

Dollars and Sense

MONEY • BUSINESS • ACADEMICS

Basic skills don't seem so basic anymore

By BOB FAHEY

Salem State Log, Salem State U.

Reading, writing and arithmetic, long considered the essentials, have become so rusty for many college students that professors speak openly of appalling student ability.

And with national standardized test averages dropping, many educators are scrambling to find a solution to students' problems and their apathetic approach to the basics.

But many students say reading stinks. The older generations can sing the praises of "one-on-one communication with the author" all they want, but reading is just too lonely for many students, they say.

And it shows, said Salem State's Paul Chevedden, an assistant history professor.

"As a teacher, you read articles (about reading aversion), but you don't believe it until you ask the questions of your own class," he said.

In one of Chevedden's classes, no one could name the capital of China, so he staccatoed and asked for the capitals of Mexico and Canada. His students fared no better.

He said reading could close those knowledge gaps.

"It's kind of shocking," Chevedden said. "You have to switch gears."

The still-infamous results of a 1989 Gallup survey show that students had better upshift.

One-fourth of U.S. college seniors

The Cliff behind Cliffs Notes

You're making an honest effort at T.S. Eliot, but it seems every sentence is like literary cheesecake — a meal in itself. And you're already stuffed from two hours of Beowulf.

In 1958, book company manager Cliff Hillegass had a hunch that students needed something to help digest the tough chunks of reading that often crossed their desks. Thus, Cliffs Notes were born — and so was the controversy.

Are the notes, which sell 5 million copies a year in more than 30 countries and comprise about 80 percent of the notes market, mere accessories to laziness? "I won't say that they've resulted in more reading or less reading, but they've resulted in more understanding of what's being read," Hillegass said.

Many professors use them and recommend them to students, while others see only red when they notice the yellow and black books in their classrooms.

Ironically, peeved professors gave his struggling business its first real shove toward success. "The people who did the ads were the teachers who would get up and say, 'And I don't want to see any of those yellow and black books.'"

Now Cliffs Notes are an educational staple. ■ Bob Fahey, Salem State Log, Salem State U.



Cliff Hillegass

thought Columbus landed in the Western Hemisphere after the year 1500, and 42 percent could not place the Civil War in the correct half-century.

The rapid world of television, the nation's nurseries, has eclipsed the challenging world of books.

But Stacey Passman, a recent U. of Wisconsin graduate, finds reading no chore at all.

"I'm really engaged by books," she said. "You're with all of these other people."

Passman said some fifty professors made sure she and her classmates savored class

discussion, so the required reading became a rite of passage, not homework.

"Those teachers inspired her," said Cliff Hillegass, founder of the still-controversial Cliffs Notes. "I think students read, usually, because at some stage they've had a teacher who was really inspirational."

Students' spelling is something Salem State English Professor Richard Elia is afraid to test. A composition student wrote the word "tuff" to mean "tough." In his 22 years at Salem, he said, "I've never seen it this bad."

And writing probably will not improve

with new college faces.

The SAT verbal average hit an all-time low of 422 in 1991. SAT officials say more students were tested last year and thus slumped the average, but that cannot hush the many doom-sayers in academia.

Bad writing is "a product of what's coming out of high schools," said Joe LeBlanc, adviser to the Northern Essex Community College *Observer*, a top-rated student paper in Massachusetts. "We're seeing the schools crumble right in front of our eyes."

In math, some students and professors even joke of their incompetence, said Temple U. Professor John Allen Paulos, author of "Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and Its Consequences." "While illiterates are ashamed of their inability to read, innumerates often take a kind of pride in their mathematical ignorance," he said.

Lackluster teaching is partly to blame for math's tedious, sterile image, according to Mary Lindquist, president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

"We probably haven't moved into the twentieth century. Much of what we've been teaching is passe... and drill-like," she said.

Salem State accounting Professor Doug Larson said of his generation, "We consider it important to do more things in the head."

What's spooky, he said, is that many accounting students rely on their calculators to provide things like 10 percent of 100, and some freshman cannot recognize one percent in decimals because calculators only require pressing "1" and a percent sign.

Movers and Quakers helps students move their 'stuff'

By MELISSA FRAGNITO

Daily Pennsylvanian, U. of Pennsylvania

Every college student has "stuff."

You know, clothes, books, computers, posters, plants, waste cans, lamps, sheets, towels...

And every fall and spring, thousands of students partake in the arduous task of moving that stuff across the country and into their dorm rooms.

What do you do as a college student who has too much stuff to mail home and too little to rent a moving truck? Wharton senior Mitch Weisman, co-owner of Movers and Quakers Inc., a Penn service that picks up belongings from home, packs it into boxes, delivers it to individual dorms and even carries it to rooms, says you call him.

"Mitchell and I recognized a need for all college students because we had the need ourselves," said co-owner Eric Linn, a Wharton senior. "We were able to develop a service, which alleviates headaches for students and parents."

During their freshman year at Penn, Linn

and Weisman, both Chicago natives, realized they did not know how to bring their things home.

Instead of spending money to mail their belongings home, Weisman and Linn decided to rent a truck. And after discovering that other Chicago natives needed away to transport their belongings home, the two decided to rent extra space in their truck to about 10 other students.

After making a small profit, the two decided they had stumbled onto a business opportunity. "The genesis of Movers and Quakers Inc. was not thinking of it as business," Weisman said. "But we found a niche in the market."

The next fall, Movers and Quakers Inc. moved 10 students back to campus, and Weisman and Linn decided it was time to expand.

They needed someone to coordinate a southern moving route, and that's when senior Josh Olshansky became the third partner of the moving company.

Students who use Movers and Quakers (Quakers being the name of Penn's mascot)



JEFFREY M. HUROK, THE DAILY PENNSYLVANIAN, U. OF PENNSYLVANIA

Not only has Movers proven to be a cash cow for Linn, Olshansky and Weisman, but now the three Wharton business school students can apply classroom principles to their company.

spend between \$65 and \$125, depending on how much stuff they are moving and how far Movers has to haul it.

They can move the student with a few boxes and a duffel bag, as well as the student with furniture from a studio apartment.

The business was not difficult to establish

because only a small amount of capital was needed for start-up costs. "We made a few dollars at first, and we have been in the black since the beginning," Weisman said.

"It's a fantastic opportunity," Linn said. "We make money, learn a lot, and apply what we learn in the classroom."