

# The Higher Learning Commission Action Project Directory

## Northeast Iowa Community College

Project Details			
<b>Title</b>	Develop a plan to assess and improve student retention	<b>Status</b>	COMPLETED
<b>Category</b>	1-Helping Students Learn	<b>Updated</b>	09-14-2010
<b>Timeline</b>		<b>Reviewed</b>	10-02-2010
	<b>Planned Project Kickoff</b> 01-15-2008	<b>Created</b>	11-24-2009
	<b>Actual Completion</b> 08-01-2011	<b>Version</b>	3

### 1: Project Goal

**A:** The goal of this Action Project is to develop a plan to assess and improve student retention. The plan will: (1) Benchmark our current retention rates and practices. (2) Identify our current strategies for retaining students and tracking attrition. (3) Develop methods for identifying and tracking student goals. (4) Identify and recommend new retention strategies appropriate for our institution. (5) Recommend elimination of ineffective retention strategies. (6) Identify proven strategies for engaging the entire College community in student retention.

### 2: Reasons For Project

**A:** This project is high on our list of priorities for the following reasons: (1) Dropping enrollment - Our enrollment has leveled off, and even dropped slightly, over the past three years. This was somewhat expected after a period of explosive growth in high school enrollment. With the rapid growth in enrollment, our focus was on managing that growth. Now, with enrollment numbers leveling off, student retention is at the forefront again. (2) Limited retention - We are concerned about the number of students who walk out our doors before meeting their goals, understanding that not all students view graduation as their ultimate goal. We need to develop better methods to identify and track student goals. Next, we need to support student retention by recognizing strategies that work and promoting and supporting new and effective strategies. (3) Limited engagement in retention - While many employees work hard to retain students, we lack an overall, coordinated retention strategy. We need to develop clear roles and responsibilities for student retention. This will include a clear understanding that all employees, not just a few, have a role to play. We need to stimulate college-wide engagement in student retention.

### 3: Organizational Areas Affected

**A:** Student retention is the responsibility of all College employees. All College employees will play a vital role in implementing strategies to improve student retention as the plan unfolds. Although everyone will be involved, the following will play a primary role in developing and implementing the student retention plan: (1) Strategic Enrollment Management Team – SEM will have overall responsibility for developing and communicating an effective student retention plan. (2) Quality Council – The Quality Council will oversee the college-wide assessment plan, including results generated by the student retention plan. (3) Student Access and Success Subcommittee – The Student Access and Success committee will assist in data collection, review current student retention initiatives, and promote and support new student retention initiatives. (4) Institutional Research - The Institutional Researcher will play a key role in providing internal and external comparison data and analyzing results.

### 4: Key Organizational Process(es)

**A:** This Action Project will affect almost all College processes. The development of a student retention plan is likely to lead to important improvements in the following processes: (1) Admissions (2) New student orientation (3) Student mentoring (4) Academic assistance (5) Accommodations (6) Academic advising (7) Academic and personal counseling (8) Financial aid counseling (9) Early intervention (10) Student activities (11) Instructional schedules geared to student needs (12) Diverse course delivery methods (13) Opportunities to interact with faculty and staff in and outside the classroom

### 5: Project Time Frame Rationale

**A:** We expect this Action Project to be completed by June 2010. This estimate is based on the following considerations: (1) The Student Enrollment Management Team (SEM) will start by reviewing currently available data on student retention, including data from Datatel, the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE), the National Community College Benchmark Project (NCCBP), and our recently completed Clarus marketing scan. The team will complete collection of baseline data by July 2008. (2) SEM will investigate and determine methods to track student goals other than graduation by October 2008. (3) SEM will establish benchmarks for student retention by December 2008. (4) SEM will complete a review of current retention practices and their effectiveness by December 2008. (5) The team will make recommendations about which practices to keep, alter, and eliminate by December 2008. (6) SEM will develop a new student retention plan by June 2009. (7) The plan will be implemented during the 2009-2010 academic year. At that time the plan will be presented to all College employees. They will be informed about their roles and responsibilities in retaining students. (8) SEM will review student retention data, establish target retention rates for the following academic year, and make recommendations regarding retention strategies by June 2010.

## **6: Project Success Monitoring**

**A:** SEM will report quarterly progress to the Student Access and Success Subcommittee of the Quality Council. The chair of the subcommittee will provide quarterly reporting to the Quality Council.

## **7: Project Outcome Measures**

**A:** The following indicators will document success in achieving the goals of this Action Project: (1) Establishment of baseline retention rates (2) Development of a new system for identifying and tracking student goals other than graduation (3) Assessment of current retention practices and their effectiveness (4) Recommendations regarding continuation, modification, or elimination of processes (5) Establishment of new retention initiatives (6) Increased participation in retention initiatives (7) Tracking of students involved in retention initiatives (8) Comparison of retention between students who participated in retention initiatives and students who did not (9) Improved retention rates (10) Establishment of target retention rates for the 2009-2010 academic year

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## **Project Update**

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### **1: Project Accomplishments and Status**

**A:** Accomplishments:

- Student Access and Success committee development of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for SAS and Quality Council Dashboards to monitor/measure access and success
- Rework of previous NICC Retention Plan
- Administration of the SENSE survey to entering students (Fall 2009) and follow-up task group to Austin for data evaluation with Entering Student Success Institute (ESSI: April 2010). This resulted in a major overhaul of our previously developed strategies. With revised strategies based on our industry's best practices, newly developed initiatives were evaluated and prioritized in response to comparisons from NICC SENSE data, NICC CCSSE data (2009) and national data from peer institutions.
- Retention plan presentations have been made to key stakeholder groups within the college for support and buy-in from the community.

Current Status:

The current status of the action project, originally slated for completion 6/10 has been extended to 6/11. Even though the project will not be fully completed until then, many of the original tasks listed in the Retention plan have been completed or are in the process of implementation (see attached NICC Retention Plan). The project has truly been a work in process and actively worked on since 2008 seeking continuous improvement. The major event that has influenced the refinement of the Retention plan was attending the ESSI Conference in April of 2010 by a Retention Task Force. Many of the issues NICC was experiencing in retention identified in our collected data were also mirrored across the nation in peer institutions. The gathering of ideas from best practice to address retention issues created a rework of our priorities and strategies of the Retention plan that are now in their final form and have been presented to several key stakeholder groups for input. The strategies have been finalized and the project is in the process of re-developing the steps for implementation.

We are currently finalizing the implementation steps for mandatory orientation of new students, one of the strategic goals of the Retention Plan, after approval from the college Cabinet. Developed implementation steps will be completed by November of 2010. The Spring student orientation has been slated for a trial run of the developed implementation steps to fine-tune full scale implementation in Fall of 2011.

## 2: Institution Involvement

- A:
- The main task group of the project is the Quality Council Student Access and Success committee including members represented from each area of NICC including support staff, faculty, administration, continuing education, and services.
  - The ESSI Task group of five consisted of three former AQIP council members, the NICC Director of Institutional Research, and chair of the Student Access and Success committee.
  - Presentations during NICC All-College day regarding Student Retention in April of 2010 provided statistical information to all college employees regarding the priority of creating an environment of success and support for students that included data from NICC's SENSE and CCSSE in comparison with other peer institutions.

## 3: Next Steps

- A:
1. Refine implementation strategies for strategic goals.
  2. Complete presentations to remaining two key stakeholder groups for consensus, information dispersal, and buy-in.
  3. Approval from NICC Board of Trustees for strategic goals and initiatives of final revision of the Retention Plan.

## 4: Resulting Effective Practices

- A:
- Increased scholarship opportunities for adult students
  - Review and revision of the NICC advising model
  - 24/7 on-line tutoring program
  - Year-long blocked schedule
  - Coaching and peer mentoring
  - Improved tracking of student withdrawals
  - Improved internship, co-op and service learning opportunities
  - Access to all student forms on-line
  - Financial literacy counseling
  - Continued growth of student life and leadership opportunities

## 5: Project Challenges

- A:
1. The mandatory participation of all new students in our orientation is new to the College. It will be a transition that requires careful planning.

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## Update Review

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### 1: Project Accomplishments and Status

- A:
- Originally initiated in 2008, this Action Project was designed to develop a plan to assess and improve student retention, because of declining enrollments over a three year period, limited success in retaining students and the absence of a comprehensive retention strategy. The plan was to: 1.) Benchmark the College's then current retention rates and practices; 2.) Identify their current strategies for retaining students and tracking attrition; 3.) Develop methods for identifying and tracking student goals; 4.) Identify and recommend appropriate new retention strategies; 5.) Recommend the elimination of ineffective retention strategies; and 6.) Identify proven

strategies for engaging the entire College community in student retention. The College has already completed many of the original tasks for this AP. However, this AP was extended by a year, as a result of information obtained at the ESSI Conference in April 2010. The College expects to implement the revised Retention Plan in the Fall of 2011. The College should be commended for its demonstrated commitment to AQIP Category 1, as well as the AQIP Principles of learning, information and people of high performing organizations.

## 2: Institution Involvement

A: The College used task groups to complete this AP, including the Quality Council Student Access and Success Committee, the ESSI Task Group, and widespread representation of faculty and staff from all academic and administrative areas. This is consistent with AQIP Categories 3, 4 and 9, the Principles of collaboration, involvement, information and people. It is unclear why students, both current and alumni, are not included in the work of these task groups, in light of the perspective they can provide, as the “consumers or recipients” of the services being provided. Their inclusion in the work of these task groups would demonstrate a commitment to AQIP Categories 3, 4 and 9 and the Principles of collaboration, involvement, learning, information and people.

## 3: Next Steps

A: There are only a few tasks remaining for this AP, as indicated. These steps (finalizing the steps to implement mandatory orientation for new students and conducting a trial run of the Spring student orientation) will be fine tuned, submitted to the Board for approval and completed by September 2011. The task team’s decision to extend the completion time for this AP demonstrates the College’s commitment to AQIP Categories 1, 3, 4, and 8, as well as the Principles of learning, information and people of high performing organizations.

## 4: Resulting Effective Practices

A: The practices adopted as a result of the College’s participation of this AP, indicate the institution has achieved an exceptional accomplishment through this project, and its work represents an “outstanding practice” that ought to be shared with other higher education institutions. The results reinforce the College’s commitment to AQIP Categories 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9, as well as the Principles of collaboration, involvement, learning, information and people.

## 5: Project Challenges

A: By conducting information sessions, publicizing the reasons for and importance of the new student orientation and making sure the program is substantive and beneficial, perhaps through the use of focus groups and surveys, the College should be able to minimize any negative reaction or resistance to the mandatory nature of student orientation. Using some of the “best practices” learned at the ESSI Conference, or obtained from an online search on the topic of increasing student acceptance of new student orientation, would be consistent to AQIP Category 3, 5, 8 and 9, as well as the AQIP Principles of involvement, learning, information and people.

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## Project Outcome

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### 1: Reason for completion

A: The College’s Student Access and Success Team (SAS), one of seven quality improvement teams, was tasked with the completion of this AQIP action project. The project kickoff was in January 2008 with a targeted completion of June 2010. The project was extended for an additional year due to the administration of the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) and attendance of the SAS team at the ESSI Institute in Austin, TX. The additional data from the SENSE survey and the strategic planning sessions at the ESSI Institute provided a glimpse into our front door experience for NICC students and influenced our final retention plan project. In addition, the SAS team utilized CCSSE data, NCCBP data, scholarly research and internal evidence to formulate our plan. The draft of the NICC Retention Plan, *Student Retention and Success: Keeping the Classrooms Full* was shared with college stakeholder groups for input and approval. These groups included, iMPACT (student leadership), President’s Cabinet, Quality Council, College Senate, and Student Services. The Quality Council and College Senate have strong faculty representation. The Retention Plan was kicked off during the employee convocation held at the beginning of the fall 2011 term. Key Retention Plan initiatives were shared with the College by the Vice President of Academic Affairs and the Dean of Student Services.

With the unveiling of the Retention Plan in August, it is now time to retire this action project and move forward with the implementation of the plan.

## 2: Success Factors

- A:** NICC has made a conscious effort to enhance our data in order to inform our decision making and planning processes. This has been a major improvement since beginning the AQIP journey.
- As the SAS team researched promising practices from other colleges, they identified over 15 retention initiatives that could be implemented immediately or could be moved into the developmental stage before the plan was completed. Rather than wait, those that could be implemented were and several are in development at this time. Those remaining to be implemented will require more cross-departmental coordination and support to move forward, most likely as part of a new action plan.
- For the first time the College has identified key performance indicators for retention and have benchmarks and goals identified that we can use for comparison as we implement the plan.
- Although this project required an additional year to complete, the SAS team was able to keep forward momentum. We were pragmatic in our goal setting as we strived to make them manageable, measurable and meaningful for our College

## 3: Unsuccessful Factors

- A:** We now find ourselves data rich and at times struggled with the “analysis paralysis” syndrome. We have an institutional research staff of one and struggle to find time to fully analyze, comprehend, and strategically plan utilizing our new wealth of data.
- “Retention is everyone’s business” continues to be a tough sell College-wide. Although AQIP as a grassroots, bottom-up accreditation process is ideal in theory, it still takes the “worker bees” of the College to get things done and keep projects moving forward. Countless individuals and groups were consulted on this project, but it took three committed individuals to keep it moving and to reach completion.
- In moving into implementation of the plan, the hierarchy of authority is unclear, conflicted, and muddy. Major initiatives cannot continue to fall on the back of the same key individuals without risking burnout and meltdown. Several of the initiatives will require faculty planning and involvement and the College is not yet at that level of shared responsibility for student retention.