

'Texan' goes too far in debating E306

On Friday, July 20, an editorial by Kevin McHargue amounted to an ad hominem attack on my motives that might lessen my effectiveness in the current effort to block the politicizing of E306, freshman English. The editorial so maligned my character and distorted my record that I called Mr. McHargue, who granted this space for my defense.

His allegation that in 1985 I cynically sought to abolish the very course I am now endeavoring to protect omitted a crucial fact: I and other English professors were then advocating another, more rigorous required composition course beyond the level of E306.

That course evolved into the present E309 series, and I taught several pilot sections of one version, E309L (The Writing Process), to demonstrate its effectiveness. The course remained an elective, despite our efforts to interest the University in its value, but for McHargue to say that I am opposed to introductory composition courses on the basis of complex decisions made five years ago is immensely unfair to my convictions about the importance of instruction in writing skills.

McHargue is contemptuous of my efforts to alert "anyone else with a printing press and a post office box" about the potential for indoctrination in the new E306. Like it or not, however, the University is a public university, supported by obligatory taxes.

Texans have a right to know how their monies for instruction are being spent. As for enclosing my curriculum vitae with my letters to the editors, I made this gesture to show that I have instructed 24 sections of courses emphasizing writing skills, 15 of them at the lower-division level, since arriving at the University in 1974.

This average of more than one such course per year shows an unusual commitment to composition and writing-component courses for a specialist in American literature teaching at a "research"-oriented institution.

McHargue's editorial stated that "the sides remain the same" as in the 1985 debate about desirable directions for English composition, but this, too, is not true. John Ruszkiewicz and Maxine Hairston, for example, signers of the recently published "Statement of Academic Concern," were never my "allies" in the 1985 controversy. But Joseph Kruppa, now English chairman, decidedly *was*.

In mocking my attitude toward graduate students who took out an advertisement to protest English Department policies in 1985, McHargue neglects to mention that I was the English grad-

Alan Gribben
GUEST COLUMNIST

"The Texan' could create a more healthy climate for campus debate by abandoning this obsession with faculty members' alleged motives."

uate studies chair then and that it was my responsibility to maintain a dialogue with those students and to develop undergraduate courses that would not diminish their opportunities to receive classroom teaching experience.

His remarks falsely make it appear that I injected myself into a situation with which I had no involvement.

I know that it has been disconcerting for students and *Texan* editorial writers to watch the English faculty have a public dispute about E306. It is probably tempting to believe that one side of the issue, represented by the appointed officers of the department and their dean, embodies political courage and virtue.

But consider the fate of someone like me who opposes the readings and emphasis in a version of E306 redesigned to study American racism and sexism. I undertook this dissent reluctantly, with the realization that mine would not be a popular opinion. I knew my opponents to be very worthy people, so I tried to keep this dispute on the level of the issues involved, the principles at stake and the inaccessibility of the "mystery packet" of readings.

Yet *Texan* editorialists have scoffed at my misgivings as "ideologically motivated whines and complaints" ("No Thanks," *The Daily Texan*, June 27) and have hinted that the "argument" of "Gribben and company" actually "rests on a lie" ("Crash Course," *The Daily Texan*, July 19). McHargue's editorial completed this picture by falsely alleging that "to Gribben, ... it is better to have no freshman composition course at all than to have one with a central theme."

The Texan could create a more healthy climate for campus debate by abandoning this obsession with faculty members' alleged motives. Indeed, its editorial writers need to accustom themselves to a habit of tolerating true intellectual dissent.

Some *Texan* writers may perceive dissenting valor only in mobs of student hecklers jeering at a university president on the steps of the

Main Building. But in reality a more arduous test of mettle is to be an outnumbered professor conscientiously trying to resist sloganistic dogmas surrounding the hallowed shibboleth of "multiculturalism."

This means submitting yourself to pillorying by *Texan* editorialists who choose sides and will not recognize that there is a place for the defense of academic standards.

By intimidating faculty dissenters, *The Texan* fails to remind the campus community that universities, more than all other societal institutions, should instill a respect for rational discourse and skeptical reflection — and never rely on character assassination or be swayed by mindless crowd-chants in considering policy decisions.

All of this becomes especially important because the English Department at the University is likely to be newsworthy again as the next academic year unfolds. Fifty English professors have already asked for a departmental meeting to introduce an Ethnic and Third World variant of the required sophomore Masterworks of Literature course (E316K), change the status of E314L "topics" sections to make them count as the equivalent of E316K, and strengthen "ethnic representation in the upper-division curriculum of the English Department."

In addition, the English chairman has appointed a committee containing very few traditionalists "to study the English major and to suggest possible changes." Since these agendas potentially raise the kinds of coercive political issues that have plagued the reconstitution of E306, the English faculty will predictably discuss, first departmentally and then openly, familiar questions.

Will students be taught to read and write only about oppression? Should politics permeate the English classroom? It is even conceivable that we will ultimately proceed to divide English into two UT departments — a politicized Department of Critical Theory and Cultural Studies, and a traditional Department of English Literature and Language.

In the middle of one of the most vital debates ever to confront higher education in the humanities, *The Texan* serves the entire community badly when its editorials ignore the intellectual substance of fundamental differences of faculty opinion while maliciously impugning an individual willing to defend traditional studies and the concept of academic excellence.

I thank Kevin McHargue for providing this space to right a journalistic wrong.

Gribben is a professor of English.