

# The Daily of the University of Washington

## UW students behind in math, professors say

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*By Andrew Doughman*

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Photo by Cliff Despeaux.

Atmospheric sciences professor Cliff Mass instructs an atmospheric structure and analysis course Friday afternoon. Mass gathered 60 signatures on a public statement expressing concern about the declining math skills of incoming freshmen.

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New freshmen entering college have a harder time in math, according to an open letter written by UW math professors.

University of Washington professors claimed UW freshmen lack the ability to do simple math in a controversial public statement asking for improvements in math instruction. The letter was published in late February and was signed by 60 UW professors in the math, science and engineering departments.

Signatures from professors in the College of Education, which trains new math teachers, were notably absent from the letter.

Signatories of the letter claim students are unable to manipulate fractions or do algebra and trigonometry.

"Those of us who are in the sciences and math subjects are seeing the problem and we think it's necessary to say there's a real issue society has to deal with," said Cliff Mass, professor of atmospheric sciences and one of the letter signatories. "What I and many

of the faculty have noticed is that a lot of students are coming to the UW without a strong math background."

There are many different methods of instructing math, which may play a part in how students are learning, said Norm Arkans, executive director of UW media relations, in an interview with the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

"We've got a bunch of different people working on math education, and they don't necessarily agree on what the best approach is," he said.

Some UW students claim the state's math curriculum has inhibited their education.

"Washington education systems in public schools are questionable," said freshman Avery Hilliard, a student in a remedial math class. "My high school was trying to phase out a certain math program, leaving transfer students like me in weird math pathways [between integrated and traditional algebra]."

Other students believe high school math curriculum is not entirely to blame for what Mass claims is the degradation of students' math abilities.

"I wouldn't necessarily blame it on their high school math instructors," said math tutor Charlene Reyes, a senior in electrical engineering.

"People get nervous about subjects they are unfamiliar with."

Statistics show that two percent of Washington state high school students who attend the UW end up in remedial math classes. That level may be much higher across the state, especially in community colleges, Mass said.

"The remediation rates in colleges have gone way up," Mass said. "The community college level is now on the order of 50 to 70 percent."

Mass, who recently taught the introductory atmospheric sciences class, said many of his students were unable to do simple algebra.

"Many couldn't do fractions," he said. "Many didn't know what sine and cosine were."

Mass and his colleagues hope distributing their letter to the Washington State legislature will encourage the state superintendent of public instruction to effectively revise the state's math curriculum.

Although the cause of the problem is debatable, Mass is sure that today's math students aren't getting the instruction they deserve.

"We can't give the same kind of questions we gave to students in 1985," he said. "The students' math background is much weaker now."

Additional reporting by Chantal Anderson.

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