MCTC Quality Program Summary

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BACKGROUND

Long before the Higher Learning Commission instituted the Academic Quality Improvement Program as an alternative accreditation method, Minneapolis Community and Technical College set about the work of continuous improvement, driven by the legislative-required merger in 1996 of the Minneapolis Technical College and the Minneapolis Community College. As we think about quality improvement at MCTC, we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge the quality improvement path that merger set us on, whether we acknowledged or appreciated it at the time. These two prior institutions had significantly different institutional sagas, missions, and philosophies which had served to distinguish the two colleges from each other. After the merger, virtually all college processes, policies and standards needed to be examined and unified.

MCTC approached the challenge of merger with an often methodical, but sometimes chaotic, effort at unification and improvement— of academic programming, of facilities, of finance operations, of serving students, of clarifying our mission. The list of very real and measurable improvements is too lengthy to list, but they speak to an organization that, at its core, functions from a continuous improvement framework, even though during some periods of time and with some individuals, that quality language would be dismissed as irrelevant and unrepresentative of the institution.

 Soon after completing the PEAQ accreditation process that resulted in reaccreditation in 2000, MCTC leaders monitored with interest the development of the Academic Quality Improvement Project (it was called a project at its inception).   The AQIP framework was of interest because it appeared to closely match the institutional culture of innovation and agility. In 2002, the College committed to the AQIP accreditation process and engaged in a year long institutional conversation that culminated in the Vital Focus Constellation activities in April 2003 and admission to AQIP in August 2003.

Leadership for MCTC's AQIP work is the responsibility of an 18 member AQIP Leadership Team. This team has representation from all units of the college, both in terms of work units and in terms of employee groups (unions and excluded administrators). Both of the Strategy Forum teams were comprised of members of the four employee union groups: faculty (MSCF), middle management (MMA), professional educators (MAPE), and classified staff (AFSCME), as well as Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Finance and Operations and other senior leaders. Coordinating the work of the Leadership Team has been the responsibility of Vice President of Strategy, Planning and Accountability, and the Faculty Coordinator of the Assessment of Student Learning Program. The College President has been an involved member of the AQIP Leadership Team.

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ACTION PROJECTS

The Constellation conversations in 2002-2003 lifted up three areas for focus and action projects: 1) The college-wide assessment of MCTC's general education core; 2) a retention action project aimed at improving the academic performance of students who applied and registered in the two weeks prior to the start of the semester; and 3) a comprehensive professional development program to improve employee satisfaction. In each case, the action project has been particularly successful at MCTC. Each of the projects accomplished the original goals and each went well beyond what was originally imagined to develop comprehensive programs for assessment of student learning, for student support at entry and beyond, and for employee professional development. As can be seen by Figure 1, each action project has been the impetus for other initiatives that have changed the institution.

The work on assessment of student learning has resulted not only in the college measuring student achievement in core general education competencies (communication, critical thinking and, recently, social responsibility) but also has led to improvements of academic program and department assessment practices and the incorporation of those activities into the core structure of the college, most notably into the annual academic program review process. Further, as a direct or indirect result of this action project, MCTC's Academic Council has revised forms and processes, digitized the curriculum approval process, re-examined the program and department student learning outcomes statements, and has clarified and managed the role of assessment in new curriculum and academic programs development.

The success of the assessment of student learning program has resulted in invitations to present at several national, regional and state conferences, as well as an invitation to join the Innovation and Inquiry for Student Learning (IISL) Consortium, sponsored by the Lumina Foundation for Education and organized by Alverno College.

Similarly impactful for the college is the late registrant retention project. A comparative analysis of student academic performance for on-time registrants versus late registrants suggested that late registrants were not significantly less successful that on-time registrants but they had a significant impact on the student services unit. Thus, several new processes were adopted to more efficiently address the needs of this population. Many of those processes migrated to an improved model for overall student support in the pre-enrollment and first semester periods.   Some of the results that emerged from this retention project include: new requirements for orientation, a student success course for developmental students, increased connections with counselors and advisors (intrusive advising), a Goals + Planning = Success initiative, a New Student Transition Coordinator, annual Student Success Days, late start classes, Semester Welcome Days, a Bridge to Success program (which provided a model for the Power of YOU), computerized early warning system, and triage stations set up during the last week of enrollment cycle. All of theses process changes have been incorporated into a redesign of the student support model. How we admit and enroll new students and how we provide them with the tools to be successful early in their college experience is an ongoing and continuous effort that directly evolved from this action project.

The focus on employee satisfaction has resulted in significant changes to the professional development effort at MCTC. In addition to college-wide professional development activities, designated funds for professional development at the individual and department level, as well as a generous tuition reimbursement program, have addressed some of the disparity that previously existed between faculty professional development benefits and staff benefits.

A second action project that emerged from the employee satisfaction project is the focus on maximizing technology to improve internal communication. An employee blog, posting minutes of weekly President's Cabinet meetings, regular videocasts with the President and other college leaders, open coffee conversations with the President , and All-College meetings are precursors to an overall communication strategy. These communication avenues are utilized to provide information and gain input from all employees as the College makes difficult budgetary decisions during this extraordinary economic time. Faculty and administration are engaged in a dialogue to develop a new AQIP action project aimed at improving internal communication to follow-up on the current maximizing technology project.

Another new action project initiated last fall focuses on a College-wide examination of processes. MCTC engaged a consultant from the MnSCU Office of Internal Auditing to work with two-teams - financial aid and satisfactory academic progress - to systematically map work processes and identify improvements leading to more efficiency and effectiveness. The teams document current processes, identify a desired future state, and develop an action plan for improvement that includes measuring improved performance. Important to this process is the goal of increased staff ownership for specific processes and a stronger sense of teamwork. An interesting observation in this project has been the extent to which student support and success underlie the process decisions the College makes.

FIGURE 1: MCTC Institutional Continuous Improvement

AQIP Action Projects and Internal Initiatives

STUDENTS

AQIP Action Projects

Retention Project for Late Registrants (*completed*)

Transfer & Completion project (Sophomore year?) (*FY10*)

By Products and Other Initiatives

Power of YOU	Goals & Planning for Success (GPS)	New Student Services Model

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ACADEMICS (LEARNING & INSTRUCTION)

AQIP Action Projects

College-wide assessment of MCTC's general education core competency in Communication	College-wide assessment of MCTC's general education core competency in Critical Thinking	College-wide assessment of MCTC's general education core competency in Social Responsibility (*FY10*)

By Products and Other Initiatives

Academic Council new forms, processes, curriculum development and assessment	Program/department-wide assessment of student learning incorporated into annual Academic Program Review	Faculty involvement: advocates, training on embedded and college-wide assessment

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EMPLOYEES

AQIP Action Projects

Improving Employee Satisfaction through a Comprehensive Professional Development Program (FY03-06 - *completed*)	Engaging Employees in Internal Communications by Maximizing Technology (FY07-09 -*in progress*)	Communication structures? (*FY10*)

By Products and Other Initiatives

Individual professional development program	Department professional development program	Tuition reimbursement	LEAD Academy
			MCTC Employee BLOG

PROCESSES

AQIP Action Projects

Financial Aid process mapping and Improvement (*in progress*)

Internal MCTC Action Projects

Course offerings and Scheduling process mapping (*in progress*)	Satisfactory Academic Progress process mapping (*in progress*)	Analysis of Student Complaints (*in progress*)	Student Complaints process project? (*FY10*)

SYSTEMS PORTFOLIO

The AQIP Leadership Team provided the structure for the development of Systems Portfolio. Category Leads were identified and each developed their own team to work on the responses to the Systems Portfolio questions. An expanded Leadership Team reviewed the draft responses for accuracy and completeness. The MnSCU E-Portfolio structure was used to produce the final document, although a PDF was also created for the appraisal team.

The AQIP Leadership Team also provided the leadership and structure for the review of the Systems Appraisal Feedback Report. Again, category leads were brought together as a team to review the feedback and to develop a strategy for improvements. An internal online wiki was developed to use as a communication and collaboration tool. A shared document was formatted to include: the original Systems Portfolio, the opportunities identified in the Appraisal, specific action plans and responses to those opportunities, timelines for actions, collaborations with other categories, and data updates. This working document was compiled into the Response to the Systems Appraisal Feedback report and will be utilized in the future for revising the Systems Portfolio. The report is available to the public on the Office of Strategy, Planning and Accountability website: http://accountability.minneapolis.edu.

As part of the College-wide response to the Feedback Report and in preparation for the Strategy Forum in 2008, conversations were held with about 80 faculty attending an AQIP information session during fall semester opening days activities, 55 members of the Executive Committee (representing all supervisors at the College) and the AQIP Leadership Team (representing all employee groups at the College). These conversations yielded the following conclusions about the knowledge, involvement, attitude, and future goals for the quality program at MCTC:

1. The quality efforts at the college have been broadening during the last four years, reaching out to departments, deans and staff. The idea of quality improvement (as most clearly understood as measuring results and setting targets for improvement) is evident in most units of the College.
2. The senior leadership team, including all administrators and supervisors, has most completely embraced a quality improvement mindset with the most current institutional work plan organized around very specific measures and targets for achievement. That effort has framed the planning process and has led to increased staff understanding of how to develop SMART outcomes, set targets, identify measures, and ensure valid and appropriate data sources. Accountability for performance is central to all leadership discussions.
3. Although AQIP has been identified with virtually all improvement efforts at the College, that identification has not been central to a communication strategy and thus many employees don't associate the improvement effort at the College as AQIP-related. That may be the result of a somewhat intentional effort to avoid the quality jargon and ideology and use a more organic - some may say "stealth"- approach to incorporating continuous improvement into the work of the college.

4. The knowledge of the quality effort is largely recognized as related to reaccreditation. Faculty members are familiar, involved, and largely supportive of the assessment of student learning program (one of our Action Projects). In every case where staff have been involved with Action Projects they are very aware of the expectation of quality improvement and the necessity to measure results and make improvements based on those results.
5. Staff in Student Affairs have come together to reinvent their approach to the delivery of student services through the quality improvement focus. This focus has moved student affairs from a previous passive model to one that is much more proactive. Over the past four years, they have used the AQIP framework to engage in a continuous and fluid reinvention which has produced processes and results that have been satisfying and exciting to those involved. Given the rather dramatic improvement in student success over those four years, they take pride in their accomplishments.
6. The staff in Finance and Operations has functioned from a quality improvement framework for the longest time and most comprehensively. Their efforts at process improvement have resulted in efficiencies, cost savings, and recognition as an outstanding unit within the MnSCU System.
7. The College has initiated a process mapping effort to intentionally examine work team processes and action plans for improving efficiency and results. It is understood that time taken to map processes will yield efficiencies as well as job satisfaction for those involved. The financial aid process mapping project, for example, has motivated, empowered, and energized the department. Financial aid staff clearly sees the relationship between intentional work on processes and better customer results.
8. Significant changes have occurred in employee professional development and support for professional development through such initiatives as tuition reimbursement for advanced degrees and the incorporation of individual and department professional development funds. Those efforts have been the result of the College's senior leadership decisions, and although those leaders clearly connect those results to improvement of quality, they have not had an AQIP "stamp/logo" that reminds staff that these benefits are a part of the College's quality effort. Thus, as with other quality improvement efforts, faculty and staff utilize and appreciate the changes but do not necessarily attach them to a "quality effort." It's simply what working at MCTC means.
9. A goal for the future is that the quality improvement approach will be built into all processes and initiatives at the college, and that any initiative will start with the questions: what is the intended outcome and how will it be measured, and then imagining the activity that will lead to that outcome.
10. It will be important to find the avenues for engaging faculty in the quality improvement effort outside of the assessment of student learning work. That will be a major impetus for the next round of AQIP work. Some faculty members believe that student instructor ratios pose a problem; the college average student faculty ratio is 25:1.

11. Assessment of student learning has been a core activity, particularly related to general education. Challenging to MCTC in the next three years is translating that energy to co-curricular and non-instructional areas that yearn for assessment measures.
12. Sustainability of the entire AQIP model must be addressed as senior leadership changes, college growth in enrollment and faculty occurs, and collective collegiate understanding of the value of AQIP ebbs and flows.

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

The College has moved very intentionally to integrate College units to produce a more coherent and efficient structure. Thus, several years ago, student affairs and academic affairs were organized under a single administrator - the Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs - in order to unify the approach to addressing the College's goals about student success. In 2006, the senior leadership team was reorganized to create a position for Vice President of Strategy, Planning and Accountability, which had responsibility for Institutional Research, strategic and annual institutional planning, assessment of student learning, and for AQIP. This decision is tangible evidence of the College's commitment to accountability and continuous improvement, a commitment to planning based on performance, measuring and targeting results, benchmarking on peers, and public transparent reporting on those results. The office is charged with developing institution-wide systems for defining and measuring outcomes. Just as academic programs and departments are required to identify their student learning outcomes, each work unit identified outcome- oriented mission statements and 3-5 outcomes and metrics for success.

The mission of the Office of Strategy, Planning and Accountability is:

> *To support decision-making, strategy formation and continuous improvement of MCTC's mission and goals, the Office of Strategy, Planning and Accountability coordinates planning and provides research, analysis and reporting.*

In order to promote continuous improvement and accountability, the office provides:

Leadership	Institutional Research	Consultation
• Strategic Planning • Quality Improvement Processes • Data Management	• Accountability • Compliance and Reporting • Student Success Analytics	• Research Design • Data Interpretation • Presentation of Results

In January 2009, the College launched a new dashboard on the Office of Strategy, Planning and Accountability website: http://accountability.minneapolis.edu. These pages serve as the primary platform for internal reporting on annually-determined measures and reporting criteria. This dashboard is a key dissemination and management tool for data aligned with MCTC's Strategic Plan, MnSCU's

Strategic Plan, specific MnSCU targets, Minnesota Higher Education Accountability System Goals, AQIP Action Projects, and other key indicators of effectiveness.

In November 2008, the AQIP Leadership Team developed their response to the Strategy Forum assignment to describe the College's quality effort. What follows is a truthful (in other words, not gilded) response to that question.

Five truths, lessons, principles, errors or myths
that we have learned from our experiences with AQIP

What matters?
Progress, information, intention(ality), systems and change = continuous, data-driven, integrated, process-focused decision making.

1. **Progress matters (more than perfection) = continuous:**
- Improvement is always a stretch goal—never perfect.
- Less is more.
- Real change takes time.
- Despite commitment, too few employees have incorporated a continuous improvement framework into their daily work.
- What was a cure the first time when applied subsequently may not be a cure.
- It can be difficult to choose a realistic scale and scope for projects that are critical to the college within the constraints of the action projects.
- Action projects can produce negative, unintended consequences.
- A sense of humor and patience is necessary as AQIP keeps changing.
- AQIP takes time. Time is precious and short.
- AQIP is a lot of work and requires talented and persistent leaders.

2. **Information matters = data-driven:**
- Value measurement and methods for using results.
- Create a department or office to get measurements and data that were not available before.
- Data should drive decisions.
- You will find out things about your institution that are fascinating and surprising and that will leave you with a sense of wonder at how you manage to do the good work that you do.
- Maintain a lot of documentation along the way, so that information is available for use in reporting later.
- Respect inter-rater reliability.
- Incorporate/seek feedback from all stakeholders.

3. **Intention(ality) matters = integrated:**
- Intentionality is everything: have a focused plan and clarity about outcomes.

- You value what you fund, and your funding reveals what you value.
- There is a great benefit to taking the time to think about what we are doing and to being intentional about how that moves us to where we want to be.
- Make no assumptions; attack premises aggressively.
- Develop defensible criteria to make decisions and improve the institution.
- We need to find a way to align AQIP with MnSCU targets and goals.
- It is hard to get the stakeholders at the table; they might have different priorities.

4. **Systems matter = process-focused:**
- Have a systematic means of evaluating progress within the institution.
- Process, process, process…data, data, data!
- Processes need to be clearly articulated and evaluated.
- Identifying methods for evaluating processes is difficult.
- 'Real' process mapping takes time.
- We need to hire a "process-mapper" on staff.
- Good people, doing good things, is not enough.
- It can be difficult to stay focused on one area when you see the manner in which the results from the process or lack of process cascade out into the organization.

5. **Change matters = decision making:**
- Changes occur, and we learn.
- IFT (Informative, Formative, and Transformative)
- Action projects can produce institutional change.
- You haven't addressed a need until you know users are satisfied with the way it was done.
- AQIP efforts can create teambuilding opportunities across departments
- An obstacle is making AQIP meaningful to faculty.

In summary, Minneapolis Community and Technical College has utilized the AQIP framework as an organizational tool for a very real institutional commitment to quality, continuous improvement, and organizational learning.