

This debate not just an academic exercise

Multiculturalism splits U. of Texas

By Karen Brandon
Special to the Tribune

AUSTIN, Texas—The question at hand seems relatively narrow: Should the University of Texas require its students to take classes on U.S. minorities or non-Western cultures?

The debate—over what one side considers multiculturalism and the other believes is political indoctrination—has been among the most divisive in the school's history. One tenured English professor resigned last year, insisting he had been ostracized by faculty who disagreed with his views on a multicultural issue.

On Monday, when the results of a faculty vote on the proposed required courses are announced, they could influence similar debates at universities throughout the country, especially in the South.

The University of Texas, with about 50,000 students at its Austin campus, is the nation's second-largest university. The Hispanic enrollment is one of the largest in the country, the number of minority students is growing and the white enrollment declining.

Multicultural courses should send a message that the university is sensitive to minorities, advocates say, and help white students understand the other cultures they encounter on campus and throughout their lives.

"If the initiative is approved, that would be a signal that this university recognizes not all one race, one thought pattern, one ideology, one region, has all of the answers. It would be a signal that our diversity is in fact a strength," said Barbara Jordan, who holds the Lyndon B. Johnson Centennial Chair in National Policy at the university's public affairs school that also bears the 36th president's name.

"I believe that this is a common-sense, American approach to the content of the university's curriculum," she said.

But opponents charge that multiculturalism is a cloak for the real agenda, political indoctrination. The classes give radical

professors a way to manipulate students' values by emphasizing Western society as racist and sexist, they say. Challenge those views, they say, and you're labeled a bigot.

"It's a view of Western civilization as oppressive and exploitative, and the universal oppressors are white males," said Joseph Horn, a psychology professor who has been at the university for 23 years. "Real multiculturalism is good. The problem is that this is political and exclusive."

Even students appear divided on the requirements. Student government supports it. The Daily Texan, the campus newspaper, opposes it.

One three-hour course would be required beginning with freshmen entering in 1992; two courses would be required beginning with freshmen entering in the fall of 1996. The courses would be required at Austin only.

If advocates of multiculturalism wanted evidence of a need for such courses, they found it in racial incidents that agitated the campus two years ago.

Two fraternities were suspended for a year after a car at the Delta Tau Delta house was painted with racial epithets and members of Phi Gamma Delta sold T-shirts featuring a "Sambo" character that was once the fraternity's mascot.

More than 1,000 students participated in protest demonstrations after those incidents. The following spring, students also held protests over the presence of a statue of Confederate President Jefferson Davis on the campus.

But opponents of the multiculturalism also found a symbol for their cause in Alan Gribben, a respected, tenured English professor who left after 17 years at the university. His department ostracized him in 1987, he says, after he cast a lone vote against offering a master's degree concentration in ethnic and Third World literature.

Gribben says he became a victim of "political correctness," cast as being bigoted toward those cultures. He said he was labeled a

See Texas, pg. 26

Texas

Continued from page 21

racist, although he is married to a Chinese-American. His colleagues avoided him, and his graduate student courses were taken away, he says.

Gribben resigned last year, but not before becoming embroiled in the university's other multicultural brouhaha, English 306, a freshman writing course.

In 1990 the English department proposed using a text on racism and sexism and other kinds of discrimination for the course. Joseph Kruppa, English department chairman, says the change was suggested to teach students argumentation and to allow them to write on ethical questions in society. But Gribben said the text gave only one point of view, portraying the United States "as having completely failed women and people of color."

"What came back to me was 'You're defending racism and sexism,'" Gribben said.

Now teaching at a Southern university, Gribben said: "To me, multiculturalism involves more than just studying oppression. Education should not simply be reduced to some kind of ethnic cheerleading."

Kruppa, the English chairman, declined to discuss the matter other than to say, "Alan Gribben's perceived slights at the hands of other faculty members are his own subjective reaction to a complex situation and are the result, not of political correctness, but of personal confusion."

As for the English 306 proposal, controversy killed it.

And now, what will happen with the university's current multicultural proposal?

No one at the university will offer a prediction on the outcome of the secret ballot. If faculty approve the measure, their recommendation will be passed to University President William Cunningham, who has not discussed the matter in public.

Wayne Danielson, chairman of both the journalism department and the faculty committee that recommended imposing the new requirements, says no one should fear political indoctrination because the classes can be taken in many departments.

To satisfy the requirements, students could choose from about 200 courses in art, history, political science, English and other areas, he said. As an example, he said a student could satisfy one required course by taking a political science course focusing on black participation in U.S. politics, he said. Already, about half of the university's students take classes that would meet the proposed requirements.

Danielson believes the controversy has less to do with politics and more to do with human nature.

"Multiculturalism, in effect, says, 'Let's look at the other cultural traditions in the world.' This is unsettling and disturbing to people because it's different," he said. "There's a strong streak of tradition that makes it difficult to accept change."