

# QUALITY CHECKUP REPORT

## Northern Michigan University

Marquette, MI  
March 25 - 27, 2009

### Quality Checkup team members:

**Jim Morrison**

Coordinator Curriculum Development  
University of Oklahoma, College of  
Liberal Studies

**Sandra Singer**

Professor, Psychology  
Department of Behavioral Sciences  
Purdue University Calumet

### Background on Quality Checkups conducted by the Academic Quality Improvement Program

The Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) conducts Quality Checkup site visits to each institution during the fifth or sixth year in every seven-year cycle of AQIP participation. These visits are conducted by trained, experienced AQIP Reviewers to determine whether the institution continues to meet The Higher Learning Commission's *Criteria for Accreditation*, and whether it is using quality management principles and building a culture of continuous improvement as participation in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) requires. The goals of an AQIP Quality Checkup are to:

1. Affirm the accuracy of the organization's online Systems Portfolio and verify information included in the portfolio that the last Systems Appraisal has identified as needing clarification or verification (System Portfolio Clarification and Verification);
2. Review with organizational leaders actions taken to capitalize on the strategic issues and opportunities for improvement identified by the last Systems Appraisal (Systems Appraisal Follow Up);
3. Alert the organization to areas that need its attention prior to Reaffirmation of Accreditation, and reassure it concerning areas that have been covered adequately (Accreditation Issues Follow Up);
4. Verify federal compliance issues such as default rates, complaints, USDE interactions and program reviews, etc. (Federal Compliance Review); and
5. Assure continuing organizational quality improvement commitment through presentations, meetings, or sessions that clarify AQIP and Commission accreditation work (Organizational Quality Commitment).

The AQIP peer reviewer(s) trained for this role prepare for the visit by reviewing relevant organizational and AQIP file materials, particularly the organization's last *Systems Appraisal Feedback Report* and the Commission's internal *Organizational Profile*, which summarizes information reported by the institution in its *Annual Institutional Data Update*. The report provided to AQIP by the institution is also shared with the evaluator(s). Copies of the Quality Checkup report are provided to the institution's CEO and AQIP liaison. A copy is retained by the Commission for the institution's permanent file, and will be part of the materials reviewed by the AQIP Review Panel during Reaffirmation of Accreditation.

### Clarification and verification of contents of the institution's *Systems Portfolio*

Prior to the Quality Checkup Visit, NMU provided the Quality Checkup Team with a newly compiled Systems Portfolio (January, 2009). The primary purpose of the new portfolio was to include important information about quality improvement activities that was omitted in the 2006 Systems Portfolio. In addition, the new Portfolio documented several substantive actions taken recently to respond to strategic and accreditation issues identified in the 2006 Systems Appraisal.

Before the visit, the Team reviewed the 2009 Systems Portfolio and agreed that it was a much improved document that provided a more thorough understanding of the University's progress toward achieving its quality goals. Verification of the accuracy of the portfolio material was obtained by discussing key issues with NMU leadership groups, including the members of the Board of Trustees, the President, his senior leadership team and the President's Council (consisting of senior administrators, academic deans and department heads, the head of institutional research, and leaders from the faculty senate and the student body).

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issues, documentation and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

### Review of specific accreditation issues identified by the institution's last Systems Appraisal

Four major accreditation issues were identified in the last Systems Appraisal: lack of data other than anecdotal evidence that NMU was tracking its effectiveness; few defined learning outcome measures; no benchmarks (internal or external) against which NMU could evaluate outcomes and measure improvement; and no discussion of how planning is aligned with the institution's mission statement and strategic planning. To address these issues during the visit, the Team focused its attention on two broad issues: assessment and strategic planning. In addition to subsuming the four concerns noted above, these two issues were also cited as needing improvement in NMU's 1994 accreditation visit.

During the Quality Checkup visit, the Team determined that NMU's 2006 Systems Portfolio had omitted important information about data collection and analysis that should have been included. While on campus, the Team found ample evidence that the University is currently operating in a data-rich environment and making good use of that information, including using data to drive decision making. There appears to be good progress being made in the area of

developing academic outcome measures for each academic program as well as for the Liberal Studies core. An ongoing Action Project “Documenting and Benchmarking the NMU Outcomes Assessment Process” will assist in the maturation of a developing system of assessment and improvement of student learning outcomes.

Strategic Planning appears to be adequately addressed through Mission/Vision Statement revisions (approved by Board of Trustees September 2008) and the comprehensive strategic plan entitled the “Road Map to 2015.” Also noteworthy is an NMU Action Plan for 2008-2009, “Benchmarking the NMU Roadmap to 2015,” in which specific quality-improvement targets will be generated and used to measure the success of the strategic plan. The Quality Checkup Team saw ample evidence that NMU communicates this strategic plan widely and effectively through posters, memoranda, communications to parents, students, and other constituent groups. The President and the Board of Trustees are strongly invested in the ‘Roadmap’ as evidenced by the fact that every area of the University is required to align all budgets and initiatives with the “Road Map to 2015.” This effectively links the mission/vision/planning processes to the resource planning and budget allocation processes.

In the team’s judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution’s approach to the issues, documentation and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP’s expectations.

Review of the institution’s approach to capitalizing on recommendations identified by its last Systems Appraisal in the *Strategic Issues Analysis*.

Action Projects for Documenting and Benchmarking NMU’s Outcomes Assessment and Benchmarking NMU’s Strategic Plan (“The Road Map to 2015”) suggest that a commitment to quality processes is becoming accepted by leadership throughout the University. The strategic planning process is now progressing very well. Outcomes Assessment activities are also moving forward. All academic and administrative units have submitted at least one assessment plan. An evaluation of those plans by the University assessment committee in 2008 revealed that: 59% are in congruence with the institutional mission statement; 85% have clearly identified the outcomes to be achieved; 59% had collected evaluative data; and 47% units are now well on their way to completing a cycle of assessment that will show if improved processes have resulted. With regard to assessment of student learning, the most advanced academic departments are mostly those who must supply outcomes information for program accreditation

(e.g. nursing and education), but all academic departments have made progress toward meaningful evaluation of student learning. Of course, there are a few skeptics who see outcomes assessment as an invasion of academic freedom or a waste of time, but the President and University leadership are strong advocates of quality processes and, thus, the institution is making good progress, despite a few naysayers.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

#### Review of organizational commitment to continuing systematic quality improvement

The team's visit with four of the eight members of the Board of Trustees, perusal of the Board meeting agendas and minutes, and discussion with the President, his Senior Leadership Team and the President's Council demonstrated the institution's commitment to AQIP, its processes and principles, at the highest levels and to the creation of a culture of continuous improvement. The action project to benchmark the strategic plan will assist in the collection, analysis and application of data pertaining to measurements of progress toward the goals and priorities listed in the strategic plan. This project should also provide the elements for a performance dashboard for the institution.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidenced that it met this goad of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

#### USDE issues related to default rate (renewal of eligibility, program audits, or other USDE actions)

The team visited with the appropriate financial aid leadership concerning the findings in the 2004 program review by the U.S. Department of Education and was satisfied that personnel changes and revision to the system processes, along with the institution of safeguards proposed by the internal audit staff, had adequately addressed the concerns revealed by the findings of the program review. Current letters certifying eligibility (dated 3/31/07 and continuing through 3/31/12) were provided by the institution. The issues with default rates are not unique to NMU. Several changes to the algorithms for calculating default rates have made it difficult to measure progress or regression, however, NMU has taken a proactive approach in spite of relatively low

default rates. Recently, it has instituted an aggressive default aversion policy including a process to contact students when they become identified as 'at risk'.

In the Team's judgment the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

#### Compliance with Commission Policy IV.A.8, Public Notification of Comprehensive Evaluation Visit

The communication notices were exemplary in both quality and scope. The public meetings were well-attended, with one afternoon meeting over-filling an auditorium that seats about 150. Many positive testimonies were made regarding NMU's value to its students and to the Upper Peninsula community as a whole. Staff noted the good communication that exists among students, faculty, staff and senior administration. Students spoke to the helpfulness of faculty and staff. Community members mentioned the fact that NMU is a source of innovative problem solving for the whole Upper Peninsula.

Written comments were submitted by individuals. Of those, 11 were very positive and two were negative. The Team discussed the negative issues brought up in the two comments and determined that the allegations were baseless.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

#### Compliance with Commission policy 1.C.7, Credits, Program Length, and Tuition

State funding issues are a continuing concern for this institution since it has experienced decreasing state appropriations over the last decade. Aggressive cost cutting and financial planning have enabled the institution to maintain relatively stable tuition rates. An interesting recruiting strategy that targets out-of-state and international students who will be attracted to NMU because of its emphasis on access to the outdoors, especially winter sports, seems to be working. It is an excellent example of the ingenuity with which NMU is responding to hard economic times.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the

Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Compliance with Commission policy IV.B.2, *Advertising and Recruitment Materials*

NMU provided samples of the organization's advertising and recruitment materials to the Quality Checkup team. The team also reviewed quite a bit of the online materials about NMU that are available to the public. All were found to be clearly written and visually attractive.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Compliance with Commission policy III.A.1, *Professional Accreditation*, and III.A.3, *Requirements of Organizations Holding Dual Institutional Accreditation*

NMU has a single institution-wide accreditation relationship with the Higher Learning Commission. With regard to accreditation of individual academic programs, the various university programs that are accredited are all in good standing.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Compliance with Commission policy IV.B.4, *Organizational Records of Student Complaints*

NMU's process for handling student complaints appears well developed and robust. A clearly defined grievance process is available to students and described in the online catalogue. A formal record of student complaints is maintained and was available for the Team to review. There is also a well defined appeals process.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Other USDE compliance-related issues

None noted.

## Other AQIP issues

### **Viability and Sustainability**

NMU's financial statements, though not subjected to an in-depth analysis by the team, indicate sufficient strength for sustaining operations and transparency in financial reporting, in spite of decreasing and often delayed state appropriations. The decreases in state funding have been ameliorated in a large part by good financial planning, careful cost containment (i.e. carefully balancing faculty mix to control unit costs), multi-level contingency planning, and rigorous budgeting processes. At the same time there was no indication from faculty or staff that significant educational programs and strategic initiatives were being left unfunded or under-funded, nor was there evidence of unhealthy deferment of maintenance of facilities. The refinancing of the long term debt from variable rate interest to lower fixed interest rate financial vehicles is an example of the proactive approach taken by the financial leadership of the university. Continued and recent significant gifts (\$1 million to fund travel abroad educational programs) provide evidence of the careful attention to resource development conducted through the Foundation offices.

### **Distinctive programs that greatly enhance the institution's viability and sustainability include:**

- Strong service and experiential learning programs that serve students and the region very well
- FCC licensing – Educational Broadband Service that supports High-Speed Internet Access
- Wildcat Incentive Fund – for funding Faculty/Staff innovative initiatives
- Center for Student enrichment
- U.S.A. Olympics Training Center located on NMU campus
- A partnership with the regional hospital contiguous to the campus results in strong, health-related academic programs and provides many research opportunities for students and faculty.