



Use State-Level Baldrige Framework to Support Continuous Improvement

By John Dew

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award is a premier national program that is supported by the National Institute for Standards and Technology and the U.S. Department of Commerce. It provides a framework for improving quality in grades K-12 and in higher education settings. Most higher education institutions can begin using the Baldrige framework by participating in one of the 36 state-level programs that are based on the national Baldrige program.

State-level Baldrige programs provide a gradual and sustainable approach to discussing continuous improvement (CI) in a higher education setting. Using the Baldrige criteria as a yardstick will support creating a culture of CI that looks at the entire institution and may well be the best resource for promoting access, affordability and accountability in higher education.

Why Baldrige?

Why should an institution consider using the Baldrige criteria in the first place? Why not rely on the peer review process in regional and specialized accreditation activities to provide the stimulus for improvement?

As most higher education practitioners know, reaffirmation is a high-stakes process. The evaluations are often subjective and inconsistent from one review to the next. Unfortunately, peer reviews often instill fear instead of encouraging improvement, and senior leaders have been known to lose their jobs as a result of accreditation reviews. Peer reviews reinforce the status quo in higher education and can be a major impediment to innovation, because innovation is often criticized by peers who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

State-level Baldrige programs are bringing a consistent framework for self-assessment to institutions all across the country, which is something the U.S. Department of Education has been unable to do. Unlike many reaffirmation processes, state-level Baldrige program reviewers receive detailed training on conducting reviews. Since the activities are not high stakes, reviewers can provide confidential feedback that is viewed as safe to receive by the institution. Because many state-level Baldrige programs allow an institution to receive recognition through a tiered process (often at a



bronze, silver and gold level), the process can be sustained over a period of years, as opposed to reaffirmation processes that are intensely focused over a short period of time, often followed by relief and relapse into old patterns of behavior.

The Baldrige criteria enable an institution to reflect on issues that are much broader than most reaffirmation processes currently consider. The role of the institution's leadership in championing a culture of quality is a vital consideration in the Baldrige framework. The Baldrige criteria move the institution beyond the consideration of whether students are just satisfied with an institution and into considering the extent to which students will advocate for their institution.

The Baldrige criteria also encourage discussion regarding the development and engagement of the entire workforce. The criteria builds on the recognition that a institution of higher education is a complex system made up of interlocking parts. Sustained improvement requires reflection on leadership, strategic planning, student and stakeholder focus, measurement processes, the analysis of data, knowledge management, a focus on the workforce, understanding and improvement of all work processes and a major focus on results.

Lack of assessment

Assessment is a hot topic in higher education these days. Unfortunately, some accrediting agencies do not require their member institutions' academic programs be assessed through objective measures that provide comparative data and support assessment schemes that contend that student learning should only be evaluated through the lens of the individual faculty member's subjective evaluation of students.

Institutions that use the Baldrige criteria, on the other hand, benefit from the criteria's emphasis on the use of comparative data connected to objective results.

Unfortunately, America's higher educational system is a train wreck waiting to happen. The current system of peer review reinforces wasteful practices, stifles innovation, rewards institutions for restricting access, supports the upward spiral in costs and tends to work actively against accountability.

Institutions that want to find a sustainable path to CI can find it by using their state-level Baldrige program.



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