

Right-wingers on the march against multicultural reform

The postponement of a syllabus change scheduled for the fall semester whereby the English Department's rhetoric and composition course would become a course on "Writing About Difference" (E306) represents a defeat for students at the University by the reactionary right.

The postponement was the result of a well-orchestrated right-wing offensive against the course in which a few conservative English professors wrote *The Daily Texan* and publicly agitated against the curriculum reform. They were supported by a national right-wing group, the National Association of Scholars, which mobilized UT and community opposition to it.

Behind the scenes, the UT administration received letters and phone calls opposing the new course. During a phone conversation with a representative of the National Association of Scholars (NAS) at their headquarters in Princeton, N.J. on July 20, the NAS representative claimed that their Texas branch had helped "defeat" a new English course. What's going on here?

The assault against a proposed reformation of a required course on rhetoric and composition is part of a nationwide rightist attack on educational changes that they see as undermining traditional values. The reactionary right are academic fundamentalists, true believers in the rectitude of exclusively teaching the fundamentals

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as they have been taught in the past, and they especially oppose the teaching of ideas that run counter to their own.

These fundamentalists have organized what Barbara Harlow calls "academic death squads" that attempt to kill educational reforms that they oppose and, in the past, they have attempted to eliminate individuals from the University who teach subversive ideas.

Earlier in the decade, similar rightist groups formed an organization, Accuracy in Academia, with the intention of monitoring UT courses to make sure that the professors were not espousing "radical" ideas; the goal was to purge the University of those who did not think as they did and to inhibit the teaching of alternative ideas. The project, which stank of McCarthyism and censorship, received widespread publicity and was roundly attacked by all of those who still believed in academic freedom.

After a year, the project disappeared from public view. Regrouping their forces, rightists formed the "National Association of Scholars" dedicated to propagating conservative values and to opposing "liberal" or "radical" educational reform. Such projects call for reflection on why the reactionary right is against educational change and why they would go to

such extremes to attack an attempt by the English Department to undertake a much needed reform of a rhetoric and composition course.

The offensive against E306 constitutes the first time in my memory in which there was a concerted campaign by professors and others both inside and outside a specific department to block reforms of a course that was already decided upon within another department.

It reveals that a well-organized group is prepared to attempt to block all educational reforms at the University that do not conform to their ideology. In so doing, those professors who have signed petitions and published letters against the course are legitimizing UT interference in course curriculum reforms, thus sacrificing the autonomy of the faculty to reform their own courses according to their own professional expertise.

Attempting to block syllabus course changes in other departments also implicitly imposes one's own biases and preferences on other departments, often, as in this case, from a standpoint of total ignorance of the history of debates over specific reforms within the department.

In the case under examination, a group of UT professors published a "Statement of Academic Concern" as an advertisement in the July 18 edition of *The Daily Texan*. While no group takes credit for the petition, nor does the ad

reveal who organized and paid for it, investigations revealed that the Texas Association of Scholars paid for it, and many names on the petition have been associated with this group. The Texas Association of Scholars is a branch of the National Association of Scholars, a group funded by right-wing foundations and dedicated to blocking liberal and multicultural educational reform.

Indeed, I wonder how many of the 56 UT professors who signed the petition are actually members of the right-wing National Association of Scholars, or their Texas branch, and how many were aware of the ideological crusade in which their names and reputations were enlisted.

Opponents of the course, outside the English Department, accused it of advocating Marxism, and described it "as indoctrination in bigotry ... serving the ends of hatred." How these academic crusaders could reach such conclusions concerning a course that had never been taught remains a mystery and exemplifies the lack of concern for facts in those who waged a war against an imaginary course whose subversive effects they fantasized.

In fact, the extreme statements by the reactionary right attacking the course are symptomatic of the systematic distortion and McCarthyist tactics used against the course from the beginning. Early on, the opponents of the course systematically misrepresented the

origins, nature and intentions of the course, and used the McCarthyist tactics of attacking liberal reforms by claiming that they were a cover for Marxism.

The end result of the intervention of the reactionary right into curriculum reform is that an exciting and innovative new course has been postponed at a time when it is desperately needed.

Multicultural education is therefore on hold. There are many reasons to believe that the assault on the proposed change in the course on writing and composition was the beginning of a right-wing offensive against multicultural education, against expanding the curriculum to include the works of women, people of color and people with dissonant views.

Only someone totally out of touch with reality could deny that significant educational reforms are needed. Were the reactionary right to open their minds and their eyes, they would see that we are

living in a rapidly changing society. Forecasts indicate that by the end of the decade more than 50 percent of the labor force will be non-white and the majority of labor will involve computers, new technologies and new structures of work.

This requires multicultural understanding and tolerance, the ability to adapt to new situations and technology, and new cognitive and rhetorical skills. Holding back necessary change, the reactionary right thus holds the University back from adapting to the technological future and robs the students of the possibilities of learning skills which they will need for future employment and citizenship.

Such thought police have been discredited in the Soviet bloc and should be subjected to similar criticism in the so-called democratic capitalist countries.

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