

## The Higher Learning Commission Action Project Directory

### Northern Michigan University: Developing Feedback Mechanisms and Enhancing Campus Leadership Communication

#### Project Details

<b>Title</b>	Developing Feedback Mechanisms and Enhancing Campus Leadership Communication	<b>Status</b>	REVIEWED
<b>Category</b>	5-Leading and Communicating	<b>Updated</b>	09-28-2012
<b>Timeline</b>		<b>Reviewed</b>	10-14-2012
<b>Planned Project Kickoff</b>	09-01-2011	<b>Created</b>	08-29-2011
<b>Target Completion</b>	12-15-2012	<b>Last Modified</b>	10-14-2012

#### 1: Project Accomplishments and Status

A: The Action Project major accomplishments of the action project to date are:

- A completed internal communication audit (survey and small-group focus discussions, analysis of the key points of the communication audit, presentation of final report) available under Action Projects at <http://www.nmu.edu/aqip/node/76>.
- A focus group discussion with new supervisory employees hired within the last three years.
- Identified five action items that the Task Force worked on during summer 2012 with the intent that it can be used or tested in fall 2012. These include:

**Action Item #1:** Create an **informational campaign** regarding the university's secure SHARE tool to better educate the campus community about what the tool is designed to do and how to access it. This campaign is a cooperative effort between Communications and Marketing and Information Technology Services. Materials will be ready for campus-wide distribution by mid-semester fall 2012.

**Action Item #2:** A **prototype of an online employee suggestion box** (<http://www.nmu.edu/employeesuggestionbox>) has been created with the intent to pass ideas up the NMU organizational levels to the executive management team, allowing for review of ideas by primary decision-makers between the idea submitter and the division leaders. Committee members will demonstrate the prototype to groups across campus during the fall 2012 semester. Feedback will be gathered from the demonstrations and the Task Force will make further recommendations on this tool after analyzing the input.

**Action Item #3:** A **prototype of an employee intranet/e-mail announcement system** is in development. It is being designed to address four key results of the communication audit: 1) decrease amount of e-mail sent to faculty and staff; 2) increase update information on major campus issues and projects; 3) provide quick links to information that are of interest to employees, and 4) help employees prioritize the sometimes overwhelming amount of communication currently being distributed. This tool is being built by Communications and Marketing and Information Technology Services, and is tentatively scheduled to be ready for preliminary demonstrations by late October/early November. Feedback will be gathered from the demonstrations with groups across campus. The Task Force will make further recommendations on this tool after analyzing the input.

**Action Item #4:** Revise the **NMU policies and procedures online manual** (draft site: <http://www.nmu.edu/node/216>), restructured for more clarity, searchability and usability. The new manuals will be a stand-alone site searchable by title, policy type, key word, unit oversight and year approved. Oversight units will be responsible for annual review of these materials to manage needed changes. Internal Audit and Communications and Marketing oversaw the restructuring of the current manuals and are finalizing updates. Once live, the manual's website will be maintained by the Finance & Administration Office. The Task Force is continuing to discuss and finalize a review and maintenance

program to ensure policies remain current. This new online manual is expected to be available to the campus by mid-fall 2012 semester.

**Action Item #5: An online supervisor's manual** (draft site: <http://www.nmu.edu/node/212>) has been created and is in the final stages of development. This manual will provide basic reference materials for daily operations by category type in a one-stop gateway to the wide array of information already available on the NMU website via many departmental sites. Human Resources and Communications and Marketing are coordinating the project. Phase I will be made live by early October 2012 and the "go-live" date will be publicized campus-wide, but particularly to supervisors.

**R:** Northern Michigan University is nearing completion of this two year Action Project. The institution is making reasonable progress toward completion of the Project and development of an institution-wide continuous quality improvement culture.

This Action Project is focused on strengthening administrative processes and increasing levels of staff engagement through improved leadership-guided communications. These Action Items include an informational campaign to promote a new secure SHARE tool, the creation of a prototype of an online employee suggestion box, a revision of the NMU policies and procedures online manual, and an online supervisor's manual. The University has indicated that this Action Project has a strong connection to Category 5 – Leading and Communicating and Category 4 – Valuing People. Other Categories related to this Project are: AQIP Category 1 – Helping Students Learn; AQIP Category 3 – Understanding Students' and other Stakeholders' Needs; AQIP Category 7 – Measuring Effectiveness; AQIP Category 8 – Planning Continuous Improvement.

As the Project progresses, the project team has included processes for further refinement and examination of the critical elements that contribute to both administrative effectiveness and improved communications, and how these elements will be assessed. Research into the literature on culture and communications, examination of best practices at peer institutions, and assessment of progress against the desired level of staff communications, are also elements of the team's work.

## 2: Institution Involvement

**A:**

- Care was taken in the creation of a 13-member campus-wide Task Force, co-chaired by the directors of Human Resources and Communications and Marketing, to include all employee groups and represent all divisions and levels within the institution. A roster listing position titles is at <http://www.nmu.edu/aqip/node/76>. The Action Project task force met bi-weekly between October 2011 and May 2012.
- As indicated in #1, action items were distributed to appropriate units.
- All NMU employees were invited to participate in the campus-wide communication audit survey. As a service learning project, students enrolled in an MBA communication course conducted the communication audit. In addition to the campus-wide survey, the MBA students held small-group focus discussions with employees from each division of the university, analyzed the data, and prepared and presented a final report.
- New employees with supervising duties were invited to a focus group discussion facilitated by NMU President and Director of Human Resources.
- Dissemination of information on the Action Project's progress appeared in articles in CAMPUS, the faculty and staff newsletter; an open campus forum facilitated by the MBA students explored the results of the communication audit; presentations and updates about the project were given multiple times to the President's Council, a group of approximately 25 administrators and staff representing all institutional divisions that meets bi-weekly.

**R:** NMU is demonstrating good attention to the inclusion of all project stakeholders. The use of feedback mechanisms such as staff surveys, focus groups, the creation of the SHARE tool, and the online employee suggestion box should facilitate broad participation. A solid understanding of the needs of all institutional stakeholders will facilitate a more complete understanding of the nature of the NMU culture and the steps that will need to be taken to increase

staff engagement. The team may even wish to consider including a student representative. It also seems likely that reflective assessment of the project team's operations would occur on a periodic basis to ensure that it continues to remain effective.

(AQIP Category 4, valuing people; AQIP Category 3 – Understanding Student's and other Stakeholder's Needs)

### 3: Next Steps

- A:**
- Members of the Task Force are in discussion with NMU's executive leadership team to fully discuss a more detailed interim project report.
  - Complete the final stages of work on the 2012 fall action items.
  - The Task Force will develop an implementation plan for the prototype demonstrations and standardize the methods of collecting feedback.
  - The Task Force will discuss two ideas that might further enhance campus communication flow and efficiency:
    - pilot a program to use Microsoft Outlook for meeting planning purposes, provide individual, on-site departmental and staff training on tool usage for employees whose jobs include scheduling and/or attending meetings. After a trial period, evaluate the effectiveness and outcomes and decide whether Microsoft Outlook should be recommended for all campus-related meeting scheduling and planning.
    - provide technical support for Microsoft Outlook on an individual departmental basis through workshops to help employees prioritize e-mail as a mechanism to improve attention, including response time, to high-priority communication issues - identified as a problem in the communication audit.

**R:** The actions taken to date represent logical next steps and the institution is on track concerning the completion of the Project. Because of the large number of initiatives relating to communications, the institution has planned the development of specific processes for evaluating the effectiveness of the changes that result. Some of these changes may prove to be more useful than others in improving organizational communications. Follow-on surveys of staff are also planned. In addition, the institution may wish to consider expanding and continuing the focus groups already held in order to determine staff evaluations of the effectiveness of these initiatives. Expanding the online employee suggestion box to include students' and other stakeholders' feedback would be another natural next step. Ongoing planning, measurement and assessment of results, along with reflective examination of these measures will also be an essential component of the operational processes that have been created, and that will continue in operation after the project is complete.

(AQIP Category 1 – Helping Students Learn; AQIP Category 4 – Valuing People; AQIP Category 5 – Leading and Communicating; AQIP Category 6 – Supporting Institutional Operations; AQIP Category 7 – Measuring Effectiveness)

### 4: Resulting Effective Practices

**A:** Academic service learning in an MBA course was the basis for a campus-wide communication audit conducted by the Task Force. Incorporating a learning opportunity into an AQIP Action Project helps to teach students about accreditation, outcomes assessment and the university's effort toward continuous improvement.

**R:** The new communications tools and processes resulting from this Project promise to be very effective. NMU is encouraged to share the results of these initiatives with the broader academic community via publication or presentation. In particular, presenting information about the creation of the online employee suggestion box should be of interest to many institutions. The institution may also wish to take the opportunity presented by this Project to plan for a follow-on project, to undertake a more general examination of any related administrative processes and how those processes support a culture of engagement.  
(AQIP Category 8 – Planning Continuous Improvement)

## **5: Project Challenges**

**A:** Although the Task Force met regularly and significant progress was made, it has been determined that the project is comprised of two components. Component 1 was the general campus communication and associated tools, referenced in the “feedback mechanism” portion of the project’s title. This is being accomplished. Component 2, relating to leadership communication has not been accomplished. Its scope overlaps with Component 1 and was the rationale for the combined project theme. However, leadership communication is more oriented to job position issues such as a supervisor evaluation model that assess leadership communication; job analysis on the department head role, in particular the academic department head, to clarify expectations regarding leading and communicating; leadership responsibilities that ensure campus-wide understanding of the decision-making process; and communication training for campus leaders.

The Task Force believes this cannot be completed by the tentative December 2012 end date and a better approach is to conclude one portion of the project and decide whether to launch a new internal project or AQIP Action Project, or if these should be embedded in other existing internal considerations. This break and restart path seem preferable to revising and extending the current project. The issues involved are not questioned, but might be better handled by a different Task Force.

**R:** Faculty and staff ownership may well be the key to long-term success. NMU is encouraged to continue to support wide participation of all staff in the ongoing effort. One way to institutionalize this may be through the encouragement of faculty publication of individual and department best practices. Many academic fields sponsor journals and conferences relating to organizational culture and organizational communication. Encouraging faculty to conduct research and publish results in these kinds of journals may prove to be useful in aligning faculty research interests with institutional priorities.

The team’s plan to close out the first component, general campus communication and associated tools, is a good one as the goal will be met within the original timeline. As this was such a large Action Project that included a second component that relates to leadership communication, it is recommended that the team could either submit this overlapping component as a next Action Project or perhaps continue to work on the second component as an informal Action Project. Either approach should lead to goal completion and lead to a system for Developing Feedback Mechanisms and Enhancing Campus Leadership Communication.

Congratulations on the creation and implementation of an Action Project that should strengthen communication institution-wide, promote effective leadership practices, and enhance a culture of Valuing People and inclusiveness.  
(AQIP Category 7 – Measuring Effectiveness; AQIP Category 8 – Planning Continuous Improvement)

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#### 1: Describe this Action Project's goal in 100 words or fewer:

**A:** This Action Project will develop processes for effective leadership-guided communication and recognized feedback mechanisms. It will review the communication role for all levels of leadership, develop clear expectations of leaders' communication, and provide for its evaluation. Current methods of disseminating information on decisions and collecting feedback will be studied in order to build effective two-way communication channels into the university infrastructure.

#### 2: Describe briefly your institution's reasons for taking on this Action Project now -- why the project and its goals are high among your current priorities:

**A:** The Systems Appraisal identified, and campus discussions affirmed, opportunities to develop and enhance campus communication. A need exists for better dissemination of information and feedback mechanisms to address two issues: perceived lack of decision transparency and realization that feedback does not always make its way up or down the leadership chain. Expectations for communication skills for leadership positions and communication must be clarified through campus-wide processes.

#### 3: List the organizational areas -- institutional departments, programs, divisions, or units -- most affected by or involved in this Action Project:

**A:** All employee groups in the campus community will be affected by this Action Project. The stakeholders most involved in the project are employees at the supervisory and middle management levels, executive management, Human Resources, Communications & Marketing, and collective bargaining representatives.

#### 4: Name and describe briefly the key organizational process(es) that you expect this Action Project to change or improve:

**A:** This Action Project potentially affects all organizational units – leadership and communication are core to most processes. The intended key areas are:

- Decision-making processes. This Action Project helps to identify employee communication needs relative to decision-making by establishing recognized feedback mechanisms that allow needs and opinions to funnel up and down to the appropriate leadership level. This will more accurately identify those needs and positively impact employee satisfaction. Effective communication between and among the levels and units within the institution will increase with the development of feedback mechanisms.
- Leader communication skills. This Action Project helps identify communication traits of successful leaders and plan for needed training and resources. Ultimately, campus-wide standards would influence future selection of leaders.
- Leader evaluation process. Clarifying leadership job descriptions and developing campus-wide standards for

the evaluation of leaders will increase consistency in job performance and evaluation, permit better measures collection and analysis, and reduce confusion on the part of both leaders and subordinates regarding true job responsibilities.

**5: Explain the rationale for the length of time planned for this Action Project (from kickoff to target completion):**

- A:
- Sep.-Nov. 2011 – Conduct a communications audit: Identify leaders' current understanding of their communications role; identify perceived current state of feedback mechanisms from all the campus community; identify actual feedback mechanisms; analyze the collected data and summarize the communications audit. An academic service learning project in an MBA Business Communications course will complete the majority of this work under the oversight of the instructor, Action Project Task Force, and Director of Human Resources.
  - Nov.-Dec. 2011 – Identify successful leader communication traits and conduct gap analysis. Established human resource tools, employee surveys from existing templates, focus groups, and a study of best practices will be employed.
  - Jan.-Apr.2012 – Update job position descriptions; Develop feedback mechanisms; Plan communication skills and feedback mechanism training;
  - May-Sep. 2012– Pilot train leaders in communication skills and feedback mechanisms; Develop Leadership Evaluation Plan; Pilot Leadership Evaluation Plan and revisions
  - Oct.-Dec. 2012 – Assessment project's outcomes; Revise processes based upon assessment
  - Dec. 2012 - Conclude project

**6: Describe how you plan to monitor how successfully your efforts on this Action Project are progressing:**

A: Identified critical success factors are transparency for "buy-in, leader support and good information as measured by campus community participation in dialog and data collection, and leader engagement in the issues and solutions at regularly scheduled administrative meetings. At the outset, discussions with project sponsors, task force and key stakeholders on project goals will reinforce the scope. Information will run through campus media to promote awareness and understanding of the project's intent and avoid apprehension or distrust. If one method of data collection, such as surveys, lacks satisfactory response, then alternative methods will be employed. Mid-term and final reports will be presented to the President's Council, as well as posted to the NMU AQIP website. The Action Project Review received from AQIP after submitting our Annual Report will be posted at the NMU AQIP website.

A timetable with agreed upon milestones, expected outcomes and lead person(s) will help ensure the project's tracking. The Action Project Task Force will employ an existing collaborative tool, SHARE, to manage the documentation and communication needs. SHARE has worked well for past projects. In addition to the mid-term and final reports, progress will be included in the regular AQIP status reports to the President's Council.

**7: Describe the overall "outcome" measures or indicators that will tell you whether this Action Project has been a success or failure in achieving its goals:**

- A:
- Development of ongoing assessment of information dissemination through recognized campus communication channels and leadership communication roles.
  - Creation of defined process for a feedback mechanism to funnel ideas and opinions up and down the leadership chain.
  - Implemented leadership communication strategies that include, but are not limited to:
    - Inventory developed of needed communication traits of successful leaders

- Communication expectations defined for each leadership position with updated job descriptions on file
  - Revised leader evaluation form(s) and procedures as it relates to communication that are pilot tested
  - Leadership communication skills training plan built and resources identified based upon a needs analysis
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- Creation of a plan for Action Project assessment as a long-term measure of effectiveness that can be incorporated into the Systems Portfolio. For example as a post-test, the initial procedure used to identify leaders' current understanding of their communications role and perceived current state of feedback mechanisms could be replicated, comparing the results to the pre-project data.
  - Possible ancillary benefits are increased employee trust and morale, time-savings due to increasingly efficient communications, and enhancement of the selection of future leaders.

*Note: This project declaration was reviewed by Danielle J. Moffett, AQIP Coordinator at Western New Mexico University.*