English profs say no more D’s in classes

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As part of a new policy adopted by MSU this semester, a ‘D’ will no longer be accepted as a passing grade for students who take freshman English.

The policy was approved last spring after the Academic Council voted unanimously to hold students to a higher standard. As of Fall 2011, students must earn at least a ‘C’ in ENGL 1113 in order to move on to ENGL 1123. Students who take ENGL 1123 must earn a ‘C’ or better in order to be eligible for the Writing Proficiency Exam.

Dr. David Rankin, chair of the English department, said the new policy will only affect freshmen and transfer students. Rankin, who proposed the change to the Academic Council, said the new policy is “a plan at Midwestern to prepare students to do more and better writing.”

“These courses help students to be competent writers,” Rankin said. “This policy raises the expectations for writing ability.”

“If a student makes a ‘D’, that student would still receive GPA credit,” Rankin said. “As far as moving on to the next level, the student would have to retake the class.”

Students who earn a ‘D’ in either of these courses, prior to this semester, will not be affected. Those grades will still be considered passing and will allow those students to move to the next level.

“But if someone made a ‘D’, my advice is you really should take that over,” Rankin said. “A lot of students who get ‘D’s do not pass the Writing Proficiency Exam and tend to avoid courses for which they have to write papers.”

According to data collected by the Writing Proficiency Office, over the last 10 years, the average failure rate has been 26 percent. Of the 1,039 students who took the exam in the last academic year, 337 failed, a rate of about 32 percent.

“A lot of those are transfer students who did not do their writing courses here,” Rankin said. “But our students should not be failing the writing proficiency.”

Rankin said the new policy will encourage students to work harder.

“Academic Council would not have passed it if they didn’t think it was in the best interest of students doing well in school and the work place,” Rankin said.

“Academic Council voted unanimously, which means everyone thinks the new policy is worthwhile.”

Dr. Alisa White, university provost and head of the Academic Council, said the idea is to show competency and that it is very difficult to show competency with a grade lower than a ‘C’.

“Many universities don’t allow a ‘D’ to be a pass so this policy is not unusual,” White said. “Anything below a ‘C’ is considered very unsatisfactory.”

Dr. Kristen Garrison, writing policy will hold students to high standards early on so that they can be successful after graduation.

“If students don’t have the skills and we keep pushing them through, that’s a problem,” Garrison said. “If those weak styles of writing are in cover letters, our students won’t get jobs.”

Dr. Peter Fields, associate professor of English, said the new policy means students can expect freshman composition to be demanding.

“If they were assuming 1113 and 1123 to be the proverbial easy B, they are in for an awakening,” Fields said. “The average grade should be a ‘C’. ‘C’ says you made the bare minimum. Your grade should reflect the skills you acquired. The D-repeat means students will get the extra opportunity to acquire those skills.”

Dr. Greg Giddings, instructor of English, said the “no ‘D’ policy” will ultimately benefit the students.

“It’s not a penalty—it’s an opportunity,” Giddings said. “Instead of being a person with marginal skills, it will give that student a chance to refresh those skills.”

Susan Button, instructor of English, said most students feel uncomfortable writing collegiate level.

“A lot of students have ideas,” Button said. “It is a fear factor when you transfer those thoughts to a more challenging environment.”

The second go around is usually more successful.”

The new policy will help students to be more effective communicators, she said.

“In the long term, it is most beneficial,” Button said. “Not just in collegiate life, but in the work force.”