

# AQIP PATHWAY SYSTEMS PORTFOLIO

A Resource For Creating A Systems Portfolio

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## About the Systems Portfolio Procedure

The Systems Portfolio procedure incorporates recommended changes in the structure of Systems Portfolios resulting from the HLC's design team tasked with improving the Systems Portfolio process. Those recommendations include:

- Reducing the numbers of AQIP Categories and the number of items within each Category.
- Refining the Maturity Rubric to inform the evaluation of both process and results items.

In keeping with the goals of the AQIP Pathway, the Systems Portfolio:

- Requires that institutions respond to all Process (P), Results (R) and Improvement (I) items under each AQIP Category.
- Limits the overall maximum length of a Systems Portfolio to between 115 and 125 pages.
- Allows an institution to hyperlink to documents on its website. (Please note: Peer reviewers conducting System Appraisals are not required to visit the links.)

# THE SYSTEMS PORTFOLIO

## Providing Context

The Systems Portfolio is the primary document by which institutions on the AQIP Pathway demonstrate they are meeting the Criteria for Accreditation. Through the Systems Portfolio, institutions also document their approach to performance excellence and provide evidence of continuous improvement.

The Systems Portfolio serves a number of purposes. It is:

- A means by which the institution will receive feedback on organizational strengths and opportunities from a team of quality improvement experts and educators.
- A common reference point that lets everyone in the institution share an understanding of how the institution is organized, what its key processes entail, what kind of performance those processes produce and how the institution subsequently improves.
- An opportunity for self-reflection on institutional key processes, results, and continuous improvement activities.
- A planning tool that helps the institution shape its future agenda and concentrate everyone's attention on those areas that should be the focus for improvement.
- A documentation of evidence, over time, that the AQIP Pathway is working to the institution's advantage and that continued participation in the pathway makes sense.
- A public information and relations tool that allows an institution's stakeholders to understand clearly and persuasively what the institution is accomplishing with its resources.

The primary audience for the Systems Portfolio is the Higher Learning Commission. Other audiences include the governing board, faculty, staff, and students of the institution.

Other audiences, which might include prospective students, parents, employers, funding bodies, state coordinating or regulatory boards, prospective faculty and staff, donors, or other accrediting agencies, may require additional explanation of terms or concepts that are specific to higher education, continuous improvement, or the AQIP Pathway.

The finished Systems Portfolio contains an institutional overview and category responses. Each category response should include a category introduction, along with the responses to each of the Process (P), Results (R) and Improvement (I) items with embedded evidence that the institution meets the Criteria for Accreditation.

## Institutional Overview

The Institutional Overview provides readers a reasonable context for understanding the institution's detailed descriptions of its processes, results and improvement strategies.

The Institutional Overview should be a maximum of two pages, and should briefly describe:

- The institution's mission, values and/or strategic vision.
- The numbers and types of students, faculty and staff.
- The level and scope of academic offerings.
- Its campuses and additional instructional locations.

**Table 1: Stages in Systems Maturity: Processes**

REACTING	SYSTEMATIC	ALIGNED	INTEGRATED
The institution focuses on activities and initiatives that respond to immediate needs or problems rather than anticipating future requirements, capacities or changes. Goals are implicit and poorly defined. Informal procedures and habits account for all but the most formal aspects of institutional operations.	The institution is beginning to operate via generally understood, repeatable and often documented processes and is prone to make the goal of most activities explicit, measurable and subject to improvement. Institutional silos are eroding and signs of coordination and the implementation of effective practices across units are evident. Institutional goals are generally understood.	The institution operates according to processes that are explicit, repeatable and periodically evaluated for improvement. Processes address key goals and strategies, and lessons learned are shared among institutional units. Coordination and communication among units is emphasized so stakeholders relate what they do to institutional goals and strategies.	Operations are characterized by explicit, predictable processes that are repeatable and regularly evaluated for optimum effectiveness. Efficiencies across units are achieved through analysis, transparency, innovation, and sharing. Processes and measures track progress on key strategic and operational goals. Outsiders request permission to visit and study why the institution is so successful.

**Table 2: Stages in Systems Maturity: Results**

REACTING	SYSTEMATIC	ALIGNED	INTEGRATED
Activities, initiatives and operational processes may not generate data or the data is not collected, aggregated, or analyzed. Institutional goals lack measures, metrics and/or benchmarks for evaluating progress. The monitoring of quality of operational practices and procedures may be based on assumptions about quality. Data collected may not be segmented or distributed effectively to inform decision-making.	Data and information are collected and archived for use, available to evaluate progress, and are analyzed at various levels. The results are shared and begin to erode institutional silos and foster improvement initiatives across institutional units. The tracking of performance on institutional goals has begun in a manner that yields trend data and lends itself to comparative measures in some areas.	Measures, metrics and benchmarks are understood and used by all relevant stakeholders. Good performance levels are reported with beneficial trends sustained over time in many areas of importance. Results are segmented and distributed to all responsible institutional units in a manner that supports effective decision-making, planning and collaboration on improvement initiatives. Measures and metrics are designed to enable the aggregation and analysis of results at an institutional level.	Data and information are analyzed and used to optimize operations on an ongoing basis. Performance levels are monitored using appropriate benchmarks. Trend data has been accrued and analyzed for most areas of performance. Results are shared, aggregated, segmented and analyzed in a manner that supports transparency, efficiency, collaboration and progress on organizational goals. Measures and metrics for strategic and operational goals yield results that are used in decision-making and resource allocations.

The stages in maturity have been adapted from “Baldrige Excellence Framework: A Systems Approach to Improving Your Organization’s Performance (Education).”

- Its distance delivery programs.
- Other key campus programs and resources.

It should also briefly describe the institution’s quality improvement experiences and reflect on its key challenges, accomplishments, failures and future opportunities. The institution is expected to remark on the last two to four years (particularly since the institution’s entry into the AQIP Pathway or its last Systems Appraisal, Comprehensive Quality Review, or Reaffirmation) and cite examples (including Action Projects) of improvement initiatives the institution has implemented to help further develop its quality program.

## Category Responses

Category Responses provide detailed answers to the Process (P), Results (R), and Improvement (I) items contained within the AQIP Pathway Categories. Evidence that the institution is meeting the Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation should be embedded in the Category Responses.

## Category Introductions

A one-page Category Introduction provides Category-specific context to guide readers’ understanding of the P, R and I responses. It also details the institution’s priorities for

improvement in the Category, such as planned Action Projects. The Category Introduction will enable peer reviewers to provide feedback where it is most valuable — the areas in which the institution currently focuses its attention.

The Category Introduction also discusses the institution's sense of the maturity of its processes, results, and improvement. Tables 1 and 2 on page 3 are provided to help institutions determine the maturity of their processes and results. Both tables identify "Reacting" as least mature, with "Integrated" being the most mature. An institution should only identify its processes or results as being a certain level of maturity if it meets all the standards within that maturity level. The Category Introduction also identifies where in the category the institution is focusing its attention. The institution can use information gained from its past appraisals to propel itself to the next maturity stage.

**Second and subsequent versions of an institution's Systems Portfolio should clearly demonstrate commitment to continuous improvement and maturation of institutional processes and results.**

**In discussing the maturity of its processes and results, the institution should be guided by the levels depicted and terminology used in Tables 1 and 2.**

## The Category Sections

### Responses to P, R and I Items

In each Category, address each of the Process (P), Results (R), and Improvement (I) items. All Category items should be referenced by item number. Skipping Category items could lead an institution to leave out data and evidence demonstrating it meets the Criteria for Accreditation.

For AQIP items that reference the Criteria for Accreditation, provide evidence to demonstrate that the institution meets the indicated Component and each Sub-component. All included evidence should be referenced by the Sub-component number.

Items not addressed in depth and thus recognized as future opportunities for improvement may be answered briefly and honestly, as shown in the following example statements:

*"We have limited measures of the effectiveness of support services at this time."*

*"Our institution has not yet developed processes for leadership succession."*

*"We began gathering student retention and persistence data two years ago, but have not yet organized and analyzed the data so that it can inform our actions."*

**Remember: Institutions must address every Process (P), Results (R) and Improvement (I) item.**

Category One, Helping Students Learn, should occupy 20 to 30 percent of all Systems Portfolios. Within the sections devoted to the remaining Categories, institutions may focus on what is most important to them and allocate pages accordingly.

**Institutions with experience on the AQIP Pathway are expected to become increasingly skilled at telling their stories effectively — describing processes succinctly, presenting significant results clearly, and explaining systems for operations and improvement vividly.**

### Processes (P)

"Processes" are the methods by which faculty and staff complete their work — both academic and administrative. Process questions ask institutions to explain how work is accomplished. Process (P) items ask for documentation of the who, when, where, how, and why for key institutional processes. Where appropriate, the terminology and levels indicated in Tables 1 and 2 on page 3 should be used to guide the institution's descriptions of its processes.

### Results (R)

When responding to Results (R) items, present key results germane to the processes described in the process section. Use (and number) tables, graphs, and charts whenever possible. Present the performance level, trend data, and, when possible, benchmark comparisons to similar institutions. When referencing tables, graphs, and/or charts, provide a brief narrative, explanation and analysis of the data. Let the levels depicted and terminology used in Tables 1 and 2 on page 3 guide the description of the institution's results.

Institutions writing their first Systems Portfolio may find their activities, initiatives and operational processes of cycles do not generate data, or data is not collected, aggregated or analyzed. If this is the case, the information available should still be presented.

### Improvement (I)

Responses to Improvement (I) items should illustrate a clear pattern of how the institution is improving its processes (and therefore its results) based on the data and information presented in the R items. The specific improvements being targeted should be described.

Continuous improvement is a challenging goal that requires most institutions to first design and measure key processes. It is only when performance results are known and can be analyzed over time that continuous improvement becomes possible.

Therefore, most institutions will find that responses to I items in the first Systems Portfolio may be reports of improvements

based on Action Projects and other strategic initiatives. However, subsequent Systems Portfolios should describe improvements based on analyses of data and information.

## Using the Systems Portfolio to Document Evidence Regarding the Criteria for Accreditation

To maintain accreditation, institutions must demonstrate that they continue to meet the Commission's Criteria for Accreditation. The Systems Portfolio provides an opportunity to have the evidence screened prior to the formal reaffirmation review. If the Systems Appraisal identifies gaps in an institution's documentation that it meets accreditation requirements, the institution will have opportunity for improvement prior to Reaffirmation of Accreditation.

**Specific Category items are aligned to the Criteria and Core Components.** The presentation that the institution makes for each Core Component can be woven through its answer(s) but must address all of the Core Components. Within its responses to the specified P items, an institution must clearly and concisely prove that it meets a Core Component.

### Provide Convincing Evidence

Institutions must provide evidence in the System Portfolio demonstrating that they meet the Criteria for Accreditation. To provide evidence of assessment of student learning, for example, the Systems Portfolio needs to explain what is assessed, the assessment measures, frequency of assessment, how the assessment is deployed across the institution, the results the measures have yielded, and how the assessment data are used to improve and communicate effectiveness. Such detail will create an evaluative Systems Portfolio as opposed to one limited to lengthy but largely unhelpful descriptions.

The peer review team will evaluate if an institution meets the Criteria for Accreditation based on the Systems Portfolio evidence. See Following Systems Portfolio Submission on page 6 for an explanation of how the evidence is evaluated.

## Writing the Systems Portfolio

The team writing the Systems Portfolio may be small (two to three writers) or large (a writing team for each Category). Either approach can be effective, depending on institutional size, culture and AQIP experience. Consider engaging the campus community as a means of reinforcing the culture of continuous improvement and improving the quality of information in the Systems Portfolio.

Creating the Systems Portfolio is a task that may be taken one Category at a time. Consider the following tips when writing the Systems Portfolio:

- Ensure colleagues understand the notion of process and system maturity. Don't assume that making progress automatically equates with maturity. If needed, research the topic and consider using Tables 1 and 2 on page 3 as didactic tools.
- Designate an editor to ensure the Category responses are conveyed in a unified voice. A skilled editor will also ensure that the Systems Portfolio is responsive to the Process (P), Results (R), and Improvement (I) items; contains appropriate references to the item numbers and Criteria for Accreditation; and is free of unnecessary jargon and acronyms.
- Assume the peer review team will read only what is in the Systems Portfolio itself.
- To make certain reasonable evidence has been provided to prove each Core Component is met, review — collectively — the responses to the AQIP questions related to each Core Component.
- Reference other Category descriptions when responding to Category items to illustrate how processes are aligned and linked at the institutional level.
- Designate the evidence for core components by number and letter using a parenthetical reference at the end of every relevant paragraph.

## Systems Portfolio Document Requirements

- The Systems Portfolio should be between 115 and 125 pages, including an Institutional Overview, with no pictures or excessive white space. A Systems Portfolio that exceeds 125 pages will not be evaluated.
- Fonts should be easy to read (Times or Arial) and sized at a minimum of 11 points.
- Footers should include page numbers; headers should include the organization's name and current date (month and year).
- All tables and graphics should be labeled, numbered, and easy to read with the data clearly marked. Text should refer to tables by their labels and/or numbers.
- Use a single voice — “we,” “the College,” or “the University”; avoid passives.
- Be brief, succinct and direct.
- Check spelling and grammar.

## Submitting the Systems Portfolio

1. Systems Portfolios are due on either June 1 or November 1. Reminders will be sent at least a month before the due date. Failure to submit the Systems Portfolio on time will delay the start of the review process, cause the Feedback Report to be late, and trigger a reexamination of your participation on the AQIP Pathway. Contact the institution's Commission staff liaison immediately if difficulties arise.
2. If the Systems Portfolio is web-based, a 125-page (maximum) PDF version as well as a link to the online version must be provided.
3. Upload a PDF of the Systems Portfolio to the Dropbox folder the Commission will share with the institution.

## Following Systems Portfolio Submission

### Commission Staff

Commission staff reviews the submission to ensure it is complete and does not exceed the page limit. The documents are then provided to the peer review team.

### Peer Reviewers

The assigned peer review team receives the documents and begins the review process, called the Systems Appraisal. The team reviews each Category for Systems Maturity and for evidence the institution meets the Criteria for Accreditation.

## Timeline

The review process takes approximately 12 to 15 weeks. The Accreditation Liaison Officer receives the peer review team's System Appraisal that documents the findings on the Categories and provides feedback on the evidence meeting the Criteria for Accreditation. No Commission action is taken.

## Feedback

Each Core Component will be rated by the peer review team as being "Strong, clear, and well-presented," "Adequate but could be improved," or "Unclear or incomplete."

Later, during the Comprehensive Quality Review for reaffirmation of accreditation, each Core Component will be evaluated as "Met," "Met with concerns," or "Not met." If at that time a Core Component is judged to be either "Met with concerns" or "Not met," that Criterion will be judged likewise and Commission follow-up will be recommended. 

## Additional Resources

### AQIP Action Projects

[www.hlcommission.org/Pathways/aqip-action-projects.html](http://www.hlcommission.org/Pathways/aqip-action-projects.html)

### AQIP Categories

[www.hlcommission.org/Pathways/aqip-categories.html](http://www.hlcommission.org/Pathways/aqip-categories.html)

### Criteria for Accreditation

[policy.hlcommission.org/criteria](http://policy.hlcommission.org/criteria)