Excellence in Higher Education: A Baldrige-Based Self-Assessment Guide for Higher Education

Jennifer K. Lehr, Brent D. Ruben

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) was established by Congress in 1987 to promote awareness of the importance of quality practices and initiatives for the improvement of the national economy. The award process is overseen by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). Since its inception, the MBNQA Award and its criteria have proven to be very useful tools for those in the corporate sector who are seeking to improve their products and services. Considerable attention has been lavished on the twenty-eight companies that have received the award since 1987, yet the MBNQA criteria have been the focus of even greater attention. The reason: the criteria provide a clear and coherent framework for thinking about organizational excellence.

More than 1.5 million copies of the Baldrige Award criteria have been distributed in the ten years since the award was initiated ("There's More to Winning . . ." 1997). Add to this the growing number of organizations, institutions, and states that have adapted the award criteria for their own use and it becomes clear that the MBNQA has had a significant impact during its first decade of existence. The Baldrige framework serves as the basis for awards programs in forty-two states (NIST, 1998), and a number of Fortune 100 companies have adapted the award criteria for their own needs.

In 1995, the NIST and Baldrige conducted pilot programs in education and health care. Designed to emphasize the sharing of best practices, these programs were met with
considerable enthusiasm. Legislative and budgetary limitations during 1996 slowed plans to broaden the initiatives; however, funding for the education portion of Baldrige has been approved for 1999. The value of adapting the Baldrige framework to specialized needs in higher education has also been recognized. An example is Excellence in Higher Education (EHE), a version of the Baldrige framework for higher education institutions that was developed at Rutgers University.

The Goals of EHE

EHE is particularly well-suited to the needs of four-year colleges and universities. It was designed for use primarily as a self-assessment tool, with a focus on identification and prioritization of improvement efforts. The approach incorporates many of the dimensions typically included in higher education assessment methodologies such as self-studies, external reviews, management audits, accreditation reviews, and strategic planning. EHE can be used to integrate or complement these approaches while also providing an assessment framework that can help to ensure a proactive, external focus for the organization. Some of the other goals of EHE include the following:

- Heightening awareness of issues related to higher education quality and communication
- Highlighting organizational strengths and areas for improvement
- Providing baseline measures and a standard of comparison
- Facilitating communication and benchmarking within and across units and institutions
- Broadening the engagement of faculty and staff in assessment and strategic planning
- Establishing unit “ownership” of quality initiatives

The EHE framework has the following seven categories, each of which consists of a group of twenty items and a series of fifty-nine areas to address:

Call for Contributions

The editor welcomes short articles and news items for Assessment Update. Guidelines follow for those who would like to contribute articles on outcomes assessment in higher education.

- **Content:** Please send an account of your experience with assessment in higher education. Include concrete examples of practice and results.
- **Audience:** Assessment Update readers are academic administrators, campus assessment practitioners, institutional researchers, and faculty from a variety of fields. All types of institutions are represented in the readership.
- **Style:** A report, essay, news story, or letter to the editor would be welcome. Limited references can be printed; however, tables cannot be included.
- **Format:** In addition to standard manuscripts, news may be contributed via telephone call, outline, or letter. The standard manuscript format is a 60-space line with 25 lines per page. If word processing is used, please submit a 3½” diskette and three paper copies of your article. WordPerfect 5.1 or 6.0 is preferred.
- **Length:** Articles should be four to eight typed, double-spaced pages (1,000–2,000 words). Short news items for the Calendar, Events, Memos, With FIPSE Support, and Book Review sections may be 100–500 words in length. Annotations of recent publications for the Resources feature should be about 50–100 words long.
- **Copyright:** Articles shall not have been registered for copyright or published elsewhere prior to publication in Assessment Update.
- **Deadlines:** Each issue is typically planned four months before its publication. Future deadlines for submitting articles are April 1 (July–August 1999 issue), June 1 (September–October 1999 issue), and August 1 (November–December 1999 issue).

Please address all contributions to Trudy W. Banta, Editor, Assessment Update, Rm. 140 Administration Bldg., 355 N. Lansing St., Indianapolis, IN 46202-2896.
A committee including faculty members, administrators, and staff was assembled to address the development of the human resource plan. Using a survey, key human resource areas were identified, such as the need for job description updates and career path development. Staff activities as well as the development of performance appraisals for staff were identified as areas needing attention. The adoption of a 360-degree feedback system was also proposed.

A second committee was formed to address the need to obtain data about student satisfaction. Surveys to gather such data were already in place in some programs; other programs, however, did not conduct surveys, and most student surveying was not done in a routine or systematic way. Also, available information was often not disseminated to all who might benefit from it. The need to develop a survey instrument and systematic process for distribution, collection, and data analysis was the focus of this team.

A third committee was assembled to address service orientation. The members identified themselves as the Customer Service Task Force and their first meeting culminated in a set of agreed-upon attributes for student and visitor service that would be the cornerstone of their improvement plans. The goals identified called for service to be prompt, personal, pertinent, and polite.

Presently this group is focusing its efforts on improving student admissions and on defining and solving the problems associated with the admissions process. The team has also identified three central areas that will be their focus in the future: the need for more qualified and competent people on the front line, the need for more competitive compensation, and computer-related issues.

These committees continue to move toward Step 4 (completion, report out, recognition, and reassessment) of the EHE process. As with other continuous improvement efforts, the EHE process takes time.

Response from the University
To date, in addition to the FOM, sixteen units at Rutgers have participated in the EHE workshop process, including administrative units such as Facilities, Computing Services, and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, and academic units such as the School of Law–Newark; the School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies; Cook College; and University College. A number of other units have requested to be in the queue for participation during the next academic year.

Participants’ reactions have been very positive. On a scale of 1 to 7 (where 7 = outstanding), participants rated the program 5.45 for its overall usefulness, 5.72 for its ability to identify strengths and improvement needs, and 5.3 for encouraging meaningful dialogue within and across units.

Overall we are extremely enthusiastic about the applicability and value of the EHE approach for both administrative and academic units within the university. For more information about using the Rutgers University Excellence in Higher Education Guide to Organizational Self-Assessment, Strategic Planning, and Improvement, please visit the Quality and Communication Improvement web page at www.scils.rutgers.edu/qci/qci.html.

Sixteen units at Rutgers have participated in the EHE workshop process. . . . A number of other units have requested to be in the queue for participation during the next academic year.

References

“There’s More to Winning Than Winning.” USA Today, Oct. 9, 1997, p. 15B.

Jennifer K. Lehr is an instructor in the English, communications, and philosophy department at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Brent D. Ruben is executive director of Rutgers Quality and Communication Improvement and distinguished professor in the School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.
1. Leadership: building and sustaining consensus on the organization’s mission, vision, values, plans, and goals, and developing a service-oriented environment; integrating these approaches in leadership systems and practices throughout the organization; and being involved in external public, professional, and academic organizations

2. Planning: the planning process for both the short term and the long term, and how plans are communicated and aligned throughout the organization

3. Service orientation: learning about the needs, expectations, and priorities of stakeholders; developing, monitoring, and improving relationships with the groups served; and assessing the satisfaction levels of these groups relative to peer and benchmark organizations

4. Information and analysis: selecting, managing, and using information to assess, track, and improve organizational effectiveness and service excellence

5. Faculty, staff, and workplace climate: enabling faculty and staff to develop their full potential and to pursue the organization’s mission, vision, plans, and objectives; building and maintaining an environment conducive to excellence, full participation, appreciation of diversity, and personal and organizational growth

6. Process management: designing, managing, and improving key processes to achieve superior organizational performance and service excellence

7. Excellence levels and trends: documenting excellence levels and trends, for the overall organization, for specific programs and services, for service orientation, for faculty, staff, and workplace climate, and for supplier-partner relations; comparing excellence levels and improvement trends in each of these areas to those of peer and benchmark organizations

The EHE Process

The EHE Process entails four basic steps: (1) self-assessment, (2) improvement prioritization and planning, (3) improvement and implementation, and (4) completion, report out, recognition, and reassessment.

Step 1: Self-assessment. The EHE self-assessment process is conducted in a workshop attended by leaders—administrators, faculty, and staff—of the unit, college, or university. After preliminary planning, a one-day workshop (or two half-day meetings) is scheduled and participants receive an EHE manual for use in familiarizing themselves with the EHE framework and criteria prior to the workshop.

The workshop consists of a review of each category and the items and areas it covers, followed by an open discussion and flip-chart listings of strengths and areas needing improvement for the unit in that area. Following the discussion, the individuals rate their unit on a 0 to 100 percent scale, following detailed instructions provided in the manual.

Step 2: Improvement prioritization and planning. This step involves scheduling a second half-day workshop session approximately two weeks after the first session. As preparation, the list of strengths and areas needing improvement are transferred from the flip-chart sheets to handouts that are distributed to participants prior to the workshop. The session consists of a review of the items, with special attention to areas in need of improvement. Items that point to similar improvement needs are grouped and, if necessary, reworded for clarity. Improvement teams are formed to develop a formal plan for addressing improvement priorities.

Step 3: Improvement and implementation. After the broad directions for improvement are approved, groups begin more detailed action planning and implementation, periodically reporting to the unit leadership on their progress.

Step 4: Completion, report out, recognition, and reassessment. Communication with unit leadership and others in the unit occurs regularly as the improvement projects progress, and more formally as they reach completion.

When projects are finished, the group returns to the list of other improvement needs initially identified and reviews and discusses priorities for a next cycle of improvement planning and implementation, and the EHE process is repeated. At periodic intervals, perhaps yearly, a full reassessment process might be conducted, complete with scoring, to gain a sense of progress and to reassess improvement priorities for the period ahead.

Faculty of Management:
A Case Study

The Rutgers Faculty of Management (FOM) is a recently organized department consisting of the faculty of the Graduate School of Management and the departments of business administration and accounting. There are one hundred full-time faculty in the FOM, who work with approximately two thousand graduate students and one thousand undergraduates. Fifteen members of the school’s administration, including the dean, five assistant deans, five associate deans, and several other departmental representatives, attended two EHE workshops.

The assessment process led to the identification of approximately fifty strengths and fifty potential areas needing improvement. Through discussion in the priority-setting phase of the EHE program the number of potential improvements was narrowed to twenty-four. Then, through multivoting, the top three priority action areas were selected:

1. The need for a human resource plan that focuses on matters that are within the FOM’s control, such as benchmarking; promoting development opportunities (professional organizations, information sharing); expanding means for recognition, especially for staff; and developing a systematic process for staff professional development and training
2. The need for a longitudinal process for collecting detailed student expectation and satisfaction data
3. The need to consider processes for servicing the potential student (“customer service” objectives)

The FOM then formed teams to address these areas needing improvement.