"UT: On the Cutting Edge"

Name of Event: "UT: On the Cutting Edge"

Sponsor: Amarillo Chapter of Texas Exes

Location: Amarillo College
Oak-Acorn Room (2nd Floor)
College Union Building
24th & Jackson St.

Time: Thursday, October 24, 1996
6:30 pm

Objective: To provide interested prospective students and parents information concerning opportunities available at The University of Texas at Austin

Participants: Curt Besselman, President; Amarillo Chapter of the Texas Exes

Professor John Ruskewiecz, Professor; Department of Rhetoric, UT - Austin

Admissions/Recruiting Official, UT-Austin

Darin Davis
Curt Besselman
George Ratliff — Former UT Students
Amy Juba
Lee DeFore

Agenda:

6:30 Refreshments and Get Acquainted

6:45 Welcome
Curt Besselman, President; Amarillo Texas Exes

6:55 Remarks by Former UT Students

Darin Davis
Curt Besselman
George Ratliff
Amy Juba

Lee DeFore

7:25	Remarks and Information by UT Admissions Official and Recruiter
7:35	UT Video
7:50	Remarks by Professor John Ruskeweicz: Department of Rhetoric, UT-Austin
8:10	Questions and Answers
8:25	"Eyes of Texas" Adjournment

Possible Committees:

Steering or Planning Committee
Promotion/Publicity
Decorations
Refreshments
Program

:

Amarillo Talk

Thesis: UT Austin is a national stage where what a student or faculty member does counts. It's an institution with real impact, as big and boisterous as the state itself--too big for any single group to control. It's intimidating the way a big V-8 rumbling under the hood can be intimidating. But for the same reason, it is also exciting If the stakes at UT Austin can be high, so are its rewards and paybacks. I greet colleagues new to UT with a simple refrain: "Welcome to the Big Leagues." At Texas, we play hardball and the game is professional. It's a privilege to be on the field.

I didn't always feel quite that way, however. In fact, for a long time I played the role many of my colleagues still prefer. To continue my metaphor, I was content to sit in the grandstands--given my salary, I should probably say bleachers--and let others make decisions about what went on at UT--what was taught, how it was taught, for what reasons. I was content to teach my courses and pursue my research. And I'd have to say that wasn't really bad policy since, for many of my years at UT, the politics and political correctness that made me get more involved didn't exist.

Oh, a few faculty were always riding their hobby horses and some student group or another was rattling about rights denied or privileges they wanted for just for showing up to class. But as long as the mission of the university was to educate students and win football games, life was pretty good. And we usually did a better job educating students than playing football.

However, life in the Department of English changed for me in 1990 when a new senior faculty member hired from an Ivy League School to run the writing program decided to change the entire curriculum of freshman English--to make the content of the course political, focusing all writing assignments on issues of racism and sexism. In doing so, she was following a national trend toward establishing courses congruent with the political movement known as multiculturalism--what Thomas Sowell describes as "a cultural relativism which finds the prominence of Western civilization in the world or in the schools intolerable."

In this proposed course, students would have written about Supreme Court cases dealing with racism and sexism. The textbook for the course was going to be an anthology called Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study by Paula Rothenberg, a feminist professor from New Jersey. All the readings in the textbook--with the exception of several dissenting court decisions--were from a single side of the political spectrum and a pretty narrow extreme of that one side. Douglas Laycock, a distinguished lawyer and Professor at the UT

School of Law, described the textbook chosen for a freshman writing course as "Truly awful ... riddled with factual errors" and guilty of "relentlessly presenting the view that all way evil in America." Unfortunately, most of the people eager to teach this course also shared this view--or at least felt compelled to share this view publicly, lest they look bad in the eyes of the radical faculty proposing the new curriculum. Now consider how free a student would feel to write about what he or she really believed when the teacher's preferred political views were also those presented in the course syllabus and those very same opinions were the only opinions given voice in the textbook chosen for the class. Would you feel free to express your mind freely in such an environment, knowing that your grade might be in the balance? Why, more than a few senior faculty were too intimidated to challenge this proposal publicaly; would it be possible for eighteen and nineteen year olds to write honestly in classrooms operating under its rules?

Let me make it clear that I'm not opposed to having students write on challenging of even political topics. I think a university should prepare students to be active, well-informed, and articulate citizens. But I didn't believe then, and don't believe now, that a university should tell students what to think--especially in a writing course that teaches argumentation. What's the point of arguing when the teacher already has all the right answers?

Well, as I have indicated, it turned out that most of my eighty or so colleagues in the English department as well as many of the hundred or so graduate students who would actually teach the course did not think that politicizing a writing course was contrary to the ideals of the university. Most, in fact, seemed eager to use the curriculum to advance political causes they supported. In the end, only four faculty members in that very large English department were willing publicly to oppose the new course. As I have mentioned, a number of my colleagues expressed private reservations, but the climate in the department made them reluctant to speak their minds. I even had a graduate student come up to me in a rest room one day to tell me that some graduate students agreed with my opposition to the course proposal, but they didn't feel free to speak for fear of losing their teaching appointments.

Not free to speak openly on an American campus--what had we come to? And before you think ill of UT in particular, let me assert that in 1990 a wave of political correctness was spreading nationwide and, if anything, its impact on other campuses, especially those on the east and west coasts, was harder and more damaging still--drowning all voices of dissent.

Those of us who opposed this politicized course at UT quickly became known as the Gang of Four--a tiny minority heavily criticized within our department and battered in the local press, especially the student newspapers and underground press. The chairman of my department labelled me--a George Bush Republican--as a "right wing extremist" in a Houston newspaper for criticizing the course while another faculty member described the four of us ominously as an "academic death squad." That charge actually strikes me as very funny now (I've never even shot a gun, let alone a liberal)--but it didn't find it funny then. Especially when we began to feel other various pressures in the department--our graduate courses didn't get enough students to make, we were shunned in the hallways, one of my colleague's was even accused of sexual harassment in what probably the lowest blow of the campaign against us.

This colleague, a distinguished Americanist and political liberal noted in particular for his work with minority students, had called another professor and his wife one evening to protest a petition they were circulating denouncing the gang of four as "unprofessional" in the way we had "misrepresented" the course. But the husband was ill and unable to come to the phone, so my colleague talked only to the wife, letting her know how that he resented the charge of "unprofessional behavior" and might even be compelled to take legal action if the petition were published.

The next day in a campus newspaper interview she charged my colleague with sexual harassment because he--a full professor--had made her--a *mere* lecturer--feel threatened. What made the harassment sexual? He was a man and she wasn't. Now, on a university campus today it's probably less damaging to be accused of embezzlement or arson than sexual harassment, so she knew exactly what she was doing. It was a classic smear technique--pure and simple--intended to undermine the integrity of a professor with a spotless record at the University. I'm happy to say that her charge didn't work; indeed, it raised doubts about her own credibility and underscored the very points we were making about the dangers of political correctness.

But this isn't a horror story--it's a tale about the way a place as large and vital as UT can make democracy and I'm happy to say it does work--slowly and surely. Those of us in the "gang of four" resolved to fight the new course to the end because we believed in our hearts that politicizing the curriculum was wrong. We knew that the public at large would agree with us if we could only get our case out of the ivory tower and out into to the public--to the taxpayers who supported the university. Today six years in retrospect, the story seems a little like a Hollywood script about four amateurs who buck the big powerful liberal establishment and

win. But that's what we did. We were an amateur cast playing our own version of Mr. Smith goes to Austin.

We won our battle by giving ourselves some self-taught lessons in community politics and deciding to apply what we knew about rhetoric to the real world, not just to the papers we grading in our classrooms.

• First, we located reliable allies across the campus and, working with them, we published a statement of "academic concern" in the college newspaper that grabbed public's attention and made administrators and UT alumni take notice--we spelled out point by point why the university community should be concerned that its only required writing course had fallen into the hands of people with a political agenda.

• We then decided to answer every charge made by our opponents, point-by-point. If they went on radio, we went on radio. If they went on TV, we went on TV (and that wasn't easy at first). If they published a letter to the editor, we wrote a better one. We were able to show out, for example, that we were the ones in favor of diversity while our opponents demanded that every section of freshman English use the same highly biased textbook and be taught the same way. When they talked about "reorientation" sessions for experiences instructors not familiar with the new ways of thinking that the course involved," we described them, tellingly, as "re-education camps"--the kind favored by dictators in socialist countries out to change the way political prisoners thought.

• When we spoke to the press, we always told the truth and also supplied the reporter with accurate supporting documents--even when we knew that the press in general favored our opponents on this issue. That is until reporters came to realize that our statements could be relied upon; they were always accurate when those of our opponents often weren't. Gradually we won a fair hearing from the press--and then even a sympathetic one. And we learned a comforting lesson about the press: they can be moved to fairness by the facts. It takes time though.

Soon small groups of students took the risk of organizing against politicized writing classes. The support of these student groups added moral authority to our position. When one of these students wrote a column in The Daily Texan, he was almost immediately denounced in a paid advertisement signed by forty English professors. Talk about professors intolerant of diversity! Nothing better demonstrated the hypocrisy of their position than this paid advertisement and yet they didn't appreciate the irony of it.

But their arrogance only emboldened other students who quickly learned a great deal about political organization themselves and proved shrewder rhetoricians than the politically correct faculty. For example, the students distributed leaflets about the politicized course at the TX homecoming football game in 1990--including quotations from the proposed textbook. Suddenly the President of the university found himself answering a barrage of questions from angry parents. Brilliantly, these students then decided to contend for the editorship of the student newspaper itself, an elected position at UT. A highly unlikely alliance of Christian student groups, fraternities, and sororities managed to vote into office an editor highly critical of the multicultural agenda. For the first time, we had a local ally in the press. And it made a huge difference.

But even before then, the gang of four had figured that the conflict we were addressing was national in scope. Students at UT were far from the only ones facing highly regimented and politically correct courses. So we established national connections and argued our case and I can still recall the day that my dear colleagues in he English department open their morning papers only to find themselves the target of a column by syndicated columnist George Will. In the halls that day, they looked as if they'd been sideswiped by a Suburban loaded with pig iron.

Will's column was followed by pieces by John Leo of US News and Richard Bernstein of the New York Times. Suddenly, we were on the offensive because we had the better arguments--and we could make a coherent case to the public because we shared the values of the public: fairness, openness, free speech. Our opponents believed that Americans were the racist, sexist, homphobic victims of capitalism whose children badly needed to be re-educated by an elite group of theorists. How could they tell the public that? How could we lose once the message got out?

We had stood up for what we believed and the public responded just as we hoped they would. And so we won. Common sense won. A writing class should be a writing class--not a soapbox for a radical professor. Writing about Racism and Sexism was first deferred and then canceled outright to be replaced by a fair and balanced class in argumentation.

As a result we were now able to celebrate at UT-Austin a kind of diversity that very few other schools across the nation can claim. We had won an enduring battle for real difference and fairness, the kind that truly tolerates opinions from across the political spectrum. What we did made a difference. And in doing so we came to understand that UT is truly a national arena, a place where even writers and journalists

from New York and Washington look to understand national trends and currents.

Not long after, we proved to be one of very few schools in the country to place a decision about a multicultural curriculum directly into the hands of the full faculty, challenging legislation that would have been imposed on all of us by a small group of politically active faculty and students. The ballot of the general faculty was secret and the radical forces once again went down to defeat, this time by a two-to-one margin. Later we established a separate division of writing to make sure that writing instruction at texas would never be politicized again.

In the fury of such events, students received the kind of education they couldn't get from books alone--though I'm not going to inveigh against book learning because it's the great books that teach us the values worth fighting for. But what I have come to love about UT is that it is a place where an individual can truly make a difference. Or where an individual can observe the difference that standing up for one's beliefs can make.

More recently, we've seen the difference a few law students can make. They protested the way they were treasted during the admissions process at the UT law school. As a result of their lawsuit, much derided and even ridiculed, programs of preferential admission at the University of Texas--and in all colleges and universities throughout Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi--have been declared unconstitutional--a violation of the equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment. In this heady conflict, I once again found myself unexpectedly embroiled because I'd been elected chair of the Admissions and Registration Committee in fall, 1996--several months before court's decision was rendered. Once again the national spotlight had fallen on UT-Austin. Our entire admissions procedure and the assumptions underlying it for the last decade had to be rethought. We're doing that now.

And so now UT must blaze a new trail, crafting admissions strategies that other schools across the country may someday also have to use--strategies that guarantee that the university remains open to students from every group across the state without thinking of them and selecting them according to racial and ethnic categories.

In the long run, I believe UT-Austin and other universities will be stronger for this change because, in many ways, the practical effect of affirmative action policies had been to polarize students, to create permanent bureaucracies designed to deal with students chiefly on the basis of their race, and to call into question the genuine achievements of minority students.

Now we have no choice but to find ways to improve the performance of all students and we need to work harder to retain the students we do admit. But we are once again allowed to think of them more by the content of their characters than according to a racial checkoff box on an application form. To quote from the Fifth District court's decision: "the use of race to achieve diversity undercuts the ultimate goal of the Fourteenth Amendment: the end of racially-motivated state action."

And so once again, UT finds itself in the national spotlight. It is a place that matters, a place where students who expect to do important things in their careers can beginning doing important things while still in college. It's a place that attracts important people: Hillary Clinton has been on campus twice in the last four years; Bill Clinton visited a year ago. George Bush was not long ago a graduation speaker and his son, our current governor, has followed him in that role. It's also a place that attracts interesting people, from Janis Joplin to William Bennett, from Lloyd Benson and Walter Cronkite to Farah Fawcett and Matthew McConnaughey--and the spectrum doesn't get much broader than that.

You can't miss UT--deep in the heart of Texas, at the crossroads of contemporary events, the biggest university in the second biggest state. Just about all we lack is that number #1 football team.