

Report reveals students weak in composition

Editor's Note: This is the second in a three-part series examining UT Department of English problems and proposed solutions.

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Results of a 1976 Measurement and Evaluation Center survey showed that many undergraduate students at the University were deficient in composition and grammar skills to the extent that they could not write a coherent sentence or express themselves on paper.

Robert King, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, said recently the survey's conclusions still stand, a problem leading to the initiation of a recent Department of English proposal to change English requirements.

James Kinneavy, professor of English and director of freshman English, said the department has a "faculty mandate" for his plan to move second-semester freshman English into the junior or senior year to remedy the problem.

Kinneavy said his proposal, if accepted and passed by the University Council, will require students to take composition for a longer period of time. The council is a group of students, faculty and administrators.

"THE WAY TO acquire a skill is to constantly practice. A piano player, if he wants to become good, will spend hours on the piano practicing his skill. Composition is a skill and needs to be practiced," Kinneavy said.

The 1976 survey was conducted by Susan Hereford from the Measurement and Evaluation Center and James Sledd, professor of English. It reached more than 1,400 faculty members and about 1,500 students.

Sledd said faculty and student responses to the survey confirmed that many students at the University are "functional illiterates."

Sledd wrote in the report, "Less than 4 percent of the faculty respondents (from all areas of the University) think that undergraduates write well. About one-third think they (students) write adequately, which means that almost two-thirds of the faculty is dissatisfied with undergraduate writing."

The report states that of the 1,500 student respondents, "206 called it (lower-division composition instruction at UT) very helpful, 447 moderately helpful, 483 slightly helpful and 394 not at all helpful."

SLEDD SAID only freshmen gave the composition course a favorable rating. Freshman English was termed "only slightly helpful" by 116 freshmen while 52 called it "not at all helpful."

Sledd said faculty discontent suggests that "We are exempting too many freshmen from the first semester of freshman English."

The report states that 93.1 percent of faculty responses complained of poor organization of written papers, 83.5 percent of assertion unsupported by evidence, 81.7 percent of bad grammar and diction, 73.6 percent of failures in logic and 62.9 percent of lack of significant content.

To remedy the problem, Sledd proposed shifting one required semester of composition from the freshman year to the junior or senior year.

Sledd said his proposal was consistently ignored by the English department.

"They wanted the the upper-division composition courses to be small elective courses, admitting only a select few among the students," Sledd said.

Kinneavy said it took until this spring to develop a remedy for the problem. "Six years is not too long a time to develop a new program," he said.

A PLAN BY James Vick, assistant dean of the College of Natural Sciences, proposes to narrow the span of courses that will satisfy basic graduation re-

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