

## NMU AQIP Action Project

Title: Improving Student Success and Retention (VERSION 2)

Category 3: Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs

Start Date: 1-30-2014

Target Completion Date: 1-30-2015

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

The intent of this project is to review and evaluate institutional services and practices related to student retention currently in place across the institution in the context of 'best practices'. Following that review, develop recommendations and implement systemic change that will improve student retention, success and degree completion.

### **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:**

For the past 10 years enrollment has been relatively flat or declining and in this climate the retention and success of our current students has received greater attention. In Fall 2011 the provost and vice president for academic affairs formed a retention committee composed of faculty, staff and administrators, whose primary charge was to examine various aspects of the instructional process in order to make recommendations that would lead to increased student success and decreased withdrawals and failures. Much of the focus of this committee's recommendations was on the approximately 15% of incoming freshman that do not meet regular admission standards and are typically considered at-risk students. In Winter 2013 a senior executive with direct responsibility for student retention issues related to academic affairs was named.

In addition to retention activities in the academic affairs division, numerous retention-related programs are overseen by the enrollment management /student services division. Examples include the First Year Experience Program, Academic and Career Advising Center, and Campus Tutoring Services. Other units on campus also support student retention and success.

Data from the retention committee's annual evaluation of their program as well as feedback from leadership in the First Year Experience Program, Academic and Career Advisement Center, Campus Tutoring and other stakeholders indicates that coordination between the programs may increase the effectiveness of the retention efforts.

The purpose of this action project is to evaluate, based on best practices, the effectiveness and impact of the current institutional programs and services that are related to student success and retention and how best to improve the coordination and communication of those practices leading to enhanced effectiveness of the retention efforts.

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

The areas most affected or involved are academic affairs, enrollment management and student services. Additionally, we anticipate that the office of institutional research as well as information technology will provide data and other technical support, which will inform and support the retention efforts.

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

Student Retention and Completion (including but not limited to):

- Expand the evaluation of the retention initiatives put in place by the academic affairs retention committee.
- Identification and evaluation of other university retention efforts:  
Examination of 'best practices' related to retention and student success to support the development of recommendations to improve student retention, success, and completion.
- Examine academic advising policies and practices and review opportunities identified but not yet implemented.

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

Adjustments for existing programs may only need clearly defined oversight or reporting. However substantive changes including new retention efforts and /or communication and coordination changes may require more extensive investigation, as well as a longer period for implementation, but investigation can be done in the intended timeframe.

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

- The task force will be representative of administrators, faculty, staff and students who will be directly impacted by the implementation of changes to current programs or new retention efforts. The task force will be held accountable for regular update reports or presentations.
- The NMU AQIP website will serve as a source for public distribution of documents and announcements.
- An intranet site will serve as a repository of task force documents.

**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:**

- Establish comprehensive, focused student retention programs and services with clear lines of responsibility and communication.
- Identification of program specific measures of success that will allow programs and services to be more effect and responsive to student needs.
- Increased recognition of the importance of retention throughout the institution leading to proactive intervention in advising, academics and student services.
- The long-range goal is to raise third-semester retention for all first-time, full-time freshman from approximately 72% to 75%. It is expected that achievement of this goal will take longer than the time frame of the current action project. It is also recognized that factors outside of the control of the University can impact student retention such as change in the local economy, however the current plan should recognize and help to mitigate these factors.

# NMU AQIP Action Project Annual Update

Title: Improving Student Success and Retention (VERSION 2)

Category 3: Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs

Start Date: 1-30-2014

Target Completion Date: 1-30-2015

## 1. Current project status summary

Briefly describe the current status of the project.

A committee composed of administrators, faculty, staff and students was formed. Specific attention was focused in current practices related to retention with a goal of evaluation of those practices. Initially, six areas were identified and subcommittees were formed to develop information on best practice and to compare best practice to current practice.

Two primary areas were identified for further examination; advising and early academic warning and efforts are underway to develop strategies that can be implemented or begin implementation by the end of the action project.

Explain how this project relates to any strategic initiatives or challenges described in the institution's most recent or soon-to-be submitted systems portfolio, if applicable.

NMU's 2014 Systems Portfolio highlights several retention-related activities that are currently taking place on campus. For example, the newly implemented "Signals" program combines data needed to advise students from multiple student records screens (Banner) and pulls data directly from faculty online grade books in the course management system (EduCat). A graphic signal (green, yellow or red) representing the student's up-to-date grade in each of their courses, includes *every* student rather than a select group. One priority of this Action Project is to evaluate the success of Signals and provide recommendations for future use.

Several other retention initiatives addressed in the 2014 Systems Portfolio are under consideration by the Action Project Committee in an attempt to evaluate current initiatives, specifically identifying those that demonstrate best practices in higher education retention.

## 2. Original project

List the project goals as stated in the original project declaration along with the metrics/measures for assessing the progress for each goal.

Expand the evaluation of retention initiatives put in place by academic affairs retention committee. This goal is assessed by comparing the third semester retention of first-time full-time freshman in both the first and second year cohorts to the previous five year retention rates. Additionally, the fifth semester retention is being examined for the initial student cohort.

Identification and evaluation of university retention efforts and comparison to "best practices" related to retention and student success. This goal is being assessed by identifying practices within the university that have

direct impact on student retention, determining best practice and outlining recommendations to improve current practice.

Examine academic advising policies and practices and review opportunities identified but not yet implemented. This goal will be judged to be successful by the implementation of new practices that increase advising effectiveness.

### **3. ACCOMPLISHMENTS OVER THE PAST YEAR**

Describe what has been accomplished with this project over the past year, specifically referring to quantifiable results that show progress. You may need to include a discussion clarifying how the original goals and anticipated outcomes may have shifted during the year

After examination of the practices at the university related to student retention it was determined that a more focused approach was necessary. The majority of the committee's attention has been primarily in two areas: Early academic warning, particularly for students in introductory courses and implementation of changes in institutional advising practices.

Early academic warning – a soft rollout of a new program “Signals” using the university's course management tool, Moodle based “EduCat” has a focus of the committee. The committee has recruited faculty to participate in the program with special focus on introductory courses that have large enrollments and historically high drop/fail/withdraw rates.

The committee is looking at the advantages and disadvantages of changing the advising model from the current faculty advising model to a centralized advising model. In this new model all incoming students would be advised by centralized advisors from the Academic and Career Advising Center (ACAC). Currently the ACAC staff advise new students that are undeclared, that are on freshman probation, and those that are admitted into the General University Studies associate degree program. ACAC staff also assist students in any academic program with specific questions.

### **4. INSTITUTIONAL INVOLVEMENT**

Describe how various members of the learning community have participated in this action project. Show the breadth of involvement by individuals and groups over the project's duration, particularly during the past year

The AQIP action project committee is representative of a number of groups on campus including faculty, staff, administration and students. Additionally, numerous faculty members teaching large introductory courses are participating in the Signals program, student tutors participating in the academic affairs retention initiative have been involved in retention efforts and are also participating in the Signals program. Institutional research has been heavily involved in providing data necessary to determine success of our programs as well as the director of accreditation and assessment. Finally, the staff of Information Services and the Center for Teaching and Learning have been heavily impacted by the creation and modification of the “Signals” program.

### **5. EFFECTIVE PRACTICES**

Describe the effect that this project has had on the institution, students, and others in the learning community. What has the institution learned that can be identified as a good practice to use in other aspects of its quality work or from which other institutions might benefit

At this point in the action project the impact on the institution has been minimal. The beginning implementation of the “Signals” program will impact a modest number of students during its initial roll-out as well as the faculty who have opted into the program. As we overcome obstacles and assess impact on student success we will have

much to share with other institutions.

## **6. ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES TO PROJECT SUCCESS**

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

It is anticipated that there will be some hesitation from faculty that do not use EduCat or at least do not use the gradebook in participating in the academic early warning system "Signals". Some faculty members have expressed concern about the necessity of altering gradebook to become Signals compliant.

We anticipate that there will be several departments that will be resistant to turning advising of their freshmen cohort to the ACAC staff advisors. Our committee has recognized that it will be necessary to provide considerable education of the faculty in those department or move initially to a co-advising model to get departmental buy in.

## **7. PLANNED NEXT STEPS AND TIME LINE**

In light of the project goals, current circumstances, institutional learning from this project, and anticipated barriers to success, list the next steps to be taken over the course of the next 12 - 24 months in order to complete or institutionalize the results of this action project. Provide a timeline for completing each next step.

It is planned that we will have implemented the Signals program and assessed one semester's worth of data by January 31, 2015. Additionally, we will have recruited faculty to participate in the second semester of the program. In December 2014 we will survey both the students that participated in the Signals program as well as the faculty. Any changes to the program that comes from this feedback will be forwarded to the staff of Information Services.

Also by January 31, 2015 a formal proposal for a change to centralized advising will be completed and presented to the Vice President for Enrollment Management and the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost. If approved the proposal will be presented to the campus community with an implementation date of Fall 2015.

## **8. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, QUESTIONS, OR CONCERNS**

Provide any additional information, inquires, or concerns that the institution wishes for reviewers to understand regarding this action project.