering the exemption score would allow poor students to place out of E306. Mr. Farrell reported that studies of his own students suggest that we are testing competency and not literacy. Mr. Sutherland explained that in the 1960s the ECT was used in conjunction with writing samples; when these samples were discontinued, (the department couldn't justify cut-off rates of 575-580, and so) the exemption cut-off was stabilized at 550.

Proposal #4: E307 exemptions are presently granted on the basis of our own difficult two-part examination. Very few students take this examination and even fewer still, no more than a dozen per year, are excused from English 307. It may be that we have simply not adequately publicized the opportunity for exempting 307. We thus recommend that the availability of the test be more widely announced so that a few more exceptional students can be exempted. Otherwise, we recommend no change in the present exemption policy for E307.

Mr. Moldenhauer wondered if more students would attempt to place out of E307 if an instrument were more readily available; the present exam is terrifically demanding. Mr. Ames said that a new ETS essay exam would be instituted this fall, and it should be publicized. Mr. Bertelsen suggested that a student take only one test that qualified him for exemption from both the first and the second course. Mr. Farrell cited a disadvantage of exempting good students from E307: classes would be homogeneous and grading standards would be difficult to maintain where student writing was all of mediocre quality.

FORMAT I

Mr. Faigley reported for the Format I team. The committee decided to defer the discussion of sequencing to the Content team, where alternative sequences were considered in detail. (Therefore, the team did not distribute a report of its recommendations.) Mr. Faigley did report on some of the other issues discussed by the Format I team.

Grade Inflation: The distribution of grades has been fairly consistent within the past ten years. For 306/307/307s/308/308s the grade distribution looks something like this: A, 17%; B, 43%; C, 27%; D, 4.5%; F, 4.5%. Mr. Faigley warned that the data is incomplete, however. The peak year for grade inflation was 1974. The overall GPA score in all freshman English sections last fall, including Q sections and Plan II, is 2.65 (in 1974 it was 2.79). The overall UT GPA for all courses at all levels is 2.8.

A breakdown of grades for E306, on the one hand, and 307-308, on the other, is forthcoming.

Panel-Graded Finals: Panel-graded finals could be instituted so that a student would receive the grade as a fixed percentage of his semester grade in the course or, alternatively, that the student be required to receive a certain grade on the final to pass the course ("exit exam"). The team could find no current university regulation concerning the necessity of passing a final to pass a course. The team believes that panel grading would follow this format: each paper would be read and ranked twice, discussions would ensue to provide a consensus for the grading norm, then grades would be assigned. In cases of wide divergence between the two rankings, a paper would be given a third reading. Such a format would provide for consistent grades. Quick collation of scores would be necessary: the mechanics of panel grading a large number of students are demanding; and if any sections of a given course are panel-graded, all the others must be panel-graded too.

Mr. Lesser remarked on the discrepancy between freshman letter-grade distribution and the proportions of our freshmen above and below the national verbal aptitude average. Mr. Rebhorn remarked on the probable role of required CIS evaluation in the inflation of grades given by individual teachers. Ms. Dwyer said that panel grading is an excellent process for teachers, but when a panel-graded exercise becomes an exit exam, problems arise. Students have sued if they fail the final (and the course) but receive passing grades on all class themes. Would it be possible, she asked, to use panel-grading in the middle of the semester? Mr. R. Cook said that in his previous experience at a smaller school, faculty members regularly shared and discussed papers. Mr. Graham said that North Texas used panel grading; failing students were weeded out without serious disagreement among graders; but distinctions were not made between As, Bs, and Cs. Mr. Wadlington suggested that panel-graded finals would not be necessary if teachers applied firm grading norms during the semester. Such norms could be established by group discussion before the beginning of the semester. Mr. Witte said that 398T and Orientation sessions already train new TAs and AIs in norms for grading freshman themes, and noted that a semester grade included other factors than scores on written work, e.g., class participation. Ms. Dwyer recommended regular faculty gatherings to work out the problems of evaluating student performance.

Mr. Moldenhauer announced that another department meeting would be held on Friday, 28 March, to continue the reports by freshman composition teams.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30.