**Project Details**

**Title**  
Baccalaureate Degree Completion Initiative

**Category**  
3-Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs

**Timeline**

09-01-2012

08-31-2015

**1 Project Accomplishments and Status**

**A**: The Baccalaureate Degree Completion Initiative AQIP Action Project is an opportunity for Missouri Western State University to provide leadership in creating pathways and supports to encourage degree completion among those who are nearing baccalaureate degree completion yet have dropped out of college while in good standing. The five goals of the project include:

1. Help participants develop appropriate degree completion programs of study related to career goals, focusing on the use of Missouri Western’s Bachelor in General Studies and Bachelor of Science in Technology.
2. Develop and offer courses to meet the needs of recruit-back participants, using delivery methods that meet participants’ needs and good pedagogical practice.
3. Increase the proportion of Buchanan County citizens with baccalaureate degrees.
4. Positively impact the regional economy and improve the fiscal status of project participants.
5. Advertise the successes of the project to recruit additional participants and grow the positive impact of the program.

During the first year of the project (2012-2013), the following activities were completed:

- Creation of Back to Western Web site - [http://www.missouriwestern.edu/completion/](http://www.missouriwestern.edu/completion/).
- Creation of Degree Completion Web site - [http://www.missouriwestern.edu/completion/bgs.asp](http://www.missouriwestern.edu/completion/bgs.asp)
- Use of billboards to market Back to Western and online course offerings.
- Getting all courses online required for minor in business.
- Getting all courses online required for minor in psychology.
- Cross-marketing Back to Western, the Bachelor of General Studies (BGS), the Buchanan County Degree Attainment Initiative and the MWSU-Heartland partnership to expand the success of each program.
- Sending post cards to MWSU former students encouraging them to complete their degree. Approximately 3000 cards were sent to former students who had at least 75 completed credit hours and had current addresses.
• Marketing Back to Western, the BGS and online courses in various print
and electronic venues.
• Continual growth of inventory of online courses and resulting growth in
online enrollments.

The project is highly active in terms of marketing and student enrollment, and will remain a
high priority initiative. An evaluation of enrollments will impact the nature of future
marketing.

R: The University has made progress toward the Action Project goals of marketing and
putting courses online required for the degrees. The partnership with MWSU-Heartland
demonstrates the University’s commitment to building relationships (Category (9) Building
Collaborative Relationships, AQIP Principle Collaboration) to enhance the project. Because
the University has spent a considerable amount of human, technical, and financial resources
for marketing and promotion of the Baccalaureate Degree Completion Program, it may
benefit from developing a method to measure the outcomes in a quantitative way which
would demonstrate movement toward and/or achievement of goal three and four (AQIP
Category (7) Measuring Effectiveness). By measuring the number of students enrolling in
the program and degree interest, the University may be able to identify which marketing
efforts and degree plans are yielding the best results and apply improvements to those less
effective (AQIP Principles Information and Learning).

2: Institution Involvement

A: This is a high profile AQIP Action Project. It is regularly discussed among the deans
and the other members of the Missouri Western Deans’ Council. Support has been provided
by two of the colleges in putting courses online that are critical to the success of the
initiative – general education courses and courses that will be used in the two most popular
minors within the Bachelor of General Studies (i.e., business and psychology). Support has
been provided by the Registrar in securing names and addresses of former students, going
back 20 years into university databases. The Missouri Western Public Relations and
Marketing Office and the marketing office within the Western Institute have designed and
implemented various marketing initiatives (e.g., billboards, print ads, electronic ads, Web
sites). Admissions has partnered with the Western Institute in various marketing initiatives
that include Back to Western, the Bachelor of General Studies (BGS), and online courses.
Missouri Western and the Missouri Western Foundation have provided financial
resources and significant support in developing and implementing this AQIP Action Project. The
Foundation provided $50,000 that has been used for marketing. The University allows the
Western Institute to function as a cost center such that revenue from online courses is used
for corresponding expenses, and for other expenses related to Back to Western, completion
degrees (the BGS and the Bachelor of Science in Technology), and online coursework. After
balancing expenses with revenue, the WI will return approximately $2.5M to the main
university budget. The significant marketing initiatives have enabled Back to Western to be
a viable program, and generate revenues. The University has demonstrated its strong commitment to this initiative.
In addition, Missouri Western has partnered with the regional healthcare provider, Heartland Health, to begin a program targeted to employees that might benefit in their careers by completing a baccalaureate degree. Information sessions, orientations sessions and structured advising support will enable approximately 20 Heartland employees to begin completing degrees in fall 2013. Some employees are eligible for the tuition reimbursement through the Buchanan County Degree Attainment Initiative as well as their employer.

R: The University has integrated collaboration and relationship building (AQIP Categories (4) Valuing People, (5) Leading and Communicating, and (9) Building Collaborative Relationships) in the project plan by including all functional areas impacted by the process including deans, dean's council, registrar, public relations, marketing, admissions, the foundation, the Western Institute, a regional health care provider, and the Buchanan County Degree Attainment Initiative. Through the inclusion of a variety of stakeholders, the University is building a framework of systematic support with various entities having a vested interest in the success of the project (AQIP Involvement Principle).

3: Next Steps

A: Back to Western will continue to be a high profile initiative in Western Institute and University marketing. Student success stories will be used for future press releases. The link between Back to Western, the Buchanan County Degree Completion Initiative – funded by $1,000,000 in federal dollars, the Heartland Health-MWSU partnership, and online courses will continue to be stressed.

R: The institution has identified some appropriate next steps for the project. The plan to continue with marketing efforts using student success stories supports the marketing goals of the project. Since a considerable amount of funding has been invested in the project, the University may benefit from establishing methods to collect data relative to the effectiveness of the marketing strategies, i.e., the number of students recruited back to assist with understanding which strategy has been most effective and those less effective (AQIP Categories (7) Measuring Effectiveness and (8) Planning Continuous Improvement). Having results (data) relative to goals four and five which are designed toward more "measurable" results such as increasing the proportion of citizens with a degree and positively impacting the regional economy will provide the project with quantitative means of measuring goals 1, 2, and 3 (AQIP Learning and Information Principles).

4: Resulting Effective Practices
A: While it is not clear that “effective practices” were developed during this past year, it is clear that many effective things have been done in the University’s attempt to use best practices to enhance outcomes. For example, use of Web sites, social media, print marketing, billboard marketing, etc. are all done with a close eye to industry best practices as judged by statistical analysis of outcomes. The selection of which courses to focus on for the development of online versions has been based on the knowledge of courses and programs desired by returning adult students. The development of online courses is facilitated by MWSU’s Instructional Media Center, whose staff consistently study best practices with the goal of sharing these practices with faculty.

R: While the University has identified that "effective practices" were not clearly established, there is an opportunity to use the data from website and social media activity as a means to identify which electronic marketing strategies are most effective (AQIP Category (7) Measuring Effectiveness). The University may want to include some method of gathering information from students as part of the project relative to how they learned about the initiative to further understand and measure effective marketing strategies for improving or abandoning (AQIP Categories (7) Measuring Effectiveness and (8) Planning Continuous Improvement). Monitoring enrollment trends in the online courses and programs will also provide an opportunity for the University to identify whether it is meeting goals two and three of the Action Project (AQIP Learning and Information Principles).

5: Project Challenges

A: One challenge is the further expansion of online course offerings so that MWSU can provide all courses online that have a high demand by returning adult students. For example, the University needs to offer an online chemistry or biology lab science course. Faculty in these two departments do not believe it is possible to offer a high quality lab science course online. As a result, returning students who need an online lab science course must take it from another institution and transfer the credit back to Missouri Western. Additional selected online courses in other areas (e.g., history and literature courses that meet general education requirements) are in departments with some resistance to providing online offerings. Another challenge is helping prospective students locate funding necessary for them to complete degrees. While the Buchanan County Degree Attainment Initiative will provide some funding for a particular sub-group of returning students, other scholarship options are limited. Also, tuition remission by regional companies varies in amount and requirements. While the above challenges exist, marketing the availability of high quality online completion degrees at a very competitive tuition rate to adults who already have had a positive experience at the university or who would be new to MWSU but who know the positive reputation of the university should overcome these challenges.

R: The University has noted that there are a few challenges at this time for the project related to resistance and student aid. While the University notes that the competitive tuition
and positive reputation should assist with overcoming these challenges, it might be beneficial for the University to expand upon its proven success with collaboration and involvement to assist with the faculty resistance issues (AQIP Involvement, Leadership, and Collaboration Principles). Continuing to evaluate the effectiveness of the project by measuring results and assessing successful strategies may enable the University to garner the support of faculty and possible funding opportunities by proving the project has made a significant difference in the project goals to increase citizens with degrees and improving the regional economy (AQIP Category (7) Measuring Results).