

University Council

The final item of business was a motion to change all UT Austin undergraduate degree programs that are within the spirit of the report of the Committee on Basic Education Requirements (the Vick Committee). James H. Sledd (English) moved that "at every point where the new writing requirements for UT Austin undergraduate degree programs specify E. 346K, students shall be given a choice between E. 346K and a second semester of composition at the freshman level." The written arguments he presented in favor of his motion were distributed to Council members on Nov. 19 in D&P 8910-8911 and on Dec. 7 in a 19-page memorandum from Mr. Sledd; the memorandum will appear as an attachment to the minutes of the Dec. 13, 1982, Council meeting.

In support of his motion, Mr. Sledd made the following points: The motion was not ideal, but it deserved approval. Nobody questioned that our undergraduates should write better and that we should provide the needed instruction. The Vick Committee had proposed an improvement — E. 306, followed by four courses in writing. At present only 18 per cent of our freshmen place out of E. 306, down from about 50 per cent a dozen years ago. It is clear we need E. 306, and in earlier Council debate English Department spokesmen had acknowledged that a 12-hour requirement in English would be excellent. These needs could be met by following E. 306 with one semester of writing in every undergraduate year — freshman, sophomore, junior, senior; that would include E. 306, E. 307, the new sophomore course E. 316K, and two courses with a substantial writing component — one of which could be the new course E. 346K. However, such a requirement had not been adopted because the department could not staff a four-course requirement. In arguing for the three-course requirement that was adopted, the English Department spokesmen had misrepresented the findings of faculty and student surveys which he had reported in 1975; the students had said that instruction in composition is most effective during the freshman year, the faculty had favored a choice between a second semester of composition at the freshman level and a semester in the upper division, and the students had said they would be more motivated in an optional upper-division course. His motion was that the English Department should staff a 9-hour requirement — E. 306, E. 316K, and either E. 307 or E. 346K; his motion presupposed that two additional courses with substantial writing components would also be required. His motion would guarantee the continuity of instruction which the English Department had urged. It would create no difficulties in any of the curricula which different schools and colleges had thus far submitted, and it would give students greater flexibility in planning their programs. It would not space out student demand for required courses as well as the requirement that has already been approved, but meeting the needs of students is more important than administrative inconvenience; though the English Department would have to teach more freshmen than under the new requirements, it would have to teach fewer than under the old. The complete text of Mr. Sledd's remarks will be included in the minutes of the Dec. 13 meeting.

James L. Kinneavy (English) spoke against Mr. Sledd's motion; the complete text of his remarks will also be included in the minutes of the Dec. 13 meeting. He made the following points: The already-approved program consists of E. 306, which is not a remedial composition course; E. 316K, a sophomore literature course with a substantial writing component; E. 346K, an upper-division composition course taken when the student has a fairly mature grasp of subject-matter content about which to write, and two additional courses with substan-

tial writing components. That will give UT Austin the best composition program of any institution in the country. Mr. Sledd's proposal would deprive the students who choose the freshman option of a professional teacher of writing to assist them with writing in their major areas at a time when they have a mature grasp of their fields. They would be deprived of the opportunity to address systematically general readers when writing in their special fields, which is probably more critical than addressing specialized audiences. Further, Mr. Sledd did not address some of the desirable features built into the already-approved program — (1) a certain percentage (probably about 10 per cent) of the students who are weakest in composition skills will have to get tutorial help in the writing laboratory along with the freshman English composition course; transfer students will be able to count their second semester of freshman English as one of the two other courses with substantial writing components, but they would have to take E. 346K and another course with a substantial writing component; some departments, like Chemical Engineering, have courses with substantial writing components at the freshman level; and E. 314L is a course with a substantial writing component that is available to students in the second semester of the freshman year. The writing laboratory can also handle students on a referral basis. If both a second freshman-level writing course and an upper-division writing course were to be offered by the English Department, other departments would probably not offer courses with substantial writing components, and the English Department cannot staff four composition courses for the entire University — English departments in institutions comparable to ours normally staff only one or two, while we will be staffing three. The new program has already been approved convincingly by the English Department, the College of Liberal Arts, the University Council, the General Faculty, and the president; all those decisions should not be reversed without trying the program.

With regard to the charges against the English Department made in Mr. Sledd's 19-page document distributed to members of the Council, Mr. Kinneavy made the following points: The charge that the primary motivation behind the English Department proposal was mainly logistical is both irrelevant and inaccurate. He agreed with Mr. Sledd that there has not been an adequate resolution of the staffing problem for composition teachers in the English Department; the status of lecturers has been improved, but it remains a major problem. The department is not planning to discontinue its sophomore-level writing courses; E. 316K, the required course in literature, must have a substantial writing component, and the courses in technical writing (E. 317) and expository prose (E. 310) are being upgraded to become different sections of the new upper-division course (E. 346K). The students and faculty expressed favorable reactions to the possibility of a junior-level course, and E. 346K meets that reaction; the students also expressed the need for a freshman composition course, and E. 306 meets that need. He has no recollection that anyone made any extravagant claims about the effectiveness of our composition program in general or of E. 306 in particular; the department is very aware of the program's deficiencies, and the newly-approved program was proposed as an improvement. The department has no intention of lowering the present exemption scores and it intends to add a writing sample requirement for exemption for E. 306. It does not intend to abolish the required freshman composition course, and both the president and the dean of the College of Liberal Arts have insisted on the importance of composition at every turn.

Mr. Kinneavy closed by stating that, based on personal impressions gained during the past 15 years in consulting with some 45 institutions of higher education across the country, ranging from community colleges to large and prestigious public and private universities, UT Austin invests more money in composition teaching, requires more composition courses, hires more faculty to teach composition, trains prospective assistant instructors more assiduously, assesses its composition program more meticulously, supports a better graduate program in rhetoric and composition, and in general worries more about composition for the students than any other institution he ever visited. He concluded by saying, "We are not perfect; we could be better, but most comparable institutions are much worse."

Joseph J. Moldenhauer (chairman, English) seconded Mr. Kinneavy's observations that the department's energies are very heavily invested in training in composition. He noted that a concern for the number of students is not contemptible — it is related to the quality of education services that an institution can deliver. He also pointed out that the English Department is the largest department in the University.

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John M. Weinstock (associate dean, College of liberal Arts) stated that the quality of the writing education we are providing our students has been the main concern throughout all of his work with the English Department over the past four years on the new program.

R. Neill Megaw (English) spoke in support of Mr. Sledd's motion that students be given the choice of a second freshman semester or a junior-level English composition course. Paul E. Begala (student representative) stated that the student representatives on the Council supported Mr. Sledd's motion very strongly.

Mr. Sledd closed the debate by saying he believed that most Council members had not yet read the lengthy document he had distributed, so he moved that action on his motion be postponed until the January meeting of the Council. Dean Robert C. Jeffrey (College of Communication) opposed the motion to postpone and took exception to the assumption that Council members had not read Mr. Sledd's document; a show of hands indicated that almost all of the Council members had indeed read it. James W. Vick (mathematics) spoke in favor of the motion to postpone, as did John D. Denson (student representative), who noted that because of final examinations only half of the student representatives were present. The motion to postpone was then adopted by a vote of 28 to 25.

There was no further business, and the meeting was adjourned at 11:45 a.m. The next meeting of the Council is scheduled for 2:15 p.m. on Monday, Jan. 24, 1983.