



# Introduction to AQIP

Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) is an alternative process through which an organization can maintain its accredited status with The Higher Learning Commission. AQIP's goal is to infuse the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities in order to assure and advance the quality of higher education. AQIP allows an organization to demonstrate that it meets The Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation and other expectations through processes that align with the ongoing activities that characterize organizations striving continuously to improve their performance. By sharing both its improvement activities and their results through AQIP, an organization develops the structure and systems essential to achieving the distinctive higher education mission it has set for itself — and the evidence to enable the Commission to reaffirm accreditation.

AQIP was developed and launched in 1999 with a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. It has grown steadily from its original 14 institutions in 2000-2001 to over 180 in 2007. Its Web site, [www.AQIP.org](http://www.AQIP.org), lists the number and names of current participants, and provides full details about AQIP's Strategy Forums, Systems Appraisals, and various other services. The Web site also provides links to information that supports AQIP's network of participants.

Based upon principles common to high performance organizations, AQIP draws from a variety of initiatives and programs — Total Quality Management (TQM), continuous improvement (CI), Six Sigma, ISO 9000 registration, state and national quality awards, and others. Many of AQIP's quality principles — focusing on key processes, basing decisions on data, decentralizing control, empowering faculty and staff to make the decisions that directly affect their work — have long been traditions in higher education, although their form and the breadth of their practice in particular institutions may vary greatly. Other components such as systems thinking and stakeholder focus appear at first to be new to academia, but turn out to be in close alignment with the values and behaviors of higher educators.

To provide a new process for maintaining accreditation, AQIP has created a new set of analytic categories, activities, and procedures that are different from those used in traditional accreditation while continuing to assure that institutions meet the Commission's Criteria for Accreditation.

## AQIP PRINCIPLES AND CATEGORIES AND THE *CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION*

*AQIP's Principles of High Performance Organizations* underlie all of AQIP's elements, activities, and procedures. They represent the values that participating colleges, universities, and AQIP itself strive to embody.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A <b>mission</b> and vision that focus on serving students' and other stakeholders' needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Broad-based faculty, staff, and administrative <b>involvement</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Leaders and <b>leadership</b> systems that support a quality culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A <b>learning</b>-centered environment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Respect for <b>people</b> and willingness to invest in them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Collaboration</b> and a shared institutional focus</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Agility</b>, flexibility, and responsiveness to changing needs and conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Planning</b> for innovation and improvement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fact-based <b>information</b>-gathering and thinking to support analysis and decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Integrity</b> and responsible institutional citizenship</li> </ul>

## USING THE AQIP CATEGORIES

AQIP puts forward nine Categories to help analyze and improve the systems essential to all effective colleges and universities. The name of each AQIP Category refers to a group of related processes. For example, "Helping Students Learn" includes the largest group of critical processes in higher education institutions, processes dealing with program and curricular design and delivery. Each Category allows an organization to analyze, understand, and explore opportunities for improving these processes. Metaphorically, the Categories serve as "buckets" that allow institutions to sort their key institutional processes into analyzable groups, and as "lenses" that permit in-depth examination of each group of processes.

Each Category identifies specific issues (in the form of questions) that guide the institution in structuring its Systems Portfolio and in crafting Action Projects. The items in each Category pose different types of questions:

<b>Context</b>	Questions that explain how a particular system is realized in a given college or university
<b>Processes</b>	Questions that ask how an institution has designed and deployed processes that help it achieve its overall goals.
<b>Results</b>	Questions that ask about the performance of institutional processes, whether their performance results meet requirements of stakeholders.
<b>Improvement</b>	Questions that ask how the institution promotes systematic improvement of its processes and performance in each Category.

**CATEGORY 1, HELPING STUDENTS LEARN**, identifies the shared purpose of all higher education organizations. The pivot of any institutional analysis, this Category focuses on the teaching-learning process within a formal instructional context yet also addresses how your entire institution contributes to helping students learn and overall student development. The Category asks you to measure and analyze the performance of these key processes, and to describe what actions you take to continuously improve teaching and learning.

**CATEGORY 2, ACCOMPLISHING OTHER DISTINCTIVE OBJECTIVES**, addresses the processes that contribute to achieving your institution's major goals *other than* educating your students. *Distinctive Objectives* are those that distinguish your institution from other colleges and universities, even if the performance of these processes does not currently make your institution *distinguished*. The Category also asks how you track and evaluate these processes to ensure they contribute directly to achieving your institution's mission.

**CATEGORY 3, UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS' NEEDS**, examines what your institution does to understand the specific needs and requirements of the individuals and groups it serves. It analyzes how you identify and subcategorize your student and other stakeholder groups (e.g., employers, students' families, communities, etc.) to understand what they need and expect from your institution. The Category also looks at how you use the analysis of these results to continuously improve your operations.

**CATEGORY 4, VALUING PEOPLE**, explores your institution's commitment to the development of your faculty, staff, and administrators, emphasizing that the coordinated efforts of all those you employ are required for institutional success. It examines your institution's processes and systems related to work and job environment and focuses on measures, analysis of results, and efforts to continuously improve these areas.

**CATEGORY 5, LEADING AND COMMUNICATING**, takes stock of your institution's leadership and communication structures, exploring the structures and processes guide your institution in setting priorities, making decisions, and communicating institutional vision and goals to stakeholders and employees. The Category also examines how measures, analysis of results, and efforts to continuously improve these areas operate in your institution.

**CATEGORY 6, SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONAL OPERATIONS**, examines a variety of key institutional support processes that help to provide an environment in which learning can thrive: the design, operation, and performance of your institution's processes and systems related to student support, administrative support, identification of needs, contribution to student learning, and accomplishing other institutional objectives. Items in this Category examine day-to-day operations, and how you use data, analyze results, and make improvements in these areas.

**CATEGORY 7, MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS**, examines the systems your institution uses to collect and analyze information to manage itself and to drive performance improvement. Items in this Category ask you to examine your institution's systems for collecting, storing, managing, and using information and data at all institutional levels. Each of the other eight AQIP Category requires measures of the success of a set of related processes, but Category 7 asks how you track *overall* institutional performance in collecting the right data and distributing it to the right people at the right time. Thus this Category examines the effectiveness of your entire information system and assures it aligns with your institutional needs and directions.

**CATEGORY 8, PLANNING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**, examines your institution's planning processes, asking how your strategies and action plans are helping you achieve your mission and vision. Items in this Category raise questions about your institution's vision, planning strategies, and action plans. They ask how you project performance targets and forecast resource needs. The Category also investigates how you evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of your planning system, and undertake regular efforts to improve it.

**CATEGORY 9, BUILDING COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS**, analyzes how your institution's current and potential relationships contribute to accomplishing your mission. Items in this Category examine your institution's processes and systems for building key internal and external collaborative relationships that align with institutional goals and directions. The Category investigates how you measure and analyze the effectiveness of these efforts, feeding your evaluation into your own processes for improvement.

## **MAINTAINING ACCREDITATION: MEETING THE COMMISSION’S FIVE CRITERIA**

To maintain their accredited status, all Commission-accredited colleges and universities must demonstrate they meet the five Criteria for Accreditation. While the AQIP processes for maintaining accredited status differ from those used in PEAQ, the fundamental requirements remain the same.

Because each of the nine AQIP Categories examines a set of processes vital to every college or university, the nine Categories together are comprehensive, covering all of the key processes and goals found in any higher education organization. The AQIP Categories’ comprehensive nature and specific questions about processes, results, and improvement allow each organization to fully describe its activities and accomplishments while analyzing itself in a way that promotes critical and productive thinking about improvement. When an organization using AQIP is required to provide evidence that it meets the Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation, it can usually reference the same evidence it provides in answering the AQIP Category questions. The document “AQIP-HLC Criteria Crosswalk,” available in the Downloads section of the AQIP Web site, illustrates the alignment between the Commission’s five Criteria for Accreditation and the AQIP Categories.

AQIP works regularly with institutions to make sure the records they present—through their Systems Portfolios, selection of Action Projects, and other activities—provide the Commission with the documentation needed to justify continuation of accredited status. Through these activities, AQIP guarantees that its requirements remain in alignment with the Commission’s, and that participating organizations should readily be able to provide evidence that they meet the Commission’s expectations for continuation of accredited status.

## **EXPLORING AQIP AND QUALITY IMPROVEMENT**

Any organization interested in joining AQIP should first learn as much as possible about it and other quality improvement programs and stimulate a campus-wide discussion of how well participating might serve its needs and fit its culture. AQIP believes it is essential for any institution that is considering participation to fully understand the benefits and challenges of pursuing continuous improvement, and how much honesty and hard work the effort will require.

An organization that currently has a flourishing quality program has already finished this first step. But if words like *alignment*, *process*, *silos*, *team*, and *metric* are foreign to campus discourse, the organization needs to encourage conversation and learn more about quality principles before continuing. It is critical that a core of people, including senior leaders, appreciates the principles of continuous quality improvement and the level of commitment required. Leaders need to clearly understand how system-wide continuous improvement can be

introduced, how improved processes can be encouraged, and how enhanced performance can affect overall organizational fitness. Although successful quality initiatives involve everyone, support from leaders is essential.

## **TWO OPTIONS FOR AQIP INVOLVEMENT**

AQIP offers two different ways for organizations to become involved. One way allows institutions accredited by The Higher Learning Commission to maintain that status, formally reaffirming it periodically, while the other allows any organization to use AQIP processes to propel its continuous improvement efforts without accreditation benefits.

### ***Maintaining Accredited Status and Driving Continuing Improvement***

When a college or university formally becomes a Participant in AQIP, the date of its next Reaffirmation of Accreditation is set seven years from the date of the official action admitting the organization to AQIP. Reaffirmation seven years later is based on a pattern of full participation in AQIP during that period, on evidence of progress and improvement in the organization, and on evidence that the organization continues to fulfill the Commission's Criteria for Accreditation.

An organization can elect to leave AQIP at any time to return to PEAQ, the Commission's traditional process for maintaining accredited status. If an organization chooses to withdraw from AQIP after participating for five or fewer years, the date for the next comprehensive evaluation reverts to the date on which that review was originally scheduled, or a year later if more time is needed to prepare. If an organization withdraws after more than five years, its next traditional comprehensive evaluation is typically scheduled within five years.

### ***Driving Continuing Improvement Only***

An organization or a major division of a large learning organization can participate in order to use AQIP's processes for improvement and for the opportunity to network with other organizations that are using quality principles and tools. This level of participation is appropriate for organizations not located in the North Central Association region and therefore not eligible for Higher Learning Commission accreditation. It is also appropriate for divisions of a large organization (such as the School of Education, the College of Engineering, or the Student Affairs Division) if the entire institution is not yet ready or willing to base accreditation on an organization-wide quality initiative. Associate participation requires the same level of involvement as organizations using AQIP to maintain their accreditation, except that accreditation is not part of the relationship. Further details regarding the Associate relationship, as well as specific regulations regarding any published referral to this relationship, are available from the AQIP staff.

## **FORMAL APPLICATION**

To join AQIP, an organization must first formally submit an application, and The Higher Learning Commission must approve it. Like most AQIP documents, the application is electronic, available on the AQIP Web site. The application should be submitted well before a traditional self-study would normally be initiated. The application should indicate that the organization continues to meet the Criteria for Accreditation, and that it has already completed some form of quality-based preliminary self-assessment or that it has concrete plans to do so, with a target date for completion of the self-assessment. Facing challenges does not exclude an organization from AQIP, for systematic improvement is often the ideal strategy for solving a problem or enhancing performance.

An AQIP Review Panel of educational and quality experts evaluates the application and forwards a consensus recommendation to the Commission's Institutional Actions Council (IAC). The executive director sends the organization a letter announcing the Commission's action. When an organization is accepted into AQIP, the entire AQIP staff serves as its primary link with the Commission for all matters.

## **PRELIMINARY SELF-ASSESSMENT**

In applying to join AQIP, an organization must demonstrate that it has *begun* to think about itself in a quality framework. A preliminary self-assessment provides evidence that the organization has looked at itself as a set of systems and processes, rather than as a collection of offices, departments, and academic or administrative units. The preliminary self-assessment also needs to provide some perspective from outside the organization, for often insiders are too close to familiar processes to perceive the organization's strengths and opportunities for improvement.

This preliminary self-assessment may take various forms. AQIP itself provides self-assessment tools and processes that are described in detail on its website. An organization that has completed an application to a state or national quality award program may already have a valuable preliminary self-assessment in the feedback report. A quality-based assessment undertaken in partnership with external consultants or experts may also meet AQIP's expectations if the process and report give evidence of outside feedback.

## AQIP CORE PROCESSES

The Strategy Forum, Action Projects, Annual Updates, Systems Portfolios, Systems Appraisal and Quality Checkup Visit are all integral AQIP processes. So, too, is Reaffirmation of Accreditation, which enables a college or university participating in AQIP to demonstrate its continued fulfillment of the Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation. A brief description of each follows, while details on each process can be found at the AQIP website.

<p><b>Strategy Forum</b></p>	<p>The Strategy Forum is a supportive, facilitated peer review process to help an organization select, critically examine, and commit to a set of Strategies and Action Projects that will drive quality improvement. The Strategy Forum helps the organization address the AQIP Categories that are most vital at the time.</p>
<p><b>Action Projects</b></p>	<p>Action Projects strengthen an organization’s commitment to continuous improvement; educate and motivate faculty, staff, and administrators; and improve systems and processes that lead to success in achieving organizational goals. Each organization concentrate its energies on three or four Action Projects that will most significantly advance its goals. At least one relates directly to Helping Students Learn. All Action Projects are entered into a Web-based database containing all current and successfully completed Action Projects undertaken by AQIP participants. The Directory can be searched by organization, by the AQIP Categories related to a project, or by keywords, and it provides details and a contact person at the organization doing the project.</p>
<p><b>Annual Update</b></p>	<p>Organizations participating in AQIP file Annual Updates on the progress or completion of the Action Projects that they committed to after attending the Strategy Forum. Updates provide feedback, recognition, and assistance if needed.</p>
<p><b>Systems Portfolio</b></p>	<p>During the first four years of participation, an organization assembles a Systems Portfolio with broad faculty and staff involvement. This document is essential for the Systems Appraisal that AQIP conducts three years after the organization is accepted to participate in AQIP. The Systems Portfolio consists of an Organizational Overview and explicates each of the major systems employed to accomplish an organization’s mission and objectives. The organization answers specific questions for each of the nine AQIP Categories. For each system, the questions deal with context for analysis, processes, results, and improvement. The Organizational Overview presents a capsule picture that helps readers understand the organization’s key strengths and ambitions, as well as the challenges and conflicts it faces.</p>

<p><b>Systems Appraisal</b></p>	<p>The Systems Appraisal complements the intensive work embodied in the Action Projects by asking the organization to take stock of its overall systems for maintaining quality. It also provides stimulus for future Action Projects. Following standardized evaluation procedures, the Systems Appraisal produces a consensus Appraisal Feedback Report for the institution. This report assesses the maturity of each of the nine systems to which the AQIP Categories refer, identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement within each. In addition, the Systems Appraisal provides an executive summary that may serve as a concise report of the organization’s progress in its quality journey.</p>
<p><b>Quality Checkup</b></p>	<p>During the seven-year cycle leading up to Reaffirmation of Accreditation, AQIP requires a site visit to each institution conducted by two or more trained evaluators who will spend at least two days on campus. The team prepares for the visit by reviewing relevant organizational and AQIP file materials. Quality Checkup visits occur in the two-year period before an organization’s scheduled Reaffirmation of Accreditation. The Quality Checkup team produces a written report summarizing its findings, identifying those areas the team has verified and/or clarified, and addressing the institution’s compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation, noting any areas that require additional clarification before Reaffirmation of Accreditation.</p>
<p><b>Reaffirmation of Accreditation</b></p>	<p>Reaffirmation of Accreditation is the summative review ending each seven-year period of participation in AQIP. An AQIP Reaffirmation Panel examines each organization’s current Systems Portfolio and its last six years of Action Projects, Systems Appraisals, and other interactions with AQIP and the Commission, including reports of the Quality Checkup as well as any additional organizationally requested or Commission-sponsored visits. The Panel documents where it finds satisfactory evidence of compliance with each of the Criteria for Accreditation. In exceptional cases in which the evidence is incomplete, the Panel seeks and obtains additional facts or verification, ultimately recommending to the Commission’s Institutional Actions Council whether the institution meets the Criteria for Accreditation and whether it should be permitted to continue participating in AQIP. Specific procedures dictate immediate action if the evidence available fails to confirm that an institution meets all of the Commission’s accreditation requirements.</p>

## AQIP CYCLES

AQIP is a quality improvement program *and* a quality assurance program for higher education organizations. It operates by involving participating institutions in three distinct cycles that occur simultaneously. Each cycle has a different duration and sequence of distinctive processes.

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**Action** — This **one-year cycle** drives continuous improvement by having every AQIP college or university tackle three or four **Action Projects** that it has chosen, committed to completing in a few months or years, and published in AQIP's on-line **Action Project Directory**. Organizations can complete **Action Projects** and begin new ones at any time. Each fall, they provide **Action Project Updates** to AQIP on the progress of current projects, and AQIP provides written feedback on these reports. Improvements in the processes an institution employs or the performance results it achieves are incorporated into its published **Systems Portfolio**.

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**Strategy** — This **four year cycle** drives improvement by having every AQIP organization create and maintain an up-to-date **Systems Portfolio** describing key systems and processes the organization uses to achieve its goals and the performance results it obtains from them. A **System Appraisal** of the **Systems Portfolio** provides institutions with written, actionable feedback they can use to create strategies and actions that will move them quickly toward achievement of their goals. Participation in a **Strategy Forum** drives organizations to use this feedback in shaping new strategies, aligning systems, and creating specific **Action Projects**.



**Accreditation** — This **seven-year cycle** quality assurance reviews evidence from both the action cycles and strategy cycles, evidence that demonstrates that an AQIP organization continues to comply with the Higher Learning Commission's *Criteria for Accreditation* – and that continuing its participation in AQIP will result in measurable performance improvement. A **Quality Checkup** visit to the institution a year or two before its **Reaffirmation of Accreditation** review confirms the improvements it is making as well as the accuracy of the evidence it has provided to AQIP while providing helpful feedback and consultation on specific issues of its choosing.

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**New AQIP institutions** concentrate their first **Strategy Forum** on selecting initial **Action Projects** that will launch their quality initiative with energy. Following this first **Strategy Forum**, they create a **Systems Portfolio**, and submit it for **Systems Appraisal** no later than the academic year that occurs ten years after their last PEAQ comprehensive evaluation. To make sure they will have sufficient time to create a **Systems Portfolio**, institutions joining AQIP must have had their last comprehensive site visit within the last seven years. This provides three to four years for the challenging task of developing a first **Systems Portfolio**.