

Department works for classroom communication

I read with interest Branden Cornelius' letter about not being able to understand his statistics instructor (Battalion, Sept. 17). I would like to respond by discussing the general issue of international instructors and some of the procedures the University and statistics department have instituted to enhance effective teaching in our courses.

First, a basic fact of academic life is that to carry out the research needed to solve problems faced by Texas (and the United States as a whole), Texas A&M tries to attract the most highly trained faculty and graduate assistants possible without regard to race, gender, national origin or any other external factors. Given that a fair number of the most highly trained people do not have English as their native language, administrators are often asked why we don't hire additional faculty from the United States solely to teach introductory courses.

The first two reasons we don't employ that practice are the shortage of funds and the shortage of qualified Americans interested in such a job. But there are other reasons as well. One reason is that we have all seen examples proving that being from the United States is no guarantee of being a good teacher. Another is that our international instructors have not received significantly lower ratings on evaluation forms. In fact, the instructor Mr. Cornelius criticized is one of our most conscientious teachers and has received consistently high student evaluations.

There is one other fact I would like to emphasize about why we have international instructors: they are remarkable people and their presence greatly enhances the multicultural milieu required of a great university. They have learned a second language, have adapted to a culture far from home and have had to qualify to become instructors in order to continue their financial support — all while carrying on a

Dr. H. Joseph Newton
Reader's Opinion

challenging program of research and/or study themselves.

As Mr. Cornelius said, statistics can be a difficult subject, particularly for students having difficulty in the prerequisites, whether from lack of technical skills or from math anxiety.

We have developed several procedures for helping students with these problems. These procedures include:

- An algebra pre-test designed to warn students who are weak in technical skills that they might need remedial help before taking the course.

- An almost round-the-clock system of help sessions. These sessions are free of charge and, contrary to Mr. Cornelius' claim, are run by instructors coming from a wide variety of national origins.

- The availability of paid tutors.
- The availability of Professor Elizabeth Eltinge, our director of undergraduate affairs, to any student not finding the other procedures helpful. Professor Eltinge is a tenure-track assistant professor possessing degrees in both statistics and education.

- And, if all else fails, I am happy to meet with students having difficulties of any kind in our courses.

Any subject is difficult if an instructor, international or not, has poor communication skills. In the case of international instructors, we work closely with the University's English Language Institute. They provide courses in English for the instructor. Based on their reports and our knowledge of the instructor, we certify that they are capable of carrying on classroom instruction.

In addition, we work closely with the Center for Teaching Excellence who observes and videotapes all of our instructors, international or not, and provides us with feedback on the relative skills of all our instructors.

Of course, it is possible for us to make a mistake, and students could be faced with an instructor (again I emphasize, international or not) with inadequate communication skills. This fall the University has implemented a Classroom Communication Enhancement Program under the Associate Provost for Honors Programs and Undergraduate Studies. This program provides a standard, University-wide mechanism for students to register complaints about

the communication skills of their instructors. We welcome this program as well as the general Commitment to Education Program instituted by Texas A&M.

I would like to emphasize that I welcome an informed discussion of the role of international instructors in a major university. But such discussion must in fact be informed as well as rational and even-tempered.

In order for Texas A&M to continue to grow stronger, we must be sure that we provide an environment where no group feels singled out for unfair criticism. In this regard, I welcome the report of the President's Committee for a Discrimination-Free Campus, also

adopted this fall.

I have tried to be positive and upbeat in this Reader's Opinion, but I feel I must end on a negative note.

In any future discussion of this issue, I hope that venomous phrases like the ones employed by Mr. Cornelius, such as "makes a very poor attempt at speaking English," "speaks English on a fifth- or sixth-grade level," and the infamous "I have nothing against these people" (italics mine) can be avoided. They add nothing to the discussion, do damage to the intellectual vitality of a great University and have thoroughly offended all of the students and faculty in our department.

Dr. H. Joseph Newton is head of the Texas A&M Department of Statistics.

Students mustn't abuse complaint program

With the University's new Classroom Communication Enhancement Program, students have the power to correct communication problems with their instructors. A power we should be careful not to abuse.

The program allows students to submit formal complaints about problems they have understanding professors in class. Department heads and associate deans will review the complaints and decide on appropriate measures within seven days.

Many problems have been overlooked in the past because no complaint process existed before, and the program is an excellent way for students to seek help with any communication problem. It is also an excellent way for foreign teachers to be discriminated against.

We all know many faculty members come to Texas A&M from other countries, and most of us have taken classes from international instructors. In some cases, instructors may not know English well enough to communicate effectively. These problems should be addressed.

But many of these instructors are



Cindy McMillian
Editor

competent in English; they just retain the accents of their first language. These are the instructors I'm worried about.

We must try and understand the problems foreign instructors face. English is a difficult language to master because of all the exceptions to grammatical rules, and international instructors often explain complex concepts in class. I have trouble ordering a Coke in a foreign language, while some of these people are explaining nuclear physics.

If instructors know English but have an accent, it's not that hard to work with them and try to understand. Filing complaints against instructors just because they

don't speak exactly like we do is narrow-minded and unfair.

Why be so harsh and quick to judge? In classes where the instructor has a foreign accent, I've often heard students say, "He can't speak a word of English" or "Why can't we have someone American for a change?"

The teachers' accents are rarely as bad as students make them out to be. Besides, being born in the United States doesn't make someone a good teacher. The worst teacher I've had at A&M speaks perfect English, and one of the best teachers I've had is an international instructor. You can be good (or bad) communicator in any language.

The Classroom Communication Enhancement Program is a great way to resolve legitimate gripes about instructors who can't explain class material and instructors who can't adequately communicate in English.

Just remember *unfair* accusations will reinforce the discrimination problems many international instructors already face. Let's not punish anyone if we can help bridge the gap ourselves.

Cindy McMillian is a senior economics major.



Mail Call

Pro-choicers not "pro-abortion"

EDITOR:

I read Mr. Bradham's letter with interest and some sadness. I am emphatically not "pro-abortion." I am "pro-choice." I would never, under any circumstances, favor the government using its power to force a woman to have an abortion, nor would I favor forcing medical personnel to participate in abortions.

However, I believe that government control of our private lives has become far too intrusive. I do not believe that the government should make this decision. It should be a decision between the woman and her doctor and ultimately between a woman and God.

When the government claims the right to prohibit abortion (as it did in Romania under the Communist dictatorship) it is within the government's power to compel abortion (as it does in China under the Communist dictatorship). It should not be the government's decision.

I hope society can decrease the annual abortion rate through efforts such as contraception education. But studies have also shown that when women are denied choice, the result is often death at the hands of butchers and self-induced abortions.

Many remember when abortion was illegal. The silent trips out of state for the rich; dead or mutilated girls for the poor. There are no easy snap answers. The decision is an often difficult and traumatic one. But, the decision should not be made by the government.

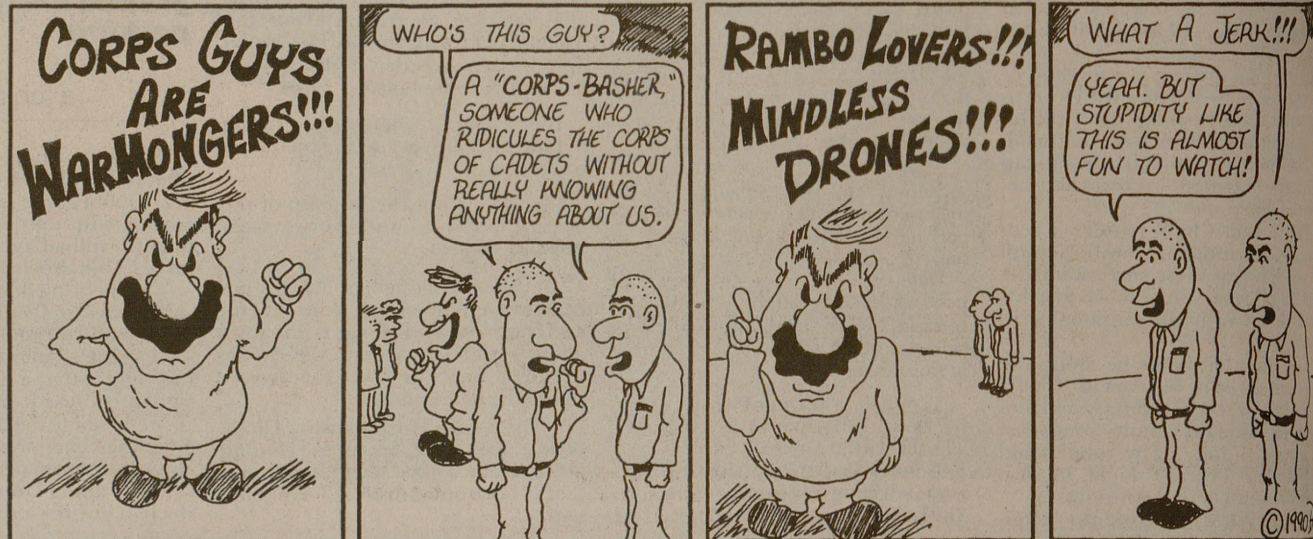
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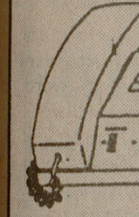
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