

What Goes Around Comes Around: Using the Malcolm Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence

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This article describes Richland College's Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award-winning Performance Excellence Model. Richland's leadership team uses systematic strategic and operational approaches to improve performance. These approaches mirror Richland's vision, mission, values, and goals and reflect their approach-deploy-learn-integrate philosophy. The authors discuss methodology, successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. They also suggest generic guidelines for others to create their own performance excellence models.

Introduction

The Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence provide a systems perspective for understanding performance management. They reflect validated, leading-edge management practices against which an organization can measure itself. With their acceptance nationally and internationally as the model for performance excellence, the Criteria represent a common language for communication among organizations for sharing best practices. The Criteria are also the basis for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award process. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recognizes performance excellence and quality achievement among U.S. manufacturers, service companies, educational institutions, and health care providers.

Richland College, a 2005 recipient of both the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and the Texas Award for Performance Excellence, is one of seven separately accredited community colleges in

the Dallas County Community College District in Dallas, Texas. Richland serves approximately 14,700 credit students and some 6,000 continuing education students each semester. The student body is comprised of one-third full-time and two-thirds part-time students who are primarily baccalaureate-bound (71%) or career program-bound (10%). In addition, the student body is ethnically diverse with 42 percent Anglo-American, 20 percent African-American, 18 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Asian-American, and 5 percent international students.

Richland's senior leadership team is called the ThunderTeam and includes nine members: the President; the Vice Presidents for Student Learning, Student Development, Institutional Effectiveness, Workforce and Economic Development, Educational Transitions, and Financial Affairs; the Director of Human Resources; and the Assistant to the President. In addition, a 15 member group called the Expanded ThunderTeam meets monthly to review progress on the institution's strategic measures. This

group includes the nine ThunderTeam members, plus the Executive Dean of Student and Enrollment Management, faculty liaisons for the Quality Enhancement Plan, and three members of the leadership and staff of the Planning and Research for Institutional Effectiveness Department (PRIED).

The PRIED team supports data-informed decision-making at Richland College by providing critical empirical data to all employee groups. While the PRIED staff focuses primarily on quantitative data, the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) staff encourages employees to focus on qualitative data. Faculty members focus their QEP efforts on assessing student-learning outcomes that measure what students know, think, and can do as a result of their Richland College education. The faculty's goal is to ensure students are meeting their respective educational goals and are being prepared for life in the 21st century.

Staff QEP teams assess their administrative and educational support services so they, too, can determine how best to serve students for an enhanced Richland College experience. The QEP is supervised by two faculty liaisons—one who leads the faculty assessment activities and one who leads the staff assessment activities. Both the faculty and staff QEP teams make annual assessments: faculty teams assess two student-learning outcomes and staff teams assess two services. At the end of the assessment cycle, these teams use their results to implement changes for improvement—improvement of their curriculum or pedagogy (faculty) and improvement of the services they provide (staff). The PRIED works with faculty and staff to produce meaningful assessments. For example, they help faculty identify appropriate student segments for their assessment activities, and they calculate assessment results for both faculty and staff. Once assessment activities are complete, teams document their implemented improvements on their assessment reports. In turn, this information becomes input to the Departmental Action Plans.

The PRIED staff also provides national and local surveys, focus groups, and significant benchmarking information (internal, external, and organizations outside the education sector) as a bridge between the quantitative and qualitative data. These data enable the ThunderTeam to make more accurate and robust evaluations and decisions. Because

people often rush to judgment, the ThunderTeam and all of the Richland community strive for a different approach to stay on track. Their philosophy is to “turn to wonder first”: in other words, to be informed by the data, but not driven by it. Their approaches and decisions, therefore, encompass both quantitative and qualitative inputs.

The Richland College Performance Excellence Model

Every institution must design a Performance Excellence Model unique to its culture. Although the Richland College model is unique to its culture, the Expanded ThunderTeam adapted elements from both within and outside higher education and made them the college's own. Richland adapted its schematic design shown in Figure 1 from a model used by Saint Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, another Baldrige-winning institution. Richland developed its key performance indicator system from an idea gleaned from Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Missouri, and refined the system from its benchmarking of Texas Nameplate, a two-time Baldrige recipient in the small business category. Figure 1 is a generic blueprint of key steps for establishing an institutional performance excellence model.

Thanks to the discipline of the Malcolm Baldrige Education Criteria and the college employees' commitment to performance excellence, Richland College's culture embraces systems and data-informed processes to improve performance results over time. To illustrate this process visually, the ThunderTeam uses a schematic representation that helps employees see the big-picture relationship among key elements of our performance improvement efforts. The model demonstrates how employees' participation as individuals, in departments, and in cross-cutting councils contributes to the results achieved in the college's cycles of organizational improvement. This schematic representation—Richland College's Performance Excellence Model Overview (Figure 2)—explains the systematic, interrelated approaches the leadership team deploys in building a pervasive culture of quality improvement.

The linchpin in Richland's Performance Excellence Model is the college's strategic planning ap-

proach that identifies Richland’s future direction and focus. The ThunderTeam begins the college’s institutional cycles of improvement with strategic planning. Each August, the Expanded ThunderTeam members review, among other things, the Richland College vision, mission, and ThunderValues (Richland’s core values) at an annual three-day strategic planning retreat. By being certain that Richland’s vision and mission statements are sharply focused and easy for all employees to recite from memory, the ThunderTeam ensures the college’s alignment to a common purpose.

The ThunderTeam charts strategy based on the college’s vision and mission. In 1999, Richland experienced a significant breakthrough in organizational alignment when the ThunderTeam restructured the strategic planning priorities to five sharply focused goals they later reduced to four:

1. Identify and meet the community educational needs
2. Enable all students to succeed

3. Enable all employees to succeed
4. Ensure institutional effectiveness

These goals so permeate Richland activities that all employees can recite them from memory. The deans and supervisors align annual budget development with these priorities to ensure Richland’s commitments to funding are consistent with the college’s organizational focus for results. The Expanded ThunderTeam weights each of the strategic planning priorities for importance—the Enable Student Success priority is weighted heaviest at 35 percent.

Each strategic planning priority goal has associated key performance indicators (KPIs). Because these KPIs best evaluate overall college performance, the Expanded ThunderTeam also weights each of them for importance. They identify institution-level measures, also weighted, for each key performance indicator. The criteria for measure selection are: 1) whether the measure will produce actionable data,

Eight *Generic* Steps for Performance Excellence

1. Identify and assemble a small (approximately ten members) cross-functional team to draft the strategic plan.
 - Share drafts college-wide for broad input prior to finalizing the plan.
 - Make a leadership commitment to work the plan for the academic year.
 - Keep a log of potential modifications for consideration during the final evaluation.
2. Identify at least three, but no more than five, strategic planning priority goals.
 - Write broad, easy-to-remember statements.
 - Ensure these statements encompass every college activity.
3. Identify indicators of performance (objectives) for each strategic planning priority goal.
 - Limit these to those that are key to overall institutional health.
 - Restrict the total number of key performance indicators to a maximum of 20.
4. Identify at least one institutional measure for each key performance indicator.
 - Select measures with readily available data that can compare to data from other institutions.
 - All measures should produce data that is actionable.
5. Establish targets for each measure (both long and short term).
 - Use trend data, comparative data, and environmental scanning to set targets.
6. Create multi-level actions that deploy the plan.
 - Monitor progress throughout the year.
7. Track results monthly.
 - Use root cause analysis when results fall outside the acceptable range.
 - Initiate corrective actions.
8. Evaluate the plan at the conclusion of the academic year.
 - Use the results as the cycle begins anew.
 - Share the results with all faculty and staff.

Figure 1. Key steps for establishing an institutional performance excellence model

2) the accessibility to the data, and 3) the availability of comparative data. The Expanded ThunderTeam also sets target ranges for each institutional measure for the current year, for three years out, and for five years out. Working with the PRIED, they set target ranges using trend data, current year performance data, comparative data from best-performing peer colleges, census data, environmental scans (both internal and external), and external benchmark data outside the education sector.

These processes form Richland’s blueprint for the academic year with the vision, mission, values, strategic planning priorities, and key performance indicators in alignment. The Expanded ThunderTeam strives to be comprehensive in the strategic planning process; therefore, they do not allow changes in pri-

orities, key performance indicators, measures, or targets during the academic year. ThunderTeam documents ongoing proposed changes for the subsequent planning cycle year.

Putting the Blueprint into Action

The ThunderTeam develops a plan of action to ensure excellent performance for each key performance indicator during the three-day strategic-planning retreat in August. To integrate the plan into the college’s procedures and processes, they use two sources of information: 1) actions plans, including Organizational Actions, Departmental Actions, and Individual Actions, and 2) Quality Enhancement Plans (QEP).

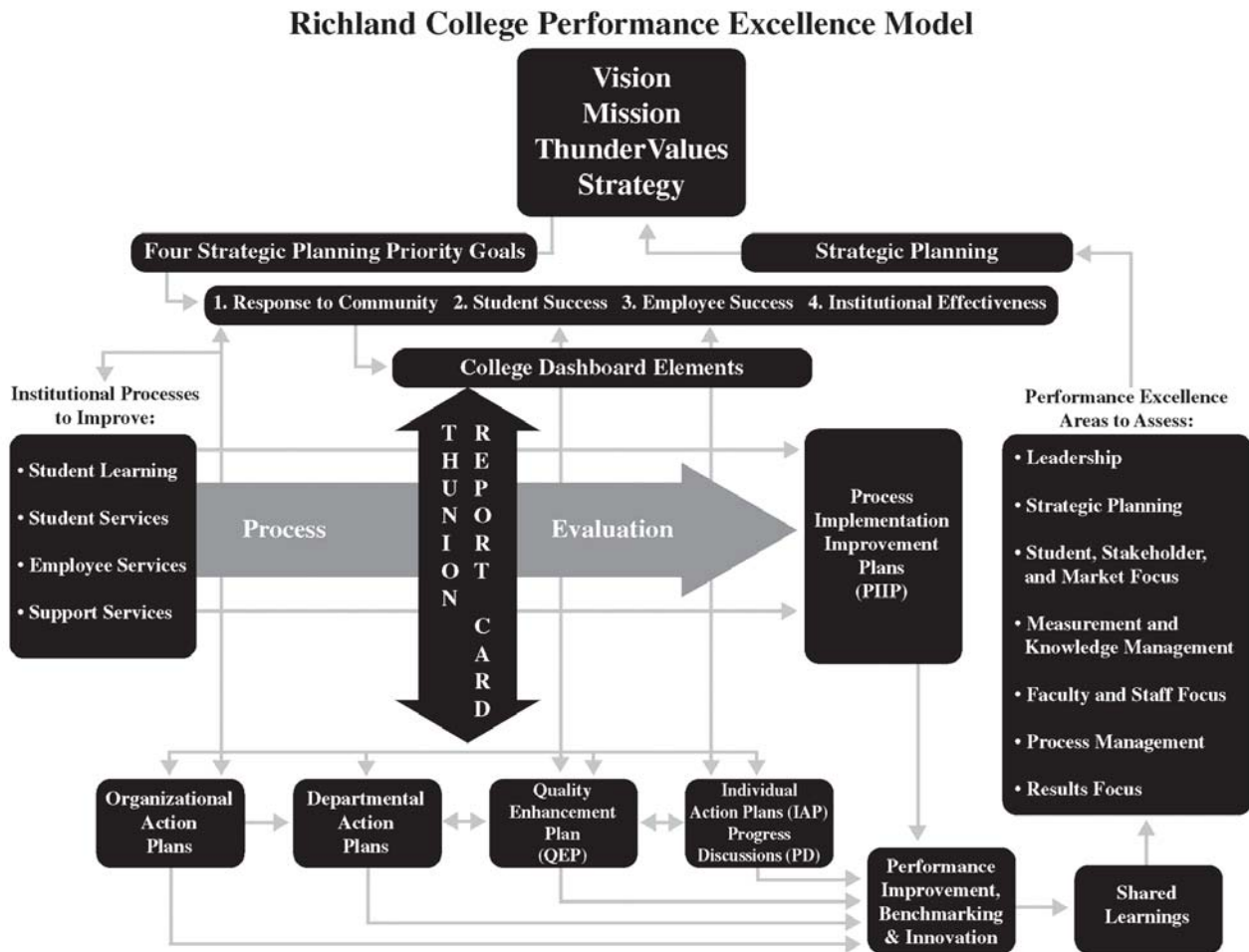


Figure 2. Richland College Performance Excellence Model.

Richland's five-year Organizational Action Plan is based on Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) board and state of Texas mandates, institutional strategic initiatives, and performance gaps gleaned from surveys, focus groups, and outcomes resulting from the monthly indicator tracking represented in the end of year report. The Expanded ThunderTeam designs the organizational action plans at the macro level, and each plan must have at least one supporting departmental action plan. Departmental teams write the action plans that occur at the departmental (micro) level. The Director of Institutional Effectiveness and area vice presidents track the mid-year update to ensure the progress of these plans. However, departmental actions may exist without a corresponding Organizational Action Plan, but these actions are always tied to a Strategic Planning Priority Goal. Individual action plans further support departmental actions by detailing specific supporting faculty and staff activities. All full-time employees are required to participate on a QEP team, organized according to workgroups. Annually, the QEP teams document their use of their assessment results and these results are used as input on their next year's departmental action plans.

The ThunderTeam tracks Richland's institutional measures monthly using their Thunion Report Card with its three layers that the ThunderTeam peels back like an onion to review the inner elements systematically. Layer 1 represents the college's dashboard and contains an overall college performance score and a score for each of four weighted strategic planning priority goals. Layer 2 represents a more detailed layer with scores for each of the 16 weighted key performance indicators. Layer 3 is the most detailed with scores for all 96 weighted institutional measures. The raw-data sheet provides the raw performance data and the raw computed scores. Data from this sheet automatically populate all three layers of the Thunion Report Card using links between Excel spreadsheets and imbedded formulas.

In preparing these reports, the PRIED staff employs a "stoplight" system to identify how well the college is performing. A green light means the college is performing as expected with a score of 9.0 or greater. A yellow light means "caution: the college is performing below expectations," but with a score of

at least 8.5 to 8.99. A red light means "warning: the college is performing well below expectations" and may not meet the target for the academic year.

The Expanded ThunderTeam reviews the Thunion Report Card monthly. This monthly tracking system offers numerous advantages:

1. The institution focuses on what the leadership team and employees deem most important.
2. Leadership and staff can intervene when performance falls below expectations and take corrective action instead of waiting until the end of the year to discover a performance gap. This assessment enhances Richland's organizational agility, enabling leadership to respond quickly to mid-cycle challenges and make needed mid-course corrections.
3. The collective brainstorming and teamwork that occur spontaneously during the review of the institutional measures are especially productive. The old adage that "two heads are better than one" really applies in this case. The varied viewpoints generate creative solutions to address opportunities for improvement and enhance our abilities to create breakthrough innovations.
4. Accountability for actions and follow-through are always at the forefront. The Expanded ThunderTeam documents what they intend to do, and then they follow-up to ensure action has been taken. The data and analyses are the yardstick for determining effectiveness for the strategy/action.

The meeting agenda typically includes a review of six elements: 1) the current month's Thunion Report Card, 2) action items from the previous month's agenda, 3) progress on Process Improvement/Implementation Plans, 4) benchmark activities (reviewed quarterly), 5) student and community feedback summaries (reviewed quarterly), and 6) Quality Enhancement Plan updates. Review of the Report Card begins with a look at the dashboard for low-performing areas. Then the team drills down to Layers 2 and 3 to determine root causes and where interventions may be necessary. As they peel back the layers of the Report Card, their philosophy is to turn to wonder, not to judgment. The area vice presidents drill down further if necessary; this generates a meeting action item for follow-up at the subsequent month's meet-

ing. The PRIED staff keeps detailed notes at these sessions to document follow-up and to chronicle any proposed enhancements to measures for the next planning cycle. The planning year ends August 31st and the end-of-year report is published in November. The report includes action items for the next year's strategic planning; thus, the cycle comes full circle.

Richland's ThunderTeam ensures the improvements are systematic, documented, and replicable using three major processes: 1) Process Improvement/Implementation Plans (PIIPs), 2) Benchmarking Plans, and 3) Quality Enhancement Plans (QEPs). One major challenge Richland College faced was systematizing its continuous improvement process so improvements were documented and posted for other employees to view and replicate in their areas of the college. To this end, the PRIED staff created the PIIP form to document any improvements or newly initiated processes. The form includes a statement of the issue, person(s) responsible for the improvement, a timeframe for completion, and an evaluation of the change. The Director of Institutional Effectiveness tracks and reports on all PIIPs. The PRIED staff posts submitted forms on the college intranet for all faculty and staff to review.

The benchmarking form was created to document the benchmarking process and includes a justification for benchmarking, the estimated costs of benchmarking, as well as the final recommendations of the benchmarking effort. Formalizing the benchmarking process helped Richland College to focus its efforts strategically on areas of high priority for improvement, seek selective best-in-class comparisons, increase timely follow-through for initiated efforts, improve the cost/benefit, and document the results for reference.

Another systematic process that promotes documentation and replication is the QEP. All full-time employees receive professional development credit for their individual QEP participation. Sharing that learning across the institution is a major challenge. To succeed at this, QEP teams post their team minutes and their reports on *eCampus*, the software faculty members use in their distance learning and their on-campus classes to provide documents electronically. In addition, an annual QEP report identifies campus assessment activities and the implemented use of results derived from those activities.

The Challenge Ahead

Continuous improvement requires constant vigilance and focus. Because performance excellence is an on-going journey, the challenge to Richland's leadership is in sustaining commitment to that journey and inspiring faculty and staff to continue to improve in order to take the organization to the next level. Richland's systematic and focused approach to strategic planning clearly demonstrates "what goes around comes around." Richland's passion for student-learning success inspires these efforts in the faculty and staff's ongoing quest for performance excellence. Furthermore, the discipline of the annual applications for the Texas Award for Performance Excellence and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award accelerated the college's ability to make rapid improvements. Feedback reports from each application provided valuable insights for improvement efforts and caused paradigm shifts that may not have otherwise occurred. An example of this is who, how, and what employees benchmark. Prior to Richland's involvement with the Baldrige criteria, the employees' attitudes about benchmarking were rather narrowly confined to other community colleges, primarily their sister colleges within the Dallas County Community College District. Adherence to the Baldrige criteria caused Richland's leadership to approach benchmarking more expansively, including best practices from outside higher education in private industry and health care institutions. Richland has learned strategies for best practice benchmarking that yield a maximum return on the investment of the institution's resources.

For More Information

Information about the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Program and the criteria for performance excellence can be found on the web at www.quality.nist.gov/Education_Criteria.htm. Information on the Texas Award for Performance Excellence can be found at www.texas-quality.org/Content.asp?W=314&C=311. Richland's applications for both awards can be found at the Richland College website, www.rlc.dcccd.edu, by clicking on the Baldrige or Texas logos in the upper right hand corner of the home page. A complete copy of the

Richland College Strategic Plan, 2006-2012, as well as all other strategic planning documents, can be found at www.rlc.dcccd.edu/thunderdoc/.

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