

Overcoming Obstacles to Earn the Governor's Quality Award *North Arkansas College's Journey to Excellence*



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On September 15, 2015, North Arkansas College (Northark) was awarded the Arkansas Governor's Quality Award for Performance Excellence (GQA) making Northark the first educational entity in the state to earn this recognition. Northark's quality journey began somewhat out of necessity, but not without a great deal of desire.

Challenges & Obstacles

In late 2011, the College faced a few inherent challenges along with a significant impending obstacle. The inherent challenges included accreditation concerns regarding data and planning, and the depletion of half a million dollars in the College's reserve funds. The impending obstacle included the passage of state legislation that would reduce an institution's funding if state-mandated performance levels were not met. The potential loss of accreditation, need to gain financial stability, and performance funding became the starting blocks for Northark's journey. However, Northark had less than eighteen months to correct accreditation findings related to planning and use of outcome data and prepare for the implementation of performance funding. So in all reality, our journey started a bit more like a sprint.

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The Vision

As a result, in the fall of 2011, we completed a three-year comprehensive strategic plan that addressed accreditation criteria, financial stability, and performance funding measures. It was during this planning, that we realized that the College did not have a Vision Statement. Through collaboration with various stakeholders, the College developed its first ever Vision Statement: "to be a premier institution, achieving excellence through innovation, technology, continuous improvement, and quality instruction."

Continuous Quality Improvement

This Vision created an enormous sense of responsibility to ensure the College moved toward achieving it, and so we furthered our efforts by seeking and gaining acceptance into the Continuous Quality Improvement Network (CQIN). We knew that in order to sustain the strategic plan and move toward an environment of “continuous improvement”, a cultural transformation was critical, and the CQIN framework provided a proven route. CQIN’s framework of a single-themed, intensive institute with carefully chosen learning partners supporting continuous quality improvement (CQI) practices enabled the college to focus on high level transformational strategies deployable across the entire institution.

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Over the next three years, Northark sent teams to CQIN's annual Summer Institute to glean strategies and approaches that became the foundation for improving employee engagement, operational effectiveness, planning, and customer focus. During this time, the College remained committed to a process of sending campus-wide representational teams who were responsible for guiding the deployment of

learning from the Summer Institute to the entire campus over the course of the following year. Since 2012, over forty Northark employees have attended one of CQIN's Summer Institutes to ensure ongoing involvement and engagement in building a culture of continuous quality improvement.

Governor's Quality Award

The strategies and approaches we learned from CQIN permeate Northark’s strategic plan and became the salient examples included in the Governor's Quality Award (GQA) application. Over 70% of institutional strengths noted in the GQA feedback report correlate directly to learning from CQIN Summer Institutes. One identified overall strength from the GQA feedback report noted “it is evident that employees and students operate from a shared and demonstrated commitment to achieving the organization’s Key Results for achievement.” Northark’s Key Results (30% completion, 60% retention, 90% satisfaction) were developed after attending CQIN's 2012 Summer Institute, which focused on "Creating a Culture of Accountability."

Another strength noted by examiners stated “the overall strategic planning process and the trademarked GADIE® planning model are well-structured and innovative and have led to evidence-based decision-making being embraced throughout the organization.” This outcome is a result of CQIN's 2013 Summer Institute on "Systems Thinking".

Feedback from the GQA examiners noted this as a strength saying “senior leaders are building a culture along with a successful institution, actively providing training for the desired culture, and support reward and recognition processes to recognize high performance and positively impact the motivation of the workforce.”

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Milestones

Since starting our quality journey, Northark has reached several milestones and achieved many accomplishments, but the most significant outcome has directly benefited our students, our community, and our state in that we have increased degree and certificate completion by over 56% since 2011. And while Northark’s accomplishments are noteworthy, the real advantage of being a CQIN member has been cementing a culture of quality improvement characterized by student and employee engagement, constantly seeking feedback, building our educational processes around that feedback, and rewarding our people for process improvements and the results they achieve for our students.

The quest for quality is truly a journey, not a destination. And it isn’t about an award, but about setting sights on excellence and continually striving to improve as an organization. The historical focus on continuous improvement has led Northark to achieve three key “firsts”:

1. Northark become the first Arkansas educational institution to be accepted into the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP), which is an alternative means of accreditation offered by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.
2. Shortly following our AQIP acceptance, Northark became the first college in the State to be accepted into CQIN in 2012.
3. Last September, Northark was the first college to earn the coveted Arkansas Quality Award for Performance Excellence.

The lessons learned from CQIN have inspired numerous quality improvements and our CQIN membership has been invaluable to us. The deep commitment to continuous improvement is engrained in our Vision Statement and will remain Northark’s main focus and goal as we move into the future.