

Title: A Cross Case Study of Continuous Improvement in Two Universities of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

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Institutions of higher education continue to face increased demands for accountability and improved quality, especially in light of double digit tuition increases. Continuous improvement (CI) techniques have proven to assist businesses (and some universities) in achieving cost savings and improved process efficiencies. Why are some universities using continuous improvement techniques and others are not? What are some of the “best practices” in higher education continuous improvement implementation and how can other schools adopt them?

The purpose of this research was to study and describe successful CI techniques used by two universities deemed by Benson (2000) as “more progressive” in their implementation of CI within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (SSHE). It was initially expected that each university’s “best practices” could be shared with others in higher education to assist in more widespread adoption of CI.

A cross-case study was conducted during Fall 2003 using interviews, document analysis, researcher observation and using Banta’s 14 features of a quality-oriented institution as a framework. The study revealed that CI initially led to significant improvements at both universities such as improved shuttle services, improved student transcript and transfer services. In fact, the design of a new state-of-the-art student services center facility was one significant accomplishment that was repeatedly attributed to CI techniques.

However, this study identified a number of concerns associated with the *sustained*

implementation of the continuous improvement program on each campus. The research results concluded that transaction leadership was prevalent in the implementation at each school. Furthermore, the long-term goals of CI at each of the universities were never clearly stated nor were the strategies for implementation designed for the long-term process of change – i.e. CI was never formally institutionalized into the campus cultures.

The study also revealed that neither university was able to sustain CI, using process improvement teams, in any significant and long-term manner although unanimously, the research participants expressed optimism that the spirit of CI still existed on campus and that perhaps the study would prove motivational to the university leadership and that the final outcomes of the study will assist in the re-evaluation of their current CI status and future planning efforts.

