

Conference reports

Liberal arts students are in the dark on technology

By Ann Portal
Of the Emerald

A small but growing number of educators feel liberal arts students aren't getting the skills they need to deal with an increasingly technological society.

Students cannot be "strong and whole" human beings without learning how to think in analytical and quantitative terms in their liberal arts courses, suggest the results of a recent conference on "technological literacy" held in Florida.

But the University already is moving toward meeting that need, says the dean of the arts and sciences college, although technological skills may not be as important as knowledge of their effects.

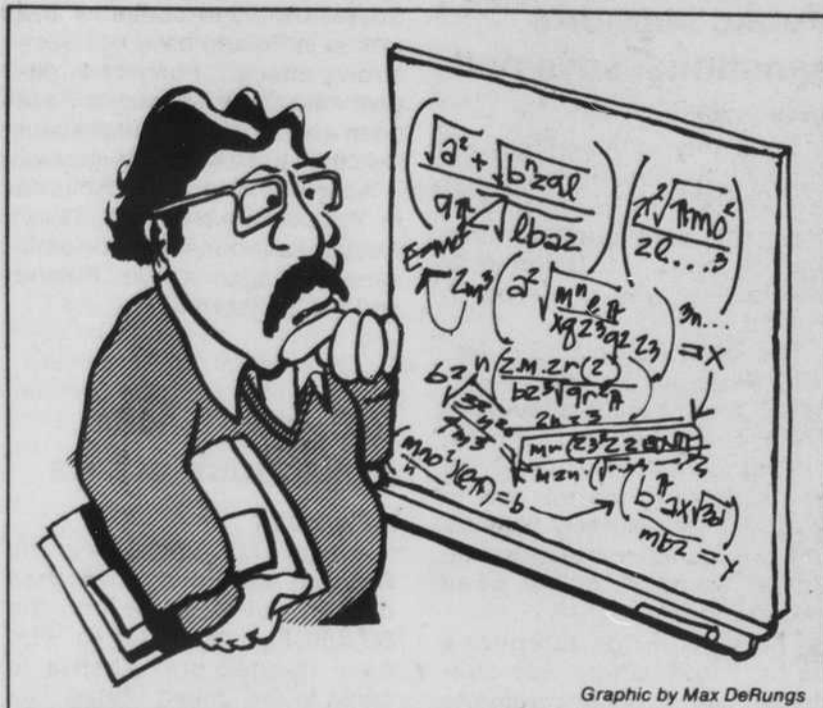
"We need ethics courses, philosophy courses, history courses and literature courses that force students to see the moral implications of technological thought," says dean Robert Berdahl.

"Technological thinking implies certain moral judgments."

However, he says there's "no question that education is moving in some perceptible ways toward what they are referring to as 'technological thinking'."

Mathematics and computer science already are areas of growing importance at the University, Berdahl points out. For example, the faculty introduced and approved a new math requirement for the Bachelor of Science degree last year, although that requirement will not take effect until the budget can provide the necessary faculty.

(B.S. students currently must only fulfill a minimum "science" requirement, which may be satisfied with either math, computer science or science



Graphic by Max DeRungs

courses.)

In addition, the arts and sciences college is working toward a point where "virtually everyone can get a minor in computer science," Berdahl says. The overflowing computer science major may be limited to those with a 3.0-or-better grade point average, but there is a "real commitment" to allow everyone into the lower level computer courses by fall term 1983, he says.

"Computer science is a language that is pretty important in our culture," and everyone should have a "minimum literacy" in it, Berdahl says.

Students also need to learn scientific thought processes, particularly in the social sciences where new research methods require quantitative skills, Berdahl says. But the University also needs to offer more courses about technology, stressing its impact, he says.

Berdahl says he would like to see some clusters of courses

built around a technological theme, with literature, economics and sociology courses all looking at the history of technology from different angles.

Many implications of technical thought are disturbing because they're dehumanizing, he says. The language of Vietnam, which was all "quantitative terms," masked activities that were morally questionable, he says.

"That seems very dangerous to me. We really need the kind of education that provides people with the critical understanding of language to understand what they're talking about," Berdahl says. "Nuclear exchange" is just a "nice, clean" term for nuclear holocaust, he says.

Yet he isn't arguing over whether technology is important and relevant, or whether it has a place in the liberal arts curriculum.

"There are no nuts here that think technology ought to be stopped. It just must be understood."

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