**Road Map Benchmarking Action Project Update – September 2009**

A. Describe the past year’s accomplishments and the current status of this Action Project.

The Road Map to 2015 is the framework that guides Northern Michigan University’s strategic planning. As noted in the Road Map description, “The Road Map is and will be an evolving document. But it must also provide *benchmarks* by which to guide our decision making and our work with students.” The Road Map is organized around four themes, and each theme has goals and priorities. The Road Map itself does *not* contain benchmarks, however, and the purpose of this Action Project was to create those measures.

The four themes of the Road Map to 2015 are: *Innovation, Meaningful Lives, Leveraging Campus Attributes, and Community Engagement*. The Benchmark Working Committees, one for each of the themes, selected members to represent the diversity of each of the Road Map Themes. Committee membership is described below; each Committee met on a weekly basis to complete their work. After considerable discussion, the groups agreed to define “benchmark” as the current level of activity in the areas defined by the Road Map, rather than as a target level of activity. The groups also defined a university-wide planning cycle with steps as follows:

1. Articulate Vision and Goals
2. Develop Strategic Priorities
3. **Create Assessment Measures (Benchmarks)**
4. Set Target for the Assessment Measures
5. Create Actions to Achieve Goals and Priorities
6. Evaluate Progress Utilizing the Assessment Measures
7. Revise and revisit steps 1-4, above.

As the work of the committees progressed, a set of principles emerged that helped structure the work efforts.

1. **Principle One: Benchmarks need to become an integral part of the University’s planning processes.** The University has numerous planning procedures in place. The efficacy of these processes is best tested with a consistent set of benchmarks that will confirm (or not) the effects of the strategies we adopt. We have a rich store of internal data to support longitudinal studies, and reports from these are regularly produced. However, we need to ensure that we can explain causal relations between our actions and desired outcomes using a consistent set of benchmarks.

Michigan has a well-developed repository for recording individual university benchmark values over a comprehensive set of enrollment and financial variables. National comparative data is available at IPEDS. While the university relies on these for establishing our position relative to a set of comprehensive peers, additional work can be done in this area.

1. **Principle Two: Benchmarks need to become part of the University’s public statement of accountability.** Northern Michigan University recently became a member of the national Voluntary System of Accountability Program, which was designed to “…improve public understanding of how public colleges and universities operate”. Information shared in this public forum generally includes data about students and their families; student experiences and perceptions; and student learning outcomes. The benchmarks defined via this Action Project will be useful as we develop measures that represent the state of NMU that will be shared with the public.

1. **Principle Three:** **The collection, maintenance and publication of benchmarks must be routine and managed.** The university has invested in technology, both to support student learning and to automate work-flow and the dissemination of information. We have the software tools to expedite the collection and publication of benchmarks. Data sources we relied upon for our benchmarks came from a variety of sources, including: *Banner,* NMU’s repository of university data; HEIDI, Michigan’s repository of common university information data; and IPEDS, the federal repository of common university information. Data from these disparate sources can be assembled into a single local data store and managed by the NMU AdIT (Administrative Information Technology) staff.

Some of the benchmark data will flow through our content management system to become part of our public statement of accountability. Other benchmark data will feed various internal planning/review processes. Significantly, the University has already invested in the underlying software infrastructure. A critical next step will be to create the data stores from which benchmark values can be computed. A substantial majority of these data already exist, and our challenge will be to organize them in a fashion that makes them intuitive to use and relevant to our planning processes.

The benchmarks that were developed are displayed in the Final Report of this Action Project (see: <http://webb.nmu.edu/aqip/SiteSections/ActionProjects/Roadmap/RoadMapIntro.shtml>). In all, 53 benchmarks were identified in the *Innovation* theme, 56 benchmarks in the *Meaningful Lives* theme, 86 in the *Leveraging Campus Attributes* theme, and 33 in the *Community Engagement* theme.

In addition to determining appropriate benchmarks for each of the themes, we attempted to identify the following per benchmark:

* Person responsible for collecting the benchmark data
* Planning process(es) that would use the benchmark
* Site of publication of the benchmark (internal to NMU, or displayed publicly)
* Peers against whom the NMU benchmark would be measured

The major goals of this project were reached: we have identified current levels of activity with respect to the goals and priorities identified in the Road Map. However, for this information to be useful in our continuing planning processes, we must now focus on the already identified steps in our university-wide planning cycle (see above), turning those benchmarks into objectives that describe specific, measurable outcomes, and then setting a timetable for achieving those outcomes.

***AQIP Review*** *(09-24-09):*

This is a truly impressive Action Project that exemplifies AQIP’s quality principles and the purposeful, continuous improvement of systems and processes in support of institutional goals! While the primary goal of this Action Project, the identification of benchmarks for each of the Road Map themes, has been accomplished, the institution clearly understands and articulates the necessary next steps -- identification of outcomes for each of the benchmarks and a timetable within which to evaluate their progress. Managing the number of benchmarks that have been identified will be a challenge; using technology to automate the work, including the development of a single data store, will help the institution meet the challenges involved in this aspect of the project.

B. Describe how the institution involved people in work on this Action Project.

Four working committees were created to accomplish the goals of this project; all of these committees were chaired by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The NMU AQIP Liaison also attended all meetings of the four committees, to ensure consistency in the output of the groups. Members of these committees consulted with their units between the weekly meetings to collect the requested information.

Members of the *Innovation* committee, which addressed the broad concept of ensuring that our curriculum remains relevant and meaningful, and that our teaching continues to be contemporary and effective, included the Chairman of the Academic Faculty Senate, the Director of the NMU Foundation, the Dean of the College of Professional Studies, the Director of Human Resources, the Chief Information Officer, and the Director of Grants and Research.

Members of the *Meaningful Lives* committee, which derived benchmarks to maximize the opportunity for students to succeed in their university experience and lead productive, meaningful lives, included the Chairman of the Liberal Studies Committee, the Associate Provost for Student Affairs, the Director of the Academic and Career Advisement Center, the Director of the Center for Native American Studies, the Director of Financial Aid, the Director of Academic Computing, the Director of the Honors Program, and the Chairwoman of the Teaching and Learning Advisory Committee.

Members of the *Campus Attributes* committee, tasked with finding benchmarks to gauge our success in leveraging our unique rural and rugged physical location into quality academic programs and a sustainable campus environment, included the Associate Vice President for Business and Auxiliary Services, the Dean of Academic Information Services, the Director of Broadcasting and Audio Visual Services, the Director of the NMU Beaumier Museum, the Associate Dean and Director of the School of Art and Design, our largest academic major, and the Chairman of the Educational Policy Committee.

Finally, members of the *Community Engagement* Committee, which derived benchmarks to ensure that NMU provides our students a rich learning environment outside of campus as described in our recently-obtained classification as a Carnegie Foundation “Community Engaged” university, included the Director of Student Enrichment, the Coordinator of the NMU Superior Edge Program, the Faculty Chairman of Academic Service Learning, the Department Head of Political Science and Public Administration, the Director of the Center for Economic Education and Entrepreneurship, the CEO of the Lake Superior Community Partnership (the local area Chamber of Commerce), a Faculty Member of the Department of Sociology/Social Work, and the Interim Director of Continuing Education.

***AQIP Review*** *(09-24-09):*

The broad-based membership of each of the four thematic sub-committees and the active participation of these stakeholders in improvement processes is evidence of a culture of inclusion and indicative of AQIP Category 4 – Valuing People, and Category 9 – Building Collaborative Relationships. The participation of the Committee Chair and AQIP Liaison across the four sub-committees is a best practice that likely contributed to continuity of purpose and consistency of output as the work progressed. The Action Project’s description had stated that this project was expected to “involve work from all NMU employees and many students”. It is unclear, however, how students have been engaged in this work.

C. Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.

The next phase will move us along the planning process demarcated by this Action Project Committee, from the creation of benchmarks to the subsequent steps outlined in response (A), above:

* **Set Targets for the Assessment Measures**
* **Create Actions to Achieve Goals and Priorities**
* **Evaluate Progress Utilizing the Assessment Measures**

We recognize that each of these steps will require input from many segments of the NMU community; we also acknowledge the substantial time commitment necessary to adequately complete each step. One of our proposed 2009-10 Action Projects is to continue this important task. As noted on the NMU AQIP website (see: <http://webb.nmu.edu/aqip/SiteSections/ActionProjects/ProposedActionProjects2010.shtml>), this and other potential Action Projects are currently the topic of conversation across campus. However, whether we embark upon this as an AQIP Action Project or as a Road Map project fostered by the Office of the President, this important work will continue during the 2009-10 academic year.

***AQIP Review*** *(09-24-09):*

While the major goals of this Action Project have been met (identified current levels of activity with respect to the goals and priorities identified in the Road Map), the University will be able to build upon the foundation developed during this work as it continues to refine its strategic planning framework. The institution will benefit from its enhanced ability to plan and implement strategic initiatives as a result of this work.

D. Describe any “effective practice(s)” that resulted from your work on this Action Project

The most effective practice from this Action Project involved identifying the steps remaining so that we will realize the goals articulated by the Road Map. These steps included the identification of:

* the set of three principles that helped structure the work load of each committee;
* the 7 steps involved in a fully functional, university planning cycle; and
* the person who will be responsible for collecting benchmark data; the planning processes that will use each benchmark; benchmark publication site (internal or external); and the peers against whom each NMU benchmark will be measured.

A consistent definition of these processes permitted this Action Project to refine what began as a formidable task into a system that we can use in future planning efforts.

***AQIP Review*** *(09-24-09):*

Shared understanding of the definition of benchmarks, the planning cycle, and a set of guiding principles were used to structure this work; the University will be able to build upon this foundation as it embarks on the next phase of this extensive undertaking. The AQIP Categories evident in this work include Valuing People (4), Leading and Communicating (5), Measuring Effectiveness (7), and Planning Continuous Improvement (8). The institution has achieved an exceptional accomplishment through this Action Project, and its work represents an “outstanding practice” that should be shared with other higher education institutions.

E. What challenges, if any, are you still facing in regards to this Action Project?

The largest challenge remaining with this Action Project does not reflect inactivity or lack of achieving goals on the part of committee members; rather, it reflects the substantial charge presented by our Road Map to 2015 strategic plan: to articulate our goals, develop strategic priorities within each goal, create measurable benchmarks for these priorities, set targets for these benchmarks, create actions to achieve the goals, and finally assess our progress towards using these measures. The articulation of the Road Map defined goals and priorities, and this Action Project created benchmarks for those priorities. The remaining challenges – setting targets, creating actions, and assessing our progress – will be addressed during the current and subsequent academic years.

A second challenge that arose while completing the current Action Project exists because we did not delay Road Map activity while working on the project; indeed, we enthusiastically encouraged that progress. The Road Map to 2015 was an important focus of discussion at the recent July 2009 annual President’s Council Retreat. Progress on Road Map goals and priorities was evaluated, after which current priorities were ranked according to if they 1) had been completed, 2) should remain, with revisions, 3) should remain as originally written, or 4) should be dropped. A fifth category represented new priorities that could be added to the Road Map. This exercise indicated that 78 distinct programs and events had occurred to meet the goals and priorities defined under the Innovation theme of the Road Map; 61 under the Meaningful Lives theme; 72 under the Leveraging Campus Attributes theme, and 47 under the Community Engagement theme (the Road Map to 2015 – July 2009 Update can be viewed here: <http://webb.nmu.edu/aqip/RoadmapUpdate.pdf>). Hence, an important challenge for this project will be to integrate the continual Road Map progress with the evolving benchmarks and targets, actions, and assessment measures of those activities.

***AQIP Review*** *(09-24-09):*

The environment in which the institution operates is constantly changing; its systems and processes must be agile and responsive to these changing environmental needs and conditions. The University clearly demonstrated this core principle of high performance organizations by adapting work on this Action Plan as the Road Map framework continued to evolve.

F. If you would like to discuss the possibility of AQIP providing you help to stimulate progress on this Action Project, explain your need(s) here and tell us who to contact and when.

While we will retire this Action Project, the benchmarks that resulted from the project will form the basis for the next chapter in realizing the goals set forth in the Road Map to 2015. We must now select the most important of these benchmarks, and define objectives for each of the corresponding priorities that describe specific, measurable outcomes, and a timetable for achieving those outcomes. Given the progress that we made this year, and the fact that we will embark upon this second phase of setting priority targets and creating actions for those targets in the current year, we do not ask for help from AQIP on the next phase of this project.

***Review*** *(09-24-09):*

As a result of this Action Plan, the institution’s framework for implementing strategic initiatives has been refined. Using the planning cycle, guiding principles, and the process and outcome measures that were established for this project, the institution should be able to leverage the sub-committees that are in place to continue this important work.