

June 9, 2023

Dr. Lisa Freeman  
President  
Northern Illinois University  
Altgeld Hall 300  
Office of the President  
DeKalb, Illinois 60115

Dear President Freeman,

This letter is accompanied by the Quality Initiative Report (QIR) Review form completed by a peer review panel. Northern Illinois University's QIR showed genuine effort and has been accepted by the Commission. The attached reviewer evaluation contains a rationale for this outcome.

Peer reviewers evaluate all the QIRs based on the genuine effort of the institution, the seriousness of the undertaking, the significance of scope and impact of the work, the genuineness of the commitment to the initiative, and adequate resource provision.

If you have questions about the QIR reviewer information, please contact either Kathy Bijak ([kbijak@hlcommission.org](mailto:kbijak@hlcommission.org)) or Pat Newton-Curran ([pnewton@hlcommission.org](mailto:pnewton@hlcommission.org)).

***Higher Learning Commission***



## Open Pathway Quality Initiative Report

### Panel Review and Recommendation Form

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The Quality Initiative panel review process confirms or questions the institution's effort in undertaking the Quality Initiative Proposal approved by HLC. As indicated in the explication of the review, the Quality Initiative process encourages institutions 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.

Submit the final report as a Word document to HLC at [hlc.commission.org/upload](https://hlc.commission.org/upload). Select "Pathways/Quality Initiatives" from the list of submission options to ensure the report is sent to the correct HLC staff member. The file name for the report should follow this format: QI Report Review <Name of Institution>.

**Name of Institution:** Northern Illinois University

**State:** Illinois

**Institutional ID:** 1134

**Reviewers (names, titles, institutions):**

Dr Paul J. Wolf  
Emeritus Professor of Physics  
Air Force Institute of Technology

Ms. Nancy W. Parks  
Associate Provost, Student Services  
Pierpont Community & Technical College

**Date:** 8 June 2023

### I. Quality Initiative Review

The institution demonstrated its seriousness of the undertaking.

The institution demonstrated that the initiative had scope and impact.

X The institution demonstrated a commitment to and engagement in the initiative.

X The institution demonstrated adequate resource provision.

## II. Recommendation

X The panel confirms genuine effort on the part of the institution.

The panel cannot confirm genuine effort on the part of the institution.

## III. Rationale (required)

Northern Illinois University's QI addressed its concern over student success in its gateway courses via multiple perspectives: how the courses were designed, delivered, and structured in the overall curriculum and how the academic and student support structures could be reimagined to increase student success, especially in under-represented student subgroups. Both the QI and final report were well-organized and replete with details regarding the Project, its results, and the artifacts created to help guide future improvements at NIU and at any other college that opts to consider its results.

### Seriousness of Undertaking:

1. The college opted to design its QI based on work it had already started, using the Project as an opportunity to delve deeper into existing concerns. The QI wasn't an "add on" but a tool to continue an important project. Choosing the "*Success for All..*" institutional project as the QI project conveyed to all constituents the importance of the work and the administration's seriousness in seeing the project to its completion.
2. The institution has aligned the project with official institutional goals documentations, including its Strategic Action Plan, its Strategic Enrollment Management Plan, as well as aligning it with statewide plans for equity.
3. The college established an 80% student success rate in gateway courses of 25+ enrollments as a minimum expectation; this is a fairly high bar, indicating the "ambitious but attainable" spirit of a Quality Initiative.
4. In addition to revising course instruction and co-curricular supports, the institution has begun to engage its alumni as mentors for student populations identified as "under-served." Engaging the alumni in this way increases visibility and a more public accountability of the project.

### Scope & Impact

1. Every facet of this project had significant "scope and impact," including the creation and use of the data-feedback quadrant; the six categories of inquiry related to student success; the re-design of the identified gateway courses; and the significant strides made in ensuring that faculty receive training and certifications that can enhance their service to the students of Northern Illinois as well as allow those faculty to add a nationally-recognized certification (ACUE) to their professional profiles.
2. Over eight out of ten faculty who participated in "cultural competence and equity training" cited those sessions to be a "supportive space to discuss equitable learning practices." Offering such venues for faculty discussions may alleviate "venting" that may have occurred otherwise and in less "safe" spaces.
3. The toolkits and newsletters created through teaching centers provided bite-size and actionable strategies for immediate deployment. Faculty who conduct their own "action research" at the

classroom level will be able to document their efforts and share “before and after” assessment results with their colleagues at Northern Illinois and perhaps at national conferences or in their own publications.

4. The college now offers credit recovery modules at no charge to students in classes where such an offering is possible. This allows the institution to increase its success rates in select gateway courses without requiring students to re-enroll in the course, which could negatively impact their financial aid eligibility. The “credit recovery modules” provide an additional course-level assessment point for individual colleges and content areas to examine. *For example, which modules of Psychology do most students need to “recover” from? How might those findings affect future revisions to the course in order to reduce the number of students who need to “recover”?*
5. The tools and resources created as a result of the project are made available through the institution’s website for other colleges to adapt for their own institutional use.

### **Commitment & Engagement:**

1. The QI was comprehensive and targeted and involved stakeholders from all areas of the institution, including the creation of an interdisciplinary team of 30+ faculty and staff. Academic Affairs and Student Support Offices appear to be represented proportionately; eighty courses were selected for “prioritized for student success enhancement.” This interdisciplinary team complemented the work of the Executive and Core Teams made up of VPs and Associate VPs and Directors, respectively. In addition, the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning worked alongside those teams to research and disseminate evidence-based practices to improve student success. New Student Orientation modules and First Year Seminar courses have been revised in response to faculty and student feedback.
2. Several new faculty development and sustainable student support initiatives were created, including ACUE training for faculty; the creation of 8-week terms and credit recovery modules for students who were initially unsuccessful to “rebound” and have an institutionally-approved “do over.” The equity audits across curriculum can yield course design and instructional improvements for semesters to come.
3. Several stages of the project included data analysis for formative feedback. These detailed and “just in time” examinations of student and faculty feedback and course completion rates have illustrated the benefits that “even the smallest changes to course design, delivery, or supports” can make. These small changes may be the most sustainable in the long-term.
4. Success rates have improved in one-half of the courses addressed, and equity gaps have been reduced in almost one-quarter of all courses addressed. In addition, some student support areas, including instructional labs and academic advising, offer extended hours. Virtually all curricular and co-curricular areas have been affected by and, in turn, influenced the project.

### **Adequate Resource Provision:**

1. The QI supported investments in Tableau, EAB’s Academic Performance Solution and Navigate tools, and the institution increased its academic advising staff by 10 new hires.
2. The institution invested in ACUE micro-credentialing for 60+ individual faculty in “Effective College Instruction” and credentialing in “Inclusive Teaching for Equitable Learning” for over 120 faculty and graduate teaching assistants.
3. Over one million dollars was invested in classroom technology to complement design and delivery of courses, and funds have been earmarked to train twenty faculty in various curricular innovations.