



MALCOLM BALDRIGE NATIONAL QUALITY AWARD

# A Community College's Long-Term Commitment

by **Susan E. Daniels, editor at large**

**A** common lament among quality professionals is that as soon as the leader who committed an organization to quality leaves, so does the focus on continual improvement.

Certainly we can name companies that thrived under a top executive committed to quality only to see that emphasis disappear—along with market success—under subsequent leaders.

For example, under chief executive Jamie Houghton, quality was king at Corning from 1983 to 1996, and the

## In 50 Words Or Less

- Ten years ago, after instituting various quality approaches, Richland College in Dallas was looking for sustained impact and began its Baldrige journey.
- A president with more than 27 years in office and a commitment to quality performance was a key to this community college's 2005 Baldrige Award.





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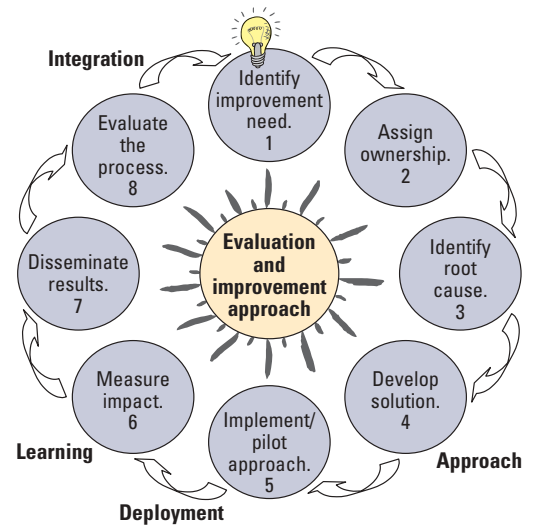
company won a Baldrige Award in 1995. Houghton, a member of Corning’s founding family, retired. The bottom fell out of the telecommunications sector, and Corning struggled both in the marketplace and stock market. Now Houghton has returned along with the emphasis on quality, and Corning seems to be coming back.<sup>1</sup>

The opposite is certainly true in the case of Richland College in Dallas, the first community college to receive the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

There, Steven K. Mittelstet, one of the school’s 27 remaining 1972 founders, has nourished a culture of high quality performance during his 27 years as president. That’s a term unheard of in the higher education field, where the average president lasts less than seven years before leaving.<sup>2</sup>

“Mittelstet is the visionary force behind what Richland College is today,” says Kay Eggleston, vice president for institutional effectiveness. “His leadership provides a consistency and unwavering commitment to quality performance from senior staff. He hires competent people and develops

**FIGURE 1** Process Implementation And Improvement Plan



their talents and abilities, as evidenced by the 22 former Richland employees who have gone on to become college presidents elsewhere.”

One of seven two-year community colleges in the Dallas County Community College District, Richland enrolls about 14,500 for-credit and almost 6,000 continuing education students each semester. It serves an area with not only a rapidly growing population typical of large Sunbelt cities but also changing demographics, including an influx of those for whom English is not a first language.

Richland’s key student segment is one whose primary goal is eventual transfer to a four-year university, but its student body ranges from adolescents in its math, science and engineering program for high school students to senior citizens taking continuing education courses.

Richland’s mascot is R. Mobius Thunderduck (“Moby Duck”). The Thunderduck culture reflects Richland’s agrarian beginnings and permeates student and employee life, supporting the creation of lifelong learners, community builders and global citizens.

### Meeting Challenges

Richland addresses challenges directly through its strategic planning approach. In addition to population demographic changes, the strategic challenges include:

**TABLE 1** Outside Higher Education Benchmarks

Organization	Nature of benchmark activity
Texas Instruments, City of Dallas	Sustainable architectural design
Texas Nameplate	Electronic dashboard, senior leader performance evaluation
Bank One	Customer service “front counter” approaches
Disney	Employee interview/screening, new employee orientation
Starbucks experience music project	Experience engineering for Thunderduck Hall and new buildings
Southwest Airlines, Container Store	Employee culture
Branch-Smith Printing	Supplier/partner scorecard
Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas	Employee professional development
Medrad Inc.	Diversity in management
Saint Luke’s Hospital of Kansas City	Employee retention/turnover/satisfaction
Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital	Employee retention/turnover

**BALDRIGE CEREMONY:** Stephen K. Mittelstet, Richland College president, and Kathryn Eggleston, vice president for institutional effectiveness and economic development, receive the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award from Vice President Dick Cheney at an April ceremony in Washington, DC.

- Technology jobs decreasing in the employer base, with students shifting to courses that will transfer to four-year colleges.
- Less prepared students and fewer resources in K-12 institutions.<sup>3</sup>
- Increasing faculty and leadership retirements.
- A need to minimize disruptions as facilities are built to expand capacity.
- A need to closing enrollment and student success gaps, particularly for Latino populations and students.

Richland’s use of benchmarking has been somewhat unique. While the activity includes examining results from surveys of students and employees and comparative data from other schools, it also looks closely at financial comparative performance ratings and data from a pretty impressive group of for-profits that includes previous Baldrige recipients (see Table 1).

Strategic and operational deployment of its plan-do-study-act cycle—refined to what it calls an approach-deployment-learning-integration cycle—is embedded in Richland’s process implementation and improvement plan (see Figure 1).

Organizational learning is also embedded in Richland’s culture, consistent with its passion for continuous learning and knowledge asset sharing.

## Enter the Baldrige Criteria

While those associated with Richland knew it was a quality organization, it didn’t have a systemic, comprehensive way to demonstrate it until about 10 years ago when it began its Baldrige journey. Prior to that, staff had worked with total quality management and management by objective, but these and other approaches didn’t seem to have a sustained impact on Richland’s organizational performance, according to Eggleston.

“Metrics to demonstrate our achievements were not clearly defined and systematically tracked with clear targets and action plans,” she explains.

Richland leadership knew that, as a nonprofit, the school had to become more efficient, effective



*Photo by Arnie Sachs, Consolidated News Photos*

and entrepreneurial. External support at the state level was consistently decreasing—from 70% three legislative sessions ago to the current 30%.

To reach its goal of excellence, leadership decided it needed to adopt the seven Baldrige categories of criteria:

1. Leadership.
2. Strategic planning.
3. Student, stakeholder and market focus.
4. Information and analysis.
5. Faculty and staff focus.
6. Process management.
7. Organizational performance results.

## Leadership

While the president’s and founders’ many years of service have been important, Richland’s entire senior leadership team (called the ThunderTeam) and philosophy of empowering employees have played a key role in Richland’s Baldrige award.

Employee empowerment deploys the Carver principle of “freeing those closest to the work to make responsible decisions.”<sup>4</sup> This allows employees to analyze information, determine course corrections and quickly respond to change in the environment through formal and informal decision making.

The president’s cabinet consists of the ThunderTeam plus the president’s direct reports, key deans and directors from vice presidential councils, and presidents of the student government and professional staff support associations and faculty council.

The cabinet formally reviews how effectively written policies and procedures provide balanced freedom and parameters to employees, sharpening organizational and employee clarity and minimizing redundancy.



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In 1998, to address impacts on society, the community and economic development council replaced random efforts with systematic environmental scanning that includes focus groups. This allows the ThunderTeam to keep abreast of public concerns of stakeholders, including those from the private sector, such as chambers of commerce.

Areas of concern led Richland leadership to focus support efforts on two key communities: underprepared students, particularly Hispanic and other English language deficient groups, and communities challenged in the areas of transportation and sustainable public spaces and facilities.

### Strategic Planning

Richland's strategic and operational planning process and timing are depicted in Figure 2. It shows a seamless connection between the inner organizational work of monitoring progress in

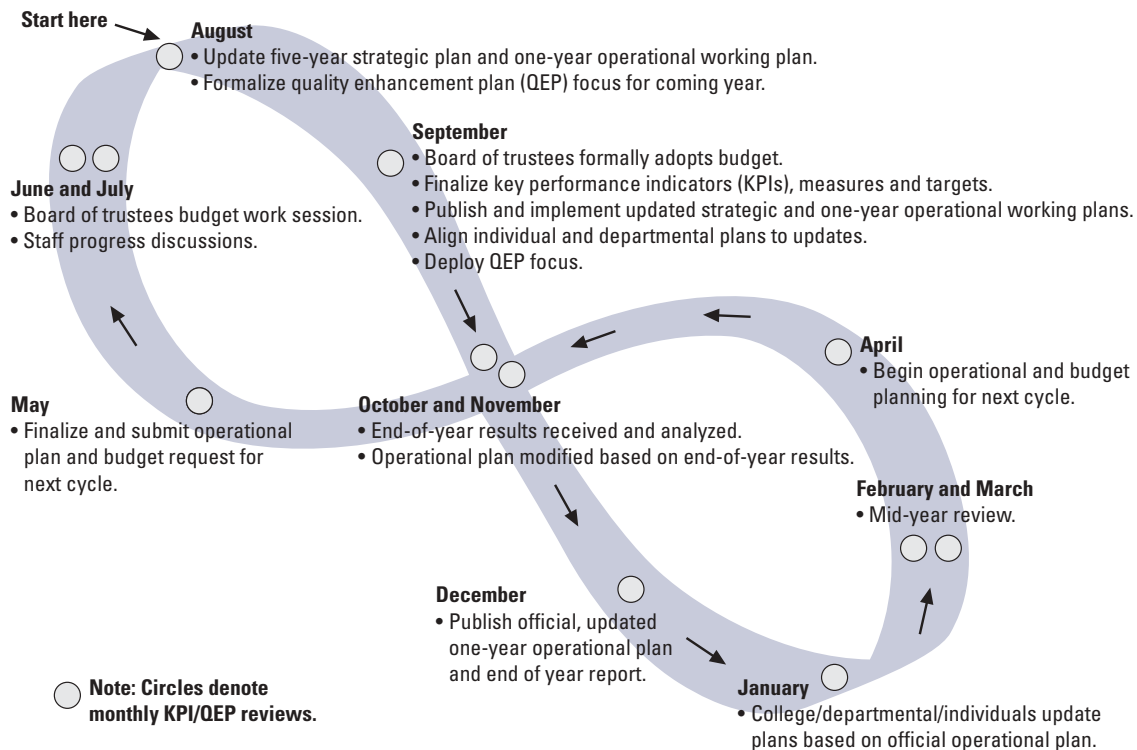
monthly reviews and the outward achievement of strategic planning milestones.

Strategic planning is an institutionwide behavior using priorities and key performance indicators (KPIs) to guide action planning at all levels. Richland's Baldrige application says a key strength is its gathering and use of information from students, stakeholders and internal and external scans to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Key inputs into strategic planning are factors such as educational reform, student and stakeholder needs, student and community demographics, competitive and market environments, technology and innovation, HR needs, and financial and other risks and economic changes.

Organizational, departmental and individual action plans and quality enhancement plans cascade from the strategic planning priorities, organi-

**FIGURE 2** Strategic and Operational Planning Process





**GRADUATION DAY:** Richland College grads frequently move on to four-year universities.

zational objectives and KPIs and measures throughout the entire workforce to ensure college-wide alignment.

### **Student, Stakeholder And Market Focus**

Richland's focus on students, stakeholders and the market has led to new activities and impressive results. For example:

- The number of students who completed the core curriculum in preparation for transfer to four-year institutions grew from 500 in 2002 to 1,660 in 2005.
- Senior leaders have worked with outside professionals and community groups to identify and resolve public concerns and with many agencies to support underserved and homeless students through adult literacy programs and general equivalency diploma, or GED, training.
- A variety of approaches, such as satisfaction surveys, student involvement on councils and advisory committees, and meetings with high school partners, balance the needs of students and other stakeholders.
- Consistent improvements in measures of student success are evident in the overall percentage earning a grade average of C or better and corresponding increases in student performance following transfer to four-year colleges and to technical fields.

Eggleston says Richland set its KPI targets for this student learning outcomes performance measure at a level that discourages grade inflation. "This is an example of how we are data informed, not data driven," she explains.

"We engage faculty within teaching disciplines and departments to discuss this important issue

because we are seeking student learning success for life, not merely success numbers on a chart," Eggleston adds.

### **Measurement, Analysis and Knowledge Management**

While Richland formally evaluates its KPIs each August, they are actually evaluated monthly to allow response to unexpected and rapid changes.

If an issue is chronically static, a program seems to have stagnated or a major external challenge occurs, the ThunderTeam commissions breakthrough or innovative approaches—usually with cross functional teams and sometimes with external partners or stakeholders—to help players get out of the box.

Recent breakthrough and innovative approaches include:

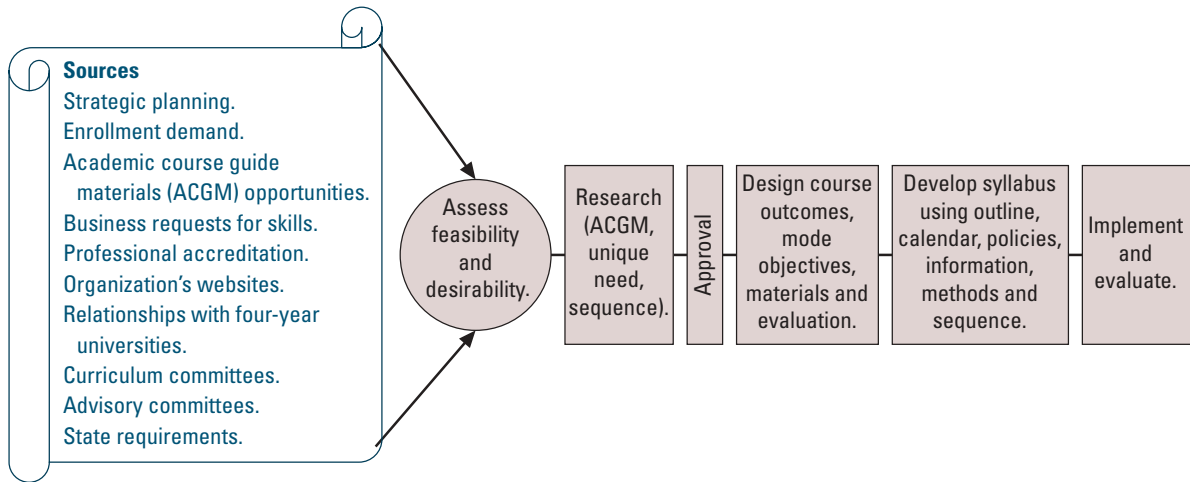
- A pilot model for stakeholder accreditation significantly influenced by Southern Assn. of Colleges and Schools accreditation standards.
- Richland's Collegiate High School of Mathematics, Science and Engineering's breakthrough approach to offering more dual credits for high school and college accommodates an increasing number of area home schoolers and others. Richland believes this is the first program in Texas and perhaps even the nation to offer only dual credit.
- A self-paced developmental math option has been a multiyear phase-in innovation.
- Multilevel instructional teams of lead faculty, teaching administrators and professional support staff has been a breakthrough approach in the classroom.

This ability to make rapid changes is also evident in the IT area. For example, the college reserves part of the budget allocation for technology expenditures



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**FIGURE 3** Academic Credit Course Design Process



to allow adjustments if enrollment changes. Opportunities for improvement are considered in the annual budget cycle.

Richland’s primary method of collecting and transferring knowledge among faculty and staff is through workgroup meetings, process documentation and the quality enhancement plan process, in which all full-time employees participate each year.

### Faculty and Staff Focus

Because of summer gaps in its work systems for teaching, Richland designed an innovative approach to supplement the traditional balance of faculty and adjunct faculty by creating new 12-month, full-time positions called instructional specialists and administrators who teach.

Instructional specialists teach in areas in which students need extensive personalized services, such as English as a second language and developmental math.

Faculty, who are hired on nine-month teaching contracts, are not available in the summer, so the administrators who teach must balance teaching and functions such as budgeting, managing faculty schedules, recruiting students and designing and improving programs.

The success of this innovation led the Dallas County Community College District to offer 10-, 11- and 12-month faculty contracts starting in 2005.

While Richland employee turnover is somewhat higher than that of its peer colleges, this is not an indication of any sort of employee dissatisfaction—

remember those 27 founders who are still at the school and the 22 others who have gone on to be presidents of other colleges.

Richland’s Baldrige application points out that all four staff who left after 15 years of service retired. The highest turnover is in professional support staff positions, in which many left after receiving associate’s degrees, enabling them to progress beyond entry level positions.

### Process Management

Of course, the bulk of Richland’s process oriented culture focuses on learning centered processes. Key requirements are identified through listening to and learning from students and each stakeholder group.

Figure 3 shows how Richland determines when a new course is needed. The design and development process for new academic courses identifies key student requirements early and incorporates them into the design.

Richland uses a similar process to develop programs for major workforce education and noncredit continuing education programs. For smaller continuing education programs, an abbreviated approval process enhances agility in design and reduced cycle time to delivery.

Both qualitative and quantitative measures and assigned in-process formative and end-process summary measures are key performance measures for learning centered processes. Figure 1 (p. 48) represents the approach used throughout the

**RICHLAND'S PRESIDENT:** Stephen K. Mittelstet has been with the school for more than 27 years.



Photo by Elizabeth Lavin, Dallas CEO magazine

college to improve student learning, student services and support processes.

Richland has learned to minimize the costs of inspections, tests and audits through economies of scale derived from the Dallas County Community College District.

### Organizational Performance Results

Category seven of Richland's Baldrige application includes 16 pages of performance results, covering everything from student learning, student and stakeholder focus, fiduciary responsibility and efficient use of resources, faculty and staff, organizational effectiveness, and leadership and social responsibility.

Of interest to taxpayers, Figure 4 is a cost analysis of Richland's use of budget resources. The college has decreased its cost to budget while improving services, adding employees and implementing innovative approaches. The percentage of budget for instruction is monitored to maintain focus on student learning.

Other result highlights not mentioned earlier include outperformance of peers and continual improvement in actual performance of transfer students, tuition rates the lowest of all community colleges in Texas, a high level of diversity in management and high scores for employee expectations and satisfaction.

### Lessons Learned

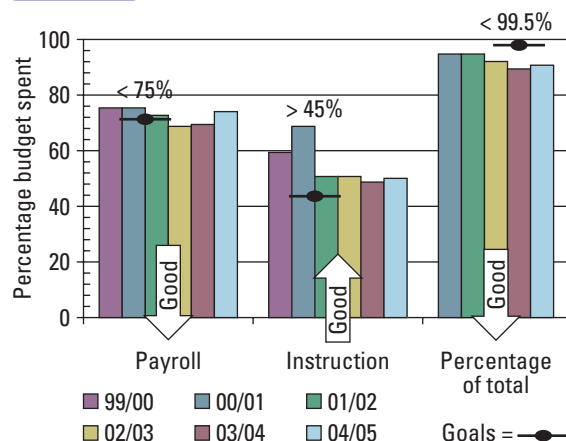
Eggleston shared six lessons learned from Richland's 10-year plus Baldrige journey:

- 1. There are no quick fixes.** While the criteria may seem daunting at first, leadership found the more they used the criteria, the more the criteria became part of the institutional language and practice.
- 2. Leadership propels and sustains the process.** The commitment of the senior leadership team is crucial, not only to launch the quality journey but, more importantly, to sustain quality efforts.
- 3. The whole person culture is important.** A culture that encourages employees to be intellectually and emotionally authentic whole persons creates a safe place for people to take responsible risks and engage their whole selves in learning and work that matters.

This is an environment in which creativity and student learning success can flourish.

- 4. Focus on the student/customer.** The Baldrige criteria helped them better listen and learn from students and other key stakeholders and, in turn, anticipate, meet and exceed expectations. In a constantly changing external environment, the needs of students and the community served change rapidly. Baldrige provides a framework to be more agile.
- 5. Employees are the key to making it happen.** Senior leaders must set the direction, communicate, develop, recognize and reward employees to ensure success.

**FIGURE 4** Budget Performance



Source: Dallas County Community College District colleague system.



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6. **Learn from others.** Breakthroughs and innovations are often based on benchmarking. The college's involvement in national consortia has proven to be invaluable to its learning.

There's no question implementing the Baldrige criteria is no easy task. But, according to Eggleston, the criteria "provide a powerful and effective framework for educational institutions to improve quality and achieve higher performance outcomes because of the systematic and comprehensive nature of the model."

Eggleston maintains that while the criteria are results oriented, the power of the model is the linkages between the criteria that propel an organization to develop approaches and deploy them throughout all aspects of its mission and business.

"Yes, education is also a business," she says. "We are compelled to become better stewards of our finite institutional resources and effectively accountable for our student learning outcomes."

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