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Systems Thinking Sounds Like a Good Idea

By Nicole Adrian

Systems thinking—looking at the whole system, rather than individual sections—sounds like it should be a given in any company, organization or institution. But the more I read, the more it becomes evident that not everyone is taking a systems-thinking approach to problem solving and continuous improvement. A lack of communication about the benefits of using these approaches, as well a lack of buy-in from educational institution stakeholders and leaders, appears to be a part of the reason some aren't taking this approach.

In a winter 2007 article from ASQ's Education Division's *QED News*, John Dew, past division chair, called for using quality methods and managements systems—especially the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award program criteria—to improve schools and universities.

“It is time for this country to take a nonpartisan approach to improving our educational system, based on a model that has been proven to work in education, healthcare, industry and the nonprofit sector,” Dew said. “We (division leaders) will state that it is unfortunate the leadership of the U.S. Department of Education is not taking the opportunity to learn from the expertise in the U.S. Department of Commerce regarding how to use the Baldrige criteria as the catalyst for change in our nation's education system. This is a missed opportunity that needs to be corrected.”

Luckily, since then, some prominent universities have been using the Baldrige criteria for continuous improvement, as well other methods of systems thinking. This issue of *ASQ Higher Education Brief* includes articles from those education institutions.

In their article, “How to Launch Lean in a University,” Alisa Salewski and Victor Klein detail the five-step plan that staff at the University of Minnesota implemented to engage in continuous improvement. The steps included finding early adopters who have an initial interest or need to improve their processes and making it clear that “transactional lean” is different and sometimes more difficult than “manufacturing lean.”

In another article, “Leveraging What We Create,” Maury Cotter, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, writes about how higher education institutions create new programs, solutions to problems and innovative approaches to complex issues, but they sometimes fail to leverage the new projects and programs. She describes how some institutions are going against the norm and using their efforts to achieve maximum impact.



Other articles in this issue provide great insight into what education institutions around the country are doing—and can be doing—to implement a systems thinking approach. With more publicity on how these programs can be implemented and the success that comes from them, I hope more schools and universities will follow suit.