



Academic
Quality Improvement
Program

The Higher Learning Commission NCA

Identifying Action Projects

What Action Projects Accomplish

To build and strengthen your quality initiative — and to demonstrate to AQIP the earnestness and vitality of your institutional commitment to quality — AQIP asks you to commit to doing three or four “vital few” Action Projects that will swiftly and determinedly move your institution closer to being the institution it wants to be. The self-assessment you did before you joined AQIP should provide you with some insight into where gaps exist in your institution. (The AQIP Criteria, Vital Focus, and AQIP Examiner, like the Baldrige categories, are organized around systems, or groups of processes. If you used either of these schemes to organize your self-assessment, the results should indicate directly which of your systems could benefit most from a focused improvement effort.)

In addition, examine your institution’s opportunities (e.g., “if we had a stronger process for student recruitment, we could...” or “if our planning system allowed us to foresee major changes early, we might...”) to identify potential Action Projects. Or look at problems and irritants — systems that have worked poorly in the past — and target them as improvement Projects (e.g., “everyone’s complained for years about the way we plan and schedule classes—now’s our chance to repair the problem by redesigning our system”).

In preparation for coming to a Strategy Forum, you need to tentatively identify the Action Projects that will best help you address your opportunities (or close gaps) to achieve your institution’s mission and vision. Specifically you need to list **three or four tentative Action Project ideas** in the Strategy for Action Workbook (the written homework for the Forum). At the Forum you will receive feedback that could cause your team to reconsider if the three or four tentative Projects will best help you address your opportunities and gaps; therefore, you should really put serious thought into your Project ideas.

Here are some questions that will help you generate creative ideas for Action Projects:

From external perspectives	From all perspectives	From internal perspectives
<i>voices of our students and other stakeholders</i> <i>voice of "the market"</i> <i>comparison with our competitors</i>		<i>voice of our processes</i> <i>voice of our employees</i> <i>our leadership's priorities</i>
How ready are we to adapt to an evolving higher education market? Where are we falling short in meeting students' needs? Where are we behind our competitors? Where might we gain new competitive advantages? What new needs are surfacing that affect our students and other stakeholders?	What stands between us and the accomplishment of our strategic goals? What new resources or capabilities must we acquire to implement our long-range strategies? How can we project the image we want? What new programs, services, locations, or other capabilities will provide better value to our students and other stakeholders?	What major delays slow down our processes? Where is there a high volume of failures, withdrawals, or courses that must be retaken? Where are the costs of poor quality (e.g., waste, rework) increasing? What concerns or ideas have faculty or staff consistently raised? What complaints have we been hearing repeatedly?

From the AQIP homepage (<http://www.AQIP.org>) you can browse or search AQIP’s **Action Project Directory**, a listing of the Action Projects that AQIP-participating institutions are undertaking.

Choose Action Projects that are Important to You

The Action Projects you choose are up to you — it's your institution, and you know better than anyone else what is vital to helping you achieve your particular vision and mission. Neither AQIP nor your peers will formally approve your Action Projects. But at the Strategy Forum, both AQIP staff and your peers — from other institutions as serious about quality improvement as you are — will challenge and test your choices, grilling you on why you selected these specific Projects and goals, why they are the most vitally important priorities for your institution's improvement, and whether doing them will really move your institution to where you want it to be.

Discuss your Action Project Ideas with your Team Before the Strategy Forum

To prepare yourself for this intensive dialogue, examine in advance whether the Projects you have identified:

✓ ***Make a serious difference to institutional performance.***

After you've completed your Action Project, people ought to *notice* the difference. The results of your Project should make people pay attention and give your colleagues renewed confidence that they can make significant institutional improvements happen. You don't want to squander your time improving something that few care about, or focusing your efforts where the change will be imperceptible.

✓ ***Embody challenging but "do-able" goals.***

Nothing will kill support for your quality initiative quicker than Projects so grandiose that they are bound to fail, or Projects so vague that no one can ever tell whether they succeeded or failed. Scope your Projects properly: avoid trying to "eradicate illiteracy" or "bring world peace." Try to craft Projects that you can complete in no more than three years. To give your faculty and staff a sense of how good success can feel, pick one or more Projects that you can complete more quickly -- perhaps in six months.

✓ ***Stretch yourself in new ways.***

Select Projects with outcomes that wouldn't happen normally, undertakings whose achievement will require *serious* institutional effort. Tackle problems with causes few now understand, where the optimal solution is neither apparent now, nor predetermined. If you choose wisely, you'll not only improve a few specific systems and processes, but you'll also convince the skeptics in your institution that working for improvement pays off, that teamwork succeeds, that people can learn new skills and tools, and that collectively you can shape your destiny. (*Warning:* If you already know exactly how you're going to improve or fix something, "*just do it*" — but don't try to make it into an Action Project. Doing what you already knew you were going to do doesn't stretch you, or help you learn more about improvement.)

✓ ***Focus both on efficiency and on benefits to students and other stakeholders.***

Don't make *all* of your Action Projects concerned with improving efficiency or lowering costs. Include Projects that enhance student learning and satisfaction, that build faculty and staff's satisfaction that their jobs are worthwhile, that communicate better to employers what knowledge and skills your graduates acquire, or other challenging and fulfilling goals.

✓ ***Help your institution learn and change as it accomplishes something significant.***

Choose Projects that do something worthwhile — solve a problem or seize an opportunity — but pay equal attention for the potential of a Project to help your employees learn to think and work together in new, creative, more effective ways. The most enduring value of an Action Project is what it does for your institution's culture. Your Projects can demonstrate the value of teamwork, help your employees learn to

*Because AQIP is an **Academic Quality Improvement Program**, at least one (1) of your Action Projects must fall primarily under **Helping Students Learn**, the AQIP Criterion most central for any higher learning organization. The Project(s) can deal with learning assessment, educational program design, delivery of instruction, evaluation and transcripting, academic advising, or other academic processes that directly affect learning. See the AQIP Criteria on our website www.AQIP.org for details of what **Helping Students Learn** includes.*

If, when you joined AQIP, the Commission articulated expectations of specific issues that your first Action Projects must address, remember these constraints as you fashion your Action Projects.

use data more effectively, develop people’s understanding of leadership roles and responsibilities, make people value colleagues with whom they’ve rarely interacted, or many other things. Examine AQIP’s *Principles of High-Performance Organizations* — the list will get you thinking about the potential for selecting Action Projects that help shape your institution’s culture in fresh, positive ways.

Narrow Down your Potential Action Project Ideas to a “Vital Few”

Prior to the Strategy Forum, we expect you to get your team together, generate a list of potential Action Projects that your institution might wish to work on, and focus in on the “vital few” — the ones which, if done, will give your institution the “biggest bang for the buck,” the most dramatic improvement for the effort invested. To narrow down all the possibilities you generate for your “vital few,” consider these questions:

What Might the Benefit or impact of this Project be?	
<i>on students and other stakeholders</i>	How or in what way will it benefit groups important to us?
<i>on our institutional vision</i>	Will it help us achieve our overall strategy?
<i>on our competitive position</i>	Will it give us advantages over competing institutions?
<i>on "core competencies"</i>	Will it strengthen a core competency? Will it let us "outsource" a capability we no longer need to have?
<i>on finances or resources</i>	Will it reduce costs, increase efficiency, eliminate waste, improve tuition/enrollment, or grow our market share?
<i>urgency</i>	How much time do we have before we must address this issue or capitalize on this opportunity?
<i>trends</i>	Over time, is the problem or opportunity getting bigger or smaller? What will happen if we do nothing?

How Feasible is it for Us to Succeed with this Project?	
<i>sequence or dependency</i>	Must some other issue be addressed first in order for this one to be addressed?
<i>resources needed</i>	What people, time, money, or equipment do we need?
<i>expertise available</i>	What technical skills do we need to do this?
<i>complexity</i>	How complicated do we expect the solution or implementation to be?
<i>probability of success</i>	Are we likely to succeed in doing it in a reasonable time?
<i>support or buy-in</i>	Will we be able to make a good case for doing this with key groups whose support we need?

What will We Learn, Organizationally, from Doing this Project?	
<i>organizational learning</i>	Will we gain new knowledge about ourselves from doing this? Will we learn and practice quality principles and tools?
<i>cross-functional thinking</i>	Will it break down "silos" and help the organization see itself as a system?

Don’t Let the Possibility of Failing Prevent You from Setting Ambitious Goals

Action Projects help you mobilize your institution, getting teams of people working on common goals in new and more productive ways. By having only three or four Action Projects at any one time, you concentrate people’s attention on what you believe is vital and demonstrate your seriousness about following through on your commitment – something that would never be possible if you pursued 50 or 100 objectives simultaneously. By tying your Action Projects to the Higher Learning Commission’s Academic Quality Improvement Program, you enlist faculty and staff’s respect for accreditation as an additional driver for your Projects. Action Projects are ideal for

tackling the tough problems and issues that demand creative solutions. Don't waste them on simple, easy-to-do tasks.

Following your Strategy Forum, AQIP will give you a few months to think through what you've heard from your peers before asking you to commit to three or four specific Action Projects. At that time, you'll need to set timelines and measurable goals for your Projects, and explain how you plan to keep them in the spotlight and measure progress as you work to complete them. We also hope you'll give AQIP permission to add the details about your Action Projects to its **Action Project Directory**, so that other institutions and the public can learn about the activities of the leaders in higher education quality improvement. Every September 21st, AQIP will expect you to provide a brief Annual Update on the progress you're making or the problems you've encountered. In return, you get constructive feedback from quality experts selected because they are familiar with the process areas in which you're working. The purpose of the feedback on these Annual Updates is to ensure you keep moving toward the goals you set for yourself, and to provide assistance if you get stuck.

Aim High and Learn

Ultimately, whether your institution succeeds or fails in a particular Action Project does not alarm AQIP, nor should it overly concern you. Taking risks – tackling difficult challenges, problems, or opportunities – sometimes leads to less success than we might desire. AQIP believes in setting “stretch targets,” in taking on challenges that help you to grow and learn – and develop new organizational muscle – even if one possible result is that you fail to reach the targets you set. As the Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote, “A man's reach must exceed his grasp – or what's a heaven for?”

AQIP does not judge an institution on the success or failure of its individual Action Projects, but on the overall commitment it makes to continuous improvement and on the demonstrated improvement in performance that comes from that commitment over the long term. When you prepare your Systems Portfolio, the cumulative effects of all of your Action Projects – both the successes and failures – will be evident in institutional sophistication about process design and systems thinking, and in improvement in operational performance. Minor dips in a road rising toward improved quality are to be expected, and will not lead AQIP or others to judge your institution negatively.

If Conditions Change

If the situation, priorities, or fortunes of your institution change significantly, and the Action Projects to which you have committed yourself are no longer the most important things for you to be doing, all you need do is inform AQIP. You can abandon an Action Project at any time, replacing it with a new Project more vital to your institution's success and performance. AQIP wants to know what happened (so we can learn from your experience and incorporate that learning into our program), but you do not need AQIP's permission to substitute a new Project for one that is no longer desirable.

Similarly, when you complete an Action Project successfully, AQIP would like a short report of what you accomplished and learned so that we can (with your approval) share your success with the broader higher education community. AQIP then expects you to create a new Action Project to replace the one completed, so that you'll always have three or four Action Projects on your institutional agenda, driving your continuous improvement effort forward. Consequently, short-term (under six month) intensive Projects are often highly desirable.

Some Background Reading on Action Projects and Action Learning

Michael J. Marquardt's *Action Learning in Action: Transforming Problems and People for World-Class Organizational Learning* (Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing, 1999) provides a good theoretical background of the way in which AQIP has designed its Action Project component. Marquardt draws upon the “action learning” work of Reg Revans in Britain, and discusses ways of implementing Action Projects, using teams to both increase the likelihood of success and to maximize the institutional learning that can be derived from the team's experience.

Some of the current books on Six Sigma are also useful when conceptualizing and implementing an Action Project. Although Six Sigma projects are primarily concerned with the reduction of “defects” caused by excessive variation (an aspect of statistical process control not normally the subject of academic discussions), Six Sigma literature gives much good advice about the formulation of projects, the selection of project teams and champions, the desirability of setting “stretch” targets and accelerated timelines for project completion, and the ways to maximize institutional learning and spread the experience of success to other employees.