

# Introduction to AQIP

Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) is an alternative process through which an organization can maintain its accredited status with The Higher Learning Commission. AQIP's goal is to infuse the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities in order to assure and advance the quality of higher education.

Based upon principles common to high performance organizations, AQIP draws from a variety of initiatives and programs — Total Quality Management (TQM), continuous improvement (CI), Six Sigma, ISO 9000 registration, state and national quality awards, and others. Many of AQIP's quality principles have long been traditions in higher education, although their form and the breadth of their practice in particular institutions may vary greatly. Other components such as systems thinking and stakeholder focus appear at first to be new to academia, but turn out to be in close alignment with the values and behaviors of higher educators.

*AQIP's Principles of High Performance Organizations* underlie all of AQIP's elements, activities, and procedures. They represent the values that participating colleges, universities, and AQIP itself strive to embody.

- A **mission** and **vision** that focus on serving students' and other stakeholders' needs
- **Broad-based** faculty, staff, and administrative **involvement**
- Leaders and **leadership** systems that support a quality culture
- A **learning**-centered environment
- Respect for **people** and willingness to invest in them
- **Collaboration** and a shared institutional focus
- **Agility**, flexibility, and responsiveness to changing needs and conditions
- **Planning** for innovation and improvement
- Fact-based **information**-gathering and thinking to support analysis and decision-making
- **Integrity** and responsible institutional citizenship

AQIP puts forward nine Categories to help analyze and improve the systems essential to all effective colleges and universities. The name of each AQIP Category refers to a group of related processes. For example, "Helping Students Learn" includes the largest group of critical processes in higher education institutions, processes dealing with program and curricular design and delivery. Each Category allows an organization to analyze, understand, and explore opportunities for improving these processes. Metaphorically, the Categories serve as "buckets" that allow institutions to sort their key institutional processes into analyzable groups, and as "lenses" that permit in-depth examination of each group of processes. Each Category identifies specific issues (in the form of questions) that guide the institution in structuring its Systems Portfolio and in crafting Action Projects.

- Category 1: Helping Students Learn
- Category 2: Accomplishing Other Distinctive Objectives
- Category 3: Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholder's Needs
- Category 4: Valuing People
- Category 5: Leading and Communicating
- Category 6: Supporting Institutional Operations
- Category 7: Measuring Effectiveness
- Category 8: Planning Continuous Improvement
- Category 9: Building Collaborative Relationships

## **AQIP CORE PROCESSES**

### **Strategy Forum (attendance required every 4 years)**

The Strategy Forum is a supportive, facilitated peer review process to help an organization select, critically examine, and commit to a set of Strategies and Action Projects that will drive quality improvement. The Strategy Forum helps the organization address the AQIP Categories that are most vital at the time.

### **Action Projects**

Action Projects strengthen an organization's commitment to continuous improvement; educate and motivate faculty, staff, and administrators; and improve systems and processes that lead to success in achieving organizational goals. Each organization concentrates its energies on Action Projects that will most significantly advance its goals. At least one relates directly to Category 1: Helping Students Learn. We are required to keep three Action Projects current at all times.

### **Systems Portfolio and Systems Appraisal (Portfolio is submitted every 4 years)**

Every four years an organization assembles a Systems Portfolio with broad faculty and staff involvement. The Systems Portfolio consists of an Organizational Overview and explicates each of the major systems employed to accomplish an organization's mission and objectives. The organization answers specific questions for each of the nine AQIP Categories. For each system, the questions deal with context for analysis, processes, results, and improvement. The Organizational Overview presents a capsule picture that helps readers understand the organization's key strengths and ambitions, as well as the challenges and conflicts it faces.

Following standardized evaluation procedures, the Systems Appraisal produces a consensus Appraisal Feedback Report for the institution. This report assesses the maturity of each of the nine systems to which the AQIP Categories refer, identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement within each. In addition, the Systems Appraisal provides an executive summary that may serve as a concise report of the organization's progress in its quality journey.

### **Quality Checkup and Reaffirmation of Accreditation**

During the seven-year cycle leading up to Reaffirmation of Accreditation, AQIP requires a site visit to each institution. The Quality Checkup team produces a written report summarizing its findings, identifying those areas the team has verified and/or clarified, and addressing the institution's compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation, noting any areas that require additional clarification before Reaffirmation of Accreditation.

The Quality Checkup Visit occurs every six years with Reaffirmation of Accreditation occurring every seven years.