

Open Pathway Quality Initiative

Information for Institutions and Peer Reviewers

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) 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. 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 processes for ensuring the institution continues to be in compliance with HLC's Criteria for Accreditation.

The Quality Initiative should suit the institution's present concerns or aspirations. HLC 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 Quality Initiative

An institution may design its own Quality Initiative, choose from an HLC menu of Quality Initiative topics, or participate in an HLC Academy as its Quality Initiative. Sample initiative topics are listed on HLC's website at hlcommission.org/quality-initiative. Information about HLC's Academies can be found at hlcommission.org/academies.

Quality Initiative Proposal

The institution submits a Quality Initiative Proposal to HLC for approval. The proposal will be accepted beginning September 1 of Year 5 and is due no later than June 1 of Year 7 of the Open Pathway cycle.

For initiatives other than HLC's Academies,¹ the institution completes the proposal using the provided [template](#). Quality Initiative Proposals should be no longer than 4,500 words and signed by the institution's president or chancellor. See page 3 for instructions on submitting the proposal.

¹ Institutions that wish to join an Academy in order to use it as their Quality Initiative should complete an [Academy application](#) instead of the Quality Initiative Proposal template.

Peer Review Process

Although HLC staff may advise an institution in the development of its proposal, the final approval of the proposal requires evaluation by a peer review panel. HLC staff screen the Quality Initiative Proposal, discuss it with the institution only if necessary, and then forward it for peer review.

1. Peer Review and Approval. A panel of two peer reviewers conducts a virtual evaluation of the Quality Initiative Proposal, based on sufficiency of scope and significance, clarity of purpose, evidence of commitment and capacity, and appropriateness of timeline. The panel either approves the proposal 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. The panel completes its evaluation using the provided [review form](#).

2. Institution Notification. At the completion of the review process, HLC sends the panel's review to the institution. The institution is free to begin its Quality Initiative except in the unusual circumstance that the panel requires the institution to resubmit its proposal. Resubmissions are due within 30 days of receipt of the panel's request.

The proposal review process will be completed in approximately 8–12 weeks unless resubmission is required.

Review Categories for the Quality Initiative Proposal

Sufficiency of the Initiative's Scope and Significance

- Potential for significant impact on the institution and its academic quality.
- Alignment with the institution's mission and vision.
- Connection with the institution's planning processes.
- Evidence of significance and relevance at this time.

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.

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 to the 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.

Quality Initiative Report

At the end of the Quality Initiative, an institution writes its Quality Initiative Report. The report offers the institution the opportunity to reflect on what it has accomplished, to document the achievements and strategies used, and to define new priorities and challenges. It is due no later than June 1 of Year 9 of the Open Pathway cycle.

For initiatives other than HLC's Academies,² the institution completes the report using the provided [template](#). The Quality Initiative Report should be no longer than 6,000 words and signed by the institution's president or chancellor. See page 3 for instructions on submitting the report.

² Institutions participating in an HLC Academy for their Quality Initiative do not follow this report and review process. Instead, these institutions engage in a concluding event and use a different report template.

Peer Review and Decision-Making Process

Upon receiving the institution's Quality Initiative Report, HLC staff review it for completeness and forward it for peer review. The peer reviewers' recommendation is used to help determine the institution's eligibility to choose its Pathway for Reaffirmation of Accreditation following its Year 10 comprehensive evaluation.

1. Peer Review. A panel of two peer reviewers conducts a virtual evaluation of the Quality Initiative Report and prepares a review using the provided [review and recommendation form](#) that addresses the genuineness of effort on the part of the institution. If the panel has questions about the institution's Quality Initiative, the panel leader will contact the institution for clarification, typically via email.

The panel recommendation is limited to the following:

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

The panel sends its preliminary recommendation to the institution's HLC staff liaison. If necessary, the liaison discusses the review with the panel before the panel submits the final report. HLC sends the final report to the institution.

If the panel cannot confirm genuine effort: The institution is given an opportunity to provide a response to the panel's findings. The institution's Quality Initiative Report, the panel report and the institution's response are then sent to a second panel for final review. The second panel follows the same review process as the first. The second panel's finding is final.

2. Decision-Making Process. HLC adds the panel report with the recommendation and documentation from the Year 10 comprehensive evaluation and forwards them to the Institutional Actions Council (IAC) for decision making. If the reviewers cannot confirm genuine effort on the part of the institution, it will lose eligibility to choose its Pathway for Reaffirmation of Accreditation. The Quality Initiative in itself cannot result in monitoring or a sanction. The IAC takes action on the institution's Reaffirmation of Accreditation and on the institution's pathway eligibility.

Submission Instructions

The institution should submit its proposal and report as single PDF files at hlcommission.org/upload to "Pathways/Quality Initiatives." The PDF file name should follow the formats below and must include the institution's name (or an identifiable portion thereof) and state.

- Proposals: QIProposal[InstitutionName][State].pdf (e.g., QIProposalNoNameUniversityMN.pdf)
- Reports: QIReport[InstitutionName][State].pdf (e.g., QIReportNoNameUniversityMN.pdf)

Please note: When submitting its Quality Initiative Proposal and Report, the institution should carefully consider whether documents containing personally identifiable information (PII) must be included. If the documents must be included for evaluative purposes, please redact the PII where possible. If redaction of the PII will interfere with the evaluative value of the document, please clearly identify the document as containing PII (for example, through a cover page or prominent notation on the document). Institutions are not expected to redact or identify information or documents where the only PII included is employee or Board member names and work contact information.

PII is any information about an individual that allows the individual to be specifically identified. This includes, but is not limited to: name, address, telephone number, birthday, email, social security number, bank information, etc. A document does not include PII if personal information is de-identified (for example, student financial receivables without student names or bank routing information) or is provided in the aggregate (for example, data on faculty qualifications). See [HLC's PII Guidelines](#) for more information.

