

## EDUCATION

# Quality Goes To College

by **John Dew**

**T**he use of quality principles and methodologies is becoming more popular, and they are being adopted at all levels of higher education throughout country. From community colleges to private colleges, from regional universities to major research universities, higher



### In 50 Words Or Less

- **Quality principles and methods are being embraced by more colleges and universities throughout the country.**
- **Efforts are focused on a variety of areas, including admissions, finance, student housing, financial aid and procurement.**
- **Much of the interest in continuous quality improvement in higher education is being sustained by grassroots organizations.**

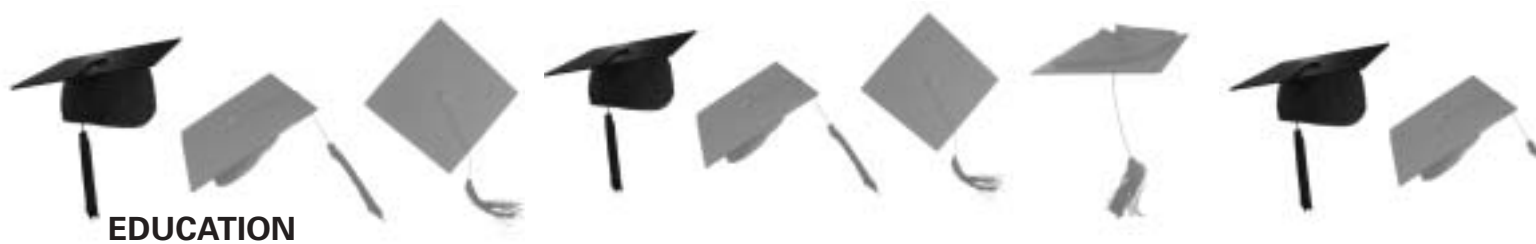
education is seeing an upswing in interest in—and the application of—quality management.

This increased interest in quality methods comes on the heels of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which last year recommended colleges and universities "embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement."<sup>1</sup>

This article is an overview of the types of institutions working on quality improvement, how they are using quality methods and the ways quality professionals can support this growing initiative.

Higher education has always held a strong interest in quality assurance. For decades, regional accreditation and accreditations in specific disciplines have focused on ensuring the quality of academic programs, qualifications of faculty,

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## Quality Rolls on at UA

The University of Alabama (UA) established an office of continuous quality improvement (CQI) in 1998, basing it on a benchmarking study of quality improvement practices at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Pennsylvania State University.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, the function of this UA office has expanded to include responsibility for strategic planning, several compliance issues and overall institutional effectiveness.

The results of the CQI initiative can be categorized into areas of process improvement, strategic planning, compliance, institutional effectiveness, student initiatives, and faculty and leadership development.

Process improvements have included redesigning and streamlining the following:

- Billing and course management processes for all distance education classes
- The admissions process, which significantly expanded the capacity of the admissions office
- The admissions and scholarship awarding processes, which reduced initial scholarship response time to new freshmen from three

months to two weeks

- The Alabama Alumni Assn.'s scholarship awarding process
- The University of Alabama Press operations, which experienced a 20% increase in annual production
- Student and parent summer orientation programs.
- Facility maintenance planning and construction
- Operations at the student career center and university bookstore
- HR's hiring process and procurement processes

Strategic planning initiatives have included the development of the UA's 2004-2014 strategic plan, along with strategic plans for the university's various colleges. The university has been an innovative leader in using the future search methodology for engaging faculty and staff in the strategic planning process.

The CQI office also facilitated strategic planning for nonacademic areas within the university, such as Alabama Public Radio, the Center for Public Television, the Alabama Museum of Natural History and the University of Alabama Press.

Compliance activities at UA

have included the following:

- Leading the project to bring the university into compliance with new medical privacy regulations
- Serving as the university's privacy officer
- Participating in the development of the self-study for accreditation by the Assn. for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs, which is still in progress

Institutional effectiveness activities have included:

- Co-chairing the university's 10-year reaffirmation of accreditation by the Southern Assn. of Colleges and Universities, with zero findings or recommendations in its compliance plan
- Chairing the planning and implementation of the quality enhancement plan, which focuses on enhancing active and collaborative learning in large first-year classes
- Establishing and chairing the institutional effectiveness committee, which replaced the earlier university quality council

Assessment activities have been improved by conducting a



campuswide survey of students every two years since 2000 to provide feedback on experiential quality and satisfaction; conducting secret shopper programs each spring to provide administrative offices with student feedback; conducting numerous surveys of faculty, alumni, parents and employers regarding performance feedback for the university; and conducting numerous focus groups for university libraries, student affairs and financial affairs.

Student initiatives have included:

- Facilitating the campus team on diversity
- Facilitating seven joint faculty and student affairs teams that have resulted in policy changes on student health issues
- Developing new approaches to educate students on issues of alcohol, drug use, sexual behavior, eating and nutrition, and tobacco use

At the university president's request, the CQI office established and has led a student and administration environmental management council that implemented campus recycling programs.

Leadership and faculty development actions have included the establishment of:

- An office of teaching excellence

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- A university leadership academy modeled after programs at Cornell and Rutgers universities
- An annual orientation program for new academic department chairs
- A 360-degree feedback process for department chairs and deans
- Leadership training for 10 of Alabama's most impoverished counties
- Numerous workshops on quality improvement principles and methods, consensus based decision making, creative problem solving and team building

The University of Alabama began using the Alabama Quality Award criteria (a Baldrige flow down) as the basis for its management system in 2001.

Feedback from this assessment

process has driven many improvement efforts across the campus. It has also significantly increased the understanding of stakeholder satisfaction through

expanded assessment activities.

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The Crimson Tide is also a leader in implementing Six Sigma methods in higher education, with the entire college of continuing studies now engaged in Green Belt training and projects.

All these activities have contributed significantly to the university's successful 10-year reaffirmation of accreditation and contributed to the university's success in being listed among the top 50 public universities in *U.S. News and World Report* for the past five years.

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1. John Dew, "Roll, Quality Roll," *Quality Progress*, September 2000, pp. 49-54.



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adequacy of library resources, adherence to admission standards and academic independence of colleges and universities.

What's new in higher education is the increased emphasis on continuous quality improvement and the growing appreciation of quality management systems. This emphasis on improvement appears

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in many different ways and is supported by several grass-roots organizations.

### **What Are They Working On?**

On many campuses, the quality improvement effort focuses on significant administrative processes that support teaching and research. This includes using quality tools to streamline enrollment processes, financial management, student financial aid administration, maintenance, housekeeping, procurement and hiring practices.

For example, the graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison formed a cross functional team with members from admissions and academic student services, a transcript examiner and an admissions coordinator. The team mapped out the flow of the admissions process and collected data over an 18-month period.

After analysis of the process and benchmarking of other institutions, the team initiated improvements that reduced admission time by 39%, eliminated the backlog of admissions work and cut admissions costs by 38%.<sup>2</sup>

Other campuses look to improve quality in areas of student life, such as housing, food services, parking and bookstore operations. At the University of Miami, a cross functional team on student housing focused on improving the availability of housing and decreasing the cost of providing housing. This led to more students living in campus housing and a 41% decrease in overtime hours required to provide the housing.<sup>3</sup>

In some cases, quality improvement activities encompass improvements in academic programs, advising, alumni affairs and the administration of ancillary functions, such as museums, academic presses and outreach programs. For example, Samford University in Birmingham, AL, has extensive experience in applying quality improvement methods to individual courses and entire academic programs for more than a decade.<sup>4</sup>

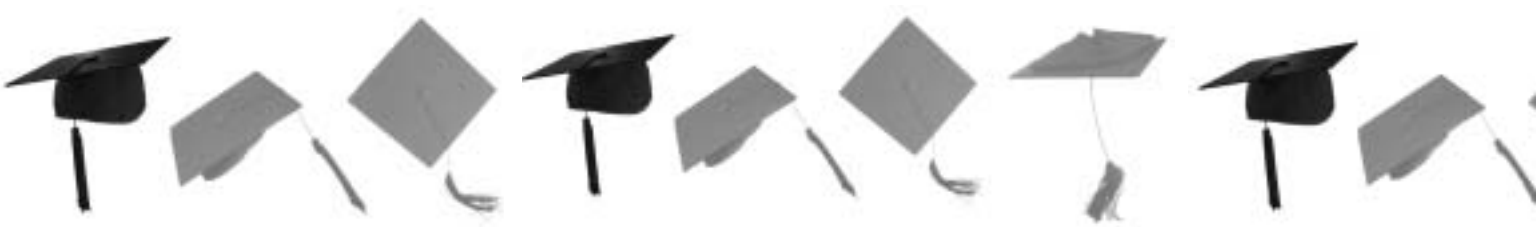
Quality improvement efforts on campus often focus on process improvements and frequently use flow charts, data collection, cause and effect diagrams and other basic diagnostic tools to improve administrative processes.

On many campuses, quality improvement programs have led to increased emphasis on collecting and assessing input from stakeholders, including students, faculty, staff, alumni and employers, and using this input to drive improvement efforts. Many auxiliary functional areas (food services, housing, bookstores, parking and recreation centers) are deploying performance metric systems widely used in the for-profit sector.

In the past, strategic planning activities on many campuses focused primarily on expansion. While growth is still important to meet both the needs of students and regional economic development, the emphasis on quality improvement is causing more campuses to include improvement of existing processes and programs as a key organizational strategy.<sup>5</sup>

With the advent of online classes and global access to higher education, many campuses recognize they must not only offer excellent academic programs, but they also must streamline some poorly managed administrative processes that can drive away students and inhibit research funding. Campuses such as the University of California,

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# Who Is Working on Improvement?

Among research universities, quality improvement is taking hold in many ways. On some campuses, such as Pennsylvania State University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Alabama, the quality initiative head reports directly to the provost or vice president for academic affairs.

These campuses support professional staff who work full time on quality improvement initiatives that include academic, administrative and student life activities. On other campuses, such as the University of Miami, the University of Washington and Miami University of Ohio, the quality improvement initiative reports to the vice president for financial affairs and focuses on administrative activities.

At some universities, such as Cornell in Ithaca, NY, and Rutgers in New Jersey, the quality improvement focus is centered on the HR organization and has a strong organizational development emphasis. At Binghamton University in Vestal, NY, the quality improvement office connects to the campus through the student affairs office.

Each of these organizational

structures has proven effective within the context of each specific campus, and all have been engaged in quality improvement efforts for many years.<sup>1</sup>

Regional universities, such as the Baldrige recognized University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, and Northwest Missouri State University, have taken the lead in developing quality improvement initiatives that permeate the entire campus.<sup>2</sup>

Other regional universities with active quality initiatives include:

- The University of Central Oklahoma
- New Mexico State University—Carlsbad
- Edinboro University of Pennsylvania
- Texas State University—San Marcos

At a number of private universities, such as Belmont in Nashville, TN, Samford in Birmingham, AL, and Villanova in Pennsylvania, have more than a decade of experience in applying quality improvement methods to processes across their campuses.<sup>3</sup>

Many community and technical colleges, such as Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton, WI, and

Western Wisconsin Technical College in La Crosse, also have more than a decade of experience in using quality improvement methods and are models for other campuses.<sup>4</sup>

Richland Community College in Dallas set the standard for community colleges when it received the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2005.

Additional quality improvement initiatives also have been established at the University of Virginia, American University in Washington, D.C., Wheaton College in Illinois, the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities campus, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Southern California.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Higher Learning Commission—North Central Assn., *A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement*, 2002.
5. National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education, *NCCI Executive Council Resource Book*, 2006.



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Berkeley are using balanced scorecard methods—along with quality improvement teams—to reduce costs and improve efficiency.<sup>6</sup>

Campuses accredited by the Southern Assn. of Colleges and Schools (SACS) are now required to have at least one ongoing quality improvement project focused on improving student learning outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

These quality enhancement plans are a condition for reaffirmation of an institution's accreditation, which is required to be allowed to administer federal funds for student financial aid.

As a result, SACS schools are experimenting with a wide range of improvement efforts and methods that they hope will result in a body of knowledge of best practices for improving academic programs.

### Quality Management Systems

The colleges and universities with strong quality improvement initiatives are the thought leaders in developing management systems that integrate assessment, planning and improvement activities. These campuses link strategic plans with performance indicators, make effective use of stakeholder feedback, and keep raising the bar in terms of expectations for effective processes and outstanding results.

Some community colleges, four-year colleges and universities also are making use of state level quality programs to provide a meaningful yardstick for evaluating their management systems. Three higher education institutions have received the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA).

- At the University of Wisconsin–Stout in Menomonie, the school's Baldrige application included the entire campus and remains the most comprehensive approach to quality management in higher education.
- At Richland Community College in Dallas, its Baldrige award illustrates an exemplary approach to comprehensive campus management in the community college setting.
- The University of Northern Colorado's Monfort College of Business earned the Baldrige award for the quality management system it applied to one school within its regional university.<sup>8</sup>

The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Assn. of Colleges and Schools has successfully developed the alternate quality improvement process (AQIP), an innovative way for schools to achieve reaffirmation of their accreditation by focusing on quality improvement activities. More than 150 schools in the association are now using the AQIP model.<sup>9</sup>

Under the leadership of Brent Ruben, Rutgers University's Center for Organizational Development and Leadership has developed the excellence in higher education model. The model is being used on campuses to put the Baldrige in education criteria into the language of higher education and to integrate assessment, planning, and improvement activities as part of a management system.<sup>10</sup>

### Quality Flowing In

Interest in quality improvement is gradually flowing into academe from a variety of directions. Faculty in disciplines such as engineering, education, nursing, pharmaceutical and medicine encounter quality improvement methods embedded in their accreditation processes.

Quality improvement principles are increasingly appearing in the standards for conducting research that institutional research boards use to provide oversight for research protocols.<sup>11</sup>

Many universities manage clinics and hospitals in which teaching faculty now encounter quality improvement programs in the healthcare context. Awareness is growing among many faculty, but some have deep reservations about quality methods that might appear to impose a business model on academe. The best remedy for this concern is to engage faculty in improving the teaching and research processes that matter most to them.

### Interest Is Growing

The growing interest in continuous quality improvement in higher education is being sustained by several grass-roots organizations:

- **The National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI)** comprise of more than 80 member institutions that have quality improvement efforts on their campuses. NCCI was established with the help of the National Assn. of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO). NCCI partners



with the American Council on Education in championing the quality movement in higher education, and conducts national and regional meetings and workshops.

- **ASQ and its Education Division** will make quality in higher education the focus of education presentations at the World Conference on Quality and Improvement April 30 to May 2 in Orlando, FL. ASQ's Education Division is seeing an upswing in interest in quality in higher education, following ASQ's expansion of its overall emphasis on quality in education by making it one of the society's major market areas. The division will sponsor a one-day regional conference on quality in higher education in June in Ann Arbor, MI. ASQ also will participate in the upcoming rulemaking negotiation process with the U.S. Department of Education to establish expectations for accreditation of higher education programs.
- **The Continuous Quality Improvement Network Community (CQIN)**, an association of colleges, was organized a decade ago and hosts an annual event to bring together teams from campuses to solve problems. Richland Community College was a founding member of CQIN and is working with many other institutions on quality system implementations.
- **The Professional and Organizational Development (POD) network** was organized by faculty and staff focused on improvements in student learning outcomes. Each year, the POD network brings together several hundred experts in curriculum design, student learning outcomes and teaching to exchange ideas and best practices in improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning on campuses across the nation.

The major professional associations in higher education also are adopting quality improvement themes, usually under the mantle of improving institutional effectiveness. The American Council on Education has included sessions on quality improvement in its annual meetings for university and college presidents. NACUBO has conducted numerous workshops and conference sessions that champion quality improvement in college business processes. The National Assn. of College Auxiliary Services (NACAS) recently focused on teaching the

use of performance metrics at several of its regional conferences.

### **How Can We Help?**

Quality practitioners in higher education today are like their counterparts in industry 25 years ago. Many feel like the lone wolf on their campus. With internet technology and online seminars, the quality enthusiasts can form networks and share a lot of information. But, there is much more quality professionals and ASQ members can do to nurture this growing movement.

Quality improvement principles are increasingly appearing in the standards for conducting research that institutional research boards use to provide oversight for research protocols.

Many people engaged in quality in higher education come from within the academic community and are not aware of an ASQ section in their community—or that ASQ even exists. Sections can invite the quality champions at their local community college or university to attend section meetings, take advantage of local training programs and ASQ certification programs, and join the society.

If your local higher education community is not plugged into the quality movement, perhaps it is time to give it a nudge. Educators need to hear from local stakeholders about accountability and the expectation that graduates should have some understanding of quality concepts. (The same applies to local high schools and trade schools.) Organizations should not have to spend their resources teaching basic quality methods to new employees. This content should be included



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in school curricula.

Most of all, educators need to hear about the benefits of quality methods in your organization. If you work for a company with a strong commitment to quality, perhaps your top executive should offer to take the local higher education leader out for lunch to talk about the importance of quality to your company and the community. Indeed, most of the early quality initiatives in higher education began through connections between business and higher education leaders. College presidents listen when prominent business and community leaders speak.

### Much Work Remains

These are challenging times for the higher education community, which serves as a vital link in the supply chain for the world's economy. Higher education institutions provide graduates with the expertise to staff all segments of the world's economy, conduct much of the groundbreaking scientific and technical research that drives the world's economic growth, and develop the arts and social sciences that enhance the quality of life in our communities.

Clearly the higher education community is beginning to embrace the concepts of continuous quality improvement. On the other hand, the examples in this article still constitute only a small percentage of the higher education institutions in this country. So much remains to be done.

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#### WEB RESOURCES

ASQ Education Division, [www.asq.org/edu](http://www.asq.org/edu)  
Continuous Quality Improvement Network, [www.cqin.org](http://www.cqin.org)  
National Consortium for Continuing Improvement in Higher Education, [www.ncci-cu.org](http://www.ncci-cu.org)  
Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education, [www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org)



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### Please comment

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