

## **HEARTLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

### **AQIP PARTICIPATION APPLICATION**

Heartland Community College received its most recent NCA accreditation visit in January 1999 and is not formally due for another such visit until 2009. Since that last visit the NCA has introduced the AQIP process, and with this application Heartland is formally applying for admission to AQIP status.

**Question 1 . How does your organization currently demonstrate that it meets each of the Higher Learning Commission's five *Criteria for Accreditation*?**

**Criterion One: Mission and Integrity.** The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students.

**Criterion One, Part 1: The organization's mission documents are clear and articulate publicly the organization's commitments.**

Heartland Community College's mission statement is simple and straightforward: The College "provides access to higher education and excellence in teaching and learning." This statement appears in every edition of the College Catalog and is displayed on the College's Website, <http://heartland.edu>. Copies of the College's mission statement, an articulation of its vision and philosophy, and an enumeration of its institutional values are also mailed to potential employees who are invited to campus for interviews.

The mission statement also identifies eight institutional purposes and goals through which the College's mission is fulfilled (see Appendix 2). These purposes and goals are measurable and can serve as one means of evaluating the institutional effectiveness of the College.

**Criterion 1, Part 2: In its mission documents, the organization recognizes the diversity of its learners, other constituencies, and the greater society it serves.**

An acknowledgment of the value of diversity has always been a part of the College's mission statement. In its most current formulation, that statement recognizes the goal to "promote appreciation of human diversity and commonality" as one measure of institutional effectiveness in fulfilling the College's mission. Similarly, the philosophy and values statement of the instructional area of the College affirms that "the diversity of our student body is a strength for the institution and for our students as they learn from each other." Recognizing that "students arrive at Heartland Community College from different cultures and with varying goals and objectives," this statement acknowledges that "they have the right to expect that this diversity will be both appreciated and respected."

One of the strengths of Heartland Community College's commitment to diversity lies in the breadth of the College's definition of the term, which is understood to include not only such aspects as culture and heritage, but also a consideration for learning style and ability.

An appreciation of diversity is one of the four categories in which students' general education progress is assessed, indicating that faculty at the College believe it is among the important skills and abilities that our students will need upon leaving the institution.

An affirmative recruitment and hiring policy have further underscored the College's commitment to diversity, with the result that both employee and student demographics mirror those of the district as a whole.

**Criterion 1, Part 3: Understanding of and support for the mission pervade the institution.**

During its 1999 comprehensive evaluation of the College, the Commission on Institutions of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools determined that the College's mission "was well understood" by members of the Board of Trustees, administrators, faculty and staff, and students. The Commission team reached this conclusion by spending time interviewing representatives of each of these groups. The College is confident that similar inquiry today would produce the same result.

Understanding of and support for the College's mission continues to be widespread. As already noted, the College's mission statement undergoes regular review as part of the annual strategic planning process. It was revised and made more concise in November 2002.

The College also is engaged in strategic planning, with an annual review as part of the strategic planning process. The strategic plan consists of five institutional goals and associated actions as well as operating goals and initiatives. Unit and College goals are derived from input from all College constituents. The five strategic goals are related to the Illinois Board of Higher Education's Illinois Commitment and to the Illinois Community College Board's Promise for Illinois as well as to the College's mission. This plan also includes a review of external data (environmental scan, State goals) and internal data (CQI Report, Program Review, Performance Review, Assessment Report). All are evaluated basically to determine if we are fulfilling our mission—and if we are doing a good job.

**Criterion 1, Part 4: The organization's governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the organization to fulfill its mission.**

An emphasis on collaborative decision-making has been characteristic of the College since its inception. One of the first actions of the College's executive management team was to attempt to define and articulate a set of values that would help form the ethos and working environment of the College. There were two primary reasons for this approach. First, it was hoped that an explicit statement of institutional values would supplant the notion of management as creators and enforcers of arbitrary policies and procedures with a concept of managers as facilitators of organizational goals, behaviors and attitudes, affording employees a stronger sense of ownership and self-direction. A second motive was the desire explicitly to link values, mission, and goals, thus providing a meaningful way to evaluate policies, practices, and even performance. Appropriately, the identification of institutional values was itself a collaborative process. Early drafts were distributed for broad internal input before a final version was presented to the Board of Trustees for adoption.

A similar process underlies much decision-making at the College today. A typical response when new problems confront the College is something like the following process: an ad hoc team is formed that is broadly representative of the College community, or at least of those bodies affected by the decision. As the team reaches preliminary consensus, its recommendations and other findings along with their rationale are shared with the larger group(s) for their reaction and input. The team then uses that feedback in forming its final conclusions.

A good example of this process at work can be seen in the Quality Council, one of the four major standing committees at the College. This committee, comprised of the broadest possible representation of campus faculty, staff, and administrators, reviews all campus-wide policies and initiatives. The Quality Council also previews many of the reports submitted to State offices, such as the Performance Report and the Accountability and Program Review Report.

**Criterion 1, Part 5: The organization upholds and protects its integrity.**

The College has striven continually to demonstrate integrity in its practices and relationships. Although certainly not an inclusive list, the following are examples of measurable indicators that illustrate this commitment:

- The College makes available (either in print or on College Web pages) up to date versions of College policies and procedures that are consistent with the College's mission, philosophy, and stated values
- The College has grievance procedures in place to resolve internal disputes
- College publications, statements, and advertising accurately and fairly describe the institution, its operations, and its programs
- The College maintains cooperative working agreements with district high schools, other community colleges, and four year institutions
- Hiring practices and other institutional procedures ensure equity of treatment, non-discrimination, affirmative action, and other means of enhancing access to education and the building of a diverse educational community
- The College has in place procedures and processes for monitoring contractual arrangements with government, organizations, and the business community
- Meetings of the College's Board of Trustees adhere to all provisions of the Illinois Open Meeting Act
- Various institutional reports to the State and federal government—enrollment, credit and non-credit count, etc—also insure the integrity of the institution.

**Question 1, Criterion Two: Preparing for the Future. The organization's allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.**

**Criterion Two, Part 1: The organization realistically prepares for a future shaped by multiple societal and economic trends.**

The College follows a five-year cycle for strategic planning, with annual reviews and updates of both college-level and unit-level strategic goals and actions. Environmental scanning of internal and external trends occurs continuously and mechanisms are in place to incorporate necessary adjustments to ongoing activities.

During all of our institutional planning meetings, we have adapted and modified both short term and long-range goals for the college, using studies of our changing demographics to adapt and update our programs. For example, when a need was identified for more employees that could speak Spanish fluently, we recruited a Spanish-speaking adviser for Student Services. When an important regional employer announced extensive layoffs, the College reacted by offering and providing retraining services to the displaced workers.

On a smaller scale, this planning also occurs in the academic divisions. The Nursing program, for instance, has consistently surveyed graduates and employers for feedback on its program. The Technology division adapts its program offerings frequently to meet a changing external climate.

**Criterion Two, Part 2: The organization's resource base supports its educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.**

HCC maintains several planning tools to ensure that adequate resources are available to support current and future programs and services of the institution. Included among these planning documents are a Strategic Budget, a Financial Reserves Plan, a Technology Master Plan, and a Facilities Master Plan.

The Strategic Budget is a rolling 5-year budget model for the primary operating funds of the College. This model projects all operating revenues pursuant to a set of dynamic assumptions that are reviewed several times throughout the year. As factors impacting the assumptions change, the Strategic Budget revenues are altered to reflect these changes. Likewise, expenses are estimated for each fiscal year included in the model. Expenses are calculated on the basis of anticipated staffing needs and related benefit costs; planned technology expenditures for a specific year; projected fixed costs; acceptable levels of expenditure for materials, supplies, and travel; established fund transfer amounts; and targeted accumulation of fund balances. This Strategic Budget provides the framework for the more precise development of the current fiscal year's operating budget.

A Financial Reserves Plan was created to clearly identify the priority the Board of Trustees and Executive Leadership placed on insuring resources are available both for unforeseen events and addressing planned growth opportunities for the College. This Plan defines the amount of money to be committed annually to the institutional Operating Fund reserves. These reserves then accumulate by fund for use when necessary or as planned, for example, with a construction project.

Heartland places a high priority on integrating leading-edge technology in the teaching and learning environment. The same commitment to technology extends throughout all other areas of the College. To insure this commitment is sustained a Technology Master Plan was developed. This Plan identifies strategic technology initiatives the College seeks to pursue in the future. Technology initiatives are prioritized and operational as well as financial strategies are devised to implement the desired initiatives.

Adequate facilities are essential to maintaining and strengthening the quality of programs and services offered by the College. To that end a Facilities Master Plan provides a template for future physical growth of the institution. Facilities planning efforts are continually refined as the educational programs are adapted and modified over time.

As a public community college, Heartland is subject to the state-level recognition review. Currently, the recognition process involves a thorough review of College policies, procedures, reports, programs, operations, and facilities as specified by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), the state planning and coordinating agency for Illinois community colleges.

Every five years the ICCB identifies a set of standards to be used in evaluating Illinois community colleges. The college completes a self-study addressing these standards and ICCB staff review and evaluate the performance of the college on these standards. Heartland Community College recently

has completed a comprehensive Recognition review and once again has received “Recognition” from the ICCB.

**Criterion Two, Part 3: The organization’s ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement.**

Institutional effectiveness is monitored at all levels of the organization.

- The Assessment Committee monitors evaluation methods at the course level through approval of the evaluation components of each course as part of the course approval process.
- The Assessment Committee also coordinates the assessment of student learning of the general education outcomes, both through monitoring the general education outcomes associated with each course and through the systematic collection and evaluation of artifacts in designated courses each semester.
- Evaluation of program effectiveness is accomplished through the statewide Program Review process, whereby each occupational program and transfer content area is reviewed on a five-year cycle.
- The annual Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Report presents data on thirty-five measures of institutional effectiveness organized around the College’s Strategic Goals and Key Indicators.
- Comparisons of HCC’s performance with that of other Illinois community colleges are examined as part of the Performance Report submitted to the ICCB. Statewide Common Institutional Indicators and Mission-Specific Indicators show the College’s progress in achieving the goals of the IBHE’s Illinois Commitment.

Data and information assembled from each of these levels are shared with appropriate groups to provide feedback and examined for areas needing improvement. To cite one example, the mathematics curriculum was completely revised several years ago in order to smooth the transitions between developmental and more advanced courses.

**Criterion Two, Part 4: All levels of planning align with the organization’s mission, thereby enhancing its capacity to fulfill that mission.**

As part of the Strategic Planning process, the Mission is re-examined every five years and either reaffirmed or revised if appropriate. The Strategic Goals are then derived from the Mission and Institutional Purposes and related to two sets of statewide goals, the IBHE’s Illinois Commitment and the ICCB’s Promise for Illinois. Goals for the College’s four major organizational Units are derived from the College’s Institutional and Strategic Goals and department and individual goals are likewise derived from the goals of their respective units.

**Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching. The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.**

**Criterion 3, Part 1: The organization’s goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible.**

HCC's General Education Learning Outcomes center on four themes: Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Communication, and Diversity. Each of the outcome statements has been revised to improve their ease of assessment by leveling the statements and by providing clearly stated rubrics to assist faculty members in applying their assessment strategies.

The inclusion of these statements in the General Education courses was the first part of this process. Every course now has stated learning outcomes as a required component of the course syllabus. Evidence of such assessments can be found in the various faculty promotion portfolios that have been written over the past five years (evidence of faculty commitment to assessment is a component of faculty promotion portfolios).

As an example, the Nursing curriculum established learning outcomes specific to its program. Their development was much like that of the General Education Outcomes as the Nursing faculty debated the question, "What skills and knowledge do we want our graduates to possess at the end of their two years at HCC?" Those outcomes are summarized in a recent NLN accreditation document.

### **Criterion 3, Part 2: The organization values and supports effective teaching.**

Prior to start of classes each fall and spring semester the College conducts "Best Practices" workshops to which all faculty are invited. Workshop topics typically include assessment strategies, academic standards matters, or classroom issues (for example, student conduct, problems associated with emotionally disturbed students). Generally the sessions are presented by our own faculty, a feature that has been well received.

New adjunct faculty orientation, adjunct training, and adjunct mentoring are provided to encourage widespread adjunct faculty participation in the life of the College and to engage them in professional development.

- The College provides faculty support for learning new technologies such as WebCT for online and hybrid applications or Web page design.
- The Assessment Quarterly, a newsletter written and edited primarily by HCC faculty, is distributed to all faculty across the College. It provides a forum for sharing instructional methods.
- The College has vigorously supported faculty and staff Professional Development—from bringing in outside speakers to discuss important assessment topics, for example, to supporting faculty attendance and participation at local and national conferences. Faculty across the college have been exposed to the latest and best in classroom innovations.

### **Criterion 3, Part 3: The organization creates effective learning environments.**

In all its design and construction activities the College has been committed to designing classroom and lab spaces that support effective, technologically advanced, and affordable learning environments. Faculty members have participated in every phase of design—of classrooms, labs and other student use spaces.

The administration seeks faculty input in such matters as maximum class size and course format (e.g., a 2-hour time block for some math/science courses and studio formats for biology/physics courses).

The College supports hybrid and online learning formats. Certain math courses have switched to a format heavily dependent on group work.

Through its CQI efforts and with the help of the Office of Institutional Research, HCC has studied the success of developmental math and developmental English students and their transition to the college-level course that follow. Student performance data is collected in the Reading Program, and efforts are under way to study reading students' success in their first reading intensive college-level course.

The College has created a Writing Center, staffed by writing faculty, to provide tutorial assistance for students who request help with writing assignments.

**Criterion 3, Part 4: The organization's learning resources support student learning and effective teaching.**

The Division of Academic Support provides programs and services that directly support student learning and effective teaching. These include:

- A Student Tutoring Program certified by the College Reading and Learning Association.
- An Open Computing Lab providing access to 75 computers, some with course-specific software, and free printing. The computer lab is open 78 hours per week.
- Instructional Design Center that “enable[s] faculty to better respond to various learning styles and to keep abreast of new instructional technology” (1999 Self Study Report, 45).
- The HCC Library, greatly expanded in size of staff and collection. Moreover, HCC's membership in the Illinois Library Computer System Organization (ILCSO) provides patrons with access to the collection of 65 academic libraries across the state (22 million titles).

**Criterion Four: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge. The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.**

**Criterion 4, Part 1: The organization demonstrates, through the actions of its board, administrators, students, faculty, and staff, that it values a life of learning.**

The College supports academic values in a variety of ways. These include,

- Faculty and staff are encouraged to participate in professional development. College funds are provided, and faculty members may share those funds with other faculty.
- Faculty procedures governing tenure and promotion are evidence of institutional support of life-long learning.
- Faculty enrolled in advanced coursework take advantage of tuition reimbursement.
- The nursing program stresses life-long learning in the nursing curriculum. HCC's nursing graduates continue study for a BSN at approximately 23%, compared to a national average of 17%.
- Nursing students attend a regional conference each year.
- The faculty in the Technology division regularly upgrade their disciplinary skills and knowledge.
- HCC faculty receive College support for professional organizations, publications, books, conferences, workshops, and short courses. They are encouraged to pursue training and education whenever appropriate.
- Students are regularly reminded of the need to continue their education and skill attainment beyond the classroom. A goal of the technical program area is to equip students with a background sufficient to continue their learning beyond study at HCC.

**Criterion 4, Part 2: The organization demonstrates that acquisition of a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry are integral to its educational programs.**

- The College supports professional development of faculty through their attendance at conferences and through opportunities for skills attainment in the clinical area.
- The College supports instruction through purchase of the latest technology to supplement instruction with simulation models.
- “Best Practices” workshops feature presentations from HCC faculty.
- The College provides tuition reimbursement for formal education program.
- Faculty are generally encouraged to develop mastery in their particular field and, whenever appropriate, to develop additional background in secondary subjects.
- In most technical programs, students take courses consisting of a technical specialty and a component designed to broaden their skills beyond their technical specialty area.
- Every HCC degree program includes a general education component that complies with State guidelines.

**Criterion 4, Part 3: The organization assesses the usefulness of its curricula to students who will live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society.**

HCC's Curriculum Committee and Assessment Committee play an active role in reviewing curricula and assuring their appropriateness to the world outside the college. Other measures to assure continuing relevance include:

- Articulation agreements and cooperative agreements with other colleges and universities
- Annual Program Reviews based upon input from community
- Ongoing review of technical programs are continuously to ensure they meet local, regional, and global standards.
- Regular updating of technical curricula and lab activities to accommodate rapid changes in technology and industry.
- Advisory committees for each career program to assure that programs remain current and competitive.
- A Graduate Follow-Up Study conducted each year as part of Program Review. Results are included in the annual CQI report, as are data on NCLEX pass rates.
- Employer surveys of nursing graduates conducted each year. Nursing faculty and administrators also meet with representative of institutions that offer RN-BSN degrees to share information for dissemination to students.

**Criterion 4, Part 4: The organization provides support to ensure that faculty, students, and staff acquire, discover, and apply knowledge responsibly.**

Examples of HCC support for this purpose include:

- Nursing faculty meet with the Peoria, Springfield, and Bloomington-Normal clinical facility nursing administrators and educators to improve the clinical opportunities for students.
- Faculty members present information to one another in “Best Practices” workshops and in division or program meetings.
- Learning Outcome Statements provide guidance for faculty to strengthen student learning.

- Staff are regularly afforded the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills as appropriate for their position.
- HCC's Foundation supports active fund-raising programs to support student scholarships, promoting access and opportunity, assisting students based on merit and financial need, and supporting students from diverse backgrounds.
- The HCC Foundation provides support for equipment purchases and HCC childcare scholarships. Community volunteers serve on the foundation board and committees that support students at the College.
- International programs include student participation in short term and semester long programs, faculty/staff exchanges, and two cooperative programs with China: these are with Liaoning Normal University and with Dalian and Northeast Normal University in Changchun.
- HCC's international programs are evidence of a recognition of the importance of global understanding.
- The HCC Cultural Tour is a low cost ten-day program that provides exposure to other cultures.

**Question 1, Criterion Five: Engagement and Service. As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.**

**Criterion Five, Part 1: The organization learns from the constituencies it serves and analyzes its capacity to serve their needs and expectations.**

Since an ideal of service is at the heart of our Mission and permeates the institution, our students and other constituents are surveyed on a regular basis to evaluate our facilities and the services we offer. All courses offered at Heartland are evaluated, and the results of these evaluations are shared with the division chairs and instructors. Instructors and divisions are expected to respond to reasonable suggestions and criticism. Similarly, Community Education uses evaluation instruments for all courses and workshops offered under their auspices.

Student Services asks all students to complete an Advisement and Enrollment report card in which they respond to their experiences of enrollment, advisement, student records, and financial aid. Additional questionnaires are used to determine why students have withdrawn from classes and a survey is currently under development to determine what may be desirable to enhance student activities. Similarly, Marketing regularly conducts surveys to determine which marketing techniques brought students to campus. Suggestion boxes are located at all teaching locations and the comment cards go directly to the president.

Workforce Services continually seeks feedback from students, employers, and external agencies (e.g., Chamber of Commerce, Workforce Issues, Workforce Investment Board, Jobs of the Future, etc.) as well as College-led advisory teams consisting of academic and/or technical division leadership and related leaders from business and industry. There are also links between the College and regional social service providers and state and national bodies such as the Illinois Department of Employment and Training, the Office of Rehabilitation Services, the U. S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

**Criterion Five, Part 2: The organization has the capacity and commitment to engage with its identified constituencies and communities.**

From the beginning, the commitment to engage in a vital way with community and constituents has been an integral part of the culture of Heartland Community College. The list of activities in which HCC staff and students regularly participate is long and impressive (State Farm Diversity Day; Bloomington/Normal Education Alliance; WIA Board; Local Guidance Services Committees in all three counties in the district; Community Action Agency; HUD educational projects; worker fairs for laid off workers; Students Involved in Technology Conference; Tech Prep activities with local high schools; Women in Technology Initiative; Department of Human Services fair; Rotary; Kiwanis; the Chambers of Commerce of three counties; and others).

**Criterion Five, Part 3: The organization demonstrates its responsiveness to those constituencies that depend on it for service.**

Over the years, Heartland Community College has prided itself on being responsive to the many requests of its constituencies. While there are too many examples to enumerate, the following list gives an idea of the range and breadth of the initiatives we have undertaken in direct response to community requests:

- Youth Enrichment Program
- Greatly expanded ESL program
- Development of several apprenticeship programs
- Programs such as Business Essentials: a program developed at the request of the McLean County Chamber of Commerce to provide entry-level vocational training to an economically disadvantaged population
- Skills for Success Program: a program developed at the request of the City of Bloomington to provide basic life skills and job search help to clients on public assistance
- Introduction to Entrepreneurship Program: a program developed at the request of YouthBuild, a local organization serving at-risk youth with GED and construction trades skill training
- Course and program offerings at Normal's Unity Center
- Making rooms available to community organizations—an extensively used service
- Guaranteed course section offerings
- Community Education offerings
- Varied Corporate Education offerings
- All of the cooperative agreements with Community Colleges throughout the state to allow in-district tuition at other colleges for programs not offered at HCC.

**Criterion Five, Part 4: Internal and external constituencies value the services the organization provides.**

Since all programs and services have experienced enormous growth over the past 14 years, we know we are reaching thousands of individuals from our district. Survey and evaluation instruments show that our services are meeting the needs of the community and that the services we offer are highly valued. Graduate follow-up reports solicited from transfer institutions indicate that former HCC students achieve at the same level as the students who spend all four years at the same institution. These surveys also report that our former students are being successfully employed in their chosen careers.

**Question 2A. Through what specific actions has your organization demonstrated its responsiveness to the Commission in addressing specific accreditation concerns or challenges identified by the Commission's last comprehensive evaluation?**

Heartland's most recent comprehensive evaluation visit occurred on January 25-27, 1999. The evaluation team recommended continued accreditation for the full ten years allowable. The team did, however, identify four institutional challenges or areas of concern. The first of these challenges was easily (and promptly) dealt with. The evaluation team had noted that "[t]he reference to the NCA accreditation in the 1998/1999 Catalog [was] not in compliance with the required NCA disclosure format (i.e. Commission name with address and phone number must be included)." This lapse was corrected in subsequent editions of the catalog. In the most current edition (2004-2005), the correct NCA disclosure format appears on page 11, along with a similar disclosure statement for the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission. It also appears on the official College Website (<http://www.heartland.edu/about/>).

The evaluation team also voiced a concern that "[t]he span of control of the Vice President of Instruction appears to be too broad in relation to other administrative staff and functions." Efforts to relieve the administrative pressure on the Vice President of Instruction, in fact, actually began before the Commission's evaluation team arrival on campus for the evaluation visit. In 1997, for example, corporate and community education programs, international education programs, the office of institutional research, and marketing functions, all formerly responsibilities of the Vice President of Instruction, were assigned to other Cabinet-level administrators. Other changes followed the evaluation team's visit. Responsibility for all technological services was assigned to the Vice President of Business Services. (Formerly, the Vice President of Instruction was responsible for instructional technology, while the Vice President of Business Services oversaw the technological needs of the campus offices and other non-instructional areas.) Adult education programs were reassigned following a major administrative reorganization that occurred after the move to a permanent campus.

Currently, three deans (instruction, academic support, and student services) report directly to the Vice President of Instruction. The scope of the Vice President's responsibility is comparable to that of chief academic officers at other similarly-sized institutions.

Finally, the team noted that "[t]he College has been through a period of rapid growth in which many decisions have been made, often by necessity, quickly." Team members went on to caution, "However, with growth slowed to a manageable level and with the anticipated move to a new campus, decisions should be made more slowly and deliberately." This change has occurred as a natural consequence of the College's transition into a mature institution with a permanent campus, established curricula, policies and procedures, an experienced faculty, stable enrollment, and predictable growth.

**Question 2B. What specific actions or activities are you planning to take in order to address any accreditation concerns or challenges from the Commission's last comprehensive evaluation that are still active issues.**

One active issue remains from the 1999 Commission evaluation team's enumeration of institutional challenges. As the team noted in its report, "The assessment of student academic achievement at Heartland is undergoing change and appears to have created a dichotomous approach to the collection

of data. It is not clearly understood as to how these measures will integrate towards an effective evaluation of mission and institutional effectiveness.”

Assessment of student learning has been an important part of the educational experience at Heartland Community College since the hiring of its first faculty in 1991. At the same time, it would be accurate to say that the College’s embrace of assessment as a teaching and learning tool, while early and enthusiastic, was also at times insufficiently informed and overly optimistic. But we have learned from both our successes and our missteps.

Today, assessment of student learning at Heartland Community College begins with the student syllabus. Each syllabus contains a section identifying the Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes—essentially the minimum sets of skills or abilities that a student must achieve to successfully complete the course—as well as the means by which each outcome will be assessed. Moreover, several of the Learning Outcomes may also be tied to one of the General Education Learning Outcomes. These outcome statements reflect what faculty as a whole at our College believe are the important skills and abilities that our students will achieve and need upon leaving our institution. While the General Education Learning Outcomes are primarily intended for courses meeting the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) guidelines (a model curriculum designed to ensure easy transferability throughout the state), they may also apply to non-IAI courses.

General Education Learning Outcomes are now grouped into four categories: Communication, Diversity, Problem-Solving, and the more recently added Critical Thinking. Again, these categories incorporate skills that faculty believe are important for all students regardless of the course in which they are enrolled.

In some courses, assessment across all or most sections has become a well established practice at the College. For example, in our Writing program (English 101 and 102), a pre-and post-writing prompt is utilized to examine the impact of the Writing program on our students. The program also uses a portfolio system that has students submit samples of their writing from throughout the semester and this portfolio is used as both an evaluation and assessment tool. A communal measurement format is also performed to provide faculty with a second and third opinion on the assessment of their students.

A new method for assessing our General Education Learning Outcomes was piloted during the Spring 2003 term. In this method a group of trained assessors examine a common artifact given to most or all of the students taking one of twenty-six general education courses. (This common artifact could be a test item, a term paper, a presentation, a group project, or any other assignment.) This artifact then is assigned to the students in each section and collected by the instructors. At the end of the semester, the team of assessors score a subset of these artifacts and then collectively issue feedback to the faculty. Both the General Education Learning Outcomes being assessed, as well as the courses selected for this assessment, will be rotated on a regular schedule. In this way, the College expects to be able to determine how well its general education program is working and whether it is contributing to student growth and development.

Results so far have been promising and the College is generally satisfied with the approach it has developed, although clearly much more experience with this approach will be necessary before the College can determine with any confidence how well it is working and how useful the data it generates actually is as a measure of the quality of general education at the College. Another unknown factor is

how easily and effectively it can be adapted to assessment in the College's career programs. Thus assessment of student learning remains for us very much a work in progress.

**Question 3. Why does your institution wish to participate in AQIP? What benefits do you hope to gain as a consequence of participating?**

Heartland is applying to become an AQIP institution because acceptance into AQIP would encourage closer alignment of HCC's current Planning, CQI and Program Review processes, producing a more coherent quality enhancement initiative. This integrated system could better organize the impact of these separate activities and lead to improved overall efficiency in the College's quality measurement initiatives. In addition, it would provide greater impetus to address specific quality issues we have tentatively identified, but that have not yet risen to the top of our priority list. The advantage of AQIP is that it encourages the college to define its own quality initiatives and pursue quality enhancement projects that are particular to its mission and crucial to its advancement.

AQIP will provide a framework for the next comprehensive review of the College's Strategic Plan and will provide an incentive to further coordinate its many different planning and evaluation processes. While the College has many excellent practices in the tradition of continuous improvement, there is always room for additional improvement. Further, the realistic approach of the AQIP accreditation process is well suited to an institution whose founding was based on the principle of developing the most effective approaches to operating a community college. It affords a structured mechanism for broad-based involvement in focused improvement efforts and for moving the College to a higher level of reliance on data and information for decision-making.

**Question 4. Since broad understanding of, support for, and commitment to a continuous improvement approach and AQIP are essential for their success, what is the current level and extent of these elements in your organization? What is the evidence that key groups in your organization (e.g., Board, CEO, senior leaders, faculty, and staff) understand the nature of continuous improvement efforts and the demands of AQIP?**

Interest in, and support for, seeking reaccreditation through an AQIP approach has grown steadily at the College. Initially, the College looked carefully at several alternatives, trying to identify the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. During the past year or so, discussions about applying to join AQIP have been the subject of presentations to the HCC Board of Trustees, faculty meetings, the College's Quality Council, and at a College Assembly. The response has been uniformly supportive: faculty members, trustees, administrators, and classified personnel have all expressed interest and support. This writer has heard no negative responses at all.

This favorable reaction probably follows from the conspicuous position CQI has occupied in the College's life for many years. HCC is not a newcomer to the use of quality improvement principles and techniques; thus, basic AQIP concepts are well understood and widely supported. Heartland has long enjoyed a culture of self-assessment and reflection, and all levels of the organization, including the President and the Board, have experienced CQI and have expressed interest in extending those concepts to include the AQIP process.

As a relatively new college, HCC was designed "from the ground up" to be organized around the most effective practices of organizational structure and processes. An early example of the College's embracing of quality improvement concepts is HCC's experience with student assessment. Assessment

of student learning was early on accepted as a fundamentally important function and its concepts are now embedded in all courses. However, assessment practice as it exists today bears little resemblance to the College's early efforts, for it has taken several years for the College to find an approach that best fits our faculty, students, and curricula. As a result of much experimentation (and not a few false starts) feedback mechanisms are now in place that are designed to provide faculty with data that may be used to determine if adjustments in curriculum and/or delivery are needed. In addition, full time faculty extensively document their assessment practices and results in the portfolios they present in support of their applications for promotion.

The Board, the President and the senior leadership promote the concepts of process improvement as a preferred approach to solving problems. It is so deeply embedded, in fact, that it is almost transparent.

The most visible sign of the continuous improvement orientation of the College is the formal Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Report. The format of this report has changed somewhat over the years, but its focus is on reporting data on several Key Indicators that were established to monitor essential functions and important processes and outcomes related to the College's institutional goals.

**Question 5. What are your plans for integrating participation in AQIP into your organization's current agenda? Are there major events on the horizon (e.g., a change in leadership, a major contract negotiation, budget cuts), and how are you planning to address them or integrate them into your quality efforts?**

Are there major events on the horizon that will influence participation in AQIP or that may affect the College's quality initiatives? In brief, none are foreseen.

- Faculty contract negotiations are currently under way, but no serious snags seem likely.
- Budget cuts are always a possibility, particularly at the state level. We try to anticipate them and plan budgets that take possible reductions into account.
- No major leadership changes, either at the level of the Board of Trustees or the president's cabinet, are anticipated.

We plan to integrate participation in AQIP into our organization's current agenda by aligning AQIP with other strategic planning processes already in place. The current Strategic Plan covers FY2003 – FY2007, and it is anticipated that the comprehensive review scheduled for FY2007 will roughly coincide with early activities of the AQIP planning processes. Consolidating these activities will both improve the relevance of the Strategic Plan and align the entire planning process with other important activities related to both external accountability and internal decision-making. AQIP at Heartland will be a central feature of its quality enhancement efforts. It will not simply be something utilized for the purpose of acquiring reaccreditation, but otherwise unrelated to the daily operation of the College.

HCC's interest in AQIP began about a year ago when HCC's president invited the Vice President of Instruction to begin planning for the next NCA accreditation. As a first step, the Vice President created a Planning Committee, a group composed chiefly of faculty members and administrators, to consider whether HCC should pursue AQIP or follow a traditional accreditation process. Members of the Planning Committee inquired into AQIP by

- reading information posted on the AQIP website and discussing what members learned

- a day-long visit to Joliet Junior College, an AQIP “veteran” college, to learn from faculty and administrative AQIP participants who have direct experience
- attending a presentation on AQIP and other quality initiatives at Illinois Central College
- attending an intensive AQIP conference in Chicago.

Committee members have also spoken informally to counterparts at other Illinois community colleges who are considering applying for AQIP or who have recently begun AQIP at their campuses.

The Planning Committee recognized many attractive features in the AQIP process, particularly on account of the HCC's long experience and involvement with CQI, and decided both to examine AQIP more closely and compare it to other familiar quality initiatives.

Following are some of the Planning Committee's conclusions and a few of the things we learned:

- Participation in AQIP requires the College to conduct a preliminary self-assessment as one of the first steps in the process. The purpose of this self-assessment is to give the College a foundation on which to build its continuous improvement efforts, to provide for structured external feedback, and to promote a systems and processes perspective. We plan to complete such a self-assessment even before we learn the outcome of this application to join AQIP.
- AQIP accepts a variety of self-assessment vehicles, including the Baldrige National Quality Program, Baldrige-based state quality awards programs (in Illinois, the Lincoln Foundation for Performance Excellence), and the Continuous Quality Improvement Network (CQIN) quality assessments. Each of them provides a formal mechanism for obtaining external feedback from trained examiners familiar with the criteria of each program.
- The advantage of using any of these programs is that they are well-established and are based on a widely accepted set of performance excellence criteria. However, although Baldrige Criteria have been established for educational institutions, they are derived from a business environment and there may be resistance to them among people whose focus is an academic one. Even the CQIN Criteria, while modified even more extensively and designed specifically for community colleges, are heavily influenced by business models.
- AQIP provides two alternatives: the *Vital Focus* and the *Examiner*. The advantage of using either of these is that they provide a strong focus on the educational environment and may well be best suited to the purposes, traditions, and structures of academic institutions. As a participant in AQIP, future reports will be structured around the AQIP Criteria; the opportunity to use the same criteria, structures and processes from the beginning is appealing.

**Question 6. How are you planning to organize your quality effort? Explain which current or new structures (committees, systems, etc.) you will use to organize and run your improvement efforts? What organizational systems, structures, and other resources (e.g., a quality council, quality “champions,” task forces, training programs, etc.) currently exist or are planned that will sustain your continuous improvement efforts?**

As described in the response to Question 4, there is considerable interest in and support for HCC's participation in AQIP among employees of the College. An indicator of that support is that more than 20 different individuals cheerfully wrote contributions to this application.

An AQIP Steering Committee, the successor to the Planning Committee, has recently been appointed; it consists of a cross section of college leaders familiar with quality improvement principles, includes members of every employee group and represents every major College work unit.

The College's structure for communicating decisions is organized around the four major organizational units (Business Services, Institutional Advancement: Continuing Education, Institutional Advancement: Development, and Instructional Services), each of which reports to the President's Cabinet, who in turn communicate with the Board of Trustees. The Quality Council, composed of representatives from each of these four major units, meets quarterly regarding general college operations and to inform one another of updates on two primary planning processes: budget planning and strategic planning. Members of the Planning Committee helped to produce the College's Strategic Plan, the Program Review Report, and the CQI Report.

Steering Committee members have already explored AQIP through interaction with peer AQIP institutions and participation at an AQIP conference in Chicago. The Steering Committee has enthusiastically accepted the charge to engage faculty, staff and other stakeholders, solicit widespread participation in self-assessment and oversee development and implementation of Action Projects.

**Question 7. Prior to attending a Strategy Forum, how are you planning to meet AQIP's requirement to conduct a preliminary self-assessment from a systems- or process-focused perspective, one that includes input from perspectives external to the organization?**

Immediately after completion of this application, the Steering Committee will plan the transition to AQIP by carefully considering the two alternatives, *Vital Focus* and the *Examiner*.

Following reflection and debate, the College will decide which AQIP alternative to pursue. In preliminary conversations, some members have already expressed the view that *Examiner* seems more suited to HCC, in part because last NCA visit was in 1999, some six years ago. Steering Committee members want to reduce delay in implementing its first projects, thus taking advantage of the enthusiasm for AQIP already present.

If *Examiner* is the path the College eventually chooses, the Steering Committee will sponsor at least two College-wide assemblies to describe the results of the survey, invite comments and suggestions, and discuss possible Action Projects that may emerge from the survey results. External perspectives will be a valuable part of this step: for example, we plan to invite AQIP participants from neighboring colleges as consultants, both to assist in the discussion of our survey findings and to lend their insights to our planning processes.

**Question 8. Prior to attending a Strategy Forum (within the 12 months following admission), how will your organization identify issues, challenges, problems, or opportunities that might become Action Projects?**

Of course, it is premature to select Action Projects before the survey is administered, but nonetheless several projects have already suggested themselves. These projects relate to strengthening developmental education, particularly with respect to assuring smooth transitions to more advanced work; student recruitment, intake and placement processes; retention strategies; and improving follow-up survey procedures.

As described above, the Steering Committee will sponsor several College-wide meetings ("AQIP Seminars") to describe the results of the survey, invite comments and suggestions, and discuss issues

and challenges that may have emerged from the survey and that might become Action Projects. These Seminars will set the table for further discussions and will eventually conclude, following our participation in a Strategy Forum, with well defined Action Projects.

Central to the planning process is the establishment of tentative time lines. The schedule below, albeit very approximate and somewhat sketchy, is based on adoption of *Examiner*, which presumes a decision not yet made; however, it is illustrative of our present thinking with respect to implementation time lines.

- August 26, 2005: HCC submits AQIP application.
- September 15, 2005: Make the survey available; promote it to all College employees, through personal solicitations from Steering Committee members, presentations to campus employee groups, College assemblies, Quality Council, and at the September 20 Board of Trustees meeting.
- October 15, 2005: HCC receives *Examiner* survey results and employee comments from AQIP.
- October 31, 2005: Receive response to AQIP application.
- November 15, 2005: Schedule the first AQIP Seminar to discuss survey results. An external consultant will be invited to join to help interpret the results and lead the discussion. Several possible candidates for this role have already been identified, and one has already indicated a willingness to serve in this capacity.
- December 9, 2005 (approx): Annual Holiday party provides an opportunity to bring employees up to date (briefly!) on AQIP status and developments.
- December 13: Share survey results and discuss the first Seminar with the Board of Trustees.
- January 28, 2006: Schedule the second AQIP Seminar to discuss survey results and update attendees on AQIP developments. An external consultant will be invited to join to help interpret the results and lead the discussion. Discuss with Board of trustees.
- Spring 2006: Attend Strategy Forum to define and develop Action Plans.
- Steering Committee members present proposed Action Plans at various meetings—such as the Board of Trustees, Department meetings, the Quality Council, the Assessment Committee, and the Curriculum and Academic Standards Committee—to gather input and support.
- Late Spring 2006: The Steering Committee begins work on Action Plans. For each Action Plan (we envision adopting about three of them) an AQIP Work Group will be formed. Separate from the Steering Committee (but perhaps with some membership overlap) these groups will plan how best to undertake meeting their project's goals and fulfilling its purposes. Finally, the Work Group will organize itself to conduct necessary research, plan its activities, and report regularly to the Steering Committee on its progress.

At present, interest in, and enthusiasm for, participation in AQIP is quite strong at Heartland. We are eager to begin the process while this interest is at a high point and before other emerging concerns compete for attention and resources.