

SYSTEMS APPRAISAL FEEDBACK REPORT

in response to the *Systems Portfolio* of

NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

September 20, 2010



**Academic
Quality Improvement
Program**

The Higher Learning Commission **NCA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

The following are summary comments on each of the AQIP Categories crafted by the Appraisal Team to highlight **Northern Michigan University's** achievements and to identify challenges yet to be met.

Category 1:

- NMU appears to have in place significant data gathering capability and NMU reports extensive assessment at the course level. Compared to its peers, learning outcomes appear to be equal or higher. Extension of assessment to the program level could identify further opportunities to improve student learning outcomes. However, utilization of assessment information to improve processes appears uneven across the institution. NMU appears aware of this and is encouraged to broaden the use of assessment information among its departments. NMU has identified the need for increased support of at risk students, which is an opportunity to improve outcomes of those students. In addition, there appears to be a need to better connect the various sections of this category in the portfolio. The institution reports processes for which results are not reported and results of actions not discussed in the process section.
- Overall, NMU appears to be moving from designing processes towards implementing and determining the effectiveness of the processes. As it continues its journey, potential next steps include integrating regular review processes or feedback processes into the currently implemented student learning processes and increased use of direct measures of student learning. NMU's increased focus on the use of results suggests an opportunity to identify acceptable or target levels of student performance for each of the relevant metrics, allowing NMU to focus its efforts for continuous improvement on those areas it judges to be most off target. As the institution matures, a systemic and holistic approach to its processes may lead to improved results, better cross-department coordination, and a mechanism for prioritization of efforts in an environment of constrained resources.

Category 2:

- NMU presents examples of improvements in accomplishing its other distinct objectives. The institution has identified the need for further actions in the development of its key

processes to support non-instructional programs and is moving forward in selected areas. Although NMU does describe many accomplishments, it would strengthen the portfolio to include developed targets for measuring these objectives, tracking the trends of these measures, and providing analysis of data supporting evidence of its accomplishments. In addition, the processes presented by NMU are not connected to the results section. In the results section, economic development, workforce development, and community engagement are provided as three overarching classifications of other distinctive objectives. Yet, in the processes section, these are mentioned in passing and not fully addressed or integrated throughout. Elevation of economic and workforce development to the same level as community engagement would create a more effective system for accomplishing other objects.

Category 3:

- Overall, it appears the university is committed to internal and external stakeholders; however, the extent to which there is a holistic approach is not evident. Continued development of processes to serve its identified three key non-instructional objectives will assist the region and strengthen the institution.
- NMU has numerous data gathering efforts underway in an attempt to measure satisfaction of its stakeholders and has established a variety of mutually beneficial relationships with external stakeholders. Although venues for understanding student and stakeholder needs are identified and operational, such processes are largely informal and greater data analysis is needed for results and findings to inform future planning. Opportunities exist to establish an overall strategy for implementing actions based on the data and benchmarking the institution's progress against other comparable peers. The university will benefit from a more coordinated institutional effort in these areas permitting a more efficient process for evaluating its relationships and the satisfaction level of its stakeholder groups.

Category 4:

- NMU has invested resources in balancing productivity and employee satisfaction, training processes, the implementation of the Leadership Model, and aligning its rewards to Road Map 2015. However, there appear to be opportunities for a more systematic

and strategic approach to valuing its people. NMU has a data rich environment; it has an opportunity to use the collected data to identify improvement opportunities.

Category 5:

- NMU is aware of its needs to continuously improve its ability to lead and communicate for the betterment of the university. It has put time and effort into redesigning its mission and strategic plan providing leadership for decisions and future actions. There is an opportunity to use these documents to identify and clearly articulate an institutional culture, to monitor performance, and to formalize performance measures and communication processes. Establishment of metrics and performance targets specific to leading and communicating and collection of relevant data can help NMU better assess its performance in this area.

Category 6:

- NMU appears to be on the way to well-designed processes to identify, document, and communicate available institutional support services. Results are reviewed and integrated into planning processes. Additional measurements of performance compared to peer institutions may benefit student support areas.

Category 7:

- NMU is in the process of establishing more direct measures of institutional effectiveness that connect more closely to its mission and goals. NMU currently reports collecting and analyzing data in a variety of areas, but does not seem to have identified a process by which the effectiveness of these activities can be measured. NMU may benefit by addressing how effective its data collection and reporting systems are in providing relevant and useful information for performance assessment and decision making. As NMU appropriately states, “the University’s measurement of performance results can be improved by implementing processes that are more systematic.”

Category 8:

- NMU has taken the need to plan its continuous improvement seriously. Using the Road Map to 2015 as a core anchor, activities have occurred to define the institution’s place in the future. Although NMU has a well designed planning process that flows from its strategic plan to shorter term plans and actions, it is not clear the extent to which

evaluation of those processes is integrated and aligned across the institution. The University would benefit by focusing on establishing measures of effectiveness in its planning processes. The successes reported appear to be *ad hoc* targets of opportunity rather than the result of a comprehensive and systematic approach to selection of initiatives. NMU operates in a severely constrained resource environment; determining that the chosen initiatives represent its highest priorities can ensure the most effective use of available resources. There is a need to distinguish between the outcomes of strategies and actions and the effectiveness of the processes used to identify, develop, and implement them.

Category 9:

- NMU has many relationships that contribute to its institutional mission; however, the data and information in the portfolio do not provide a reader with clarity concerning what processes are in place or how those processes led to the establishment of identified relationships. Additional improvements could include critical analyses of relevant measures and discussion of how systematic processes are used to improve institutional performance in this category.

Accreditation issues and Strategic challenges for **Northern Michigan University** are listed in detail within the Strategic and Accreditation Issues Analysis section of the Appraisal Feedback Report.

ELEMENTS OF NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY'S FEEDBACK REPORT

The *Systems Appraisal Feedback Report* provides AQIP's official response to your *Systems Portfolio* by a team of readers trained in evaluation. After appraisers independently reviewed your document, the team reached consensus on essential elements of your institutional profile, strengths and opportunities for improvement by Category, and significant issues for your institution. These are presented in three sections of the Feedback Report: Accreditation Issues Analysis, Critical Characteristics Analysis, and Category Feedback. These components are interrelated in defining context, evaluating performance, surfacing critical issues, and assessing institutional performance.

It is important to remember that the Systems Appraisal Team had only your *Systems Portfolio* to guide their analysis of your institution's strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Consequently, their report may omit important strengths — if you were too modest to stress them in your *Systems Portfolio*, or if your discussion and documentation of them was unconvincing. Similarly, the team may have pointed out areas of potential improvement that are already receiving the institution's attention. Again, the team used its best judgment in identifying improvement opportunities. If some of these areas of potential improvement are now strengths rather than opportunities because of your own focused efforts, that is all to your credit. If the team was unsure about an area, we urged it to err on the side of giving your institution the best possible advice about where investing your efforts might pay off. If some of their advice comes after the fact, after you've already tackled an area, no harm is done.

Executive Summary: Summative statements agreed upon by the Systems Appraisal Team reflecting the reviewers' assessment of the institution's current status in relation to critical quality characteristics: robustness of process design; utilization or deployment of processes; the existence of results, trends, and comparative data; the use of results data as feedback, and systematic processes for improvement of the activities that the Category covers. Since institutions are complex, maturity levels may vary from one Category to another.

Strategic challenges for the institution are listed in detail within the Strategic and Accreditation Issues Analysis section of the Appraisal Feedback Report.

Strategic and Accreditation Issues Analysis: Strategic issues are those most closely related to your institution's ability to succeed in reaching its mission, planning, and quality improvement goals. Accreditation issues are areas where you have not yet provided evidence that you meet the Commission's *Criteria for Accreditation*, or where the evidence you have presented suggests you may have difficulties, now or in the future, in meeting these expectations. If accreditation is essential for your institution then any accreditation issues identified are, by definition, also strategic. The Systems Appraisal Team identified both of these kinds of issues through analysis of your Organizational Overview and the feedback it provided for each Category, as well as by reviewing the Index to the *Criteria for Accreditation* that you provided along with your *Systems Portfolio*. This list of strategic issues offers a framework for addressing ongoing improvement of processes and systems, serving as an executive summary of the Report's key findings and recommendations.

Critical Characteristics: Your Systems Portfolio's Organizational Overview provides context for the team's knowledge of your institution's identity, mission objectives, strategic goals, and key factors related to improvement. Critical Characteristics are those features most important for understanding the institution's mission, environment, stakeholders, competitive position, goals, and processes. Characteristics having the greatest relevance to each Category are identified in the Report.

Category Feedback: The Report's feedback on each of AQIP's nine Categories specifically identifies strengths and opportunities for improvement. An **S** or **SS** identifies strengths, with the double letter signifying important achievements or capabilities upon which to build. Opportunities are designated by **O**, with **OO** indicating areas where attention may result in more significant improvement. Comments, which are keyed to your *Systems Portfolio*, offer brief analysis of each strength and opportunity. Organized by Category, and presenting the team's findings in detail, this section is the heart of the Report.

STRATEGIC AND ACCREDITATION ISSUES

In conducting the Systems Appraisal, the team attempted to identify the broader issues that present the greatest challenges and opportunities for your institution in the coming years. These are all strategic issues, ones you need to grapple with as you identify your institution's strategies for confronting the future and becoming the institution you want to be. The team also examined whether any of these strategic issues put your institution into jeopardy of not meeting the Higher Learning Commission's accreditation expectations.

Issues Affecting Compliance with the *Criteria for Accreditation*. An important goal for the Systems Appraisal was to review your institution's compliance with the Higher Learning Commission's *Criteria for Accreditation*. The peer quality experts who served on the team were all trained in evaluating colleges and universities using the Commission's *Criteria*, and the Systems Appraisal process they followed included careful steps to ensure the team used the *Criteria* as a major factor in their review. As the team reviewed your presentation of your institution's systems and processes under each AQIP Category, it searched for accreditation-related issues and concerns. In addition, the team used the *Index to the Criteria for Accreditation* that you provided with your Portfolio to perform a comprehensive review of the

Criteria and each Core Component to ascertain whether you presented compelling evidence that your institution complies with each of these Commission expectations.

The Systems Appraisal team concluded that **Northern Michigan University** has presented evidence that it complies with each of the Five *Criteria for Accreditation* and each of their Core Components. Although the Systems Appraisal does not in itself constitute a review for continued accreditation, the team's conclusion upon reviewing your Portfolio against the Criteria will serve as a telling piece of evidence during the Commission's next scheduled AQIP review of your institution for Reaffirmation of Accreditation.

Issues Affecting Future Institutional Strategies. The Systems Appraisal Team identified the following strategic issues to assist Northern Michigan University in prioritizing and taking action on the important broad challenges and opportunities it faces. From these you may discover your vital immediate priorities, shaping strategies that can lead to a quantum leap in the performance of your institution. Implementing these strategies may call for specific actions, so AQIP's expectation that your institution be engaged in three or four vital Action Projects at all times will help encourage your administrators, faculty, and staff to turn these strategic goals into real accomplishments. Knowing that Northern Michigan University will discuss these strategic issues, give priority to those it concludes are most critical, and take action promptly, the Systems Appraisal Team identified three areas:

Collection and Use of Data

- NMU relies mainly on indirect measures. Increased use of direct measures would improve the validity of information collected and used.
- There is a lack of consistency between the measures stated in the R1 sections and the results reported in the other results sections. The team noted that many of the results presented were not linked to the processes or measures presented in the portfolio. It is important to report on the measures stated. NMU will benefit from a more focused effort on collecting and analyzing data related to clearly defined targets and learning outcomes.
- NMU has made many improvements in the AQIP categories. However, much of the information provided does not link to the performance process and results provided in the previous answers. An opportunity exists to connect the threads among process,

results, and improvements. Absent a systemic approach to improvements, *ad hoc* improvements may lack cross-departmental consideration and coordination and lack a mechanism for prioritization of efforts in an environment of constrained resources.

- NMU may benefit from more clearly defined peers for the purposes of benchmarking. The team recognizes that each category may require differing institutions for benchmarking purposes, but each category should have a peer group referenced. Researching peer institutions may assist NMU to identify best practices and to set realistic targets for improvement.

Processes

- Throughout the portfolio NMU describes numerous activities used to accomplish its goals. However, there is a concern that there are few formal systematic processes described. NMU may benefit by more clearly articulating its processes and by ensuring a systematic approach.

Culture

- The team consistently pointed out NMU's difficulty articulating its culture and how it impacts the institution's decision-making processes. The institution would benefit considerably from identifying its predominant institutional culture and the impact this culture has on its processes for continuous improvement. This will help the institution more clearly articulate who they are, why they function in specific ways, and how they interact with various stakeholders. In doing so the institution will be able to strengthen and retain those attributes it values most.
- Much of what has been described in the portfolio indicates that NMU tends to react to its external stakeholders and environment rather than being proactive in its processes. This suggests a culture of compliance as opposed to one of continuous improvement.

USING THE FEEDBACK REPORT

The AQIP *Systems Appraisal Feedback Report* is intended to initiate action for improvement. It is therefore important that the Report produced by the Systems Appraisal Team stimulate review of organizational processes and systems. Though decisions about specific actions are each institution's, AQIP expects every institution to use its feedback to stimulate cycles of