

Action Project Guide



Academic Quality Improvement Program

The Higher Learning Commission

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AQIP's Goals for Action Projects

For all colleges and universities participating in AQIP, Action Projects serve important goals. They focus and highlight an institution's efforts in undertaking specific improvement initiatives, and they provide the Higher Learning Commission with evidence that AQIP institutions are seriously committed to a regimen of continuous improvement.

For AQIP, the knowledge that a college or university is working on a series of concrete improvement projects provides minimal evidence that quality improvement is alive and active at that organization. For that reason, AQIP expects *every* participating organization institution to have *three* Action Projects underway at *all* times, and to share information about them.

For Institutions new to AQIP

AQIP anticipates that an institution's first Strategy Forum — and the selection of its initial Action Projects — will be the kickoff for a *continuous series of projects*. Contrary to some impressions, AQIP Action Projects do *not* form part of a four-year “cycle,” a closed loop, in which an institution attends a Strategy Forum, chooses three projects, completes them, and then puts its quality improvement efforts into hibernation until its next Strategy Forum rolls around. Action Projects are valuable to new AQIP institutions for three reasons:

1. First, they are a means of focusing institutions that are just joining AQIP into getting to work on three pressing projects to test their resolve to devote their efforts to quality improvement; forcing institutions to develop the superstructure(s) necessary to organize and oversee a quality initiative; making institutions engage their faculty and staff in selection of projects and empower employees by using them on project teams; and opening an avenue for peer interaction, feedback, and review beginning with the first Strategy Forum.
2. Second, 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 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 of these first projects.
3. Third in the design is the belief that while working on its Action Projects, an institution new to AQIP will have 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.

For experienced institutions already in AQIP

Veteran AQIP colleges or universities that are attending their second (or subsequent) Strategy Forum will:

- have already made a serious commitment to continuous improvement,
- have completed at least three (and hopefully more) Action Projects,

- have three or more Action Projects underway when they attend the Forum,
- have completed and kept up-to-date a Systems Portfolio describing the current organization and performance of the major work systems in their organization; and
- have received and studied the feedback from their Systems Appraisal.

This situation is quite different from an institution's first Strategy Forum, where AQIP's goal is to stimulate the institution to *action* — both on projects and on creation of the systems Portfolio. At its second and subsequent Forums, an institution should focus its attention on larger strategic issues. Issues like the clarity of its mission, the relation of its strategies to its mission, its mechanism for creating Action Projects or concrete action objectives and making sure they implement strategic decisions, its processes for shaping and improving institutional culture, etc. By this point in its evolution, an AQIP institution should need minimal outside help in choosing and shaping Action Projects, and so the second Forum that an institution attends is quite different from its first.

When an Action Projects ends, a new Action Project begins

As an Institution completes or ends an Action Project, it becomes part of an accumulating visible history of the institution's quality improvement activities. When an institution finishes an Action Project, AQIP wants it to begin a new one, using the knowledge and skills gained from its earlier projects to select, and shape the replacement. Before it formally declares a new project in the AQIP Action Project Directory, the organization should get feedback on the idea for the new project — from other institutions, or from outside quality experts.

Setting your Action Project Timetable

An Action Project should last as long as it takes — six weeks, three months, two years — 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.

In AQIP's early days, it erroneously 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. The Declaration Form for Action Projects has been changed to prevent this problem in the future. Instead of asking for goals for "Year 1," "Year 2," etc., it now asks for goals for up to three stages. If you have 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, you may want to create two or three stages by identifying "mileposts" that will tell everyone when they move from one stage to another.

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 employees develop knowledge and skills that will serve them well in other challenging situations.

Creating an Action Project Charter

You can help any Action Project by clearly “chartering” the team so that they have confidence that the solution or approach they invent will get a fair hearing and trial that rewards their hard work. AQIP doesn’t require you to charter every Action Project, but many institutions 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 these elements:
 - Business case
 - Problem/opportunity statement and goal statement
 - 2-3 sentence description of the project scope, constraints, and assumptions — *without* opinions as to what’s wrong, what the cause(s) might be, or who’s to blame; without prescriptions about what the solution(s) should be; and without combining several problems into one.
 - Team guidelines
 - Team membership
 - Preliminary project plan (timetable for what the team will do)
 - Identification of important stakeholders
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 support trying or piloting the solution the team comes up with. (There is no better way to kill enthusiasm for continuous improvement than to create project teams and reject the fruit of their work without giving it a fair trial.)
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.

Getting Feedback before you declare an AQIP Action Project

Before you declare any Action Project in the Action Project Directory, you must share the Declaration Form (and *Action Project Charter*, if you have one) with outsiders to get feedback on your planned project. The purpose of soliciting and considering this feedback is to ensure that AQIP institutions don’t undertake Action Projects with vague motivation or fuzzy objectives.

The Action Projects your institution comes up with at its first Strategy Forum have already received and benefited from this kind of feedback — from the facilitators and other teams that participated in the Forum.

But for institutions that have been in AQIP longer, starting an Action Project that *did not* receive feedback in an initial Strategy Forum requires that you solicit some outsider input before you solidify your project plan. You can do this by asking for feedback from higher learning institutions (preferably in AQIP) or quality experts in business or other fields. Be cautious about using a paid consultant for this. It’s best to get feedback from someone actually engaged in an organization that is doing work on processes similar to the one(s) you’re trying to improve. You can solicit the feedback in writing, or you can have a group from the institution meet with the reviewer(s) physically or by telephone conference. (Don’t let just **one** person from your institution receive and interpret the feedback; share it with a group.) You don’t have to share the feedback you get with AQIP, nor do you have to document for AQIP that you solicited feedback. The quality of your Action Projects themselves will demonstrate whether you went through this essential

process, and the Annual Updates you do will provide AQIP with an opportunity to see the results of your work in selecting and defining projects.

Here are some good questions to use in soliciting feedback on new Action Projects:

- How clear and compelling are the organization's reasons for undertaking this Action Project? How crucial is successfully achieving its goals for the institution? How will the Action Project directly benefit specific groups of people important to the institution? What do you see as the urgency or benefit of undertaking it now?
- How clear are the goals and scope of the proposed Action Project? How well will the stated goals and objectives allow everyone to agree objectively on whether the project is a success at some future date? How clearly has the organization identified measures or indicators that will tell it whether it has achieved its goals in completing the project?
- How appropriate is the institution's timetable for this project? Is planned completion time too brief or too drawn-out? If the project extends longer than three months, are there clear "milestones" along the way that will enable the institution to measure reasonable progress or the lack of it?
- Has the institution chosen the right people to work on this project? Is the project team too small, too large, too diverse, too homogeneous, too inexperienced, lacking needed expertise, too heavy in high- or low-level people, etc.? Will they have the resources they will need?
- How well has the institution designed this project so that it both accomplishes its goals *and* provides a learning experience that will add to the value of those involved or develop the quality-orientation of the organization's culture? How will doing this proposed Action Project stretch and increase the institution's capacity to tackle and solve other challenges and projects?

Declaring your Action Projects publicly

At all times, every participating Institution should share with AQIP — and the public — three Action Projects that demonstrate the institution's continuing commitment to and efforts in continuous improvement. The Declaration Form is online, part of the Action Project Directory available on AQIP's website (www.AQIP.org). Declaring an Action Project requires:

- giving it a name and description that will help others understand your work and goals
- describing the goals of the project, inventing a set of measures or indicators that will tell you whether you are making progress toward your goal(s) and how you will determine when you complete the project and whether it was a success, partial success, or failure; and
- indicating whom at your institution others can contact if they wish to find out more about the Action Project (or offer to collaborate with you).

Below is a list of the items you must complete when you add your Action Projects to AQIP's Action Project Directory, with explanations. When you enter the information into the Directory, use the following style guidelines:

Every word that you put into the Action Project Directory will appear as plain text — no formatting, boldface, italics, underlining, etc. If you need to highlight a word or give it emphasis, the simplest way is to use CAPITALS (or asterisks — two for **bold** and one for *italics*). Please use these devices sparingly. TOO MANY words IN CAPITALS can UNDERMINE THE GOAL of EMPHASIZING PARTICULAR words or phrases.

The Action Project Declaration Form on AQIP's website does not require you to decide in advance how you are going to solve the problem or capitalize on the opportunity represented by the Action Project. That's the job of the team members you put together to tackle the project. You don't want to hamstring their creativity by dictating the solution to them before you give them a chance to solve the problem.

The Action Project Commitment Declaration

AQIP institutions complete their actual Action Project Commitment Declarations in the Action Project Directory on AQIP's website, but the web form follows the structure below. We've provided brief explanations of what each item requires in italics, after the item.

Institution: (Name of your college or university)

Planned project kickoff date: (default is the date of the project declaration, but you can enter a different date):

Target project completion date: (the date you plan to complete the project):

Actual project completion date: (default is the date you retire the project, but you can specify a different date)

A. Give this Action Project a short title in 10 words or fewer.

Use a descriptive name containing nouns and verbs that will enable people searching for projects that interest them to find yours.

B. Describe this Action Project's goal in 100 words or fewer.

You don't need to explain how you are going to accomplish the project's goals, but the clearer and more explicit the purposes are to you, the more likely you are to mount a successful project.

C. Identify the single AQIP Category that this Action Project will most affect or impact.

Identifying the primary AQIP Category will allow colleagues from other institutions who are searching for projects that interest them to find yours. Making clear which of the nine AQIP Categories is most related to the goals of your project will help you and others with similar interests to communicate.

D. Describe briefly your institution's reasons for taking on this Action Project now — why the project and its goals are high among your current priorities.

E. List the organizational areas — institutional departments, programs, divisions, or units — most affected by or involved in this Action Project.

List the academic units, departments, or organizational areas that will be directly or indirectly affected by the project, or whose needs may influence the way the project is conceived.

F. Name and describe briefly the key organizational process(es) that you expect this Action Project to change or improve.

Some key processes have commonly used names (hiring, personnel evaluation, course preparation, program design, budgeting, planning, etc.) while others may require unique designations and descriptions.

- G. Explain the rationale for the length of time planned for this Action Project (from kickoff to target completion).

If you plan for this project to last longer than one year, identify the goals you hope to reach at one or more interim phases as you work on the project. Establishing "mileposts" that mark progress toward your ultimate goal is equally useful for projects of shorter duration as well, but not required. These interim goals or mileposts should be objective measures or indicators that "stretch" or challenge your capacities and thereby build and extend your institution's skills in tackling and solving problems.

- H. Describe how you plan to monitor how successfully your efforts on this Action Project are progressing.

Your Action Projects are important, and deserve a central place in your institution's attention. Explain how you plan to keep everyone focused on what you are working to achieve.

- I. Describe the overall "outcome" measures or indicators that will tell you whether this Action Project has been a success or failure in achieving its goals.

Process measures tell you whether you are making progress toward accomplishing the project's goals, and serve as "leading indicators" or predictors of a successful project. Outcomes measures tell you whether the project has actually accomplished the goals or purposes that led you to undertake it, measuring whether it was successful when completed.

- J. Other information (e.g., publicity, sponsor or champion, external partners, etc.)

- K. Project Leader and contact person (First Name, Middle Initial, Last name, Title, Email, Telephone)

Supply the name and contact information for the project manager or leader of the project team above, an employee of your institution who will be directly responsible for the work of doing this Action Project. Each of your Action Projects should have a different contact person. If the person with this responsibility changes, you should update the Action Project information on AQIP's Action Project Directory.

Updating Your Action Projects: Goals of the Annual Update Process

Every year, September 14th is the date Annual Updates are due on each of your institution's Action Projects. (You must provide an Annual Update on any project declared before April 1. If you declare a project after April 1, it won't be included in the Annual Update process for that year, unless you specifically request that it is included by August 1, when the Action Project Directory is opened for Updates.) There will be no extensions of the Annual Update deadline for any reason. These Updates serve to keep AQIP informed about:

- *the progress you are making, based on each project's timelines, goals, and measures;*

- *the problems, snags, delays, and challenges you have encountered; and*
- *any outstanding successes and discoveries you have made.*

You should view the Annual Update process as an opportunity to identify areas where you want to solicit objective input that will be useful to you as you continue each project. The process is not designed to judge, trap, or penalize you, but to help you stay on course to accomplish the goals you set for yourself.

Your responses should be direct, factual, and provide AQIP with a clear picture of your progress, accomplishments, and challenges.

Steps for Entering an Annual Update into the Action Project Directory:

1. On the AQIP Homepage select the *Action Project Directory* link to go the Action Project Directory page. In the Action Project Directory Page click on either *Institutional Login* at the left in the blue navigation column or *Click here to login and manage your Action Projects* at the very bottom of the page. Both of these links will take you to the institutional login page.
2. Enter the login and password assigned to your institution after attending the Strategy Forum.
3. You will see the Liaison Welcome Page.
4. In the blue column on the left, select the button labeled *Manage Action Projects*.
5. The next screen will show all of the Action Projects for your institution, both current ones and those listed in draft, cancelled or retired status. When your project is listed in draft status you will not be able to submit an Annual Update. It must be listed as current to enable the Annual Update fields to show. To edit your Action Project Declaration, your project must be in draft status. If it is already listed as current, but you want to make changes, you will need to change the status in the drop-down menu and then click on *Save Status*.
6. Select the *Submit New Update* button beneath a current Action Project you wish to update.
7. At the bottom of your Action Project Declaration, you will now see the Annual Update fields with the 5 questions you need to answer. Your response to each question should not exceed 200 words. You can type your answers directly into the fields or cut-and-paste from a text file.
8. Once you fill in the update questions, to save the Update and come back to it later you must click the *No* option in the drop-down menu beneath the project and then click on *Save*. If you have completed the Update and are ready to submit it for Review, choose the *Yes* option from the drop-down menu and then click on *Save*. Once you do this, you will no longer be able to see or edit your Update.

Update Questions

Each Update consists of your answers to five required questions:

#1. Describe the past year's accomplishments and the current status of this Action Project.

Describe concrete achievements: meetings, data gathered and analyzed, plans made or implemented, changes in processes, and measured results. If you haven't made much progress, explain why you think things are moving slower than planned.

#2. Describe how the institution involved people in work on this Action Project.

AQIP wants information about motivation and communication: how you kept this project on the institution's priority list, how you maintained general awareness of the importance and progress of the project, and how you kept those working on it directly active and motivated.

#3. Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.

Be specific about the next critical steps you are planning to move the Action Project ahead. If your planning is vague or there is no planning at this point, explain why.

#4. Describe any "effective practice(s)" that resulted from your work on this Action Project.

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 another institution if they copied your innovation. If you believe that your work on this project has little or no value for other institutions, explain why.

#5. What challenges, if any, are you still facing in regards to this Action Project?

This is an opportunity to get constructive, actionable feedback and advice from our review process. Use this question to specify where your blocks, gaps, sticking points, or problems are. If you have already fashioned strategies to deal with any challenge you face, share *both* the challenge *and* your strategy for meeting it.

When the Update is posted, the assigned Reviewer receives an automated email alert. When the Reviewer has completed the review, it is sent to a Review Manager for final posting.

All Reviewer feedback will be posted within the Directory by Nov. 19th. You will need to login to the Directory to see the feedback. After all reviews are completed and posted, your institution will be invoiced \$150 per Annual Update Review.

All Annual Updates must be posted to the Action Project Directory by midnight, Sept. 14th. After that date, the submit Annual Update option will be removed.