

NMU AQIP Action Project

Title: Developing a Student Inquiry and Complaint Tracking Process

Systems Portfolio Category: 2: Meeting student and other key stakeholder needs

Planned Project Launch Date: April 15, 2015

Target Completion Date: April 15, 2016

Sponsors: Cindy Paavola, Assistant to the President – Strategic Initiatives
Jill Compton, Internal Auditor

1. Briefly describe the project in less than 100 words. Be sure to identify the key organizational areas (departments, programs, divisions, units, etc.) and key organizational processes that this action project will affect, change, and/or improve.

NMU currently collects information regarding student complaints and inquiries. However, the process varies across campus. The purpose of this Action Project is to develop a campus-wide process for accepting, logging and evaluating student complaint and inquiry data. The development of this process will take place primarily within Business Intelligence and Information Services. Major gateways of student complaint and inquiry data such as Dean of Students, Financial Aid, Housing and Residence Life, and others will participate in the development. NMU expects to gather data that will lead to a more accurate view of our students' experiences.

2. Describe your institution's reasons for initiating this Action Project now and for how long it should take to complete it. Why are this project and its goals high among your current priorities? Also, explain how this project relates to any strategic initiatives or challenges described in the institution's recent or soon-to-be submitted portfolio.

Currently, NMU is in the process of developing a new strategic plan and core values. A central component to this discussion is "student success" and the value that NMU places on the experiences of our students. Understanding student complaints/inquiries on a campus-wide level will allow NMU to more accurately track our students' experiences and how, specifically, we as an institution respond to student complaints and inquiries. It is our expectation that these data will provide evidence for effective decision-making processes, leading to policies of improvement.

The timeframe selected is based upon current recommendations from major stakeholders in this Action Project; specifically, Business Intelligence and Information Services and several representatives from departments across campus who are among our largest student complaint/inquiry gatekeepers.

3. List the project goals, milestones, and deliverables along with corresponding metrics, due dates, and other measures for assessing the progress for each goal. Be sure to include formal evaluations when the project progress will be reviewed.

Action Project: Developing a Campus-wide Student Inquiry and Complaint Tracking Process

Months 1-3:

- Identify largest informational gateways on campus
- Interview gatekeepers and document how student complaints and inquiries are currently handled via the primary gateways
- Map a process of gateways to determine commonalities and distinctions; discuss communication flow issues
- Begin preliminary development of database components

Months 4-6:

- Develop preliminary database components, input and reporting procedures
- Review with gatekeepers and revise as necessary
- Create a prototype plan and debut to key stakeholders campus-wide; revise as needed
- Send prototype plan to Information Technologies to begin programming process
- Provide Action Project Update report to key stakeholders and to AQIP

Months 7-8

- Program database; outline metrics that will be available as a result of the tool

Months 9-12

- Review prototype; revise as needed
- Develop pilot program
- Revise database based on pilot program use

4. Describe how various members of the learning community will participate in this action project. Show the breadth of involvement by individuals and groups over the project's duration.

The Assistant Vice President of Information Services will oversee her team in the development of the new student complaint/inquiry tool. As revisions are required during the development of the Action Project, the same team will make necessary adjustments. In addition, the following student complaint/inquiry gateways have been identified:

Dean of Students, Financial Aid, Housing and Residence Life, Student Services Center, Registrar, Academic Affairs, Enrollment Management and Student Services, Academic and Career Advisement Center, College and Academic department heads offices, Public Safety, Dining Services, President's Office, Finance and Administration, Identify, Brand and Marketing, Human Resources, Center for Native American Studies, Athletics and Recreation Sports Center, Engineering and Planning, Library, Alumni, NMU Foundation and Auxiliary Services.

The Action Project Committee will develop subgroups to interview all stakeholders identified above, as well as student groups on campus.

5. Describe how the institution will monitor project progress/success during, and at the completion of this project. Be sure to specifically state the measures that will be evaluated and when.

The measures of campus-wide trends that are of most significance to NMU at the current time are as follows:

Action Project: Developing a Campus-wide Student Inquiry and Complaint Tracking Process

- Time taken for an individual to receive a response from a complaint/inquiry and the nature of the response
- Time taken to come to a resolution
- Method by which complaints/inquiries are received on campus
- Offices handling the most/fewest complaints on campus
- Demographics of students who make complaints/inquiries
- Changes in workload of staff who are implementing the new tool
- Changes in the number of complaints/inquiries resolved since implementing the new tool
- Changes in the manner/elements of resolution of complaints/inquiries since implementing the new tool

6. Describe the challenges that may be encountered in successfully completing the project or for institutionalizing the learning from the project's goals.

The success of the Action Project will depend upon buy-in from various departments on campus that currently have departmentalized data collection processes in place. A successful new database collection tool will glean useful information for campus decision-making purposes without significantly increasing the workload of our information gatekeepers' daily schedules.

7. Provide any additional information that the institution wishes for reviewers to understand regarding this action project.

The Higher Learning Commission Action Project Directory

Northern Michigan University: Developing a Student Inquiry and Complaint Tracking Process

Project Details

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|----------------------|------------|
| Title | Developing a Student Inquiry and Complaint Tracking Process | Status | REVIEWED |
| Category | 2 - Meeting Student and Other Key Stakeholder Needs | Updated | 09-29-2015 |
| Timeline | | Reviewed | 10-15-2015 |
| Planned Project Kickoff | 04-15-2015 | Created | 04-15-2015 |
| Target Completion | 04-15-2016 | Last Modified | 10-15-2015 |

1: CURRENT PROJECT STATUS SUMMARY

- A:** Launched on April 15, 2015, the Action Project *Developing a Student Inquiry and Complaint Tracking Process* specifically addresses the federal compliance requirement regarding "Institutional Records of Student Complaints" as well as the Higher Learning Commission's Core Component 2.A. In addition, the Action Project is in alignment with one of Northern Michigan University's Core Components – *Community*, which states "Northern has a distinctive sense of place – some refer to it as the upper hand. We are a warm, friendly caring and helpful university. We are collaborative, on campus and off, valuing partnerships and service to each other, the community and the region. Our focus is always on students."

Overall, the project is progressing as planned. The Action Project committee has been successful in addressing the initial tasks identified in the Action Project Declaration. Meeting agendas, minutes, various resources used by the committee and documentation of other Action Project activities are located on NMU's internal Share drive.

- R:** Northern Michigan University's *Developing a Student Inquiry and Complaint Tracking Process* action project directly relates to compliance with federal and HLC requirements, making this project important for the University on an institutional level; more importantly, the University correctly understands that this project is related to its internal Core Component of providing a warm, friendly, caring and helpful university, which is an indication that the University is working toward improvement in AQIP Category 2 Meeting Students' and Other Key Stakeholders' Needs.

Although the action project is successfully moving forward and the University states it is progressing as planned, it appears from the provided timeline to be slightly behind schedule. What was to be completed in the first three months appears to have taken six months. (The University does provide an explanation of this in its anticipated challenges – delays due to summer and staff unavailability.) The University does not, however, indicate that it has made any change in the final target completion date.

2: ORIGINAL PROJECT GOALS AND DELIVERABLES

A: The original project goals, timeline and evaluation of progress are as follows:

Months 1-3 (April 15-July 14)

- Identify largest informational gateways on campus
- Interview gatekeepers and document how student complaints and inquiries are currently handled via the primary gateways
- Map a process of gateways to determine commonalities and distinctions; discuss communication flow issues
- Begin preliminary development of database components

Months 4-6 (July 15-October 14)

- Develop preliminary database components, input and reporting procedures
- Review with gatekeepers and revise as necessary
- Create a prototype plan and debut to key stakeholders campus-wide; revise as needed
- Send prototype plan to Information Technologies to begin programming process
- Provide Action Project Update report to key stakeholders and to AQIP

Months 7-8 (October 15-January 14)

- Program database; outline metrics that will be available as a result of the tool

Months 9-12 (January 15-April 15)

- Review prototype; revise as needed
- Develop pilot program
- Revise database based on pilot program use

R: NMU has developed project goals and timelines that will help the University keep this project on track. To strengthen the overall outcomes, the University may want to consider stating the expected observables in more detail such as answering the question, "What is the actual deliverable for the *Identify largest informational gateways on campus?*"

The University may also want to begin discussing the question, "What is the overall goal of this action project?" Is it the process itself, or does the University hope to improve beyond process implementation? What metric/measure/target will the University use to determine its success? If the ultimate goal is to reduce complaints, how will the University measure success and what is its ultimate target? How will the University know that it has been successful?

The University may also want to start mapping out the process it will use to monitor the process and use the collected data. Who will input data? Who will have access to the data? Who will analyze and report on it? To whom will the data be reported? Who will be responsible to determine improvements? Who will set targets and monitor results against those targets? In other words, how will the University make this process sustainable?

3: ACCOMPLISHMENTS OVER THE PAST YEAR

A: This action project has been in place for almost six months. During that time, the committee has been successful in completing all activities targeted in the initial set of tasks (i.e., months 1 – 3) and has entered into the 4-6 month activities by moving into the earliest stages of defining input fields and collection procedures for a potential student complaint database prototype.

Currently, the following project goals have been completed:

- Identify largest informational gateways on campus
- Interview gatekeepers and document how student complaints and inquiries are currently handled via the primary gateways
- Map a process of gateways to determine commonalities and distinctions; discuss communication flow issues
- Begin preliminary development of database components

In addition to the original project goals, the committee found it necessary to investigate our peer institutions' definition of "complaint" as it relates to student communication. It was discovered in committee meetings that representatives from NMU's major student inquiry and complaint gateways defined "complaint" in different ways, although all areas of campus found it crucial to respond to *any* student communication in a timely manner. Currently, the committee is establishing meaningful parameters of complaint activity before proceeding with database development.

The committee membership is comprised of staff, faculty and a student – all of whom responded to a campus-wide email inviting interested parties to join this Action Project. As a result, the committee is somewhat larger than usual, but having NMU's major complaint gateway representatives together in meetings has allowed the committee to work efficiently and begin an exchange of information already recognized as having significant potential in developing a greater understanding of our students' needs.

R: NMU has made progress on this action project; however, it is difficult to evaluate to what extent. The completed bulleted items listed contain no information regarding the deliverables or any analysis of what has been determined to this point. Providing this information would not only be helpful to the reviewer but may help the team working on the project to review their progress and celebrate their successes to this point.

The University has discovered an important issue that will need to be clarified as it continues with this project: What is a complaint? What is an inquiry? What is a suggestion? And possibly, what is an appeal? Overall, what the University will need to decide is what exactly will be tracked?

The University may want to consider tracking all of these areas by category. Federal compliance only requires the tracking of formal complaints, but the total number of these complaints seldom reaches a level where improvements can be made. Tracking information on all complaints, appeals, inquiries, suggestions, etc. may provide lots of meaningful data the University can use for improvement. (Section 6 also addresses this issue.)

4: INSTITUTIONAL INVOLVEMENT

A: Committee members include the following:

Director-Housing & Residence Life
 Assoc. Director-Multicultural Education Resource Center
 Director-Internal Audit
 Circulation Supervisor-Academic Information Services
 Ast. to Dean-Special Projects
 Exec. Secretary-Financial Aid
 Ast. Dean of Students
 Coordinator-Center for Student Enrichment
 Coordinator-Academic & Career Advisement Services
 Ast. to President – Strategic Initiatives
 Assoc. Prof.-Academic Information Services
 Help Desk Manager
 Ast. Manager-Bookstore
 Director-Institutional Accreditation and Assessment
 Student representative

Committee members have presented their own departments' processes and procedures in detail, as well as interviewed other department representatives on campus. Broad representation of committee membership has been helpful in the committee's ability to keep stakeholders informed and fully address how a new campus - wide policy might affect one department on campus differently from another department. Committee members also have presented their priorities in moving forward with the Action Project. For example, matters regarding student confidentiality, student access and employee workload have been reviewed and discussed from the perspective of each of the departments. The student representative on the committee will be presenting the committee's progress to NMU's student government (Associated Students of NMU, ASNMU). Student feedback will help guide the prototype development process.

In the early stages of the Action Project, Information Services (IS) was notified of the intent to move to an online campus -wide format for tracking student complaints. The IS representative discussed the possible framework options for such a project. As the committee moves forward, IS will become more involved in the Action Project and will assist from prototype development through the final launch. Data analyses will be a component of the online process to be launched in 2016 near the completion of the Action Project.

R: Northern Michigan University has involved a wide range of individuals representing various campus departments in this action project. This breadth of involvement should help the University to develop an excellent process. The University has also included a student representative in this process and the opportunity for further input from the University's student government. Excellent!

5: EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

- A:** Sending a campus-wide invitation to participate in this Action Project was an effective method to begin building our committee. It gave all stakeholders an opportunity to participate in this project, regardless of their role at NMU. In addition, *every* individual who requested membership was invited to participate.

Committee members are learning about the similarities and differences in their departments' responses to student communications, as well as the differences in the number and types of communications that take place. A greater awareness and understanding of the questions, concerns and obstacles experienced by students is one of the goals of each committee meeting.

The sharing of techniques to communicate with students has been most informative and will provide NMU with a number of recommendations for campus - wide, innovative practices to communicate with students. For example, some departments have developed a sophisticated and efficient social media - based approach to answering students' inquiries and complaints.

- R:** Bringing various department employees together to focus on a specific goal can lead to significant improvements beyond the original expectations, something NMU has discovered through this project. Departments are getting the opportunity to improve internal communications and share their innovative practices. The University has also used a campus-wide invitation to develop a team that is very focused on a single common goal. By giving everyone an opportunity to participate, the University also assured that the opportunity for participation was available to everyone, a sign that the University is working on AQIP Category 3 Valuing Employees.

6: ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES TO PROJECT SUCCESS

- A:** Expanding the scope of the Action Project to include "inquiries" is resulting in the need for additional clarification from committee members. However, the committee is aware of the value of this type of communication and, at this point, will continue to include inquiry information in the database under development.

The project experienced some delays during the summer of 2015 as students, faculty and some staff were unavailable for meetings. The remainder of the project will take place, for the most part, during the months when we expect stakeholders to be available. A meeting schedule has been put in place and full participation of committee members and Information Services staff is expected.

- R:** It appears that the University now has the action project back on track and will be able to overcome the delays it has experienced. In terms of the inquiries, the University also appears to have this resolved (with some clarification forthcoming).

7: PLANNED NEXT STEPS AND TIME LINE

A: Moving forward, the Action Project committee will complete the final objectives described in months 4 – 6 which pertain to database components. In addition, an analysis of peer institutions will be completed. Although these tasks will involve additional time from committee members, it is expected that the committee will be on target at the end of month 8, or approximately by the end of December of 2015. The timeline for months 7 – 8 and 9 – 12 are below:

Months 7-8 (Ending December 31, 2015)

- Program database; outline metrics that will be available as a result of the tool

Months 9-12 (Ending April 15, 2016)

- Review prototype; revise as needed
- Develop pilot program
- Revise database based on pilot program use

R: NMU's next steps and adjusted timeline should allow this action project to get back on track. The University is commended for its efforts!

8: ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, QUESTIONS, OR CONCERNS

A: No additional information to provide at this time.

R: No additional comments.

1. What is the primary reason for closing this project?

The primary reason for closing this project is that the project has been brought to a point where a small number of university staff, rather than the full action project committee, can complete the remaining tasks and bring the new tools into implementation.

2. What aspects of this project would you categorize as successful?

This project was successful in a number of ways. First, the action project committee feels we have accomplished a campus-wide process for "accepting, logging and evaluating student complaints and inquiry data." The group's work resulted in a new university policy that provides the campus community a clear policy that defines the difference between a formal complaint and all other types of student feedback. We feel we have created a clear set of expectations related to collecting and reporting student feedback, along with procedures and new tools for processing student feedback.

Through the new tools (website and database), the ability to share information between students and university staff, both at the departmental level and campus-wide, has the potential to dramatically increase. The new database has created the potential to collect trend documentation, as well as increase the amount of quantifiable data from what is currently being collected. To close the loop of collecting such data and trend information, the creation of the Student Complaint and Feedback Committee, under the oversight of the Office of the President, provides the university with routine ways to regularly review student feedback for the sole purpose of identifying opportunities for improvement.

Some other aspects of this project that made it successful have been the efforts by the committee members to do extensive information gathering from across the campus, interviewing (sometime multiple times) more than two dozen departments that were identified as high-volume areas for student feedback, which the committee identified as "gatekeeper departments," as well as extensive research on more than three dozen state and national peer institutions to learn more about their student feedback and complaint policies and procedures.

Lastly, the committee found ways to address collecting student feedback data and trend information without adding significantly more work to university departments and staff members. All university units will be able to participate at some level in reporting on their current experience of student feedback. This is important because it allows for regular calls for student feedback information from every university unit – no matter how big or small, nor how directly in contact with students or not – which will serve as a constant reminder to all that student feedback is not only important to the health and vitality of the university, but it provides ongoing opportunity to improve the "Northern experience" for current, incoming and graduated students.

3: What aspects of this project would you categorize as less than successful?

The action project committee's early discussions centered around a way to create one simple and standard way to report student complaints and feedback. However, after interviewing the staff in 25-30 NMU offices and departments about how they collect, document and respond to student complaints and feedback, it became very clear that one option would not be possible. Even the definition of a "student complaint" varied from campus area to campus area (which has been addressed in the formation of the new university policy that defines formal complaint versus all other feedback). Additionally, university staff interviewed about increasing tracking and documentation expressed concern about additional work and the potential for changing tracking systems currently in use. Although the committee feels it has created options that address these concerns, it is still a concern that there will be pushback from some areas to the new reporting requirements, at least in the initial stages of the implementation process.