

DOCUMENTS AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL

REQUEST FOR FACULTY ACTION CONCERNING
THE ENGLISH COMPOSITION PROGRAM

James L. Kinneavy, Professor of English and Curriculum and Instruction, has filed with the Secretary of the University Council the Request for Faculty Action Concerning the English Composition Program set forth below. The Secretary has classified this request as minor legislation.

Notice is hereby given that this request will be presented to the University Council for consideration and possible action at its meeting on March 17, 1986.

H. Paul Kelley
H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The University Council

REQUEST FOR FACULTY ACTION CONCERNING
THE ENGLISH COMPOSITION PROGRAMAN ASSESSMENT

It is now possible to make a preliminary assessment of the proposed composition program which several members of the English department and Dean Robert D. King described to the University Council last month-- although several points still remain rather obscure.

I would like to take a look at the program at each level, from the admissions suggestions to the advanced composition courses and the required two courses with substantial writing components. I will, however, separate the English courses from the substantial writing courses for the reason that it is almost impossible to make a comparative judgment about writing across the curriculum courses in different institutions. Although a national survey says that already 50% of universities have such courses, they are very uneven and differ markedly in format from one place to the other.

ADMISSIONS AND EXEMPTIONS. Currently the exemption score for the first course in composition is a score of 550 on the English Composition Test (ECT). This year 40.1% exempted, and this figure has not changed significantly for three years. The test has been a fair barometer of writing skills for several decades. In the sixties, before the period of

grade inflation, it correlated well with scores in the freshman courses; it dropped with the drop in SAT, GRE, writing scores of NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), and other scores in the seventies and eighties; and it went up when the new entrance requirements were enforced in 1983.

I do not agree with Dean King that a writing sample is needed for the marginal scores in the vicinity of 550, because 550 is already a fairly low score. And I would be very suspicious of a new instrument that would suddenly exempt 75% to 80% of the students.

I object strenuously to the proposal of the English administrators that the Writing Center could offer short courses in grammar and mechanics that would prepare the students to re-take the tests. It flies in the face of 70 years of research which demonstrates that the isolated teaching of grammatical skills has no appreciable carry-over to writing ability. Such courses would probably get some students to pass the test. But they would know no more about writing than they did before. And, since there is now no advanced composition course for the vast majority, such students would have to be taught fundamentals in the departmental courses with substantial writing components.

THE FIRST COURSE IN COMPOSITION: E. 306.

There is one constant in the debate about E. 306: the English department would like to get rid of it. The members of the committee which proposed the new program to the department considered this, but felt that they probably could not get away with it; the English department officially voted to require E. 306 but not teach it -- that is still the official department policy; and the English administrators say that they will offer it for some four or five years, at which time it will no longer be necessary because of exemptions. In the meantime, the course will be made more "sophisticated," more interesting to teach and to take.

The exemption rates offer no suggestion that the course will soon no longer be needed (there has been a drop of 1.2% in the last three years). This is just wishful thinking on the part of the English department -- in fact, it is just wishful. English 306 will be with us for many years to come and consequently the second composition course will not be offered in the foreseeable future, except as a pilot course.

In the meantime, the department feels it must overhaul E. 306. It might be pointed out that E. 306 has probably been the most researched and investigated course in the history of the institution. There have been seven major research projects evaluating many different aspects of the course: mapping of assignments onto the types of writing assignments made in 25 departments of the University, longitudinal effects of the library unit after three years, increase in general writing ability, in reading ability, and in use of mechanical skills, use of the Writing Center as an alternate method of teaching the course, etc. The evaluations are favorable, the students like the course, and they learn a good deal about writing.

The new course will be more sophisticated and interesting to teach, it is said. Translate that "literary;" thus the few regular faculty who teach the course will be interested. How effective will such a course be? I have no objection to such a course in principle--it can be interesting and effective. But generally such courses are being more and more discarded, as a study at Texas A & M demonstrated some years ago. Jay Leringan, former chairman of the English department at Michigan State University, and Jay L. Robinson, former chairman of English at The University of Michigan, agree, as they indicate in recent articles in College English. The tendency in such courses is to end up teaching literature and to neglect the teaching of writing.

THE INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE: E. 316.

This course is supposed to incorporate a fair amount of writing into an introduction to literature, either British, or American, or World. Because of the firing of the lecturers, it has been necessary for many students to take the course in large lecture sections of 200 to 250 students. The compositions are handled by the teaching assistants (each given about 40 students). The sections which have been offered so far have, as far as last semester's Executive Committee could determine, insisted on some compositions. In fact the teaching assistants meet with the students four or five times a semester to prepare for the writing assignments. Unfortunately, the concern for composition has not allowed the teaching assistants to run weekly discussions for the literature--to the detriment of the course, many people in English think.

I agree. At the risk of appearing heretical to my own creed, I believe that emphasizing the writing assignments to the detriment of the literature in this particular course is a serious mistake. In any case, the course is not basically a composition course.

THE ADVANCED COMPOSITION COURSE.

Prior to 1983, the advanced composition courses were the sophomore courses in expository writing and technical writing. In spring, 1983, 68 sections were offered for these two courses. In 1983-84 and 1984-85, they were replaced by the junior level course, E. 346K, Writing in Different Disciplines. In fall, 1984, 44 sections of E. 346K were offered, and in spring, 112. This year the course has been suspended and only 5 or 6 courses in small, special purpose classes in advanced composition are currently offered per semester. The English department voted in September to discontinue the technical and business variants of the course but to continue the arts and humanities and social science variants. Last month, the University Council was advised that someone had decided that all versions of the course were being discontinued.

In their stead, the English department recommended a group of sophomore level courses, based on literary and humanities readings. Now, it appears, these have been downgraded to freshman level courses by someone. Eventually, when E. 306 disappears they will be offered.

Three remarks have to be made about the present and future situations. First, the courses are not currently being offered, nor is there any reasonable chance that they will be offered with a significant number of sections in the foreseeable future.

Second, even when they are offered, all professional writing courses will be excluded. The argument offered for this is that the English department members cannot teach technical writing and such courses are in decline. As a matter of fact, the English department here and in hundreds of other colleges has successfully taught technical writing for the past forty years. Secondly, in institutions offering Ph.D.'s in English in the country, there has been an 83% increase in the offerings of technical writing in the past three years, according to a recent survey by the Modern Language Association. The English department is simply uninformed on this matter.

Thirdly, the students of this university need such professional courses. Some departments need them for certification purposes. Nearly two-thirds of the undergraduate students are registered in colleges needing something like this kind of writing. The English department's proposals for advanced composition are addressed to the interests of the teachers, not the needs of the students.

Do we need a second semester composition course? The English department thinks so; it approved the requirement. I know for a certainty that the 1,000 provisional students whom we take in annually need more composition than the five weeks they get in the summer. I also know that we draw from the same type of students as do the better state institutions in the rest of the South. Sometimes, unfortunately, we forget that Texas has the lowest SAT scores of any state in the South or Southwest. Yet the rest of the public institutions in the South and Southwest nearly all require two composition courses--and many require two literature courses also.

How does this university's advanced composition situation compare to that in other public universities? I do not know of a single public institution in the state which has poorer offerings in this area, nor do I know of a public institution in the entire South which is so impoverished. In fact, I am not aware of any major public university in the country which offers such a lean program in advanced composition as we are currently offering and will continue to offer for the foreseeable future.

The central administration has been sold a bill of goods about this composition program by the administrators of the English department. Not that the administrators of the English department are dishonest--they are simply uninformed, because they are uninterested. The program actually is an embarrassment.

THE COURSES WITH SUBSTANTIAL WRITING COMPONENTS.

In 1981, when the earlier proposal of the English department was adopted, the General Faculty also recommended to the different colleges to require two additional courses with substantial writing components. This was a part of the Vick committee recommendations.

What is the current status of these two courses? They are currently being required in all of the colleges. But two critical dimensions of the original proposal are being ignored. In the first place, there were supposed to be additional funds allocated to pay for the use of teaching assistants in large classes (1 for each additional 20 students). Secondly, these teaching assistants were to be trained to help with grading and with conferencing with students. At Michigan and at Penn, where such programs are in place, the administrators of the programs feel that without the teaching assistants, the programs simply would not work.

Unfortunately, the promised funds for paying the teaching assistants and for training them have never been given by the University. I feel that the current program is in jeopardy. Like the rest of the dimensions of the entire writing program at this university, the writing across the curriculum courses are at risk.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Attempts on the part of English departments to avoid or denigrate the teaching of composition are a common phenomenon in many universities at the present time, so much so that the main scholarly body for English studies, the Modern Language Association, has appointed a national committee to study the problem. What does this committee recommend for a situation such as ours? At its annual meeting in Chicago this year, Dr. Robert Scholes gave a speech entitled "The Case for Divorce," recommending in such situations the separation of the composition faculty and courses from the literature component of the department.

Such a solution has been adopted by Harvard, Minnesota, UCLA, USC, Iowa, and Utah, to give examples of institutions with which we are frequently compared. In my opinion, our situation is quite parallel to that at most of these institutions.

If the composition program is to be salvaged here at Texas, I believe that the administration ought to realistically consider the separation of the composition program from the literature program. Dean King even suggested such a separation a few years ago, and several of us have sent Dean King the outline for such a program.

The installation of such a program, parallel structurally to that of, say, American Studies, would entail little or no money, as far as administration goes. The same policy committee which ran the old two freshman courses could run a freshman and an advanced composition course. At Minnesota, for instance, four faculty members administer the program.

The staff for one of the courses is in place--the assistant instructors in English right now are teaching the freshman course. But someone would have to be hired to teach the advanced composition course which the lecturers used to teach.

It was a tragic mistake for the administration to allow the lecturers to go. Their dismissal is at the heart of the whole program which we are considering. By letting the lecturers go, the administration saved about \$700,000. But is not half of the composition program worth at least this?

Is the University going to sit back and watch the Writing Center teach to the test to exempt students from a course they need, then watch the English department try four new ruses to rid itself of freshman composition, then watch the English department offer one of the poorest advanced composition programs in the entire South and totally neglect technical and business writing? Is the University going to sit back and watch the administrators of the English department fail to implement half of the composition requirement that the department itself mandated?

It is about time the faculty of the University asserted itself.

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