

The Baldrige Foundation Outstanding National Leadership Award in Education Lecture

The Bumpy Road to the Promised Land

by Brent D. Ruben, PhD

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It's wonderful to have the opportunity, today, to celebrate what we've been able to do together to advance the Baldrige philosophy and organizational improvement framework to the benefit of Rutgers, and higher education, more generally. It is extremely gratifying to have these contributions recognized by the Baldrige Foundation through their National Leadership Award in Education and by the University, and to have you all here to take part in the festivities.

When colleagues first suggested the idea of a reception to celebrate the Baldrige award, it occurred to me that this could also be a great occasion to share a few thoughts about what this award recognizes, and why that matters. They agreed that the idea was an excellent one.

Over the past weeks as I began thinking about what I might say today, I confess that more than once I wondered what I was thinking when I made that suggestion—and the thought of going directly to the refreshments seemed increasingly attractive. As I began writing my concern soon shifted from worrying about having too little to say, to realizing that the problem was just the opposite. As I edited, reworked, and revised my comments it occurred to me that perhaps there is a need for an article on “the curse of continuous improvement.” I'll put that on the “to do” list. At any rate, I'm going to try to stick closely to my notes so that you and my colleagues on the program are not here long into the evening hours.

Let me begin with a bit of personal history: During my years in graduate study, I became convinced that I wanted to work in higher education, based largely on the view that our colleges and universities were special and unique institutions—different in all important ways from organizations in other sectors, from which I assumed there was little to be learned.

In 1993, before my work in assessment and continuous improvement in higher education began, my research was focused on interpersonal, inter-professional and organizational communication in healthcare. My studies centered on patient needs and goals, their experiences with healthcare personnel and facilities, and the frequent mismatch between patient priorities and experiences, and those of medical providers. I had learned that much of the gap had to do with communication and organizational issues—rather than medical issues, as one might have logically predicted.

My research indicated that patients were largely judging their healthcare experiences, and forming impressions of them, based on how they were treated, and whether the environment was welcoming, whether providers seemed to take personal interest in them, and whether systems and procedures

were efficient and organized with patient needs in mind. One important implication was that health care providers and institutions needed more focus on communication, information, and organizational issues, to more effectively achieve the desired healthcare outcomes.

As I reflected on these studies, the parallels with higher education were striking. As a Rutgers faculty member, I had heard many reports of the so-called “RU screw,” and knew that undergraduates felt that their needs and experiences often received insufficient attention by the University. Students often found themselves being referred from one office to another, taking buses to multiple buildings on different campuses to register, to get parking permits, or to pay bills. There were individuals and offices where courtesy, friendliness, and helpfulness were hallmarks; but there were many others where these attributes were absent. The organizational and interpersonal deficiencies created major quality gaps in the student experience—and together provided the basis for the “RU screw.”

Ironically, faculty and staff often faced similar problems. The university went to great lengths to recruit talented faculty and staff, many of whom after their arrival, like students, found themselves overwhelmed by confusing and unwelcoming systems, unwieldy work processes, and highly fragmented institutional structures.

These problems were not unique to Rutgers, but in fact were present to some degree in nearly all large multi-mission colleges and universities. But we may well have been a world-class leader in these ways at Rutgers, given our challenging geography and the confusing structures that resulted from our unique history.

During this same period, my research in healthcare had come to the attention of Johnson & Johnson, and they expressed an interest in working with me to develop formalized programs that would address communication, information, and organizational issues for hospital and medical leaders around the country. J&J designated a senior executive—Denis Hamilton—to work with me to explore possibilities for collaboration.

As I began working with Denis, I noticed immediately that he had a distinctive work style. The project began with extensive planning—articulating objectives, enumerating the list of key tasks, developing a timeline, determining exactly what the deliverables should be, identifying resources that would be needed, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and gathering information on effective practices from peers and others. I remember thinking that I had never approached any project in such a systematic and methodical way.

As the project progressed, I came to realize that this approach wasn’t unique to Denis; rather it was emblematic of the J&J style. In addition to the extraordinary rigor in planning and detailed approaches to clarifying work processes, I was struck by the remarkable level of courtesy, thoughtfulness, and professionalism in the way J&J employees in all positions interacted with one another and welcomed individuals from outside the company such as myself. Frankly, this was not what I had expected to find in the business world, not just across the street, and not in NJ, which was a frequent target of blame in discussions of the underlying causes of the “RU screw” and problems of campus incivility.

What I didn’t yet understand was that the J&J approach and these behaviors were all manifestations of their commitment to the core philosophy of the Baldrige, and what they called SOQ—the Signature of Quality framework. J&J had created the Signature of Quality as a healthcare adaptation of the Baldrige

approach—and they were using it as a management model in their nearly 200 J&J companies world-wide.

My work with Denis and others at J&J had a very significant impact on me, personally and professionally. It taught me, among other things, that while our higher education mission is unique, many of our ways of carrying out that mission were not so special—and that contrary to my earlier assumptions, we had a great deal to learn from other organizations and other sectors—and from leaders in the business community, in particular.

I came to understand the role the Baldrige philosophy played at J&J, and the great emphasis that was placed on clarity of organizational and project mission and vision; strategic planning; leadership practices and development, stakeholder engagement and collaboration, rigorous assessment, and continuous improvement.

I had become convinced the Baldrige philosophy, framework, and approach had a great deal to offer Rutgers and Higher Education and applied and was accepted to participate in the week-long Baldrige training program offered by the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

As those of you who are familiar with the Baldrige framework know, the model identifies and focuses attention on seven factors that have been identified in the literature and reviews of organizational best practices and found to be critical to organizational success in organizations of all kinds, in all sectors: Leadership, Strategy, Customers, Workforce, Operations, Measurement/Knowledge Management and Results. (See Figure 1).

The Baldrige Framework (Figure 1)



From Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. 2017. *2017–2018 Baldrige Excellence Framework: A Systems Approach to Improving Your Organization's Performance (Education)*. Gaithersburg, MD: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology. <https://www.nist.gov/baldrige>.

<https://www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/baldrige-excellence-framework/baldrige-excellence-framework-graphics>

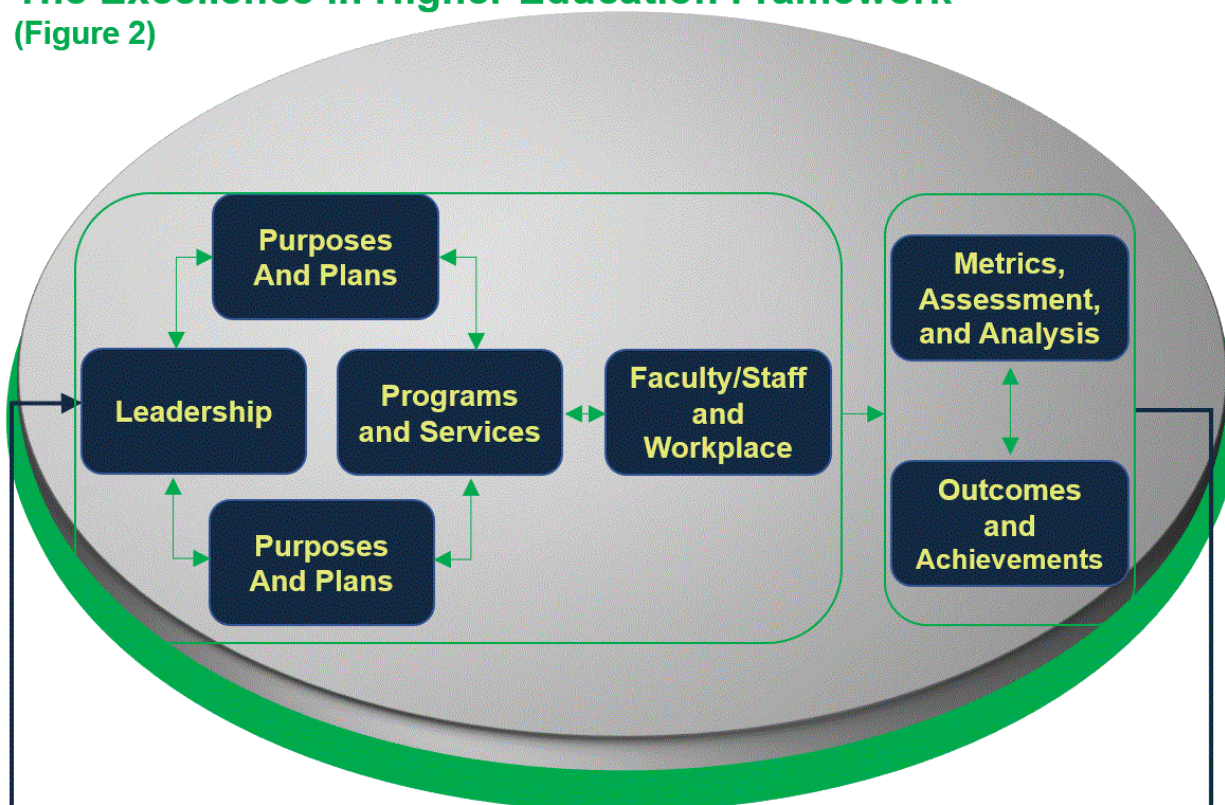
Terminology aside, it seemed clear to me that the framework was broadly applicable to higher education—to an entire college or university, or to individual units within an institution. The Baldrige also defined an approach to self-assessment and improvement planning. I came to recognize that whether one thinks of processes like developing new academic courses or programs, ordering supplies, streamlining grant submissions, or enhancing constituent relationships and public support and outreach, the Baldrige categories could be very helpful in defining effective approaches and in implementing efficient solutions.

I had a vision of the promised-land, but really no sense of how bumpy the road might be heading in that direction. I assumed my knowledge and enthusiasm would be easily transferred to others. This was certainly not the case.

Resistance, at Rutgers and at other institutions—particularly from faculty members—was significant. It's easy to recall the voices of critics: "Baldrige is a business model; higher education is not a business, students are not customers; we don't have, or want, managers." "Organizations in other sectors should be learning from us, rather than the other way around." And, I could go on, and on.

The more prestigious the department or institution, the more resistance, it seemed. On the road to the promised-land, pot holes were everywhere. In trying to make sense of this, I concluded that much of this had to do with issues related to language and organizational culture, more than to those related core concepts. It became clear that the challenge was not simply one of ADOPTING the Baldrige, but rather one of ADAPTING it, so that the framework and vocabulary would fit with the culture of higher education, and with accreditation standards and processes. With that recognition, the idea of creating the *Excellence in Higher Education* (EHE) model was born. (See Figure 2).

The Excellence in Higher Education Framework (Figure 2)



Ruben, B. D., *The Excellence in Higher Education Guide: A Framework for the Design, Assessment, and Continuous Improvement of Institutions, Departments and Programs – Eight Edition*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing. 2016.

The Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Sciences—then Cook—and the Rutgers Business School were among the first to volunteer to give the EHE process a try—and the model was well received in both units. Ironically, the dean of Rutgers Business School then was, George Benson, who is now the Chairman of the Board of the National Malcolm Baldrige Foundation, and I’m delighted that George is here with us today.

An influential early national adopter of EHE was UC-Berkeley. Chancellor Robert Berdahl commissioned a task force of campus leaders to identify ways Berkeley could become a better institution. The group undertook a national study of potential approaches and concluded that EHE was the most promising organizational assessment and improvement framework available for higher education. I visited Berkeley on various occasions and worked closely with the leadership on the implementation of EHE. I recall that on various occasions, the Chancellor was challenged by faculty and staff as to why a program like EHE was needed at a great school like Berkeley, Bob always responded: “Berkeley does have great faculty, staff and students. Imagine how much better we could be if we also had a great organization?” Working with the leadership team there was a wonderful and rewarding experience for me personally and professionally, one that led to many refinements in the EHE model, and one that also gave great national visibility to our work.

(Work on EHE was an ongoing process, and with each new edition of the framework—the latest being the 8th edition, published in 2016—improvements were made. While working with UC-Berkeley, for instance, considerable concern was expressed because, like the Baldrige framework, EHE used the terms-- “deployment became implementation” (“deployment” is a military term and has no place in higher education; “training is for animals,” and so “training” was relabeled “education.” We “made” those changes in the next edition, and then all was good.

At Rutgers, some [50 units have participated in the EHE program](#). In nearly all of these cases, participation has consisted of a self-assessment and improvement prioritization and planning workshop, attended by all administrators, faculty, and staff in that unit. These groups have been as small as 10, and as large as 100. Many of you have been participants.

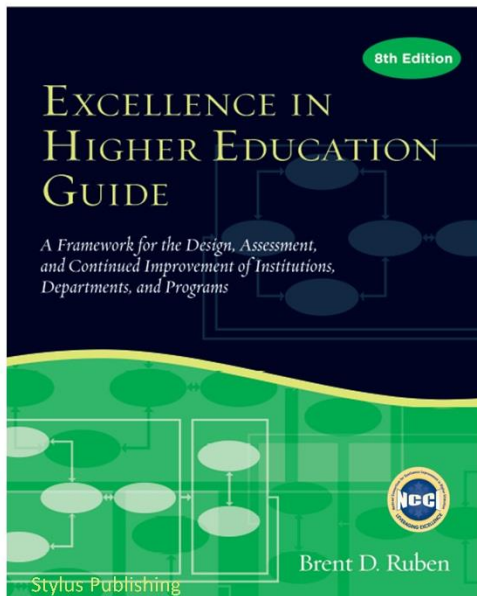
At [least 50 institutions around the country](#)—that I know of—and several internationally, have used the EHE framework. At some colleges/universities EHE was used in particular administrative, academic units, student affairs, or service areas; in other instances, in all of these areas; and in a couple of cases as a model to frame the accreditation process for the entire institution.

In the title of my comments today, I refer to the “promised land.” This phrase is a way of characterizing an institutional ideal for colleges and universities—one that includes excellence not only in our core mission areas of teaching/learning, research/scholarship, service/outreach, but also excellence in the way we are organized, approach our work, and collaborate with one another—practicing what we teach and striving for excellence in all that we do,

This way of thinking recognizes that students learn not only inside the classroom, labs and studios, but also from our faculty, staff and our systems through the dozens of informal encounters on our campuses daily, outside the classroom. Together, we should be able to create organizations from which students graduate with a mastery of an academic area, and also with first-hand knowledge of how great organizations should work.

I believe that Baldrige and EHE provide both a vision of what the promised-land might look like, and tools for the journey.

Excellence in Higher Education: A Rubric for Organizational Design, Assessment, and Improvement



1. Defines **standards** of excellence and effectiveness based on the mission and aspirations of an institution and its academic, administrative, student life, and service departments and their programs and services
2. Provides **a strategy** highlighting current strengths and areas in need of change
3. Serves as **a tool** to inventory, organize, and integrate existing assessment, planning, improvement, and other change initiatives
4. Offers **a blueprint** for designing new or reorganized institutions, departments, programs, or services

So, the story of EHE is a story of collaborative accomplishment, and this event provides a wonderful opportunity for me to thank each you and the many other administrators, faculty, staff, and students—at Rutgers and at other institutions, who have helped to pave roads and fill potholes on the road to that promised-land I have described.

I know you can appreciate that it is impossible to list all those within the University, the Department of Communication, and the School of Communication and Information, who have contributed their encouragement, insights, and support to the work of the Center, but I am sincerely appreciative of the role each of you has played.

Focusing on today's event, I especially want to thank Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Barbara Lee, and President Emeritus Richard L. McCormick—who suggested the idea of this event—for their thoughtful comments. I am also very grateful to the other speakers who are here today—Debasish “Deba” Dutta, Chancellor, Rutgers University-New Brunswick; Denis Hamilton, former Vice President for Assessment Programs at Johnson & Johnson, and Professor of Professional Practice, Rutgers School of Business; Joseph Barone, Dean, Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy; Richard De Lisi, Dean Emeritus, Graduate School of Education and University Professor; and George Benson, Chairman of the Board of the Baldrige Foundation. The supporting contributions from Sherrie Tromp, Ralph Gigliotti, Barbara Corso, and Kim Davis, colleagues in the Rutgers Center for Organizational Leadership also deserve

special recognition. I also want to thank Angela Mullis, Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs, for her guidance in orchestrating this event.

Finally, I want to offer a special note of appreciation to my wife, Jann, and my children and their spouses, and the three grandchildren who are here today. Thanks to each of you, and particularly Jann, for her unending patience and support over these many years of hearing about EHE and the work of the Center. It's not an exaggeration to say that I couldn't have done it without her.



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