

Maxine C. Hairston

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Dean Standish Meacham
College of Liberal Arts
University of Texas
Austin, Texas 78712

Dear Dean Meacham,

For nearly two decades I have made the study of rhetoric, writing theory, and the teaching of writing the focus of my professional life. I have done my publishing in this area and been active nationally, speaking and consulting, and serving as president of our 8000 member national organization of college writing teachers five years ago. I was also director of Freshman English here at Texas for four years.

I mention all this so you will understand how professionally concerned I am about the proposed changes in English 306. For strong pedagogical reasons, I do not believe it is a good idea to make 306 a topics course focusing on the highly charged political issues of racism and sexism. And since I will not be on campus for the fall semester, I would like to make my contribution to the debate before I leave on September 6 to spend the fall term in New York.

I believe the central issue of the discussion should be this: What kind of required writing course will best prepare freshmen to enter into the academic life of this university? I believe the professionally responsible answer to that question is this:

1. A course that will give them experience in writing for different purposes and to different audiences.
2. A course that will help them to become critical thinkers by having them develop their own ideas through writing and examine those ideas with their fellow students.
3. A course that will help them to become confident writers who can use logic and rhetoric effectively to present their ideas to others.

For several reasons, I do not think that making 306 into a topics course on public issues involving race and gender will achieve these goals. (Incidentally, I don't think making it a course in writing about literature will accomplish these goals either--definitely not.)

First, because of their fear of grades, freshmen are usually reluctant to express their opinions. They will be even more afraid to express those opinions on the controversial issues proposed for the new 306 course, particularly if they believe the teacher would disagree with them. Such an environment isn't likely to produce thoughtful or honest writing. It is more likely to produce anger, even though unexpressed directly in class. It will be expressed outside of class.

Second, because we still have relatively few minority students at the University, most sections of freshman English will have an overwhelming majority of white students. That is going to make a very uncomfortable environment for both groups of students, one in which it will be difficult for students to write or speak honestly or to generate productive feedback on each other's writing. I believe most minority students in these classes will not relish having their lives and experiences written and talked about by other students whom they find naive and uninformed. Again, it's not an environment likely to produce thoughtful writing or critical thinking.

Third, the issues that are proposed as the center of the new course are extraordinarily complex social and psychological issues. Anyone who hopes to speak and write about them knowledgeably, sensitively, and authoritatively in a classroom needs to have studied carefully and invested substantial time and energy in developing well thought out presentations of the material. I think few English department faculty have been able to spend time doing that. How much less so the graduate students in English, the very people who would teach 90% of the proposed freshmen classes. They are the last ones to have time to invest in preparing such material; they are the last ones who should be put into the delicate and difficult classroom situations I believe the course would create. They are also the most vulnerable people in the department if they get poor teaching evaluations. Teaching freshman English is already one of the most demanding, labor-intensive assignments in the department. I think it would be unconscionable to make graduate students' work even more difficult by instituting the proposed course.

I do think the University should be moving quickly and firmly toward promoting cultural diversity throughout the entire curriculum. Issues of race, class, and gender are central in our society, and we need to do much more to make all students aware of them. One proposal the University administration might consider would be to institute a two course requirement in cultural difference for all students, similar to the two course substantial writing component requirement. Such classes could be created in almost all departments, and could be taught, and taught well, by qualified, interested faculty. It is even possible that a freshman course in cultural diversity could be instituted, to be based in the sociology department. It could fill requirements in social studies.

I urge, however, that we exclude political issues from freshman English and keep it what it needs to be: a course that encourages new students to explore ideas freely through writing in an open classroom, and one in which we help students to become independent thinkers and confident writers. I don't think that can happen in classrooms that are politically charged and intimidating to students new to the University.

Yours truly,

Maxine Hairston

Maxine Hairston
Professor of English

Copies to Dr. Joseph Kruppa
Dr. Gerhard Fonken

