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## Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) Systems Appraisal Feedback

### *A summary of the feedback to Mid-State Technical College's Systems Portfolio*

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#### Background

Mid-State Technical College (MSTC) completed its Systems Portfolio in May 2006, and submitted it for review to AQIP in June 2006. The systems portfolio is a diagnostic snapshot of the college's continuous improvement processes. The portfolio is reviewed by a group of external Higher Learning Commission peer reviewers (called *systems appraisers*) who read the document, evaluate the contents, and reach consensus on the current state of continuous improvement at the college. The anonymous systems appraisers prepare a report called a *systems appraisal* that summarizes the group's findings. The systems appraisal is one component reviewed by the Higher Learning Commission or HLC (the regional accrediting body that accredits MSTC) in determining whether to renew the college's accreditation, which is up for renewal in 2009.

The systems appraisal provides feedback for each of the nine categories in the systems portfolio. The categories are evaluated in the context of the college's *critical characteristics*, which the systems appraisers identify from the first section of the systems portfolio, called the *overview*. The critical characteristics are identified by the systems appraisers based on a reading of the portfolio; for example, one critical characteristic that the appraisers identified is that:

*MSTC is an accredited two-year technical college offering a focused set of career oriented certificates, technical diplomas, and associate degrees. MSTC is part of the 16 college Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS).*

Each of the nine categories is further divided into four areas: Context, Process, Results, and Improvement. In the context section, the college provides the framework within which the systems appraisers can place the answers from the subsequent sections. The process section outlines processes, the results section outlines supporting performance data, and the improvement section outlines how the college identifies and continuously improves the processes relevant to the category.

Each issue identified within a category by the systems appraisers is placed into one of four classes:

- SS: An exceptional strength, which the systems appraisers consider to be exemplary.
- S: A strength.
- O: An opportunity, which the systems appraisers consider to be ripe for improvement.
- OO: An outstanding opportunity, which the systems appraisers consider to require a more urgent need for improvement.



In addition to feedback on each category, the systems appraisers specifically identify accreditation and strategic issues. Accreditation issues are those that, if left uncorrected, would put the college's HLC accreditation at risk. Strategic issues are broad challenges and opportunities that may have a significant impact on the college and its operations, in the opinion of the systems appraisers.

The AQIP Systems Appraisal Feedback summary has been created by MSTC staff. The purpose of this summary is to provide a condensed version of the systems appraisal feedback, in lieu of the large (36-page) document from the systems appraisers.

## **Accreditation issues**

The systems appraisers found no accreditation issues for MSTC. In the systems appraisal, the reviewers wrote:

*The Systems Appraisal team concluded that Mid-State Technical College has presented evidence that it complies with each of the Five Criteria for Accreditation and each of their Core Components. Although the Systems Appraisal does not in itself constitute a review for continued accreditation, the team's conclusion upon reviewing your Portfolio against the Criteria will serve as a telling piece of evidence during the Commission's next scheduled AQIP review of your institution for Reaffirmation of Accreditation.*

## **Strategic issues**

The systems appraisal team identified the following general strategic issues at the college; the strategic issues are repeated verbatim from the appraisal:

- 1. While MSTC describes processes in response to the questions in the nine categories, there is no discussion of a process or processes connecting them to a continuous improvement system. This may make it difficult to accomplish improvement initiatives.*
- 2. MSTC lists a wide variety of data sources, but little trend line data are reported in the portfolio and there is no evidence the data is being used as part of a comprehensive continuous improvement process. There appears to be a lack of alignment among data collection, analysis, and improvement processes within the college. Alignment of these measurement issues is necessary if data-based decision making is to become institutionalized throughout the organization. Full implementation of these processes and the accumulation of trend line data are critical to the college's ability to analyze effectiveness.*
- 3. Processes do not appear to be in place to monitor and improve the level of diversity in staffing for the college and to provide a variety of methods to support diverse student learning styles. Without attention to these important issues it would be difficult to adhere to the Higher Learning Commission's requirements focused on diversity.*
- 4. A strong student focus is not readily apparent throughout the MSTC portfolio. A student focus is integral to maintaining a successful AQIP learning environment and a continuous quality improvement culture. Directly involving students, identifying their needs, and incorporating this information into institutional*



*planning and decision making seems an important next step if MSTC is committed to continuous improvement.*

5. *MSTC has not demonstrated an overarching commitment to maintaining a stakeholder focus and including all stakeholders in planning and decision making for the college. Throughout the portfolio, a top-down approach to management issues, communication, and planning appears to be prevalent in the organization. Listening to stakeholders, collaborating on decision making, and moving to more participatory, cross-representational processes are key components of a successful continuous improvement environment.*
6. *Overall, the MSTC portfolio document appears to focus on a more traditional (PEAQ) approach to accreditation requirements rather than an AQIP approach. Failure to shift college processes to a stakeholder based system will impede college efforts to realize the full benefits of a quality improvement culture.*

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## **Category Feedback**

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### **Category 1: Helping Students Learn**

This category is the largest in the systems portfolio, because student learning is central to the mission of a higher learning organization. According to the Higher Learning Commission, the 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. It examines your institution's processes and systems related to: Learning objectives, mission-driven student learning and development, intellectual climate, academic programs and courses, student preparation, key issues such as technology and diversity, program and course delivery, faculty and staff roles, teaching and learning effectiveness, course sequencing and scheduling, learning and co-curricular support, student assessment, measures, analysis of results, and improvement efforts.*”

**Strengths:** One critical component of helping students learn is to provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. The systems appraisers noted that MSTC has numerous such opportunities available.

**Opportunities:** The systems appraisers noted that the college could improve assessment, and use the data gathered to improve processes and systems. The reviewers stressed the need to use data to close the feedback loop and drive a continuous improvement process.

### **Category 2: Accomplishing Other Distinctive Objectives**

This category is a catch-all, designed to allow organizations to highlight unique objectives other than student learning. According to the HLC, this category “*...addresses the processes that contribute to the achievement of your institution's major objectives that complement student learning and fulfill other portions of your mission. Depending on your institution's character, it examines your institution's processes and systems related to: identification of other distinctive objectives, alignment of other distinctive objectives, faculty and staff roles, assessment and review of objectives, measures, analysis of results, and improvement efforts.*”



**Strengths:** The systems appraisers viewed the tight alignment of the college's other distinctive objectives with the mission and vision as a strength. The reviewers also noted the strong ties with district high schools, articulation agreements with other institutions of higher education, and the oversight from the WTCS as strengths.

**Opportunities:** The reviewers indicated that the college should use data to drive decisions, and develop measures to ensure that the institution is actually achieving its other distinctive objectives.

### **Category 3: Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs**

This category examines how MSTC works actively to understand student and other stakeholder needs. According to the HLC, the category “...examines MSTC's processes and systems related to: student and stakeholder identification, student and stakeholder requirements, analysis of student and stakeholder needs, relationship building with students and stakeholders, complaint collection, analysis, and resolution, determining satisfaction of students and stakeholders, measures, analysis of results, and improvement efforts.”

**Strengths:** The systems appraisers noted that the college has regular methods of collecting information about student satisfaction, course feedback, and business and industry perceptions. The reviewers mentioned the structured, well-established relationships with local stakeholders that feed back into college processes. The reviewers also noted the use of both internal and nationally normed measures used to gather information about student and stakeholder satisfaction.

**Opportunities:** The reviews noted that the college does not yet appear to have a systematic means to improve processes including the feedback loop for evaluation and improvement. The college currently uses *ad hoc* procedures for process improvement as opposed to a careful and deliberate planning process. The systems appraisers also noted that the college needs a process for establishing priorities, setting targets, and communicating results.

### **Category 4: Valuing People**

This category examines how MSTC views its human resources, since people are central to the success of an organization. The HLC says the category “...examines your institution's processes and systems related to: Work and job environment, workforce needs, training initiatives, job competencies and characteristics, recruitment, hiring, and retention practices, work processes and activities, training and development, personnel evaluation, recognition, reward, compensation, and benefits, motivation factors, satisfaction, health and safety, and well-being, measures, analysis of results, and improvement efforts.”

**Strengths:** The reviewers identified the general hiring process as a strength, because the job duties tied to the core values, certification requirements, and an analysis of the duties of the position. The reviewers also identified the new faculty mentoring program and the training opportunities available to employees as strengths. Incorporation of the core values into the staff appraisal process was also identified as a strength.



**Opportunities:** The systems appraisers felt that while the college had policies and processes for human resources, there was no comprehensive process to continuously improve employee satisfaction, health, safety, and well-being. It was not clear how targets for improvement were set. The reviewers also noted that the portfolio did not describe a plan for dealing with the impending wave of retirements or how to recruit a diverse workforce.

### **Category 5: Leading and Communicating**

According to the HLC, this category “...addresses how your institution’s leadership and communication structures, networks, and processes guide your institution in setting directions, making decisions, seeking future opportunities, and building and sustaining a learning environment. It examines your institution’s processes and systems related to: Leading activities, communicating activities, alignment of leadership system practices, institutional values and expectations, direction setting, future opportunity seeking, decision making, use of data, leadership development and sharing, succession planning, measures, analysis of results, and improvement efforts.”

**Strengths:** The systems appraisers cited the “cascading goal development process,” where strategic directions and college goals drove executive committee member goals, which in turn drove the development of management goals and so on, down to the individual employee level. The reviews also labeled the college’s three-year strategic planning process and the process’ resultant strategic direction for the college as a strength. The widespread visibility of the core values was viewed positively.

**Opportunities:** The appraisers thought that communication appeared to be largely top-down. The reviewers noted that it was not clear if there were measures tied to the strategic directions. In addition, the reviewers noted that although the college collected various types of data, it was unclear if there was a continuous improvement process where data was used to drive improvement. There seemed to be no formal process for ensuring the transfer of mission, vision, and values.

### **Category 6: Supporting Institutional Operations**

The HLC says this category evaluates “...institutional support processes that help to provide an environment in which learning can thrive. It examines your institution’s processes and systems related to: Student support, administrative support, identification of needs, contribution to student learning and accomplishing other distinctive objectives, day-to-day operations, use of data, measures, analysis of results, and improvement efforts.”

**Strengths:** The reviewers cited the ongoing process to evaluate, document and modify its processes to align with the PeopleSoft software system and consortium colleges as a strength.

**Opportunities:** The reviewer’s comments focused on the absence of an identified continuous improvement process that used data to drive decisions and improvement. While citing the QRP process as a good process for academic programs, the reviewers noted that no comparable process existed for other areas of the college.



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## Category 7: Measuring Effectiveness

According to the HLC, this category, “...examines how your institution collects, analyzes, and uses information to manage itself and to drive performance improvement. it examines your institution's processes and systems related to: collection, storage, management, and use of information and data- at the institutional and departmental/unit levels; institutional measures of effectiveness; information and data alignment with institutional needs and directions; comparative information and data; analysis of information and data; effectiveness of information system and processes; measures; analysis of results; and improvement efforts.”

**Strengths:** The reviewers noted that the WTCS has a system in place to share comparable data across institutions within the system. The systems appraisers also observed that the college has identified data collection mechanisms, storage, users and accessibility options.

**Opportunities:** The reviewers observed that the college does not have processes in place to evaluate the effectiveness of internal measurements. The systems appraisers remarked that the college had no systematic, comprehensive method that tied the collection of data to continuous improvement goals. The reviewers also pointed out that there was no process to identify which users needed specific types of data and measures.

## Category 8: Planning for Continuous Improvement

The HLC says this category evaluates “... your institution's planning processes and how your strategies and action plans are helping you achieve your mission and vision. it examines your institution's processes and systems related to: institutional vision; planning; strategies and action plans; coordination and alignment of strategies and action plans; measures and performance projections; resource needs; faculty, staff, and administrator capabilities; measures; analysis of performance projections and results; and improvement efforts.”

**Strengths:** The systems appraisers noted that the college has a clear long-range vision, and specific long- and short-term strategies tied to the mission and vision. The reviewers recognized the potential of the Quality Review Process to help the college collect and analyze program data in a systematic way.

**Opportunities:** The reviewers observed that the college collects data that may be relevant, but does not mention how the selection, collection and analysis of data are tied to a comprehensive improvement plan. The systems appraisers also felt that the planning process was top-down in nature; the reviewers felt a top-down approach would make stakeholder buy-in more difficult to achieve.

## Category 9: Building Collaborative Relationships

According to the HLC, this category “...examines your institution's relationships-current and potential- to analyze how they contribute to the institution's accomplishing its mission. it examines your institution's processes and systems related to: identification of key internal and external collaborative relationships; alignment of key collaborative relationships; relationship creation, prioritization, building; needs identification; internal relationships; measures; analysis of results; and improvement efforts.”



**Strengths:** The reviewers felt the college had a significant number of collaborative relationships in place both within the district and statewide. The systems appraisers also noted the work of the External Collaboration action team for developing a classification system for partnerships.

**Opportunities:** The systems appraisers noted that the institution has not identified a uniform process for creating and building new relationships based on a data-driven decision making process in the area of building collaborative relationships. The reviewers observed that MSTC had no formal, standardized process to insure that the needs of those involved in partnerships and activities were met, but that the college acknowledged that activity in this area was limited and had identified the need for progress in this area.

### **Next Steps**

The AQIP accreditation process is a continuous cycle. The table below outlines the cycles in AQIP, with dates for the next time the activity is due for MSTC:

Frequency	Activities
Every year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Annual updates on current action projects (<i>September 14, 2007</i>)</li><li>2. Internal updates to the Systems Portfolio to ensure currency (<i>continuous</i>)</li></ol>
Every four years	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Systems Portfolio submitted to AQIP (<i>June 1, 2010</i>)</li><li>2. Strategy Forum (<i>January 23-26, 2007</i>)</li></ol>
Every seven years	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Checkup visit from AQIP (<i>2007-2008 school year</i>)</li></ol>
Every ten years	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Reaffirmation of Accreditation (<i>2008-2009 school year</i>)</li></ol>