

Action Project Guide



Academic Quality Improvement Program

Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association

Why Action Projects?

AQIP is about taking action, improving things that will make institutions better at serving those it serves. Underlying this focus on action is an often-quoted truism:

If you keep on doing what you've always done, you'll keep on getting what you've always got. To get different results in the future, you must do things differently.

While trying new approaches and doing things differently does not *guarantee* improved performance, as Albert Einstein liked to remind people, “insanity is doing the same things and hoping for different results.”

Because AQIP is committed to helping colleges and universities continuously improve their performance in doing the things they value, it requires participating institutions to commit themselves to action, working consciously to improve the activities and processes that currently produce unsatisfying results.

AQIP views Action Projects as the keys mechanisms institutions can use to improve performance. Therefore institutions are urged to take on as many significant Action Projects as possible, completing each as quickly as possible. AQIP participation requires colleges and universities to share publicly at all times at least *three* current Action Projects on which they are working. Knowing about an organization’s current Action Projects provides assurance that its ongoing commitment to continuous quality improvement is genuine. More importantly, *doing* Action Projects moves institutions toward AQIP’s fundamental purpose: helping the organizations it serves improve their performance.

Benefits of Action Projects

Action Projects provide institutions a finite, concrete place to begin their quality improvement efforts, hopefully without the extended deliberation and delay that often comes with larger strategic planning activities in higher education. For many institutions, *action* is the antidote to *stagnation*, and the specific choice of project is often less critical than the communication of a shared sense of activity, movement, and purpose. A demonstration that shared efforts could change things for the better is an important tangible result.

Action Projects give institutions new to AQIP time to gather data for its Systems Portfolio, working towards an institutionally-understood summary of its current processes and performance, the benchmark for future improvement efforts. The concrete activity of the projects, and the fruit they bear quickly, serves to balance what might otherwise seem a long-term, rather theoretical but essential activity with a deferred payoff — creating the Systems Portfolio. To have institutions join AQIP and spend their first three years solely gathering data and producing a portfolio has little likelihood of appealing to dynamic institutions, or of helping them improve dramatically.

Action Projects help institutions engage faculty and staff in the selection of improvement efforts, empower employees by using them on project teams, and open an avenue for interaction with and feedback from peers at other institutions, beginning with the first Strategy Forum.

Action Projects encourage institutions to develop the superstructure(s) necessary to organize and oversee a quality initiative.

Developing Action Projects

Through its *Strategy Forums*, *Action Projects*, and *Annual Updates*, the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) helps an institution work toward the transformation of its culture toward a more reflective, vigorous organization devoted to *continuous quality improvement*.

Ambitious Action Projects create a foundation for an institution's improvement initiatives, and demonstrates to AQIP the vitality of the institution's commitment to quality. Each institution needs to commit to 3 or 4 Action Projects that will swiftly and determinedly move it closer to being the institution it wants to be. Because AQIP is an *Academic Quality Improvement Program*, at least one of these projects must relate directly to *Helping Students Learn* — learning assessment, educational program design and delivery of instruction, evaluation, student records, academic advising, or other academic processes that directly affect and reflect students' learning.

In designing Action Projects, an institution can examine new opportunities to identify potential Action Projects. Or they can look at past problems and irritants — systems and processes that have served it poorly in the past — and target them for improvement.

To develop valuable Action Projects, an institution should search for challenges and opportunities that:

- ***Make a serious and visible difference to institutional performance.*** After an Action Project is completed, people ought to notice the difference. The results of a Project should make people pay attention and give institutional colleagues renewed confidence that they *can* make significant improvements happen.
- ***Embody challenging but attainable goals.*** Nothing will kill support for an institution's quality initiative quicker than Action Projects so ambitious they are bound to fail, or so vague that no one can ever tell whether they succeeded or failed. The best advice is to select projects that can give faculty and staff a sense of how good success feels, projects that can be completed in 6 -18 months.
- ***Stretch the institution in new ways — to learn and to excel.*** Institutions should select Action Projects with outcomes that will *not* happen ordinarily, undertakings whose achievement will require *serious* institutional effort. An Action Project is a chance to tackle problems with causes few now understand, where the optimal solution is neither apparent now, nor predetermined. If an institution chooses wisely, it will not only improve a few specific systems and processes, but also convince its campus skeptics that improvement efforts pay off. It will show that teamwork succeeds, that people *can* learn new skills and tools, and that collectively the faculty, staff, and administrators can shape their destiny.
- ***Focus on both efficiency and benefits to students and other stakeholders.*** An institution should not make *all* of its Action Projects concerned with improving efficiency or lowering costs. Wise institutions include projects that enhance student learning and satisfaction, give faculty and staff a stronger sense of doing worthwhile work, document better for employers the knowledge and skills that graduates acquire, or other noble but challenging goals.

AQIP leaves it to each institution to choose its most useful Action Projects, for it knows better than anyone else what needs to be improved to help it achieve its vision and mission. Neither AQIP nor peers will formally *approve* an institution's Action Projects. But at each Strategy Forum, both AQIP representatives and peers from other institutions equally serious about quality improvement will challenge and test the choices, questioning why these particular projects were selected as the most vitally important priorities for the institution's improvement.

Creating an Action Project Charter

Elements of an Action Project Charter

Institution, City, State: Your institution's name and location.

Project Title: A name that will help everyone recognize what you are doing and trying to accomplish.

Context: A summary description of the project's origins and purpose.

- What is the origin/history of the project?
- How was this project identified?

Problem and Opportunity: A clear problem statement.

- What problem are we trying to solve?
- What opportunity are we trying to leverage?

Key Stakeholders: Important groups with an interest (stake) in the project.

- Who is most affected by the project?
- What are the risks/benefits to them?
- Who can most affect the project?

Project Vision and Objectives: A 25 to 30-word summary of objectives for communicating with stakeholders.

- How will we be different when the project is completed?
- What are the objectives of the project?
- How do these fit with the institution's objectives?
- What are the project's benefits?
- How will we know the project has been accomplished?

Project Sponsor: The person, people, or group with the power, influence, resources, and interest to champion the project and clear away obstacles that may arise.

- Who is the project's sponsor?

Project Scope: What the project includes — and what it specifically excludes.

- What is the project designed to deliver?
- What is to be included in the project?
- What is excluded? (Boundaries)

Budget and Timeline: How much the project will cost and how long it will take.

- What are the project's financial costs and benefits?
- What is the project's budget?
- What is the project's timeline? (Milestones?)

Constraints and Assumptions: What freedom and restrictions limit the project and team.

- What are limitations placed on the project team's actions, strategies, and decisions?
- Upon what key assumptions is the project based?

Critical Success Factors and Risks: Necessary conditions and pitfalls.

- What needs to be in place for this project to succeed?
- What could go wrong to threaten the success of this project?

Approach and Organization: The "how-to" ingredients needed to carry out the project.

- What strategy, tools, and techniques will the team employ?
- What roles and responsibilities have been assigned?

Institutions can help advance any Action Project by clearly "chartering" the project so that the team has confidence that the solution or approach it invents will get a fair hearing and trial that rewards its hard work. AQIP doesn't expect institutions to create a charter for every Action Project, but many have discovered that creating a formal charter for an Action Project enhances the likelihood of its success. Chartering involves four steps:

1. Prepare a proposed Action Project Charter that includes elements like those catalogued here.
2. Review the Charter with a potential Action Project Sponsor to confirm support. It is absolutely essential that the administrator in charge of the area of the Action Project agree with its goals and supports trying or piloting the solution the team comes up with.
3. Prepare a detailed process map of the areas of the process where measurement will be focused initially.
4. Form the Action Project team and get to work.

Setting an Action Project Timetable

An Action Project should last as long as it takes — six weeks, three months, one year — to achieve its goals, and no longer. Much of the value derived from an Action Project is learning how to identify and solve a problem quickly. If you put together a team and give them years to solve a problem that ought to take weeks or months, you may

teach and reward procrastination, delay, and unnecessary deliberation rather than inventiveness, focus, and teamwork. Moreover, if each of your Action Projects takes a year or more, the number of projects you can accomplish in a given period (and the number of people you can get involved in “action learning”) will be severely limited.

Early on, AQIP gave the impression that it was encouraging three-year long Action Projects. What it meant to suggest was that three years was the *maximum* length for any serious project, but that most should be *much* shorter — perhaps only three to six months. If your institution has a project with clear direct goals and a short timeline (say, a semester or less), make it all a single stage. If it’s a bigger and longer project, your institution may want to create two or three stages by identifying “mileposts” that will tell everyone when the project moves from one stage to another. AQIP redesigned its Action Project Directory to make this easier for institutions.

For example:

- If your institution has completed the first PDCA cycle of its re-engineered employee evaluation system, but wants to see if the work achieved all the goals that were set before the project is completed, it can create a version 2 (or 3, etc.) with a new description that fits what it is *currently* doing on this effort.
- Your institution’s original plan for expanding academic programs on the Internet hit a snag when the state slashed your budget by 20%, but it does not want to abandon the distance education initiative. The original scope and timetable are now clearly unrealistic but creating a “version 2” of the project allows your institution to send signals that the project is still alive, but that new conditions required a new vision of its goals.

However you plan a project to run, bear in mind that pushing teams to solve problems quickly often results in better and more creative solutions, communicates a higher level of energy and enthusiasm to the rest of the institution, and helps your institution’s employees develop knowledge and skills that will serve them well in other challenging situations.

Declaring and Updating Action Projects

AQIP’s **Action Project Directory** is a web-based database listing all current and completed Action Projects undertaken by institutions participating in AQIP. The Action Project Directory allows anyone to find Action Projects by institution, by the AQIP Category related to the project, or by key words. The Directory is an invaluable networking tool as well as a publicly visible testament to the creativity and self-regulatory sense of responsibility of higher education institutions.

AQIP requires all participating institutions to have at least three Action Projects underway at all times; when one ends, an institution must begin another to take its place. To assure that all institutions are seriously engaged in continuous quality improvement, AQIP requires annual evidence of these improvement efforts — obtained by reviewing the institution’s Annual Updates on the progress of at least three projects. An institution can undertake as many projects as it wishes, and can request and pay for Annual Update reviews of more than three projects, but three active Action Projects and three Annual Updates are the minimum.

Details about declaring, modifying, updating, and completing Action Projects are covered in detail in AQIP’s *Action Project Directory User Guide*, which can be downloaded from the HLC website by clicking the following links: [Maintaining Accreditation – AQIP – Action Projects](#).

The Action Project Declaration Form does not force an institution to decide in advance how it is going to solve the problem (or capitalize on the opportunity) represented by the Action Project. That's the job of the project's team members, and their creativity should not be hampered by dictating the solution before giving it a chance to solve the problem.

The Action Project Declaration	
<i>Your institution will complete an Action Project Declaration online in the Action Project Directory on AQIP's website, but the web form follows the structure below.</i>	
Institution	<i>Name of your college or university</i>
Planned kickoff date	<i>Default is the date of the project declaration, but you can enter a different date</i>
Target completion date	<i>The date your institution plans to complete the Action Project</i>
Give this Action Project a short title in 10 or fewer words	<i>A descriptive name containing nouns and verbs that will enable people searching for projects to find your institution's</i>
Describe this Action Project's goal	<i>Clear explicit purposes make the project's success more likely. Don't explain how your institution plans to accomplish these goals.</i>
Identify the single AQIP Category that this Action Project will most affect or impact	<i>Allows people searching for projects by primary AQIP Category to find your institution's</i>
Describe your institution's motivation for taking on this Action Project now	<i>Why this particular project and its goals are high among your institution's current priorities</i>
List the organizational areas most affected by or involved in this Action Project.	<i>The academic units, departments, or organizational areas directly or indirectly affected or whose needs may influence the way the project is conceived</i>
Identify the key organizational processes or activities that your institution expects this Action Project to change or improve.	<i>Recognizable processes or activities (hiring, recruiting, course scheduling, program review, budgeting, planning, etc.) can be named while others may need to be described.</i>
Explain the rationale for the length of time planned for this Action Project (from kickoff to target completion).	<i>Establish interim mileposts that mark progress toward the project's ultimate goals. Beneficial even with short projects, mileposts are essential for projects that will last longer than one year.</i>
Describe how your institution plans to publicize and monitor its efforts on this Action Project.	<i>This Action Projects deserve a central place in your institution's attention. Explain how everyone will be kept aware of what it's working to achieve. Interim goals tied to objective measures or indicators gauge progress, serving as "leading indicators" or predictors of a successful project.</i>
Describe the overall outcome measures or indicators that will determine whether this Action Project has been a success or failure.	<i>Outcome measures tell whether the project accomplished the goals or purposes that led to its undertaking, evaluating whether it was successful when completed. Strive for ambitious outcomes that challenge and stretch your institution's capacities, while building and extending its skills in tackling and solving problems.</i>

The Action Project Update Process

The Action Project Update process provides an opportunity to identify areas where your institution wants to solicit objective input that will be useful as it continues each project. The process is not designed to judge, trap, or penalize, but to help your institution stay on course to accomplish the goals it has set for itself. Your institution is asked to describe, for at least three active projects,

- *the progress being made, based on each project's timelines, goals, and measures;*
- *the problems, snags, delays, and challenges encountered; and*
- *any outstanding successes and discoveries.*

Responses should be direct, factual, and provide AQIP with a clear picture of your institution's progress, accomplishments, and challenges.

Action Project Update	
<i>Every year, your institution must update AQIP on its progress and achievements regarding at least three different Action Projects, answering these five questions regarding each Project.</i>	
<i>1. Describe the past accomplishments and the current status of this Action Project.</i>	Describe concrete achievements: meetings, data gathered and analyzed, plans made or implemented, changes in processes, and measured results. If your institution hasn't made much progress, explain why things are moving slower than planned.
<i>2. Describe how the institution involved people in work on this Action Project.</i>	AQIP wants Information about motivation and communication: how this project was kept on the institution's priority list, how general awareness of the importance and progress of the project was maintained, and how those working on it directly were kept active and motivated.
<i>3. Describe your institution's planned next steps for this Action Project.</i>	Be specific about the next critical steps your institution is planning to move the Action Project ahead. If planning is vague or there is no planning at this point, explain why.
<i>4. Describe any "effective practice(s)" that resulted from your institution's work on this Action Project.</i>	Share practices (or processes, policies, procedures, or initiatives) that could be adopted or adapted at other institutions. AQIP is most interested in practices that would give value (better educational services, cost-savings, improved morale, more satisfied stakeholders, etc.) to other institutions if they copied them. If your institution's work on this project has little or no value for other institutions, explain why.
<i>5. What challenges, if any, still face your institution regarding this Action Project?</i>	This is an opportunity to get constructive, actionable feedback and advice from AQIP's review process. Use this question to specify where blocks, gaps, sticking points, or problems are. If your institution has already fashioned strategies to deal with any challenges it faces, share <i>both</i> the challenges <i>and</i> strategies for meeting them.

The current (2011) Annual Update schedule allows your institution to submit Annual Updates for its Action Projects at any of three points throughout the year:

- Review and feedback on Action Project updates submitted January 1 – March 1 by April 30, 2011.
- Review and feedback on Action Project updates submitted March 1 – June 30 by August 31, 2011.
- Review and feedback on Action Project updates submitted June 30 - September 30 by December 31, 2011.