

REMEDICATION
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Two Plus Two Equals 10 — Math 10

The past year brought a marked increase in enrollment in Math 10, which is a rough equivalent of high school Algebra II, Plante said. Plante directs Undergraduate Studies for UNC's Department of Mathematics.

About 1000 students, or 30 percent of this year's freshman class, placed into the course, up from 25 percent last year, Plante said. The increase created a last-minute demand for more sections of Math 10 for nearly 200 extra students who needed the course.

Plante said he was shocked that so many students at a respected university did not have the basic algebra skills covered in Math 10.

"Just after I had to add five extra sections of Math 10, I read an article on how wonderful this year's freshman class is," Plante said. "It just seems like a contradiction is there."

Jicha said many students otherwise prepared for University courses have problems with math. "Mathematics seems to be a particular trouble spot for students."

The English Angle

Within the English department, a majority of freshmen are placed into English 11 or 12.

However, the most basic English course, English 10, has maintained a small but consistent enrollment of over 100 students in each of the past few years.

Between 1994 and 1995, enrollment in English 10 for the fall semester fell from 159 to 110 students.

The decrease in enrollment in English 10 was the first drop in three years, said Susan Stedman, a program assistant in the department.

But students' writing skills may not be as consistently up to par as placement tests indicate.

Tom Baker, an adviser in the College of Arts and Sciences who has been a lecturer in the history department, said student writing abilities vary greatly.

"It runs the gamut from people who are very well-prepared in terms of writing to people who have trouble with paragraph structure and don't know what a topic sentence is," he said.

Baker said the variation reflects differences in high school preparation. "Most of the people who don't know how to do it haven't had a chance. With a place like Carolina you're talking about people from all kinds of backgrounds."

Definition Difficulties

Disagreement over the definition of the term "remedial" has contributed to confusion about the numbers of students requiring extra preparation for university courses.

Because the UNC General Administration, which oversees the 16-school UNC system, has no standard definition of a remedial course, its figures on remedial enrollment mean different things at each of the 16 branch campuses.

At UNC-CH, Math 10 and other basic courses are usually not listed as remedial. General Administration statistics report that no students at the University are enrolled in remedial math courses.

Plante said Math 10 should be described as a remedial course, but that the University does not officially recognize it as one.

"Math 10 didn't exist 10 years ago, and it covers material that a good high school would have taken care of," he said.

Jarausch said for students who have taken a language for at least two years in high school, level 1 is a remedial course.

She also said students who take level 1 after high school study tend to intimidate true beginners in the language, and everyone ends up hurt by the process. Jarausch said she puts as many students as possible in level 2 to keep them from losing ground.

Dreams Deferred

Students who have to take a remedial course may be falling behind in more than just one subject area, Plante said.

"I don't actually believe that someone who starts in Math 10 has much of a conceivable chance to major in mathematics or in any of the physical sciences," he said.

He said because large numbers of freshmen place into remedial math, students might be shying away from the majors they want to pursue. Some of the University's popular majors, such as biology, require students to take advanced mathematics courses.

Jason Johnson, a sophomore from Willow Springs, almost gave up on his desire to major in business when he placed into Math 10 during his freshman year.

"I was afraid to go into a business degree at first, because I didn't think I was a strong enough math student," he said.

Johnson said he quickly realized that he was having problems not because he was a poor student but because his high school math teachers had not encouraged him.

"I think a lot of teachers in high school don't know how to meet students' special needs," he said.

Cowell, who taught high school in rural North Carolina before coming to UNC, said some high school teachers do not have the resources to meet all students' needs.

"Things are not improving in rural areas because some teachers there may not have the experience they need to teach higher-level foreign languages," she said. "They have to make do with what they have."

For Meredith Breen, a senior from Winston-Salem, the worst thing about being in a remedial level class was the stereotype that comes along with it.

"When you're first enrolled, you don't realize the stigma, but then after you tell people that you're in Math 10 you begin to see it," she said.

Breen was enrolled in Math 10 as a junior transfer, even though she had taken calculus in high school. She said she thought

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JOSEPH PLANTE
UNC Math Professor

of Math 10 as a helpful refresher course.

"The most interesting thing was when I would ask my friends for help who had placed out of Math 10 with SAT scores or whatever," Breen said. "They would say, 'I don't remember that stuff, I haven't touched it in years,' and they couldn't help me."

Placement Tests : a) Accurate b) Flawed

In light of the numbers of freshmen in basic courses in a time when N.C. SAT scores are up by five percent over the last year and at record highs, some people are questioning the accuracy of the placement test method.

Michael Kestner, section chief for mathematics and science at the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, said it is not unusual for students to score well on the SAT and to falter on university placement tests.

"The SAT isn't supposed to represent the actual amount of learning someone did in high school. Instead, it shows their capability, their aptitude, for learning."

Kestner said placement tests are not emphasized as much as SATs in the high schools, so many students do not know what to expect, Kestner said.

Vanessa Jeter of the Department of Public Instruction said she thinks many students taking the placement tests have not seen the material in several years.

"Let's face it, you don't remember calculus when you haven't used it in a while," Jeter said.

Cowell said many students that come to

her with placement problems did not take a language class or were in an independent study during their last year of high school.

Similarly, Plante said most UNC applicants do not take the placement tests until summer orientation, although most have taken Algebra II during their freshman or sophomore years of high school. Therefore, he said, the results of the test can be confusing.

"You can't tell whether they've lost track of the material and forgotten it, or if they've never learned it at all," said Plante.

Solution Strategies

Some faculty members are working to find answers to what they call a serious problem, but they say there is no organized effort toward a solution at the University level.

Jicha said the University had no formal program to give feedback on freshmen placement to high schools, but he said the information was available.

Concerned professors and lecturers are taking it upon themselves to find ways to help students prepare for arrival at the University and flourish when they get here.

Members of the math department are working to stop the overflow of freshmen into Math 10 or at least to give them another way to get the credit.

Math 10 coordinator Mark McCombs is using a two-year grant from the National Science Foundation to create a computer version of the course.

"The proposal is to set up a multi-media computer classroom with self-paced courses," he said.

When the project is finished, students could complete the Math 10 requirement in as little as a month, McCombs said.

Some faculty in the Department of Romance Languages are also taking steps to help students be better prepared.

Both Cowell and Jarausch are members of the Foreign Language Association of North Carolina. They say they use the organization to talk to teachers at the high

school level and let them know what the University expects of foreign language students.

"I absolutely think we have the respon-

sibility to work with high schools, particularly in foreign language," Cowell said. "They learn from us, and we can learn from them, too."

As a result, Cowell said more and more students are prepared for the kind of foreign language courses that the University offers.

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