

AQIP Action Project: Learning Outcomes

Annual Update with HLC Review 2014

Northwestern Michigan College

Question #1: General project status: Completed? In progress? Reopened? Suspended? Original project start date? Original project end date? Anticipated completion date if not completed? Briefly describe the current status of the project Explain how this project relates to any strategic initiatives or challenges described in the institution's most recent or soon-to-be submitted Systems Portfolio, if applicable:

The Learning Outcomes project began February 2014 with a proposed completion in July 2015. The project was born from our self-assessment in our Systems Portfolio, specifically in Category 1: Helping Students Learn. Moreover, NMC's Systems Appraisal further confirmed our need to improve the alignment of our learning outcomes' systems. In particular, the reviewers commented that "NMC's evaluation of General Education outcomes is in the early stages of development. A strategic issue for NMC is continuing its work with General Education outcomes to develop a deeper level of analysis than was available in the Portfolio. It is important to align learning outcomes with the three broad General Education outcomes. Expanding the outcomes analysis to the program and course level is a strategic issue for NMC to consider" (NMC's 2014 Systems Appraisal, p.8).

REVIEWER:

The institution has clearly made a commitment to meet HLC Criterion 3 Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support and HLC Criterion 4 Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement. The effort to provide quality assessment of student learning in the general education area is consistent with the institution's project category AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn. At the institutional level these foci reflect organizational integrity as sought in the Principles of High Performing Organizations: Integrity in Words and Deeds.

Question #2: List the project goals as stated in the original project declaration along with the metrics/measures for assessing the progress for each goal:

The original project goal as identified on NMC's strategic plan is: Develop and implement an integrated and aligned learning outcomes system that includes the articulation of and means of documenting learning outcomes, assessments, results, and actions for improvement at the course, program, and institutional levels.

The outcomes measures for the project are predominately process measures. These include:

- 1) NMC will demonstrate alignment of learning outcomes among the course, program, and general education levels
- 2) NMC will develop a comprehensive assessment plan that includes documented process for learning outcomes assessment at the course, program, and general education levels
- 3) NMC will provide evidence for the actions taken by instructors to improve student achievement on course level learning outcomes
- 4) NMC will develop useful professional development for faculty on identifying learning outcomes, assessment techniques, and follow up actions
- 5) NMC will determine the most efficient and cost effective way to document and track learning outcomes and results that may include a software database

REVIEWER:

The institution's project goal to align course, program, and general education learning outcomes meets AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn and HLC Criterion 4 Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement as well as a comprehensive plan is evidence of the institution meeting Principles of High Performing Organizations: Fact-based Information Gathering. Further, the plan should provide information concerning how instructors have sought to improve student achievement. Evidently some faculty will require professional development which the institution is willing to commit to providing, thereby upholding AQIP Category 3 Valuing Employees. Ultimately, once fully developed and implemented, an assessment program will allow the institution to efficiently and effectively manage its resources [AQIP Category 5 Knowledge Management and Resource Stewardship] in order to achieve AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn. In order to achieve the stated outcomes measures, the institution will need to define the "process" and clearly identify what are the "process measures."

Question #3: Describe what has been accomplished with this project over the past year, specifically referring to quantifiable results that show progress. You may need to include a discussion clarifying how the original goals and anticipated outcomes may have shifted during the year:

In the six months prior to this update, the project team has conducted a current state analysis of compliance with our learning outcomes systems at the course and program levels. We found that course outlines were not available for a majority of our courses in a centralized repository. Many courses did not have up-to-date learning outcomes. Also, learning outcomes were not identified for a majority of our programs on our annual planning documents (A3s). We intend to address those gaps over the next year. Additionally, the team provided feedback to the Curriculum Committee on the new course outline and helped to clarify instructions for filling out the outline. In particular, we provided instructions for how to show alignment between course outcomes and our general education outcomes. The Course Outline serves as a master record for a course. Over the summer 2014, academic areas began reviewing the course outlines for accuracy and consistency. Once the course outlines have been reviewed and submitted to the central repository, the Learning Outcomes team will begin a review in order to identify professional development needs in writing quality outcomes.

The project team developed two professional development workshops, one for faculty leadership, and the other for all faculty at opening conference to show how our different learning outcomes' systems are aligned, to review the processes for documenting learning outcomes at the course and program levels, and to get faculty to think more deeply about course learning outcomes by re-introducing Dee Fink's framework for significant learning.

Additionally, many faculty members have taken advantage of one-on-one consultation with the Instructional Design team to update course syllabi with outcomes revisions. Our instructional designer was assigned specifically to work with the Technical area in summer 2014, to assist in taking the area's predominately competency based curriculum and articulating learning outcomes.

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Team members from different areas have developed curriculum map examples in order to aid others in linking assignments to course learning outcomes, and course learning outcomes to the program outcomes and General Education outcomes. We will use those this coming year in professional development sessions.

We have redesigned our faculty resource webpage, Teaching@NMC, to incorporate more explicit resources on writing, aligning, and assessing learning outcomes in teaching.

REVIEWER:

The institution is to be commended for its inclusion of and collaboration with [Principles of High Performing Organizations: Promoting Collaboration] a wide range of organizational members. The project team's work over the past 6 months in conducting an analysis of the current levels of reaching the course and program goals has set the stage for continuous, ongoing quality improvement to enhance AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn. The feedback by the project team to the Curriculum Committee and involving academic areas to review the course outlines for accuracy and consistency reflects efforts to include stakeholders [AQIP Category 2 Meeting Student and Other Key Stakeholders Needs]. The project team's professional development workshops for faculty [AQIP Category 3 Valuing Employees; AQIP Category 4 Planning and Leading; and, Principles of High Performing Organizations: Promoting Collaboration] to instruct faculty on the assessment program and giving them a significant framework for improving student learning and its assessment.

In addition, the redesign of the institution's faculty resource webpage provides resources on writing, aligning, and assessing student learning outcomes [AQIP Category 2 Meeting Student and Other Key Stakeholders Needs and AQIP Category 3 Valuing Employees]. Other collaborative efforts include consultive opportunities for faculty members with the institution's Instructional Design team as the technical area moves toward a competency-based curriculum. This effort certainly supports Principles of High Performing Organizations: Foresight and Plan Proactively and Principles of High Performing Organizations: Agility and Responsiveness to Change. Further evidence of the institution's commitment to quality and its mission [HLC Criterion Mission] is evidence by the project team members from different areas developing curricula maps to help other faculty link their course assignments to student learning outcomes, and student learning outcomes to the program outcomes and General Education outcomes. We have redesigned our faculty resource webpage, Teaching@NMC, to incorporate more explicit resources on writing, aligning, and assessing learning outcomes in teaching. The institution is making good progress toward achievement of its AQIP project.

Question #4: Describe how various members of the learning community have participated in this action project. Show the breadth of involvement by individuals and groups over the project's duration, particularly during the last year:

The action project team is comprised of nine members from multiple disciplines, including five faculty members from Humanities, Social Science, Health Occupations, Science (who is also the Assessment

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Coordinator for the college), and Communications. College leadership is represented by the Vice President for Educational Services and the Academic Chair of the Business Area. Two other staff members, our Instructional Designer and the Executive Director for Institutional Effectiveness, round out the team. We periodically invite guests to our meetings to represent impacted areas, for instance the Director of the Center for Instructional Excellence to collaborate on professional development activities.

The team is an effective cross-section of the college for working on learning outcomes, whose primary role has been to identify the professional development needs of faculty as we work to implement processes that have already been established. As such, the other college teams impacted by this project include the Educational Services Instructional Management Team (Academic Chairs), the Center for Instructional Excellence, and the Curriculum Committee.

In some way, all faculty members will be involved in this action project to improve the alignment of learning outcomes by engaging in our processes to identify, assess, analyze results, and document improvement actions for student learning at the course level. Faculty members with the primary curricular responsibility for a course will be writing and reviewing learning outcomes on an annual basis for that course. Program managers along with other faculty that teach in the program will be writing and aligning course outcomes and program outcomes. Faculty with regular teaching responsibilities for a course, along with adjunct faculty for a course, will be aligning their assignments to the course outcomes on their syllabi.

REVIEWER:

A student learning outcomes assessment program [AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn] and the additional focus on competency-based outcomes [Principles of High Performing Organizations: Foresight to Plan Proactively] is one that requires the type of broad collaboration among staff, faculty, and administration that the institution has demonstrated in the makeup of its project team and others who are working with the team [Principles of High Performing Organizations: Promoting Collaboration and Principles of High Performing Organizations: Leadership Support].

Question #5: Describe the effect that this project has had on the institution, students, and others in the learning community. What has the institution learned that can be identified as good practice to use in other aspects of its quality work or from which other institutions might benefit?

A successful outcome of this project will have profound implications for the learning outcomes' systems at NMC. We are really transforming the way we think about learning when we shift to a learning outcomes mindset. With alignment of learning outcomes from the General Education, program, and course levels down to the learner level, we'll be able to give individual learners feedback on how they have performed on learning outcomes. The information could potentially be a powerful tool for learners as they chart a pathway to completion. They can be advised to take certain classes that may enhance their skills in Critical Thinking, Communications, or Qualitative Reasoning for example, because they will know where their skills might be lacking. We currently have a model developed and implemented for this vision from which other projects may follow.

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Because of the magnitude for what we are attempting to accomplish, the effect on the institution of this project in the first six months has been messy, typical of a large-scale curriculum alignment project. Part of our work in the last six months has been to cultivate buy-in for the project. The current state analysis shows that in some areas we are in the very early stages of implementing the continuous improvement cycle of plan, do, check, adjust. We are still in the planning stage with initial development and documentation of learning outcomes in many courses and programs.

REVIEWER:

As the institution has indicated, as it continues toward successful completion of this project there will need to be a transformation of how staff, faculty, and administrators think about student learning outcomes. The alignment of student learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels [AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn] will give students individual feedback on how the student has performed in achieving the desired learning outcome/s. The institution is to be encouraged to adapt its current model to other projects in the future [Principles of High Performing Organizations: Agility and Responsiveness to Change; Principles of High Performing Organizations: Foresight to Plan Proactively]. Clear effort has been made to meet the AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn; however, due to the early stage of the AQIP project, as the institution has indicated the achievement of continuous improvement will involve "a cycle of plan, do, check, adjust" until documentation of student learning outcomes in courses, programs, and at the institutional level have been reached.

Question #6: Describe the anticipated challenges that may be encountered in successfully completing the project or for institutionalizing the learning from the project's goals:

The challenges that face NMC as we progress include meeting the individual needs of individual faculty members, program managers, and academic leadership with professional development and training. Different programs and faculty members are at different stages in their ability to write quality learning outcomes. Some program areas, such as the nationally-accredited Nursing program, are adept at engaging in the full continuous improvement process including documenting the actions taken to improve student learning, and using that information in annual planning. Other areas are just beginning to engage in the processes.

Additionally, we anticipate being challenged when it comes to our fifth process measure from #2 above: *NMC will determine the most efficient and cost effective way to document and track learning outcomes and results that may include a software database.* At this time, we have already determined that it is most cost effective to work with our current course management system (Moodle) to track learning outcomes, and assessment results. However, not all faculty members are fully using the system (Moodle Gradebook) and some will require training in order to do so. Moodle Gradebook training is being implemented and will continue over this next year.

Also, the Moodle system does not yet have a way to provide aggregated learning outcomes' results, or an easy way to export those results into a system from which we can run analytics. We will be working with the Learning Resources and Technology department to figure out a way to make this happen.

Finally, using this database system would require the integration of an additional process or system that would show actions taken to improve student learning and to use that information for future planning, such as in the faculty annual plans. Making compliance with these processes part of the faculty annual plans is an action item for this year.

REVIEWER:

The level of understanding, training, and experience among faculty in various disciplines is always a challenge. Inasmuch as the nursing faculty is knowledgeable, experienced, and adept concerning how to provide continuous quality improvement through assessment and subsequent documentation, mentoring from the nursing faculty may be a viable way to enhance the other faculty members' ability to effectively use assessment in order to meet AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn. Such an approach is consistent with HLC Criterion 4 Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement; AQIP Category 5 Knowledge Management and Resource Stewardship; and, Principles of High Performing Organizations: Focus on Stakeholders and Principles of High Performing Organizations Promoting Collaboration.

Continuing to employ an in-place system (i.e., Moodle Gradebook) along with the necessary training of users is consistent with HLC Criterion 5 Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness and AQIP Category 2 Meeting Student and Other Key Stakeholder Needs. Using the Learning Resources and Technology Department [HLC Criterion 5 Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness; AQIP Category 5 Knowledge Management and Resource Stewardship; and, Principles of High Performing Organizations Fact-based Information Gathering] to develop effective ways to analyze and export data will ultimately allow the institution to maximize information garnered through its student learning outcomes assessment program.

Question #7: In light of the project goals, current circumstances, institutional learning from this project, and anticipated barriers to success, list the next steps to be taken over the course of the next 12 - 24 months in order to complete or institutionalize the results of the action project. Provide a timeline for completing each next step:

The project is scheduled to conclude in July 2015, though we anticipate having to extend beyond that time as our challenges become evident. Even so, our plan for what will be accomplished in the next academic year is as follows:

Fall 2014:

- Course syllabi reflect the course learning outcomes that are annotated on the course outline
- Faculty map their course assignments to specific learning outcomes
- Faculty revise outcomes and assignments as necessary with changes reflected in the next iterations of the syllabi and course outlines

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- Social Science academic area pilots the tracking and results documentation of the General Education outcomes in Moodle Gradebook as they are supported and assessed in those courses (Critical Thinking and Communications)
- Complete the comprehensive Assessment Plan encompassing NMC's methodology for assessing course, program, and the General Education outcomes
- Assessment Coordinator will facilitate faculty forums on writing and measuring learning outcomes, Friday Forum scheduled for October 3, 2014
- Several sessions at the all faculty October 7, 2014 professional development day will also focus on writing learning outcomes, linking assignments to outcomes, and demonstrating specific tracking software used in certain occupational areas

Spring 2015

- Program managers will continue to map courses to the program outcomes; curriculum maps to be submitted to the academic chairs by June 2015
- Assess the Social Science Moodle Gradebook Outcomes Tracking pilot for acceleration into other academic areas
- Faculty to review course outlines, required annually in the faculty handbook, and submit updates to office managers
- Update Teaching@NMC web resource to provide greater accessibility to learning outcomes resources
- NMC is also in the process of designing a New Faculty Professional Development course in conjunction with the Center for Instructional Excellence and the Educational Services Instructional Management Team that will incorporate mentoring in the ability to write and assess quality learning outcomes as a part of the three year probationary period.

REVIEWER:

The institution has established a process designed to meet its action project goal to meet AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn. The amount of effort to fully develop and implement a project of this magnitude is daunting, to say the least, and therefore, it is reasonable to expect the institution will need to extend beyond its original time for completion of this action project in order to meet AQIP Category 1 Helping Students Learn. The institution has made good progress and is moving forward to complete its action project in a reasonable time.