

# Coping with our 'literacy crisis'

Are we illiterate? By 1977's standards, the answer is probably no, we are not. By standards of a decade ago, we are clearly approaching illiteracy — if we haven't passed it already.

News magazines, newspapers, academic journals and discussions within universities across the nation have labeled the problem as a "literacy crisis."

Students graduate from high school unable to construct simple sentences and paragraphs and leave college unable to do much more than write a simple paper.

**NO ONE** really knows why. Students quickly blame University faculty who show more interest in what's said rather than how it's said and who show more interest in Freudian analysis of literature than the art of constructing clear sentences and paragraphs. On the other side, professors state that their students simply aren't what they used to be.

Indeed, we are not.

**IN 1966**, the mean score for entering freshmen on the verbal part of the Scholastic Aptitude Test was 540. In 1971, the mean score fell to 521 and five years later in 1976 the mean score plummeted to 494.

At the University in 1971, 49 of every 100 freshmen scored above 550 on the English Composition Test (ECT), which exempted them from the basic English composition course, English 306. By 1975, only 25 of every 100 scored 550 or better on the ECT.

For whatever reason, students no longer approach the literacy competency of students a few years ago. This problem definitely has some administrators and some faculty concerned...but that concern has been minimal.

**IN 1973**, the General Faculty voted to reduce the lower division English requirement from 12 hours to nine hours. During the past spring, an ad-hoc committee was appointed to study and evaluate the change in the re-

quirement.

The results of that committee? First, the committee found that it is difficult to determine the causes of the decline of writing.

**SECOND**, writing is an extremely difficult skill to master and there is no evidence to suggest that increasing the number of required hours would improve writing ability.

Finally, the committee found that there was a definite need for another committee to study the matter further.

Understandably, academics love committees. It's an easy way to create the impression that something is being done about a problem.

**IN ADDITION**, it's the easiest way for this University to avoid facing facts: a lot of University students can't write worth a damn and, with a few notable exceptions, most fulltime faculty members aren't going to take the time to teach students simple grammar, rhetoric, composition and syntax.

There's no simple solution to this problem, but University English Prof. James Sledd has come up with a pretty good idea. The good doctor suggests that the English requirement should be eliminated and that students should be required to take courses in a department of writing.

**INDEED, SLEDD'S** radical solution departs from traditional academics, but a radical solution is needed for a critical problem.

The writing department could draw professors from across the University who are interested in teaching students how to write and how to express themselves clearly and cogently.

When, and if, University President Lorene Rogers establishes a committee to study ways to improve general writing, we hope that the committee will consider Dr. Sledd's proposal. It deserves a hearing.

— D.M., D.E.

## Funding the park?