

The Value of the Baldrige Framework for Self-Assessment and Improvement in Education: The Rutgers Excellence in Higher Education Program

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The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Program (MBNQA) was established in 1987 by Congress to promote awareness of the importance of quality practices and initiatives for the advancement of the national economy (NIST, 1999). The award process is overseen by the National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST) and, since its inception, the MBNQA organizational excellence framework has proven to be an extremely popular and useful guide for corporate-sector improvement efforts.

In the 12 years since the program was initiated, well over 1.5 million copies of the Baldrige Award criteria have been distributed. Moreover, the Baldrige framework serves as the basis for awards programs in 42 states (NIST, 1998), and many leading companies have adapted the award criteria to their own needs¹. Above all else, the pervasive influence of the Baldrige has occurred because the MBNQA framework provides a clear and coherent way of conceptualizing and assessing organizational excellence.

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In 1995, the program was extended beyond the business sector. In that year, NIST developed pilot initiatives for both education and healthcare. These programs and assessment criteria paralleled the “Business Baldrige,” and like the corporate version were designed to foster organizational improvement and “best-practices” sharing. The “Education Baldrige” was designed for educational units at all levels and all types – public and private.

Legislative and budgetary limitations during 1996 slowed plans to implement these new programs on a broader scale. Nonetheless, many states began to utilize the education and healthcare criteria in their own state award processes. In New Jersey, for instance, the *Governor’s Performance Excellence Awards*² published guidelines and encouraged applications and review for educational institutions at all levels. In 1998, two New Jersey public school systems have submitted applications, and in 1999 the Hunterdon School System was selected as a state award recipient.

In 1998, Congressional funding for the implementation of the education-sector Baldrige process was approved and plans for a national program began in 1999-2000. In the first year of implementation, a number of schools submitted awards applications—and several were selected to receive site visits—but none were selected as award recipients.

In higher education, a number of institutions have utilized the “Education Baldrige” framework, among them Belmont University, University of Missouri-Rolla and Northwest Missouri State University. The Baldrige framework has also begun to have an influence on the approaches utilized by the regional accrediting associations, and upon professional accrediting criteria in business, engineering, and the health sciences. The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) also developed an awards framework emphasizing the leadership and process dimensions of the Baldrige and, in 1999, the American Council on Education (ACE) also introduced an awards program drawing on concepts related to the Baldrige.

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Adapting the Baldrige Framework: The Rutgers *Excellence in Higher Education* Model

As had been the case in business, the value of adapting the Baldrige framework to specialized needs in education has been recognized. One example is *Excellence in Higher Education (EHE)*, a version of the Baldrige framework developed at Rutgers University, especially for higher education (Ruben, 2000a; Ruben, 1995; Ruben & Lehr, 1997).

EHE was designed to address the needs of colleges and universities, and utilizes language that is familiar to the culture of such institutions³. It is intended for use as an assessment, strategic planning and quality education tool for administrative or academic units within a college or university, or with an entire institution. The approach incorporates many of the dimensions typically included in higher education assessment methodologies, such as self-studies, external reviews, management audits, accreditation reviews and strategic planning. *EHE* can be used to integrate or complement these strategies. The goals of *EHE* include:

- Increasing awareness of issues related to higher education assessment and improvement
- Providing baseline measures and a standard of comparison using an accepted assessment framework
- Serving as a vehicle for leadership and professional development
- Sharpening the focus of the unit or institution on the needs, expectations, perspectives and satisfaction/dissatisfaction levels of the groups served by the unit
- Highlighting organizational strengths
- Identifying and prioritizing potential areas for improvement
- Facilitating communication and benchmarking within and across units and institutions
- Broadening faculty and staff leadership engagement

- Providing a proactive and constructive response to demands for increased accountability and performance measurement

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The *EHE* program has been implemented at more than 20 academic and administrative units at Rutgers, including law, nursing, business, liberal arts, communication, information and library studies, environmental and agricultural science, computing services, human resources, facilities management, research and sponsored programs, student campus centers, and the Provosts' campus administrative councils in Newark and Camden.

The University of California-Berkeley has also adopted the *EHE* program; thus far, it has been implemented in eight units. *EHE* programs have also been conducted for units at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Howard University, California State University-Fullerton, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of San Diego.

A new version of the framework—*EHE 2000*—was published in December 2000 (Ruben, 2000a; Ruben 2000b; Ruben 2000c).

EHE 2000 provides a systems view of organizational excellence. The *EHE 2000* framework consists of the following categories: 1) leadership; 2) strategic planning; 3) stakeholder focus; 4) information and analysis; 5) faculty/staff focus; 6) process effectiveness; and 7) excellence levels and trends, as illustrated in Figure 1. Each category includes a sub-group of items and a series of areas to address.

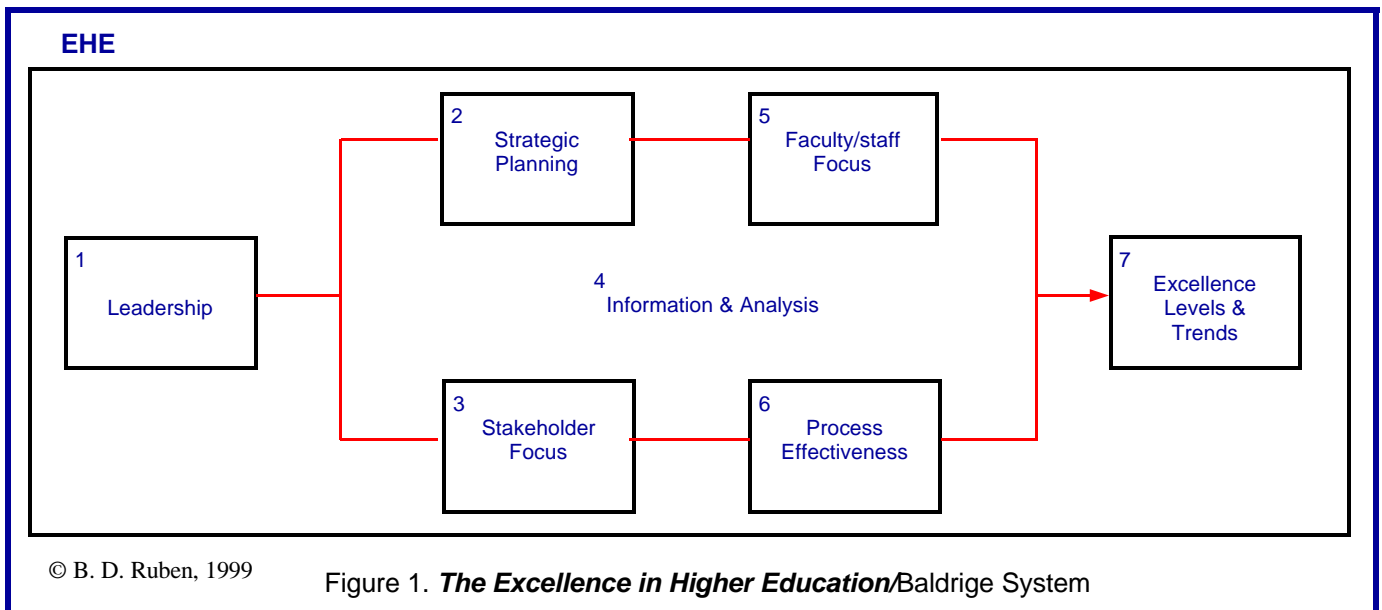


Table 1. Excellence in Higher Education 2000 Categories

Category 1. Leadership

- Does your unit have a clearly defined, documented and shared view of your mission, vision, values, plans and goals?
- How do leaders guide your unit, and clarify, build and sustain consensus on your directions and priorities?
- How do leaders focus your unit on understanding and addressing the needs and expectations of stakeholders?
- How do leaders use communication, performance review and other approaches to foster effective leadership systems and practices throughout the organization?

Category 2. Strategic Planning

- How does your unit translate its mission, vision and values into priorities, goals and action steps?
- Does your unit have a formal planning process and a plan?
- How do you implement and evaluate your plans and goals?
- How do you engage faculty/staff from your unit in the planning and implementation process?

Category 3. Stakeholder Focus

- For what groups does your unit provide programs and services?
- How does your unit learn about the needs and expectations of these stakeholder groups?
- How do you build and enhance your relationships, communication and reputation with stakeholders?
- How do you assess the satisfaction levels of your major stakeholder groups?

Category 4. Information and Analysis

- How do you select and use data and information to assess excellence levels and trends for your unit?
- How do you use information to coordinate and improve all aspects of the organization?
- How does your unit select and use comparison information from peer, competitor and leading organizations?

Category 5. Faculty/Staff Focus

- How are the faculty/staff encouraged to develop their full potential, and to link their efforts with the priorities of the unit and institution?
- How does your unit build and maintain an environment that is conducive to excellence, engagement, appreciation of diversity, and personal and organizational development?
- How do you assess and monitor workplace climate and the satisfaction of faculty/staff?

Category 6. Process Effectiveness

- How does your unit identify, monitor and assure the effectiveness and efficiency of your mission-critical work processes?
- How are support processes – processes that are necessary to mission-critical processes – monitored and improved?
- How does the unit regularly review and improve mission-critical and support processes?
- How are comparisons with other organizations used for process improvement?

Category 7. Excellence Levels and Trends

- How successful is your unit overall in achieving its mission, vision, plans and goals?
- How successful are specific programs and services in achieving their goals?
- How satisfied are your major stakeholders and faculty/staff?
- How successful are partnering/alliance/supplier relationships?
- Are your current, documented excellence levels favorable/unfavorable in each of these areas?
- How do these patterns compare to peer, competitor and other leading organizations?

The EHE Process

The *EHE* process as it has been most often implemented entails four basic steps: 1) self assessment; 2) improvement prioritization; 3) project planning; 4) project implementation, report out, and recognition, as illustrated in Figure 2. A brief explanation of each phase follows:

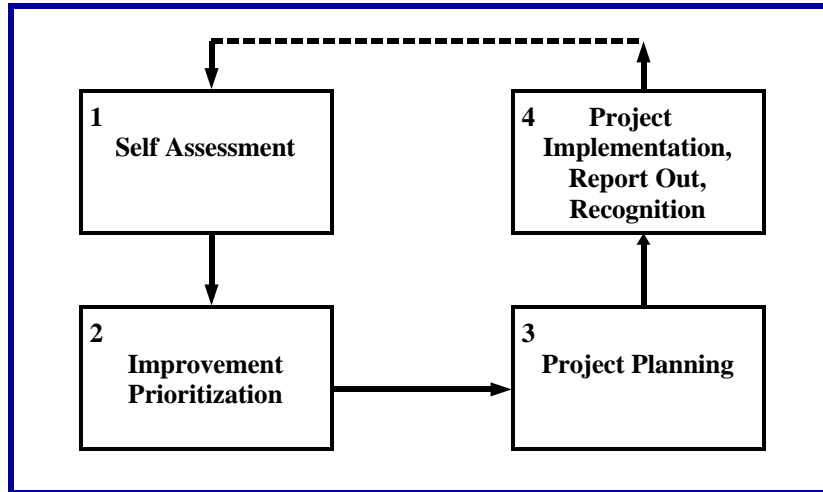


Fig 2. The EHE Process

Step 1: Self-Assessment

The *EHE* self-assessment process is conducted in a workshop attended by a leadership team—administrators and selected faculty and staff from throughout the institution/unit. A one-day workshop is scheduled, and participants receive an *Excellence in Higher Education Guidebook* (Ruben, 2000a) in order to familiarize themselves with the framework and criteria prior to the session.

The workshop itself consists of a sequential review of each category with documentation provided in the *Excellence in Higher Education Workbook* (Ruben, 2000b). The components of the category are reviewed and explained, the elements of the category are discussed, and examples of “strengths” and “areas for improvement” for the institution/unit in the category are identified through group dialogue. “Strengths” and “areas for improvement” for the unit are recorded on flip charts. Next, participants individually rate the institution/unit on a 0% to 100% scale, following detailed instructions provided in the manual. At one extreme, a “0%” would be the appropriate rating for a unit that has no initiative in a particular category. At the other extreme, a rating of 100% would suggest that every aspect of the category was being fully and systematically covered, to the extent that the organization is an international leader in this area. Scoring forms are submitted, and a summary of participant ratings is prepared and displayed.

The process is then repeated for each of the remaining categories, until all seven are completed.

The final activities of the self-assessment phase of the workshop involve: 1) Calculating an overall score that can be used as a reference point against which to measure progress in the future; and 2) reviewing and discussing the overall scoring profile.

Step 2: Improvement Prioritization

Step 2 involves scheduling a second workshop session of one-half day in length, one day to several weeks after the first session. As preparation, the list of “strengths” and “areas for improvement” are transferred from flip chart sheets to handouts that are distributed to participants prior to the workshop. The session itself consists of a review of the items with special attention to the areas in need of improvement. Items which point to similar issues are grouped and reworded for clarity. Next, multi-voting is used to rank order priorities for improvement. The improvement priorities are rank order based on votes received, and those receiving the greatest number of votes are selected as action items.

Step 3: Project Planning

Discussion then shifts to a planning stage where the goal is to translate the selected three-five priority areas into improvement projects. The group drafts a brief “charge” for each project, determines the appropriate membership on the team to work on the improvement, nominates a team leader, defines the team’s “deliverables” and establishes a timeline. Generally, members of the leadership team serve as team leaders, and additional faculty and staff may participate on teams.

Step 4: Project Implementation, Report Out, Recognition

In the follow-up phase, each project team develops a formalized plan for addressing their respective priorities. Plans are presented, discussed and ratified at a subsequent meeting of the group. Support, training and other resources needed by particular teams are negotiated and provided on an "as-needed, when-needed" basis. After the broad directions are approved, groups begin more detailed action planning and implementation, periodically checking with the leadership team and others in the unit to discuss their progress.

Communication with unit leadership and others in the unit occurs regularly as the improvement projects progress, and more formally as they reach completion. Depending upon the circumstance, a recognition event is held at which teams report on their accomplishments and all involved are able to share and publicly acknowledge their achievements.

As projects are completed, the leadership team returns to the list of priorities that were not addressed by the first round of projects. The cycle of improvement planning and implementation, and the process described above is repeated. At periodic intervals, annually or biannually, a full reassessment and scoring process can be conducted to gain a sense of progress and to reformulate improvement priorities for the period ahead.

A Mini Case Study⁴: The School of Communication, Information and Library Studies Rutgers University

In January 1998, 20 faculty, staff and senior administrators from the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies (SCILS) participated in the *EHE* program. SCILS is an interdisciplinary school of Rutgers University, composed of: the Departments of Communication; Journalism and Mass Media; and Library and Information Science; an interdepartmental Ph.D. Program; a Masters in Communication and Information Studies Program; a Masters of Library Science Program; the Journalism Resources Institute; the Professional Development Program; the Distance Learning Program; and various other offices and services. Participating in the *EHE* program were the acting dean, associate and assistant deans, department chairs, program and institute directors, and faculty members representing key committees within the school.

The self-assessment workshop covering all seven *EHE* categories resulted in the identification of approximately 55 strengths and 50 areas for improvement. A follow-up workshop, one-half day in length, was held for the purpose of reviewing and prioritizing suggested improvement areas. Through multi-voting, the list was narrowed to the following "top 10" priorities. These were:

1. Synchronizing university and department accountability measures
2. Identifying key processes, measures, and process owners
3. Promoting sharing and distributed management responsibilities
4. Formulating more specific and measurable goals
5. Improving, organizing, streamlining, and disseminating existing documents
6. Promoting leadership at all levels
7. Including more faculty and staff in planning
8. Reviewing and updating strategic plans while increasing stakeholder involvement
9. Benchmarking key processes and excellence indicators
10. Synchronizing personal and institutional goals and plans

The workshop also consisted of a strategic and action planning stage, at which assessment results were provided to the newly appointed dean of the school, several months hence, who is working with faculty and staff to address the identified improvement priorities.

Conclusion

The benefits of a Baldrige-based approach such as *EHE* for self-assessment, strategic planning and organizational improvement framework are numerous. The program is a useful tool for broadening engagement of faculty and staff in assessment and strategic planning, and for creating a shared language and culture across academic and administrative sectors of an institution. And, in a time of increasing demands for performance measurement and accountability, *EHE* offers a proactive and thoughtful response.

We have found that participants value the approach. On a scale of 1 to 7 (7="outstanding"), participants rated the program 6.14 for its overall usefulness, 5.97 for its ability to identify strengths and improvement needs, and a 6.23 for encouraging meaningful dialogue within and across units.

In sum, we are extremely enthusiastic about the applicability and value of the Baldrige/*EHE* approach within higher education, and we are convinced that it can have a similar potential for contribution in all levels and types of educational institutions if implemented in a manner that takes account of the institution's culture and traditions.

¹ For instance, the Johnson & Johnson *Signature of Quality* Program.

² Formerly called the *Quality New Jersey Awards*.

³ Neither the education nor the business version of the Baldrige is fully adequate for assessment in many higher education institutions. This is particularly so when the framework is to be useful for assessing internal units as well as the college or university as a whole. The education version is designed as a multi-purpose model for institutions where instruction is the primary, if not the exclusive mission. Many higher education units and institutions, however, have missions that also emphasize scholarly contributions to disciplinary and professional knowledge, the advancement of local, state, national and international well-being, and other dimensions. These institutions appropriately see themselves as serving a great many of functions beyond classroom instruction for a wide range of external stakeholders. And, within larger colleges and universities, some units serve specialized functions that support one, but not necessarily all of these mission elements. This may well be the case, for instance, with research institutes or technology-incubation centers. Moreover, some college and university units—such as student unions and co-curricular programs, athletic programs, alumni organizations and fundraising foundations—serve educational, and also important business functions. Still other major units have missions that focus primarily on service to faculty and staff. Examples are research support services, human resources departments and professional development centers. In each of these instances, the "Education Baldrige" framework and language may be perceived as being too restrictive. The "Business Baldrige" – which is less prescriptive as it relates to mission and stakeholder specification, uses terminology that often creates barriers to acceptance and utilization within higher education. *The Excellence in Higher Education* framework was created in an effort to overcome these limitations.

⁴ An additional *EHE* Case Study is discussed in Lehr & Ruben, 1999.

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