AQIP Action Project Update & Review:

FINANCIAL AID PROCESS MAPPING AND IMPROVEMENT

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Prepared by:

Office of Strategy, Planning & Accountability
Minneapolis Community & Technical College
1501 Hennepin Ave
Minneapolis, MN 55403
http://accountability.minneapolis.edu

Contact:

Lois Bollman, Ph.D.
Vice President
Kopp Hall K-1300
612-659-6304
Lois.bollman@minneapolis.edu

Angela Christensen
Financial Aid Director
612-659-5229
angela.christensen@minneapolis.edu

MCTC participates in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) of the Higher Learning Commission which emphasizes two purposes for accreditation: assuring quality and stimulating improvement. AQIP infuses the principles of continuous quality improvement and systems thinking into the academic culture.

AQIP Action Projects are designed to be the kickoff for a continuous series of projects aimed at quality improvement. MCTC is expected to have at least three action projects in progress at all times. For more information on Action projects, visit the AQIP website.

Action Project:
Financial Aid Process Mapping and Improvement

Overview

Planned dates for project: 05-20-2008 to 12-30-2008
Primary AQIP Category: Supporting Institutional Operations

Goal for project: 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.

Organizational areas - institutional departments, programs, divisions, or units -- most affected by or involved: Financial aid, satisfactory academic progress, business office, academic affairs (through last date of attendance policy)

Key organizational process(es) expected 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.

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

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

Annual Update: 2009-09-11

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

MCTC submission:
The Financial Aid staff met several more times to discuss and review the processes that had been mapped. They looked for duplication, slack, and bottlenecks in the process. They also identified risks.

From these meetings, five areas were identified as being the most critical areas to focus on:
- Hours of the office
- The use of ImageNow
- Training/cross training -Security of records
- Priority deadline for financial aid

These areas were identified as critical to the flow of work (use of ImageNow and training/cross training), the time needed to work (office hours and priority deadline) and to minimize risk (security of records).

The Financial Aid Office hours have been changed to allow time for processing. ImageNow has been implemented for the use of scanning processed documents. Implementation of the work flow component (sends documents to individuals for processing) will be fully implemented in the late fall. Cross training played a crucial part in the success of the fall term rush this year. We will continue to cross train and create a more concrete training manual and schedule. The security of records is still being looked at. Small changes (critical doors left locked, signage discouraging non-employees from entering certain doors) have been implemented in the interim.

AQIP Review (09-21-09):

The College is showing steady progress toward completion of this action project, and its listing of accomplishments to date are impressive. Identifying critical areas on which to focus and beginning to act on that information shows an understanding of and commitment to the continuous improvement process. The changing of hours in the Financial Aid office to allow more time for processing demonstrates that the College values its people (Category Four) as does the implementation of cross training for the staff. The commitment to its support services (Category Six) to ensure more timely delivery will be appreciated by the students and will also reinforce the process being put into place.

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

MCTC submission:
The Financial Aid staff was involved in describing the process mapping project to the HLC visitors in March. This gave the staff a real sense of ownership and understanding of how their work plays an important role in the College. The Quality Checkup team was particularly complimentary of the process mapping work and pointed out the work of the Financial Aid staff as exemplary.

AQIP Review (09-21-09):
The involvement of the Financial Aid staff in this project has been critical to its success thus far. However, involving other staff from support offices such as the Bursar, Business Office, and Academic Affairs (Category Three – Understanding Stakeholders) may add value to the information gathered. Many offices within an institution employ similar processes and may be able to offer assistance to other offices when change is taking place.

Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.

MCTC submission:
The Financial Aid staff will continue to work on the five goals described in Question 1. More specifically, they will do more cross training and implement the work flow process of ImageNow. Once the goals are fully met, they will re-evaluate all of the maps to see if they can continue to make changes based on their progress. In addition, specific performance indicators will be tracked to respond to the question of increased efficiency.

AQIP Review (09-21-09):
Continuation of the goals listed earlier is a reasonable approach to bringing closure to this action project. The College has outlined the items needing the most attention at this time. Ensuring that the staff members on hand have the resources necessary to complete the project is critical. Additionally, ensuring that the project goals and the performance indicators being tracked are based in data may aid in acquiring the necessary support.

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

MCTC submission:
One of the most effective practices this past term was the change in office hours. The financial aid staff was able to add over six hours of processing time to their week by changing the hours of the office. This left time to process documents, return phone calls, meet as a group, and train. Financial Aid staff plan to use this extra time in the future for more in-depth training.

Another effective practice was cross-training more staff to do more processing. In the past, the office had one to two people processing verification documents. This year, due to cross-training, four or five staff members worked on processing documents. Due to these increased efficiencies, the Financial Aid office was able to process all documents turned in by the priority date given to students during the fall 2009 enrollment.

This was a significant accomplishment as MCTC experienced a fall enrollment increase of 12% and an increase in financial aid applications of almost 20%.

AQIP Review (09-21-09):

The changing of office hours to more effectively implement the processes by the Financial Aid staff is something that can be considered by other offices on the campus as long as the students and other stakeholders continue to be served efficiently and effectively. Also, the college is to be commended on its efforts in cross training staff members. The more versatile the staff the easier it is to ensure that tasks can be accomplished when needed. Other offices may wish to adopt a similar cross training approach or perhaps the institution could look at more collaborative cross training efforts across the typical departmental barriers (Category Nine).

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

MCTC submission:

The biggest challenge continues to be finding the time to complete the tasks described. With the enthusiasm of the staff to learn new processes and experience results, they will and have made the process mapping action plan a priority.

AQIP Review (09-21-09):

Time is a finite resource and must be managed well during any change process. The Financial Aid staff members have shown that they are invested in this change process and are willing to put in the effort necessary to successfully complete the tasks at hand. The institutional leadership needs to be made aware of the improvement processes taking place here and the commitment and dedication of the staff.

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?

MCTC submission:
We do not have any request for assistance at this time.

AQIP Review (09-21-09):
The global judgment regarding this action project is that the institution is making reasonable progress toward completion of the project and development of an institution-wide continuous improvement culture.