




## Open Pathway

### *The Quality Initiative Proposal Process*

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This set of materials provides information for institutions submitting Quality Initiative proposals and Peer Reviewers in reviewing the proposals. The following documents are included:

- Overview of the Quality Initiative Proposal Process
- Quality Initiative Institutional Proposal Template
- Quality Initiative Proposal Panel Review Instructions
- Quality Initiative Proposal Panel Review Form 



## Overview of the Quality Initiative Proposal Process

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The Higher Learning Commission expects that institutions are always engaged in quality improvement. The Open Pathway requires an institution to designate one major improvement effort it has undertaken as its **Quality Initiative** for reaffirmation of accreditation. The Quality Initiative should suit the institution's present concerns or aspirations. It takes place between years 5 and 9 of the 10-year Open Pathway Cycle. A Quality Initiative may begin and be completed during this time or it may continue an initiative already in progress or achieve a key milestone in the work of a longer initiative. The Quality Initiative falls entirely outside the Assurance Process.

The Commission encourages institutions to use the Quality Initiative to take risks, innovate, take on a tough challenge, or pursue a yet unproven strategy or hypothesis. Thus failure of an initiative to achieve its goals is acceptable. An institution may learn much from such failure. What is not acceptable is failure of the institution to pursue the initiative with genuine effort. Genuineness of effort, not success of the initiative, constitutes the focus of the Quality Initiative review and serves as its sole point of evaluation.

### **Designing the Proposal**

An institution may design its own Quality Initiative or it may choose from a Commission menu of Quality Initiative topics or Commission-facilitated programs. Sample topics are listed in the Open Pathway booklet available on the Commission's Web site, [www.ncahlc.org](http://www.ncahlc.org). At present, the Commission has one facilitated program, the Academy for Assessment of Student Learning.

**Institutions that wish to join the Academy for Assessment of Student Learning in order to use it as their Quality Initiative should complete the Academy application and not this form.**

Information on the Academy and its application for participation can be found on the Commission's Web site, [www.ncahlc.org](http://www.ncahlc.org).

**Quality Initiative Forum (available in fall 2013).** The institution may choose to send three to eight representatives to a Quality Initiative Forum prior to submitting its proposal. These optional forums offer institutions time to focus and assistance in developing and refining their Quality Initiative proposals. Typically, twelve to twenty institutions will participate in each forum. After the forum, the institution finalizes and submits its proposal for approval.

### **Quality Initiative Proposal and Its Submission**

The institution submits a Quality Initiative proposal to the Commission for approval. For initiatives other than the Academy for Assessment of Student Learning, the institution completes the proposal using the attached template. Quality Initiative proposals should be:

- ◆ no longer than 4,500 words
- ◆ submitted electronically in PDF format to [Pathways@hlcommission.org](mailto:Pathways@hlcommission.org) with a file name that follows this format: QI Proposal No Name University MN. The file name must include the institution's name (or an identifiable portion thereof) and state
- ◆ accompanied by the signed submission form

## Quality Initiative Approval

Although Commission staff may advise an institution in the development of its proposal, the final approval of the proposal requires evaluation by a peer review panel. The Commission's Quality Initiative proposal review process has three steps:

1. **Commission Staff Review.** The institution's Commission staff liaison reviews the Quality Initiative proposal, discusses it with the institution as needed, and then forwards it for peer review.
2. **Peer Review and Approval.** A panel of two peer reviewers evaluates the Quality Initiative proposal, at distance, based on sufficiency of scope and significance; clarity of purpose; evidence of commitment and capacity; and appropriateness of timeline. The section below delineates the Quality Initiative review categories. The panel either approves with or without minor modifications, or in exceptional circumstances, requests resubmission of the proposal. The panel also provides observations and constructive commentary to assist the institution in beginning or continuing its initiative. There is no penalty or negative action attached to a request for resubmission.
3. **Institution Notification.** At the completion of the review process, the Commission notifies the institution of the panel's decision. If the panel approved the proposal with or without minor modification, the institution is free to begin its Quality Initiative. If the institution is required to resubmit its Quality Initiative proposal, it may do so at any time within the approved time period for that cycle. The same or a new panel of peer reviewers will evaluate the resubmission.

## Review Categories for the Quality Initiative Proposal

The following review categories are effective September 2012.

### Sufficiency of the Initiative's Scope and Significance

- ◆ Potential for significant impact on the institution and its academic core
- ◆ Alignment with the institution's mission and vision
- ◆ Connection with the institution's planning processes
- ◆ Evidence of significance and relevance at this time
- ◆ Potential to improve and sustain institutional and educational quality


### Clarity of the Initiative's Purpose

- ◆ Clear purposes and goals reflective of the scope and significance
- ◆ Defined milestones and intended goals
- ◆ Clear processes for evaluating progress
- ◆ Comprehensive plan for accomplishing the initiative and achieving the goals

### Evidence of Commitment to and Capacity for Accomplishing the Initiative

- ◆ Commitment of senior leadership
- ◆ Commitment and involvement of key people and groups
- ◆ Sufficiency of the human, financial, technological, and other resources
- ◆ Alignment of resources to the implementation plan and timeline
- ◆ Defined plan for integrating the initiative into the ongoing work of the institution and sustaining its results
- ◆ Clear understanding of and capacity to address potential obstacles

### Appropriateness of the Timeline for the Initiative

- ◆ Consistency with intended purposes and goals
- ◆ Alignment with the implementation of other institutional priorities
- ◆ Reasonable implementation plan for the time period 



## Open Pathway

### Quality Initiative Institutional Proposal Template

The enclosed Quality Initiative proposal represents the work that the institution will undertake to fulfill the Improvement Process of the Open Pathway.

Signature of Institution's President or Chancellor

Date

Printed/Typed Name and Title

Name of Institution

City and State

The institution completes the Quality Initiative proposal by responding to the questions in each category of the template. The institution may choose to include a brief implementation plan that addresses many of the questions below and replaces portions of the outline. Proposals should be no more than 4,500 words.

#### Overview of the Quality Initiative

1. Provide a title and brief description of the Quality Initiative. Explain whether the initiative will begin and be completed during the Quality Initiative period or if it is part of work already in progress or will achieve a key milestone in the work of a longer initiative.

#### Sufficiency of the Initiative's Scope and Significance

2. Explain why the proposed initiative is relevant and significant for the institution.
3. Explain how the proposed initiative aligns with the institution's mission and current operational or strategic priorities.
4. Explain the intended impact of the initiative on the institution and its academic core.

#### Clarity of the Initiative's Purpose

5. Describe the purposes and goals for the initiative.
6. Describe how the institution will evaluate progress, make adjustments, and determine what has been accomplished.
7. Describe potential challenges and issues in implementing the initiative.

#### Evidence of Commitment to and Capacity for Accomplishing the Initiative

8. Describe the level of support for the initiative by internal or external stakeholders.
9. Identify the groups and individuals that will lead or be directly involved in implementing the initiative.
10. List the human, financial, technological and other resources that the institution has committed to this initiative.
11. Describe the plan for continuing the work and sustaining the results of the initiative.

**Appropriateness of the Timeline for the Initiative** (The institution may include a brief implementation or action plan.)

12. Describe the primary activities of the initiative and timeline for implementing them.

### **Institutional Contact for Quality Initiative Proposal**

Include the name(s) of the primary contact(s) for the Quality Initiative.

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Name and Title

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Phone

Email

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Institution





## Open Pathway

### *Quality Initiative Proposal Panel Review Instructions*

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#### **Review Process**

The Quality Initiative proposal review occurs through a panel process. A panel of two peer reviewers evaluates the Quality Initiative proposal, provides observations and constructive commentary, and either approves with or without minor modifications, or, in exceptional circumstances, requests resubmission of the proposal. There is no penalty or negative action attached to a request for resubmission. As with all review processes, peer reviewers complete the appropriate Confirmation of Objectivity and Professional Confidentiality forms prior to conducting the review.

At the completion of the review process, the Commission notifies the institution of its approval or expectation for resubmission. Once the proposal is approved, the institution is free to begin its Quality Initiative.

#### **Review Categories for the Quality Initiative**

The panel evaluates the institution's Quality Initiative proposal based on sufficiency of scope and significance; clarity of purpose; evidence of commitment and capacity; and appropriateness of timeline. The report form below explicates these categories.

#### **Instructions for Peer Review Panel Members**

The panel reads the Quality Initiative proposal and completes the attached report template following the steps below. The review process should take no more than four weeks from receipt of the Quality Initiative proposal to submission of the panel's report.

1. On receipt of the Quality Initiative proposal, the lead reviewer contacts the other reviewer to schedule a phone conference.
2. **Individual Review.** Each reviewer evaluates the proposal independently, determining whether the response to each review category is acceptable or not acceptable and justifying the determination with two- or three observations per category. **Note:** Proposals may not align precisely with the review categories. Therefore, reviewers should consider the entire document as evidence for any category. Reviewers should evaluate holistically rather than point-by-point in the categories.
3. **Consensus Review.** The reviewers share their draft evaluations with each other and complete the report.
  - If the reviewers agree to approve the Quality Initiative proposal with or without minor modification, they finalize their report and submit it to the Commission (see point 4).
  - If the reviewers disagree on the proposal, the lead reviewer should contact the institution's Commission staff liaison. The staff liaison will schedule a consensus phone conference to reach agreement on the next step. In most cases, this will be a final report, which is completed and submitted following the instruction below (see point 4). If consensus cannot be reached, the staff liaison may request that a third reviewer evaluate

the proposal or may request that the panel review process be repeated with two new reviewers.

- If the reviewers agree to request a resubmission of the proposal, the lead reviewer should contact the institution's Commission staff liaison. The staff liaison may schedule a phone conference if clarification is needed. The reviewers then finalize the report and submit it to the Commission.
4. **Report Submission.** The lead reviewer submits the final report to the Commission office at [pathways@hlcommission.org](mailto:pathways@hlcommission.org). The file name for the report should follow this format: QI Proposal Review <Name of Institution>.
  5. **Notification to Institution.** The Commission sends the report with a cover letter to the institution. If the institution is required to resubmit its Quality Initiative proposal, it may do so at any time within the approved time period for Quality Initiatives. 🌿



## Open Pathway *Quality Initiative Proposal Review Form*

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Date of Review:

Name of Institution:

State:

Institutional ID:

Reviewers (names, titles, institutions):

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### Review Categories and Findings

#### I. Sufficiency of the Initiative's Scope and Significance

- ◆ Potential for significant impact on the institution and its academic core
- ◆ Alignment with the institution's mission and vision
- ◆ Connection with the institution's planning processes
- ◆ Evidence of significance and relevance at this time
- ◆ Potential to improve and sustain institutional and educational quality

**Finding:**

\_\_\_\_\_ The Quality Initiative proposal demonstrates acceptable scope and significance.

\_\_\_\_\_ The Quality Initiative proposal does not demonstrate acceptable scope and significance.

**Rationale and Comments:** (Provide two to three statements justifying the finding and recommending minor modifications, if applicable. Provide any comments, such as highlighting strong points, raising minor concerns or cautions, or identifying questions.)

#### II. Clarity of the Initiative's Purpose

- ◆ Clear purposes and goals reflective of the scope and significance of the initiative
- ◆ Defined milestones and intended goals
- ◆ Clear processes for evaluating progress
- ◆ Comprehensive plan for accomplishing the initiative and achieving the goals

**Finding:**

\_\_\_\_\_ The Quality Initiative proposal demonstrates clarity of purpose.

\_\_\_\_\_ The Quality Initiative proposal does not demonstrate clarity of purpose.

**Rationale and Comments:**



**III. Evidence of Commitment to and Capacity for Accomplishing the Initiative**

- ◆ Commitment of senior leadership
- ◆ Commitment and involvement of key people and groups
- ◆ Sufficiency of the human, financial, technological, and other resources
- ◆ Alignment of resources to the implementation plan and timeline
- ◆ Defined plan for integrating the initiative into the ongoing work of the institution and sustaining its results
- ◆ Clear understanding of and capacity to address potential obstacles

**Finding:**

\_\_\_\_\_ The Quality Initiative proposal demonstrates evidence of commitment and capacity.

\_\_\_\_\_ The Quality Initiative proposal does not demonstrate evidence of commitment and capacity.

**Rationale and Comments:**

**IV. Appropriateness of the Timeline for the Initiative**

- ◆ Consistency with intended purposes and goals
- ◆ Alignment with the implementation of other institutional priorities
- ◆ Reasonable implementation plan for the time period

**Finding**

\_\_\_\_\_ The Quality Initiative proposal demonstrates an appropriate timeline.

\_\_\_\_\_ The Quality Initiative proposal does not demonstrate an appropriate timeline.

**Rationale and Comments:**

**V. General Observations and Recommended Modifications:** (Panel members may provide considerations and suggested modifications that the institution should note related to its proposed Quality Initiative.)

**VI. Conclusion:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Approve the proposed Quality Initiative with or without recommended minor modifications. No further review required.

\_\_\_\_\_ Request resubmission of the proposed Quality Initiative

**Rationale and Expectations if Requesting Resubmission**

**Timeline and Process for Resubmission** (the Commission staff will add this section if the recommendation is for resubmission)

