Higher Learning Commission

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August 5, 2025

Mr. Gavin Leach
Interim President
Northern Michigan University
1401 Presque Isle Avenue
Marquette, Michigan 49855-5301

Dear President Leach,

This letter is accompanied by the Quality Initiative Report (QIR) Review form completed by a peer review panel. Northern Michigan University's QIR showed genuine effort and has been accepted by the Commission. The attached reviewer evaluation contains a rationale for this outcome.

Peer reviewers evaluate all the QIRs based on the genuine effort of the institution, the seriousness of the undertaking, the significance of scope and impact of the work, the genuineness of the commitment to the initiative, and adequate resource provision.

If you have questions about the QIR reviewer information, please contact either Kathy Bijak (kbijak@hlcommission.org) or Pat Newton-Curran (pnewton@hlcommission.org).

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Form

Open Pathway Quality Initiative Report
Panel Review and Recommendation Form

Review Process

The Quality Initiative panel review process evaluates the institution's effort in undertaking the Quality Initiative Proposal approved by HLC. The Quality Initiative process encourages institutions to take risks, innovate, take on a tough challenge, or pursue a yet unproven strategy or hypothesis. Thus, failure of an initiative to achieve its goals is acceptable. An institution may learn much from such failure. What is not acceptable is failure of the institution to pursue the initiative with genuine effort. Genuineness of effort, not success of the initiative, constitutes the focus of the Quality Initiative review and serves as its sole point of evaluation.

Submission Instructions

Submit the final report as a Word document to HLC at hlcommission.org/upload. Select "Pathways/Quality Initiatives" from the list of submission options to ensure the report is sent to the correct HLC staff member. The file name for the report should follow this format: QI Report Review <Name of Institution>.

Name of Institution: Northern Michigan University

State: Michigan

Institutional ID: 1354

Reviewers (names, titles, institutions): Barbara R. Jones, PhD, President-retired, South Arkansas Community College; Marilyn Holmgren, PhD, Associate Provost-retired, National American University

Date: August 5, 2025

I. Quality Initiative Review

☒ The institution demonstrated its seriousness of the undertaking.

☒ The institution demonstrated that the initiative had scope and impact.

☒ The institution demonstrated a commitment to and engagement in the initiative.

☒ The institution demonstrated adequate resource provision.

II. Recommendation

☒ The panel confirms genuine effort on the part of the institution.

☐ The panel cannot confirm genuine effort on the part of the institution.

III. Rationale (required)

The Northern Michigan University (NMU) Quality Initiative Report (QIR) demonstrated the seriousness the institution has had over the past three years, as time, energy, and resources have been committed to their Quality Initiative (QI) focused on improving the strategic planning process. NMU has demonstrated a concerted effort in planning and implementing the QI. They have shown a commitment to leadership, engagement of faculty, staff, students, and community, and provided adequate resources to the initiative. As noted in their report, the initiative,"…changed not just *what* NMU plans, but *how* we plan strategically, creating systems and culture that will sustain the institutional improvement far beyond any single strategic planning cycle."

NMU demonstrated a commitment to the QI process through an extensive initiative which was broad in scope, and which has had a significant and lasting impact on the institution. The initiative focused on building a planning culture. The strategic planning process was assigned to an expanding Institutional Effectiveness unit. The new university processes included communications, outcomes documentation and measurement, operation of committees, and a focus on communication, accountability, and transparency. As a result, an Interim Strategic Plan was developed and implemented for 2022-2024 using these emerging processes. Subsequently, NMU developed a new comprehensive strategic plan*, Our Compass*, using these refined processes. The scope of the strategic planning and implementation processes have been significant in the life of the university, the success and wellbeing of students, the relationships with the community, and the ongoing viability of the region. The strategic plan has been operationalized, the Carbon Neutrality Plan has a structure and timeline, well-being initiatives are moving forward through adoption of the Okanagan Charter and appointment of an AVP for Wellbeing, and communication, collaboration, and cross-functional committees are now part of the institutional culture. Ongoing challenges include sustaining the enthusiasm of the QI process, assessment and evaluation processes, and cross campus engagement. With the resignation of President Tessman, who has been a committed champion of the QI, the university leadership will need to continue championing the plan and support the momentum with adequate time, effort, leadership, and resources to assure timelines are met, results are reviewed, actions plans are implemented, and growth and improvement of the university continues.

Planning and implementation of the strategic plans have included a highly inclusive level of engagement involving faculty, students, staff, administrators, and community members. It resulted in three "Grand Challenges" and numerous specific strategies with identified measurable outcomes and a method of documenting and displaying progress. The NMU website documents the progress toward completion of the strategic plan strategies. NMU describes the cultural transformation that occurred because of the QI to include restructuring of the President's Leadership Council, students trained as leaders/facilitators, dashboard development, shared measurement and assessment tool development, committee and action team activities, and cooperative and coordinated planning and implementation activities across all spectrums of the campus environment. As they described and documented, the transformation is an institutional cultural transformation which continues to be a

work in progress. The university also utilized Collective Impact, Lean Thinking, and Strategic Doing principles to assist in this significant cultural transformation.

The institution demonstrated adequate resource provision to the QI. Resources included expanding the Institutional Effectiveness unit, assignment of executive leadership for Grand Challenges, technology enhancements, investment in AI tools for survey analysis, student facilitator training and compensation, professional development training workshops, and funds for other sessions. The institution has established a $15,000 annual strategic planning line in the budget. The website also lists several grants and gifts which have been secured to support the challenges of the strategic plan. It would be helpful to demonstrate a connection between Challenges/Strategies/Actions and the budget for those initiatives that have financial implications.