



AQIP Action Project Update & Review:
Financial Aid Process Mapping and Improvement

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Prepared by:

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Action Project Title:
Financial Aid Process Mapping and Improvement

Overview

Project lead: Angela Christensen, Financial Aid Director

Planned project kickoff date: 05-20-2008

Target completion date: 12-30-2008

Primary Category: Supporting Institutional Operations

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:

It was apparent through the work of developing the Systems Portfolio and the appraisal report that the College needs to clarify and improve its processes in some areas. The financial aid unit process is a complicated and complex process which has had to incorporate new federal and state requirements since it was developed. The financial aid program at MCTC is a critical program for MCTC students, many of whom access financial aid funds. It is the intention of MCTC to systematically examine processes across the institution incorporating the process mapping and improvement activities that will be used in the financial aid process improvement project.

List the organizational areas - institutional departments, programs, divisions, or units -- most affected by or involved in this Action Project:

Financial aid, satisfactory academic progress, business office, academic affairs (through last date of attendance policy)

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

The financial aid application and awarding process will be the key organizational process to be improved. Additional processes that will likely be impacted will be the last date of attendance reporting process, retention-related activities, Return to Title IV process, and personnel evaluation.

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

This project will be completed within six months of inception. An external consultant will be working with the process improvement team throughout their work. The activities to accomplish this project include:
Workshop I: Process Concepts and Process Maps, May - June 2008 Workshop focused on mapping concepts and team begins mapping the processes. Outcome: Map of current processes
Workshop II: Desired Future (Vision), June - July 2008 Workshop on the desired future and development of a process map that incorporates that desired future. Outcome: Improvement goals of processes and implications for the College identified, i.e., policy changes
Workshop III: Risk Assessment & Priority Changes, September 2008 Workshop on risk assessment and priority changes. Outcome: Gaps in process identified. Prioritized list of most urgent.
Workshop IV: Action Planning, October-November 2008 Workshop to confirm priority changes and plan improvement actions. Outcome: Short term and long term action plan to be implemented during the next 18 months.

Tasks for each Workshop:

- Provide information and related materials about the respective processes.
- Provide logistical support at the college for the workshop.
- Ensure that appropriate managers and staff will be available to participate in the workshop.
- Designate additional college participants for this project as the college may deem useful.

Preparation of Report: December 2008 Consultant

- Compile workshop presentation materials, including handouts.
- Compile improvement action plan.
- Provide report to the college.
- As requested by the college, present project results to staff, administrators, or others at the college.
- MCTC Participate in evaluation of services provided to the college by the consultant.

Describe how you plan to monitor how successfully your efforts on this Action Project are progressing:

A team comprised of the Financial Aid Director, the Vice President of Strategy, Planning and Accountability, and the external consultant will review the progress after each of the workshops to ensure the action project is on track to achieve its goals.

Other information (e.g., publicity, sponsor or champion, etc.):

External partner in this project is the Office of Internal Auditing Consulting Services Unit within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities.

Annual Update: 2008-09-11

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

The Financial Aid Process Mapping and Improvement action project was launched in early May with a meeting between the Financial Aid Director and the Vice President of Strategy, Planning and Accountability. Also, a consultant from the Minnesota State University and Colleges (MnSCU) Office of Internal Auditing was retained by MCTC to assist with the project. To fully engage the eleven staff members of this unit, several presentations, meetings and retreats introduced the concepts and provided training on the basic elements of process mapping. During these meetings, the group utilized the language and tools of process mapping to translate a series of processes into maps of the following:

1. Student applications
2. Receipt of FAFSA applications
3. Student loans
4. Child Care grants
5. Work study
6. Academic Competitiveness grants
7. Minnesota GI Bill
8. Minnesota Achieve Program
9. Return of Title IV aid

Each of the nine process maps consist of seven to twenty activities, functions and decision points. By the end of June, the project had provided the group with an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of processes, procedures, roles, responsibilities and interdependencies throughout the unit. By late summer, with the key processes documented, the group began informal discussions on areas of improvement. The project has provided financial aid staff with an increased sense of ownership and teamwork. Although the start of the academic year has slowed the project, it has provided an opportunity to examine more closely the processes at work.

Review (10-02-08):

The complexities of financial aid and the demands on financial aid staff make this a very challenging project, and the administration and staff are due credit for undertaking this process improvement project. The plan of attack is impressive. It was laid out clearly and communicated well, and now it is being followed according to the plan – a consistency sure to build confidence in the leadership of the project. The college has also utilized available resources through MnSCU. There has been exceptional progress (especially considering the demands on financial aid staff). It will be exciting to learn of the final project outcomes, as this project has the potential to serve as a

model for other institutions. It is not only addressing Criterion 6, Supporting Institutional Operations. It is also addressing Criterion 5, Leading and Communicating by building skills for leadership and communication within the affected staff areas, and it directly contributes to Criterion 4, Valuing People by providing training, professional development, respect for employee competencies, and motivation.

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

The Vice President of Strategy, Planning and Accountability introduced the project to the financial aid staff by emphasizing the importance of their role as it relates to the college and continuous improvement. She was also present at each of the three hour meeting/retreats to help clarify and answer any questions for the group. However, as an administrator, she emphasized that this project was not a review of performance of the unit or individual members. Once the financial aid staff fully understood the project and the potential for positive changes, they became very motivated and engaged. Meetings were very interactive and productive. In addition to group meetings, the consultant held one-on-one meetings with staff to assist with identifying and documenting processes. While creating maps, the group identified areas of intersection with other departments of the college and began informal conversations with faculty about specific procedures such as last date of attendance.

Review (10-02-08):

The leadership by vice president level and, more importantly, the commitment of the vice president to participate with the affected staff through long training and meeting sessions is exemplary in that it sends the very clear message that this and the people involved are important to the institution. This is commendable leadership. The development of staff participation and employee leadership has also resulted in identifying interdependencies and collaborations with other units and divisions. This is building a culture of collaboration that goes beyond what most financial aid staff already understand as an important part of their jobs.

Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.

The next steps are to do the following:

1. Find duplication of processes or tasks
2. Notice bottlenecks
3. Notice 'slack'
4. Identify risks in current processes
5. Inform others of what you do (tasks, responsibilities, procedures, etc.)
6. Begin documentation for clarification and for use by future new staff

Two or three more meetings between the consultant and financial aid staff are planned within the next couple of months. During these meetings, the group will work to prioritize risks, identify specific areas for improvement and decide which require the most immediate attention. The team will then develop and agree upon an improvement action plan. This plan will be used to move forward, independent of the consultant, to make improvements and changes. In addition, the group will work to identify performance indicators to measure the impact on efficiency and satisfaction with the financial aid office.

Review (10-02-08):

There is evidence here of continuing to involve staff participation and leadership that will deepen "ownership" of change processes and build confidence for continuous improvement projects in the future. Attention to Criterion 4, Valuing People is evident in every aspect of this project. This next phase also addresses Criterion 7, Measuring Effectiveness.

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

Although it may be too soon in the project to determine the extent of effective practices resulting from process mapping, the 'process' of process mapping will be replicated and extended to other areas of the college that

could result in a 'best practices' opportunity. Some key points to making this process successful are:

1. Engage, inform and include everyone touched by the processes to be mapped
2. Allow for open and frank discussions about frustrations or concerns
3. Clarify that the examination of processes is not an evaluation or review of performance
4. Train staff on the tools and techniques and encourage full use of these independent of administrators or consultants
5. Recognize and appreciate the contributions of each member to the processes under examination
6. Recognize and appreciate the efforts and contributions to continuous improvements of these processes
7. Document improvements and areas for future improvements Thus far, the project has created awareness among staff and other offices as to the depth and complexities of the processes within the financial aid office.

Review (10-02-08):

Clearly, this is part of a larger effort to address Criterion 8, Planning Continuous Improvement. This appears to be a long-term strategic direction for the institution, and it has begun with a manageable change process and an open and participative change process that should build confidence across the institution. The leadership should be sure to publicize the efforts of the financial aid staff and to celebrate their achievements very publicly. This is not only to reward the hard work put into the project by these specific employees but also to heighten the awareness that this is directed at improvement, not correction or discipline.

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

The biggest challenge that we face is finding the time to gather the entire financial aid staff. With the busy fall enrollment cycle of the college, we were not able to meet much of July, August, and September. However, as we move into October and November and before the spring enrollment cycle begins, we will focus our efforts on developing our improvement action plan and beginning implementation. The group is anxious to begin this next part and capitalizing on their enthusiasm and interest is a key element to the success of the project.

Review (10-02-08):

Considerable progress has been made on an aggressive project timeline and the employees have been given leadership in this process and recognized for their expertise. That expertise must also carry out the daily and seasonal work of the financial aid office. The demands on the staff should also be considered as the timeline is continuously monitored and adjusted as necessary to make the project not only timely but, more importantly, successful and a positive experience for those involved. Will there be IT product changes needed in order to implement the process improvements? If so, be sure to allow for adequate planning and time for implementation. Awareness of the often time-consuming obstacles yet in the road will help employees maintain realistic expectations for the outcomes of their work and remain satisfied with the progress.

If you would like to discuss the possibility of AQIP providing you help to stimulate progress on this action project, explain your need(s) here and tell us who to contact and when?

At this time, we don't feel any need to talk with AQIP regarding help on this project. The MnSCU consultant has been an important resource for assistance throughout the project.

Review (10-02-08):

The institution has achieved an exceptional accomplishment through this project, and its work represents an "outstanding practice" that ought to be shared with other higher education institutions. 9814