Thirty Fail Basic Math Course

By SANDY COYNER Thresher Reporter

The grades in Math 300a, traditionally one of Rice’s most difficult math courses, are unusually low this year. Over 30 students have failed of approximately 130 taking the course. Math 300, Differential Equations, is a basic course taken by many engineering and science majors.

Professor Jim Douglas, who taught one of the sections and is responsible for most of the failures, says, “This is the poorest class I have ever taught at Rice. Many simply did not pass.” The section taught by Professor F. S. Ulrich did not involve so many failures. Douglas said that Ulrich “apparently had a good section,” in comparison with his own.

Charge ‘Unfair’

Students who took the course react to the low grades, many of which will be conspicuous on otherwise good records, with cries of “unfair.” Douglas states, however, that he graded his section “according to standards I feel are reasonable.”

Students also blame what they call Douglas’ “attitude.” Dick Lagow, Baker, thinks that Douglas arbitrarily decided that the students were all “knuckleheads” and was prejudiced against recognizing any good work.

Douglas Praised

The grades are not, however, universally considered a reflection solely of Douglas’ malevolence. John Alexander, a Wiess junior who passed the course, called Douglas a “good teacher” even though the grades were much lower than they should have been. Tom Watkins, a Wiess junior who flunked said, “Douglas taught a good course. He was concerned about the students and why we weren’t doing as well as he thought we should.”

Students generally blame the tests for being “unrepresentative of the material covered” and much too long. Test problems involved proofs and “trick” methods for solving problems and required about twice the time allotted for completion.

A major gripe was the extremely long homework, due three times per week, and requiring from five to eight hours to complete. Watkins claimed that “people spent so much time on the homework problems that they didn’t have time to study the course.”

Douglas lectured the class for an hour following the second hour exam, on which the mean was about 35 out of 100 points. He claimed they weren’t reading the book and told them that there was no reason they shouldn’t be making higher grades on the tests in a course that was usually taught as a sophomore course on other campuses.

Douglas stated that, on the basis of their work to date, he expected a majority of the class

See MATH on Page 7
(Continued from Page 1) to fail. He told the class that he would grade them on the basis of what he thought the means should be rather than on what they actually were. Math 300a will be offered again during the second semester as a makeup course for those who failed. It will be taught by Fred Pickel, a graduate student.