

Illiberal Arts

WHILE NEWSPAPERS AROUND the state devoted page-one headlines to tuition hikes and funding debates at Texas institutions of higher learning, events transpired at the University of Texas at Austin that, if allowed to stand, will ultimately degrade higher education far more than any budget cut. Recently-appointed Interim Liberal Arts Dean Robert King, with the tacit approval of UT President William Cunningham, has begun a systematic attack on both liberal policies and faculty, since taking his post in June.

Among other actions during his two-and-one-half month tenure as Acting Dean, King has:

- Abolished the democratic governance structure in the UT English department, and installed one that excludes 60 percent of the faculty;
- Cancelled the appointment of a nationally recognized woman to the directorship of UT's Middle Eastern Studies Center, and installed a geography professor whose major field of study has never been the Middle East and who speaks no Middle-Eastern languages;
- Slashed funding for UT's Women's Studies Center, and attempted to circumvent his predecessor's appointment to the directorship of that center.

The King's English

Although he was in his office when we called, King, who holds the Audrey and Bernard Rapoport Chair in Liberal Arts, refused to return repeated *Observer* phone calls. The heavy-handed style with which these devastating policies have been enacted, however, can be best illustrated through a case study: the abolition of the English department's governance system. In June, just after his ascension to the deanship, King, in a memo to the department chair, declared his "inclination" to reject the department's previous governance structure — an "Executive Council" elected by department faculty. Instead, King wants to install a "Budget Council," made up of full professors (leaving out associate professors, who are also tenured, and junior faculty).

The department in February voted, with only one dissenting vote out of 80 English faculty, to continue its present system of governance. King's refusal to honor their wishes constitutes a fundamental violation of faculty autonomy. English department Chairman Joe Kruppa says that junior faculty are "pretty confused" by the intent of the proposed changes, and that "morale is rather low" among faculty in general.

While under UT's intensely hierarchical structure, King is technically allowed to singlehandedly reconstitute departmental government, his actions fly in the face of both tradition and written guidelines for faculty gover-

nance formulated by national organizations of which the university is a member. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), in a stern letter dated July 24, informed Dean King that, "absent compelling reasons for not providing ... approval, such as evidence that a department has become dysfunctional in its operations, generally accepted principles of collegial government would call upon the administration to respect the decision of members of the department to continue the mode of governance under which they have been operating." Copies of the letter were sent to President Cunningham and Chairman Kruppa.

Days after receiving his copy of the AAUP letter, Chairman Kruppa offered King a compromise, whereby a committee would be set up outside the department to study the governance question, until the current Executive Committee terms expire in February. That would allow time, Kruppa reasoned, to proceed in an unhurried fashion, and to switch to a new governance system, if necessary, at a natural juncture. Kruppa argued that faculty promotions are coming up in September, and that a new governing body would have to make decisions on an issue that the Executive Committee had been studying for months. Kruppa also sent a copy to Cunningham, with a cover letter saying he wanted the president to know that he had offered a compromise.

Six days later, without responding specifically to Kruppa's offer, King issued a letter to the department in which he announced that the existing faculty government would be abolished as of September 1.

As the AAUP letter implies, King has provided no compelling evidence, in fact no evidence at all, that the existing system is inadequate. King at one point made vague references to problems in faculty hiring in the department, but gave no details. Many in the department, including the chairman of the faculty recruitment committee, feel that King's concerns stem from the department's success in minority recruitment, which King has historically opposed.

The Dean's Agenda

Critics point out that King targeted the English department after it recently embarked on an effort to fulfill the administrative mandate in UT's 1987 Minority Faculty Recruitment and Retention Action Plan, in which the administration stressed "the need for aggressive action to recruit minority faculty." In the past academic year, the department hired three new professors (out of over 400 letters of inquiry), including two black faculty. The chair of the English department's faculty recruitment committee, Kurt Heinzelman, said that "King's actions will

FEATURES

Out of Touch	4
<i>By Brett Campbell</i>	
Abandoned on the Front Lines	9
<i>By Lisbeth Lipari</i>	
Barbara Aldave Interview	12
<i>By Kathryn Kase</i>	

DEPARTMENTS

Las Americas	15
Books and the Culture	
Way Down in the Valley	
<i>By Gary Mounce</i>	17
Kingdom of the Unprovable	
<i>By Barbara Belejck</i>	18
Afterword	
Banner of Resentment	
<i>By Brett Campbell</i>	20

Cover illustration by Gail Woods.

make recruitment of anybody, but especially of minority candidates, virtually impossible."

These moves don't surprise those familiar with King's previous tenure as dean of the college during the 1980s. King was then criticized for what appeared to be attempts to suppress faculty members whose beliefs clashed with King's own conservative views, particularly in UT's government department.

King's recent actions in the English department, and the slashing of the budget at the Women's Studies Center, reveal a strongly regressive political agenda. And his appointment of a director with questionable qualifications to UT's Middle Eastern Studies Center indicates that he is not above sacrificing quality to achieve his ends. Of course, King holds only an interim position, but UT President Cunningham has also appointed him chair of the search committee to select a permanent dean. Since Cunningham appears unwilling to restrain King (and in fact, observers say, may well have appointed him for the purpose of implementing such regressive policies), the degradation of UT's Liberal Arts program may get much worse before it gets better.

—S.H.