

Controversy at Bennington College

Nancy Burns

Recently, Edward Hoagland, author of the controversial essay "Shhh! Our Writers Are Sleeping!" (*Esquire*, June 1990) was offered a three year teaching position at Bennington College. This position replaces one he was denied earlier this year due to the uproar and accusations of homophobia that were a result of his essay.

The essay stirred no controversy when it was originally published, yet ignited the school last December when students and faculty became aware of it. The article surfaced after a decision by the literature faculty to hire Hoagland for a three year teaching position.

The crux of the controversy was based on Hoagland's opinion that anal sex is a main cause of the spread of AIDS and that it is an unhealthy sexual practice that "mammals had all but stopped using 70 to 100 million years ago."

Knowledge of Hoagland's essay quickly activated the college's Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Alliance, which demanded that the faculty reconsider its proposed appointment of Hoagland. The faculty re-

convened in December for a second vote, saying it was because some professors had not met Hoagland at the time of the first vote.

Hoagland cried foul play and, in an editorial in the *New York Times*, claimed, "The students told me their protest had not been spontaneous but had been instigated by a professor who showed them the offending article after the faculty vote to rehire me." Several students and faculty claimed that the statements in his essay were hostile to gays and lesbians.

Hoagland responded to the homophobia accusations by stating that he supports homosexual relationships. The passage, he claimed, was intended to warn against the dangers of promiscuity in the age of AIDS. "I am classified as a nature writer," said Hoagland "and I just think it (anal sex) is dangerous because it is not provided for physiologically. It's risky but I don't think its morally wrong."

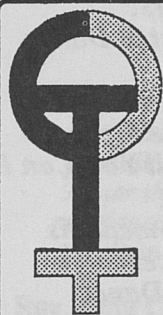
Hoagland appealed his case to the Personnel Review Committee, which concluded in their report that proper procedures were deviated from when the faculty reversed their initial decision to

hire Hoagland. A new applicant evaluation procedure was recommended and a symposium on "political correctness" was suggested for this fall. Hoagland claimed that because his statement was not "politically correct" he was not hired. The committee also stated that "Ed Hoagland should not be barred from teaching at Bennington College."

Literature faculty members quickly responded to the report with a rebuttal. In a memorandum to the Personnel Review Committee, ten Literature and Language Division faculty members endorsed a statement that "not a single member of the Division maintained that (Hoagland's) published sentences, if indeed homophobic, should disqualify him." They also stated that although Hoagland was not chosen for the position, he was not barred from other positions or removed from his current one.

Maura Spiegel, literature professor and Division Secretary said that, contrary to the conclusions of the Personnel Review Committee report, concern of the literature professors about Hoagland's teaching and treatment of students dominated the discussion about his suitability for the three year contract.

The Board of Trustees, meeting over graduation weekend, sided with the Personnel Review Committee and ordered the literature faculty to create a position for Hoagland. Less than one month after the Board's action, Hoagland was offered and accepted a three year position teaching writing, beginning in the fall of 1992. It is unclear how the faculty and students will react to the latest round in this controversy as most of Bennington College is on summer break at this time. ▼



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