

Bringing back basics

Of the many thanks we owe our student counterparts of the 1960s for the gains they made in students' rights, their successful push for liberalization of college curriculum is not among them.

Although the idea of opening up degree programs and maximizing the students' rights to choose for themselves which courses to take would seem to make for a healthy degree of flexibility and freedom, the fact is such a policy does not make for good education.

That education in this country has moved away from "the basics" has become a cliché. That this trend has produced poorly educated students has become an undeniable reality. The effects on secondary education are easily quantifiable. Nearly every study done on the subject indicates that a significant number of students who graduate from high school are functionally illiterate. And although scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test were slightly up last year, those scores consistently declined from 1963 to 1982.

The impact on higher education is exacerbated by the fact that college degree programs have become increasingly specialized. Most of the degree programs at the University either allow students too much flexibility — thus tempting them to take "easy-A" electives over courses that would broaden their base of understanding — or not enough flexibility — thus forcing them to take only specialized courses within their fields of study. It is deplorable that engineering students graduate with nothing more than a perfunctory exposure to the liberal arts and that English students graduate with no understanding whatsoever of how a computer works.

The biggest problem of all is that the vast majority of students graduate college without the ability to write.

Pete Foster, senior vice president for American Bank in Austin, explains: "As corporate recruiters, we are

constantly dismayed at the inability of even top-flight candidates for our management training program to use the written and spoken word properly. I'm referring to weaknesses in grammar, punctuation and spelling that manifest themselves even in the resumes we receive. Weaknesses later manifest themselves in difficulties on the part of our younger trainees to generate polished work products or to make impressive sales or other presentations.

"Those are harsh words," he adds, "but true."

Fortunately, something is being done at the University to combat this problem. The University Council — in response to the report of its Committee on Basic Education Requirements, also known as the Vick committee — has almost completed its revision of college catalogues to incorporate a core curriculum into each degree program. The new curriculum includes six hours of English beyond E306 plus six hours of courses with a substantial writing component, three hours of social science beyond the 12 already required in government and history, three hours of mathematics, nine hours of natural sciences, three hours of fine arts and humanities and eight hours of a foreign language.

The Vick report wisely places a high priority on writing skills and well-roundedness. It is a giant step toward upgrading the quality of education at the University, and across the state, since college-bound high school students will now have to choose their courses more carefully to ensure that they are prepared for admission to the University.

Although some students may lament their loss of freedom in choosing courses, this is one instance where the administration truly does know best. The report is an idea whose time has come.

Lisa Beyer