

*Quality Initiative Institutional Proposal*

---

**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.

**Student Success Programs: Using Assessment as a Continual Improvement Strategy**

Northern Arizona University's Quality Initiative project focuses current efforts to increase retention and engage in campus-wide systematic continual improvement practices. The primary purpose of our Quality Initiative is to systematically analyze the impact of two (of eight) student success programs on the academic success of our first year students. Results will be used to inform iterative enhancement of current practices designed to increase retention. The secondary purpose of this initiative is to use the in-depth study of these two programs to refine assessment approaches that can be applied systematically to inform continual improvement efforts for the six remaining student success programs. The proposal's desired long-term impacts are to (1) improve retention rates, and (2) strengthen the culture of continual improvement across all student success programs (through developing formative and summative models of assessment). We plan to gather data for two years and provide a final report by the end of the 2015-16 Academic Year (May 2016). The report will articulate how we will apply our findings to our other student success programs.

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

2. Explain why the proposed initiative is relevant and significant for the institution.
3. Explain the intended impact of the initiative on the institution and its academic quality.

Student achievement and progress to graduation are among the most important indicators of performance for the Flagstaff campus undergraduate educational enterprise. As stated in the first goal of NAU's Strategic Plan, our primary focus at the university is to promote high levels of student access, engagement, achievement, and affordability. Strong scaffolding of student support and guidance for achievement and degree attainment is our primary method of improving recruitment, retention, and support of students toward degree progress.

Following a long trajectory of incremental improvements in first to second year retention, from a low of 63% in 1997 to the recent high of 76% in 2012, the university's leadership has invested in innovative strategies to secure further gains in first year student academic achievement and persistence. Given the academic and social factors that influence student retention, two types of initiatives have been developed: Course-based Success Initiatives and Community-based Success Initiatives. The Course-based Success Initiatives seek to improve instructional design, first year formal learning experiences, academic supports for student achievement, and critical skills to assist students in succeeding as learners. The Community-based Success Initiatives seek to provide strong and timely guidance to students to improve their navigation of the university, strengthen connections and their sense of community with peers, faculty and staff, and cultivate stronger commitment to degree attainment through robust support of educational planning and advisement.

Our proposed project will concentrate on two of the success initiatives: Peer Jacks Mentoring program, an Enrollment Management Student Affairs-managed program, and the Student Success Coaching program, an Academic Affairs-managed program. These two programs were selected because they are relatively new, highlight complementary programs across Enrollment Management Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, and with recent substantial institutional investment, warrant focused assessment. These

programs also have clearly delineated channels for implementing improvement efforts, primarily through the presence of staff committed to the long-term success of these programs.

**Peer Jacks Mentoring** is a support program designed to assist first-year, out-of-state students in the successful transition to university life. Eligible students have the opportunity to participate in meaningful one-on-one peer mentoring experiences and attend social events specifically created to assist the development of social connections between out-of-state students and students having similar interests. The program helps students develop social networks, become familiar with campus resources and tools promoting academic success and progress, learn more about themselves, and deepen their commitment to obtaining a degree.

**Student Success Coaching (SSC)** is designed to empower each student through a coaching relationship with an NAU employee or retiree trained in life-coaching strategies. SSC is available to all first-time, full-time freshmen who are not served through other mentoring or coaching programs. Coaches provide one-on-one support to students with weekly meetings to help students transition to campus life and enhance their learning experience at NAU. The program equips students with the tools and resources to manage transition, access support, and explore academic and career opportunities.

The QI project's desired long-term impacts are to (1) refine programs to improve retention, and (2) strengthen the culture of continual improvement across all student success programs. Focused study of the Peer Jacks Mentoring and Student Success Coaching programs will inform program improvements and increase retention rates. The observations and improvements developed through our study will contribute to the development and implementation of more rigorous formative and summative assessment models across student success programs.

#### **Clarity of the Initiative's Purpose**

4. Describe the purposes and goals for the initiative.
5. Describe how the institution will evaluate progress, make adjustments, and determine what has been accomplished.

The primary purpose of this initiative is to systematically analyze the impact of two of NAU's student success programs (Peer Jacks Mentoring and Student Success Coaching) on student academic success (e.g., 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year retention rates, progression to sophomore status, course completion) in order to support the iterative enhancement of current practices designed to increase retention. The secondary purpose of this initiative is to use the in-depth study of these two programs to refine our assessment approaches that can be applied systematically to inform continual improvement efforts within NAU's other student success programs.

This initiative is a continuing project that will further enhance our collaborations in data collection and reporting across the Academic Affairs and Enrollment Management Student Affairs areas. By developing common processes, we can apply the findings of our targeted study to other student success programs, and continue to leverage our relationships to accomplish innovative, supportive approaches that will provide useful and efficient continual improvement processes to refine and sustain our support and retention of students. Developing a strong framework to evaluate our progress, make adjustments, and determine what has been accomplished will assist us in achieving our broader goals.

To accomplish the systematic analysis of the impact of the Peer Jacks Mentoring and Student Success Coaching programs on student academic success, our goals are to (1) conduct an in-depth examination of each of the programs, (2) develop a statistical model for retention that can assist us in determining to

what extent each student success program effects student retention, and (3) document the most promising assessment processes, findings, and modeling techniques in order to develop a plan for formative and summative assessment that can be utilized by all of our student success programs. To ensure we stay on track, the project leaders will provide progress reports once per semester to the Strategic Planning and Budget Council, the senior leadership group that selected the Quality Initiative Project.

Progress on the QI project will be evaluated based on the achievement of the following important milestones:

- (1) In-depth examination of the two programs
  - a. Review and refine mission statements and anticipated program outcomes
  - b. Review and refine formative assessments (surveys, etc.)
  - c. Data collection and analysis
  - d. Development of program changes based on assessment findings
- (2) Development of a statistical model for retention
  - a. Establish the cohort at the beginning of each academic year
  - b. Research and develop the statistical model that will be applied
  - c. Document the advantages and limitations of statistical techniques/models
  - d. Apply the statistical model, review the findings, and make changes as appropriate
- (3) Documentation of assessment processes, use of findings and application of statistical modeling techniques
  - a. Tracking effective and ineffective program processes
  - b. Tracking effective and ineffective formative and summative assessment processes
  - c. Based on findings develop a plan for the application of assessment processes and statistical models to other programs.

To ensure this initiative's success, the Strategic Planning and Budget Council intentionally selected the Peer Jacks Mentoring and the Student Success Coaching programs. Through our experience in the assessment of both academic and student affairs programs, we have found that one of the key indicators for success of continual improvement processes is the willingness of the populations engaged in the assessment to participate in continual improvement processes. To avoid potential obstacles, we have selected two programs that are excited to engage in this continuous improvement endeavor and that have strong track records of enhancing their programs based on formative and summative assessment findings.

It is possible that the largest obstacle of this initiative will be the engagement of other student success initiatives in continuous improvement efforts. In fact, knowledge of this has been incorporated into the design of the Quality Initiative. Through previous studies of academic degree programs engaging in assessment, we have identified that if we use the assessments and approaches developed by our innovators and "early adopters" as examples, we can engage the "late adopters" in evidence-based continual improvement efforts. Our initiative applies this same approach to our student success programs. We have identified two innovative programs eager to engage in rigorous assessment. Other programs can then utilize the models that we refine with these two programs. By providing guidance in how to use these models, we can overcome this cultural obstacle and engage our remaining student success programs in continual improvement efforts. Senior leadership from Academic Affairs and Enrollment Management Student Affairs are strongly in favor of this approach, as it is aligned with their commitment to using assessment for continuous improvement across all student success initiatives.

We anticipate having two years of summative and formative data to refine our assessment models and provide useful feedback for the continual improvement of our assessment and program approaches. We plan to begin data collection and analysis by the end of the 2013-14 Academic Year (May 2014). Thus, we

will use data from AY 2013-14 and AY 2014-15 to submit our final Quality Initiative report of findings, examination of those findings, and a plan for incorporating other student success initiatives in this continual improvement process. If we are unable to complete the development of formative and summative assessments for data collection this year, we will collect data in AY 2014-15 and AY 2015-16 and submit our final Quality Initiative Report in May of 2016. If we need additional time for data collection, we have the flexibility of adding an additional year to the Quality Initiative and submitting the final report in May of 2017, which would still achieve our commitment to report in our allotted timeframe.

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

6. Describe the level of support for the initiative by internal or external stakeholders.
7. Identify the groups and individuals that will lead or be directly involved in implementing the initiative.
8. List the human, financial, technological and other resources that the institution has committed to this initiative.

The Quality Initiative project has the full support of Northern Arizona University's President and Provost. Ongoing communication between the project leaders and senior administration will ensure continued support and commitment to the stated goals. Project leaders will report on the achievement of important project milestones to the Strategic Planning and Budget Committee, the executive leadership group responsible for the fiscally-responsible achievement of Northern Arizona University's long-term goals, once each semester. Additional support by the upper administration for the student success programs has been demonstrated through the extensive resources that have been committed to sustaining eight student success programs, each focusing on a unique approach or student population to improve student success.

Northern Arizona University has developed and sustains strong support for continuous improvement efforts. Evidence for this can be identified through the presence of offices and support services in both the areas of academic and student affairs committed specifically to assisting programs in developing useful assessments of program effectiveness, and transforming programs based on findings. (Please note that these offices are separate from the area of institutional research, which also exists at Northern Arizona University.) Such commitment has led to the university-wide establishment of the annual Assessment Fair in 2002 (a forum for academic and student affairs programs to showcase assessment findings and evidence-based changes to programs), the receipt of the CHEA Award for Assessment and Learning Outcomes in 2009, and the development and combining of academic assessment and curriculum design responsibilities (using evidence of student learning to drive continual improvement of curriculum) into a formal office in 2012. With this initiative our university leadership, offices, and program staff are leveraging this opportunity to better connect our resources and expertise to develop models for continual improvement for our student success programs.

In alignment with the projects goals, Academic Affairs and Enrollment Management Student Affairs will co-lead the project. The leaders for assessment in each of the areas (Associate Vice Provost for Curriculum & Assessment in Academic Affairs, Director for Assessment in EMSA) will lead research analysts in collecting and monitoring data to provide feedback for the larger initiative and will guide discussions with the leadership and staff of the Peer Jacks Mentoring and Student Success Coaching initiatives. Both assessment offices have staff with the necessary methodological and analytical expertise.

The proposed project capitalizes on continuing efforts. The institution has already committed resources to the Peer Jacks Mentoring and Student Success Coaching programs, the Office of Curriculum, Learning Design, and Academic Assessment, and the Assessment in Enrollment Management Student Affairs Office. Thus, no new resources need to be allocated for this work. Due to the selection of this program for the Initiative and its strong alignment to the institution's commitment to student success and ongoing

continual improvement efforts, we foresee the efforts of the QI will enhance our culture of continual improvement across all student success programs and will be naturally sustainable.

**Appropriateness of the Timeline for the Initiative**

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

**Tentative Timeline**

Year 1 (2013-14):

- Submit Quality Initiative Proposal
- Develop detailed timeline of activities and responsible parties
- Ensure communication is effective among areas
- Define and refine data collection and continual improvement efforts for formative and summative assessment
  - Analyze retention data
  - Reflect upon and modify current practices based on findings
- Progress Report to the Strategic Planning and Budget Committee at the end of the spring 2014 semester

Year 2 (2014-15): Data Collection and Continual Improvement Efforts

- Make any changes to the timeline based on progress
- Refine data collection and continual improvement efforts for formative and summative assessment
  - Analyze retention data
  - Reflect upon and modify current practices based on findings
- Ensure communication is effective among areas
- Progress Report to the Strategic Planning and Budget Committee once per semester

Year 3 (2015-16): Either Data Collection and Continual Improvement Efforts, or development of Quality Initiative Final Report. (Italics indicates areas that may or may not be implemented, based on progress in previous years of the process)

- Make any changes to the timeline based on progress
- Refine data collection and continual improvement efforts for formative and summative assessment
  - Analyze retention data
  - Reflect upon and modify current practices based on findings
- Ensure communication is effective among areas
- Progress Report to the Strategic Planning and Budget Committee once per semester
- Final Report of Quality Initiative Project