

# QUALITY CHECKUP REPORT

# Highland Community College

Freeport, IL  
March 25-27, 2009

## Quality Checkup team members:

**Dr. Glenna Ewing**  
Institutional Researcher  
University of Des Moines

**Dr. Mark Felsheim**  
Academic Dean  
Century College

### Background on Quality Checkups conducted by the Academic Quality Improvement Program

The Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) conducts Quality Checkup site visits to each institution during the fifth or sixth year in every seven-year cycle of AQIP participation. These visits are conducted by trained, experienced AQIP Reviewers to determine whether the institution continues to meet The Higher Learning Commission's *Criteria for Accreditation*, and whether it is using quality management principles and building a culture of continuous improvement as participation in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) requires. The goals of an AQIP Quality Checkup are to:

1. Affirm the accuracy of the organization's online Systems Portfolio and verify information included in the portfolio that the last Systems Appraisal has identified as needing clarification or verification (System Portfolio Clarification and Verification);
2. Review with organizational leaders actions taken to capitalize on the strategic issues and opportunities for improvement identified by the last Systems Appraisal (Systems Appraisal Follow Up);
3. Alert the organization to areas that need its attention prior to Reaffirmation of Accreditation, and reassure it concerning areas that have been covered adequately (Accreditation Issues Follow Up);
4. Verify federal compliance issues such as default rates, complaints, USDE interactions and program reviews, etc. (Federal Compliance Review); and
5. Assure continuing organizational quality improvement commitment through presentations, meetings, or sessions that clarify AQIP and Commission accreditation work (Organizational Quality Commitment).

The AQIP peer reviewer(s) trained for this role prepare for the visit by reviewing relevant organizational and AQIP file materials, particularly the organization's last *Systems Appraisal Feedback Report* and the Commission's internal *Organizational Profile*, which summarizes information reported by the institution in its *Annual Institutional Data Update*. The report provided to AQIP by the institution is also shared with the evaluator(s). Copies of the Quality Checkup report are provided to the institution's CEO and AQIP liaison. A copy is retained by the Commission for the institution's permanent file, and will be part of the materials reviewed by the AQIP Review Panel during Reaffirmation of Accreditation.

### Clarification and verification of contents of the institution's *Systems Portfolio*

The team reviewed the Systems Portfolio before arriving for the Quality Checkup visit to gain an understanding of the college. During the visit, the team verified and clarified the contents of the Systems Portfolio through discussions held with the board of trustees, president, college leadership team, academic and student services deans, faculty, students and the institutional researcher among others. There were over 100 participants in the various sessions. Although that number includes many duplicates, the team did meet with 60 to 80 different individuals.

Discussions with the campus groups noted an understanding of the general conclusions and recommendations of the portfolio. There was significant discussion of the challenges of capturing the uniqueness and true character of an organization in such a short document.

Developments have occurred since the portfolio review particularly in the areas of data collection and process development. Highland Community College has made significant progress in developing processes for its ongoing assessment efforts. Several well conceived and carried out projects and processes were noted. These included a process to identify staff training needs that included surveys and focus groups, a team that identified the key issues and then a series of recommendations to be implemented over time. The program will include participant assessment as it develops.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

### Review of specific accreditation issues identified by the institution's last Systems Appraisal

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

### Review of the institution's approach to capitalizing on recommendations identified by its last Systems Appraisal in the *Strategic Issues Analysis*.

The Systems Appraisal identified four broad strategic issues that are being addressed by the college:

1. ***The development of continuous improvement culture that includes a focus on the development and refinement of key processes.*** The college reports placing a stronger emphasis on defining and redefining their processes. College-wide training in quality principles and concept mapping has been initiated. The college is also developing process maps and suggested improvements to their processes.

The team found significant evidence that the college has indeed spent a great deal of time on refining key processes. The team also found evidence that the college has made a concerted effort to include broad representation from across the college on its committees, including support staff, faculty, administration and others. The team did express some concern with the breadth and scope of the numerous projects underway. It might be more beneficial for the college to focus its efforts on a vital few.

2. ***Concern that there may be too many general education competencies and that too few had been assigned.*** The college reports it convened a group to trim the number of competencies from 31 to 25 and to try to assess at least 23 of those by the end of Spring 2009. The team found evidence that the college had indeed reduced the number of competencies and had invested a great deal of time collecting data on student progress from a variety of classes. The team did express some concern that the data collected may not be actually measuring how well the college's graduates are doing. The data did not differentiate between first semester and last semester students, and the grading did not follow a standard rubric across classes. Faculty also expressed concern that the method used did not follow appropriate statistical processes and expressed an interest in working more closely with administration to insure better statistical methods are used. This demands the immediate attention of the institution.

3. ***Systematically addressing the financial challenges facing the college.*** The college reports the implementation of a comprehensive finance planning process that reviews current resources and is designed to make more accurate predictions of challenges and resources. These challenges have been included in the strategic plan. The team found evidence that the college has looked at its financial challenges and is developing strategies to deal with them. The new nursing building is an example of how this process has been applied to achieve concrete results. The building was built as part of the college's strategic and budget planning and included significant private help and advice.

4. ***A need to use data to drive improvement.*** The college reports that it collects significant amounts of state-required data than can be used for comparison. The team has found evidence that the college is planning to use this data for longitudinal comparisons and benchmarking. The college has also begun to collect new data to use as benchmarks for improvement.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

#### Review of organizational commitment to continuing systematic quality improvement

The team found numerous examples of the college's commitment to continuous improvement. The college makes a strong effort to include representation from across the college on its improvement committees. The team reviewed numerous big and small projects from the college that clearly used continuous improvement principles. Exemplary projects include a comprehensive alternative learning plan, CSS Learning Community Evaluation Proposal and the Program Assessment in Humanities, among others.

Faculty, administration and support staff all reported significant efforts to infuse quality processes throughout the college. Even the students noted the college's commitment to continuous improvement. Interviews with the student senate provided the team with concrete examples of quality improvement processes they witnessed.

While faculty are included on several committees and encouraged to provide input, some faculty expressed a concern that they would like to be included more, and that some processes could be more faculty driven.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

#### USDE issues related to default rate (renewal of eligibility, program audits, or other USDE actions)

Highland Community College's default rate is relatively high and rising. The college is aware of

the issue. Highland provides intensive one-on-one counseling for entering students on their obligations related to student loans, has a mandatory online orientation and a mandatory debt orientation upon graduation. The college is to be commended for its intensive, personal intervention with incoming students. Discussions centered on looking at a holistic picture of the student from intake to graduation and what more the college can do to help the students become better financial consumers.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Compliance with Commission Policy IV.A.8, Public Notification of Comprehensive Evaluation Visit

The college sent out a press release regarding the visit to more than 100 outlets and took out ads in the three largest circulation newspapers in the district. It also prepared posters and other information regarding the visit that was shared with the community.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Compliance with Commission policy 1.C.7, Credits, Program Length, and Tuition

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Compliance with Commission policy IV.B.2, Advertising and Recruitment Materials

The college is in the process of developing a comprehensive marketing plan. Marketing, advertising and other recruitment pieces mention its affiliation with Higher Learning Commission.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were

acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Compliance with Commission policy III.A.1, *Professional Accreditation*, and III.A.3,  
*Requirements of Organizations Holding Dual Institutional Accreditation*

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Compliance with Commission policy IV.B.4, *Organizational Records of Student Complaints*

The college has both formal and informal avenues for student complaints. Students are encouraged to resolve complaints on the lowest level possible. The Chief Academic Officer (CAO) maintains a log of student complaints and the outcome of those complaints. Students mentioned how accessible and responsive the CAO is to their complaints. The college has recently split the student services functions into a separate unit and that unit also keeps a log of student complaints and their outcomes. The college has suggestion boxes that are available for student use. The student senate also acts as a resource for students with complaints. There are formal processes in place for students who do not agree with the actions of the CAO.

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.

Other USDE compliance-related issues

None noted.

Other AQIP issues

The team found evidence of efforts by the college to use continuous improvement processes as a natural part of its culture. The challenge appears to be documenting those activities.

The team was particularly impressed with the positive feedback of the students it interviewed. Students were able to cite specific examples of where the college saw a problem or gap and intervened. In one case, a student talked about an issue they had with a new teacher that was

having trouble helping the students understand. After bringing this to the attention of administration, the student reported that someone came to observe the teacher and there appeared to be efforts to discreetly offer advice and guidance to the instructor. The student also noted that the instructor's instruction skills and ability to help the students dramatically improved. In another example, a student talked about how they had written an editorial in the student newspaper about the need for better emotional support and counseling for students. The student went on to say that the administration, particularly the CAO was very interested in hearing more about the idea and truly listened. The net result was a new position of social worker that was hired by the college to work with students.

Support staff were also enthusiastic about the continuous improvement processes and noted that they were encouraged to participate and to take an active role in the planning process.

While most faculty felt they were included in the planning and evaluation processes currently in place, some faculty expressed concern that they were not as included in the process as they would like and that some things were not well communicated to the faculty.

The college has clearly put a great deal of effort into refining and improving their overall processes. The team wonders if they are actually trying to do too much. The college may want to put more efforts into a vital few and concentrate more on completing the cycle. While several projects had excellent project plans, there was not a lot of consistency around the project plans. The college may want to look at focusing on trying to develop model project plans that would permit more comparison and compilation of data.

The college has begun work on a dashboard that they shared with the team. The areas featured and data used were appropriate and helpful. The team discussed the idea of adding the college's own unique measures as well as other ways to portray the data. The team encourages the college to keep moving forward with this project.



**Table 1: Participation by Highland College Stakeholders at the Quality Checkup Visit**

| <b>Day</b> | <b>Session</b>                                  | <b>Topic</b>   | <b>Participants</b> |
|------------|---|--|---------------------|
| 1          | Welcome   | Introductions, overview of key AQIP Issues, agenda and general questions                         | 8                   |
| 1          | Compliance Review                               | Check on financial aid, Title IV compliance, Marketing, Admissions and Complaint Process         | 6                   |
| 1          | Students  | Visit with students  | 9                   |
| 1          | Systems Portfolio discussion                    | Overview of systems portfolio and five criteria for accreditation.                               | 7                   |
| 1          | Action Projects                                 | Success, challenges and future potential action projects   | 7                   |
| 1          | Reception                                       | Partnership Success – Nursing wing and Wind technology building                                  | 30                  |
| 2          | Breakfast                                       | Review agenda and any changes  | 9                   |
| 2          | Assessment                                      | Discuss HCC’s assessment processes and results   | 8                   |
| 2          | Administrative Support Functions                | Discuss HCC’s administrative support for helping students learn and other distinctive objectives | 11                  |
| 2          | Support Staff and Custodial/Maintenance Meeting | Discuss perspectives of college’s quality improvement efforts                                    | 7                   |
| 2          | Student Services and Financial Aid              | Discuss students services issues and CIS project   | 10                  |
| 2          | Faculty Meeting                                 | Open discussion with faculty   | 7                   |
| 2          | KPI Discussion                                  | Discuss dashboard KPIs and performance indicators for processes                                  | 8                   |
| 2          | Academic Support Functions                      | Discuss academic support functions to help students learn  | 6                   |
| 2          | Leading and Communicating                       | Discuss governance, leadership and communication issues  | 12                  |
| 2          | Reception                                       | Discussion with stakeholders   | 35                  |
| 3          | Breakfast                                       | Discuss board perspectives   | 9                   |
| 3          | Employee Leadership Programs                    | Highlight college’s employee leadership and community leadership development activities          | 7                   |
| 3          | HCC West  | Discuss operation and processes at HCC West  | 5                   |
| 3          | Closing Dialog                                  | Preliminary findings   | 8                   |