



# Principles and Categories for Improving Academic Quality

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## Origins and Purposes of the Academic Quality Improvement Program

Launched in July 1999 with a generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Academic Quality Improvement Program attempts to infuse the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities by providing an alternative process through which an already-accredited institution can maintain its accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. With AQIP, an institution has the opportunity to demonstrate it meets the Higher Learning Commission's accreditation standards and expectations through sequences of events that naturally align with those ongoing activities that characterize organizations striving to improve their performance. By sharing both its advancement activities and the results of these actions with AQIP, an institution provides the Higher Learning Commission with the evidence it needs *both* to make a public quality assurance judgment *and* to support and to assist the institution in its efforts to excel at achieving the distinctive higher education mission it has set for itself.

To achieve these goals, AQIP uses direct, cost-effective, processes that themselves are continuously improved. Full details about AQIP's Strategy Forums, Systems Appraisals, and various other services are available from the AQIP website ([www.AQIP.org](http://www.AQIP.org)). The website also provides links that individuals and institutions can use to learn more about involvement, about quality and systematic improvement, or about the other initiatives that AQIP is undertaking to support its network of participants.

## Principles of High Performance Organizations

Research and experience indicate that common principles – *Focus, Involvement, Leadership, Learning, People, Collaboration, Agility, Foresight, Information, and Integrity* – permeate colleges and universities that have achieved a systematic approach to continuous quality improvement. These qualities underlie all of the Academic Quality Improvement Program's Categories, activities, processes, and services, and they represent the values to which AQIP itself aspires organizationally.

**Focus.** A mission and vision that focus on students' and other stakeholders' needs provide quality-driven higher education organizations with the foundation they need to shape communication systems, organizational and decision-making structures, and planning and improvement processes. An institution earns the trust, confidence, and loyalty of its current and potential students and its other stakeholders – both external and internal, including faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees – by actively developing and regularly employing listening tools essential for gathering and understanding their diverse and distinctive perspectives. The institution interprets and weighs these expressed needs, preferences, hopes, and requirements to frame ongoing communication, discussion, and refinement of a common mission and vision. Faculty, staff, and administrators integrate this shared focus into their individual work goals and decision-making strategies.

**Involvement.** Broad-based faculty, staff, and administrative involvement encourages better decisions and strengthens individual and group ownership of systems, activities, and initiatives. Individuals understand how what they do affects others within and outside the organization, and appreciate how their work helps further the institution's mission. A culture of involvement draws on the expertise and practical experience of those people closest to a situation and helps leaders

across the organization anticipate the complex implications of decisions. Such involvement often helps initiate and implement improvements that better meet student's and other stakeholders' needs. A culture of involvement requires ongoing development of people's skills in making fact-based decisions, working with diverse groups, resolving conflicts, and using quality-based tools to build consensus.

**Leadership.** Leaders and leadership systems that support a quality culture consistently model those values and behaviors that communicate to all constituents a clear and compelling vision of the future. Leaders have a responsibility to make sure that everyone understands and values the institution's mission, goals, and directions – and uses this understanding to inform individual work goals and decision-making strategies. Leadership must work to help students and other stakeholders share this understanding as well. Further, leadership must ensure that an institution's systems and processes align with its mission and vision, making certain that the necessary resources – people, policies, funds, facilities, equipment, supplies, time, energy, and other assets – are allocated and used to support the overall mission and vision.

**Learning.** A learning-centered environment allows an institution dedicated to quality to develop everyone's potential talents by centering attention on learning – for students, for faculty and staff, and for the institution itself. By always seeking more effective ways to enhance student achievement through careful design and evaluation of programs, courses, and learning environments, both the

institution and its employees demonstrate an enthusiastic commitment to organizational and personal learning as the route to continuous improvement. Seeing itself as a set of systems that can always improve through measurement, assessment of results, and feedback, the institution designs practical means for gauging its students' and its own progress toward clearly identified objectives. Conscious of costs and waste – whether human or fiscal – leadership champions careful design and rigorous evaluation to prevent problems before they occur, and enables the institution to continuously strengthen its programs, pedagogy, personnel, and processes.

**People.** Respect for people and the willingness to invest in them leads the quality-driven institution to prize and support the systematic development of its individual faculty, staff, and administrators. Recognizing that fully developing and using its people's abilities strengthens its most valuable resource, it consciously invests in all its people as leaders and learners through ongoing education, training, and opportunities for continuing development. Leadership encourages individuals to take responsibility in crafting and following through on professional and personal growth plans aimed at acquiring, practicing, and using new skills and knowledge to better serve students and other stakeholders. It nourishes a sense of responsibility and ownership in which all individuals understand how their role contributes to the measurable success of the institution and how they can become engaged as full participants in its improvement processes.

**Collaboration.** Collaboration and a shared institutional focus promote support for a common mission. A quality-driven institutions encourages active collaboration among and within different internal departments and operational areas, and, externally, between the institution and other institutions or organizations. It removes internal barriers to collaboration, such as the constraints individuals often experience within a hierarchical chain of command or when they find themselves working for a sub-unit rather than the larger organization. The institution provides its faculty, staff, and administrators with the training and resources successful collaboration demands, rewarding effective cooperation and celebrating model collaborative efforts with internal or external partners.

**Agility.** Agility, flexibility, and responsiveness to changing needs and conditions allow high performance institutions to transform themselves.

Traditionally colleges and universities have enjoyed more reflective and deliberative cultures than organizations, but the rapid development of new knowledge and technologies and the rising expectations of external stakeholders are altering these environments. As the pace of change quickens and competition becomes commonplace in higher education, the quality-driven institution develops the flexibility to respond quickly to opportunities, threats, and shifting needs and practices. It redirects its attention and resources in response to new requirements, and accurately monitors its performance in responding to such demands.

**Foresight.** Planning for innovation and improvement allows quality-driven institutions to think into the future, tracking trends in order to better predict how conditions will change, and anticipating how those changes may affect students and other stakeholders, operations, and performance. In dynamic or trying situations, the institution with foresight can innovate proactively, making meaningful changes to improve its services and processes in ways that create new or additional value for its students and other stakeholders. Open to new approaches and techniques, the institution designs, tests, and improves its planning structures and processes through practical use and experience.

**Information.** Fact-based information gathering and thinking to support analysis and decision-making give the quality-driven institution and its personnel the ability to assess current capacities and measure performance realistically. Faculty, staff, and administrators track progress concretely and consistently, and use performance results to set ambitious but attainable targets that increase and improve the institution's capability to meet its students' and other stakeholders' needs and expectations. Data-enriched thinking nurtures evaluation and a results-orientation that maximizes the benefits and value produced for students and other stakeholders. The institution develops and refines systems for gathering and assessing valuable feedback and data, and continually seeks better methods for obtaining the most useful information on which to base decisions and improvements.

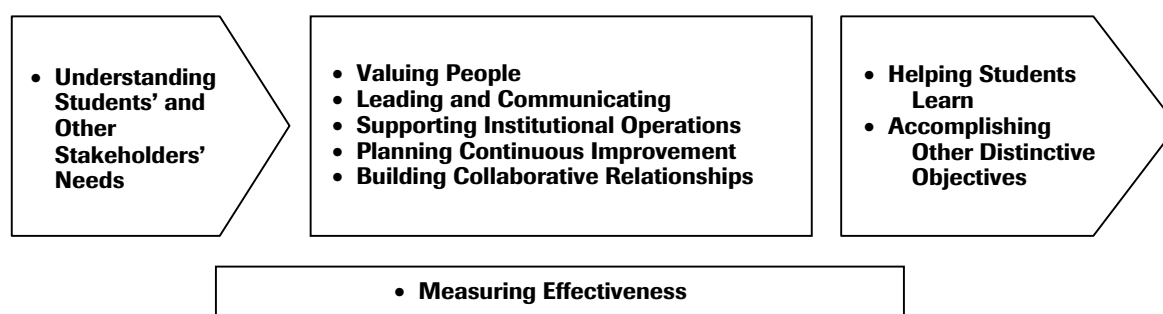
**Integrity.** Integrity and responsible institutional citizenship allow quality-driven institutions to model their values in both words and deeds. In recognizing and fulfilling its public responsibility, the institution treats people and organizations with equity, dignity, and respect. Demonstrating responsible citizenship, it anticipates and takes into account the consequences of its actions upon the various larger communities to which it belongs, and upon the higher education system, regionally, nationally, and globally. Mindful that education serves society, the institution continuously examines its practices to make certain its effects and results actively contribute to the common good.

### Systems Thinking in the Process-Focused Organization

What most distinguishes AQIP from traditional reaccreditation is its concentration on *systems and processes* both as

the basis for quality assurance and as the lever enabling institutional improvement. The figure below shows how the nine AQIP Categories together describe the interrelationships among systems essential to any effective college or university, using *quality* to refer to the never-ending improvement of systems and processes in support of mission.

### The Academic Quality Improvement Program Categories



AQIP insists that every institution be lucid and direct about what it is trying to accomplish, and clear about identifying those for whom it is doing the things on which it expends its energies and capital. To do this effectively, every institution needs a system that can decipher precisely the shifting needs of its particular target students and stakeholders. At the left of the figure, ***Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs*** examines this system, which reestablishes the basis for accountability by determining the requirements, expectations, and preferences of an institution's stakeholders. Knowing the needs it chooses to serve delineates a higher education institution's mission and vision. In turn, this understanding drives everything else – the design and operation of the other systems and processes an institution establishes to carry out its mission.

On the figure's right end, ***Helping Students Learn*** highlights the core processes – such as instructional design and delivery – that contribute directly to student learning, an educational institution's primary purpose and achievement. ***Accomplishing Other Distinctive Objectives*** provides for diversity in the character of higher education institutions by encompassing the variety of processes that institutions administer to pursue additional critical goals, such as research, development of endowment funds, competitive athletics, or service to specific communities. Together, these two Categories examine the key processes that an institution employs to create value directly for its students and its other stakeholders. In the eyes of those an institution serves, the processes included in these systems are the apparent reasons it exists. They are where an institution touches and affects the lives of its stakeholders.

The center of the diagram exemplifies the array of internal systems and processes that every institution must design and operate in order to enable and support those processes that directly impact the people it serves. ***Valuing People, Leading and Communicating, Supporting Institutional Operations, Planning Continuous Improvement, and Building Collaborative Relationships*** designate the major systems and activities through which an institution achieves the mission that its students and other stakeholders require. However these systems are enablers, making the delivery of educational and other services possible, and are often themselves invisible to students and stakeholders. The AQIP Categories require searching examination of these internally hidden support systems and processes. These five Categories do not merely review independently operating departments, offices, and divisions, but seek to understand a set of critical systems that must be linked and aligned in ways that allow an institution to maximize its ability to give its students and stakeholders the services they need.

Underlying everything, ***Measuring Effectiveness*** sustains other institutional systems by effectively collecting, storing, retrieving, and interpreting the information needed to improve the entire institution. While AQIP recognizes the importance of inputs and resources, this Category stresses the necessity for an organization to measure accurately its current performance in key processes– to know whether it is delivering what students and stakeholders require and expect. By developing and using performance metrics, an institution ensures that it is using its resources effectively, demonstrating its accountability to those who fund and support it. When gaps exist between present performance and possible or desirable results, new strategies for improvement come primarily through understanding those existing systems and processes that produced the current results.

Together, the nine AQIP Categories analyze interrelationships among systems essential to all effective colleges and universities. To advance the core purpose of all higher education, the Categories take a systemic view, defining and evaluating all of the key systems or processes within an institution as they relate to learning, and demanding concrete indicators that measure the effectiveness of those systems and processes. The questions in each Category provide every institution a roadmap for the examination of its systems by posing two questions repeatedly: *Are we doing the right things to achieve our mission?* and *Are we doing those things well?* Mission-focused and holistic, the Categories provide a framework that supports improvement within any organization whose mission targets learning.