Chapter 10
Quality Matters™: A Case of Collaboration and Continuous Improvement for Online Courses

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter approaches Quality Matters, an inter-institutional peer review quality assurance program for online learning, from a community of practice perspective. Key foundations of Quality Matters are an undergirding of best practices, antecedent research literature, and recognition of a systems perspective of online distance education.

The case begins with scene setting of online education in the early 2000s and continues with description of the response by a small inter-institutional group of online practitioners in Maryland as they problem solved a way to assure an acceptable level of quality to the faculty of shared online courses. The evolution from seed idea through a federal grant to establishment of a not-for-profit program is detailed. The two key components of Quality Matters – the rubric and the process – are presented.

Finally, by following the threads of collaboration and continuous improvement, the chapter ends with highlighting the growth of, some emerging data from, and some challenges and recommendations for Quality Matters.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Quality Matters is a peer review system in which faculty collaborate to assure quality in online courses. Developed under a federal US Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant, the project evolved into a not-for-profit, subscription-based program. As of December 2010, Quality Matters has 478 subscribers in 45 U.S. States, Canada, Australia, Saudi Arabia and Bermuda. More than 7,000 institutional faculty and staff have been trained by Quality Matters.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-111-9.ch010

SETTING THE STAGE

Survey reports from the *SLOAN Consortium of Institutions and Originations Committed to Quality Online Education* document online education growth in the U.S. from an opportunity to be "sized" in 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2003) to a reality "entering the mainstream" in 2004 (Allen & Seaman, 2004) to an arrived position of growth patterns that surpass general enrollments in higher education in 2008 (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The growth of online distance education over the past decade raised the discussion of quality assurance within and outside of the academe.

Inglis, Ling, and Joosten (1999) suggested that quality assurance is a term that moved into education from industry more than a half century ago. Best practices and benchmarking are important concepts. Best practices are, "The adoption of work practices which, when effectively linked together, can be expected to lead to sustainable world-class outcomes in quality, customer satisfaction, flexibility, timeliness, innovation and cost-competiveness" (p. 198). Benchmarking, as defined by Inglis, Ling and Joosten is, "the on-going systematic process of measuring and comparing the work processes of one organization with those of another. The purpose of benchmarking is to provide a point of reference for evaluating the improvement in a process" (p. 197). Quality in education generally focuses either on a process or on outcomes. Thompson and Irele (2007) pointed out the confusion of words like "quality", a term "generally used to refer to program characteristics and processes (technological infrastructure, student services, etc), and "effectiveness" as the term while "effectiveness" more usually refers to outcomes (learning outcomes, participant satisfaction, etc).

Moore and Kearsley (2005) provided a widely cited definition of distance education that frames the breadth and multi-levels of quality assurance issues from a systems perspective: "Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special course design and instruction techniques, communication through various technologies, and special organizational and administrative arrangements" (p. 2). From this broader systems view of distance education, Sherry (2003) highlighted three viewpoints of quality – from the institutional level, from an instructor level, and from a learner's perspective. Ruhe and Zumbo (2009) noted other stakeholders such as accreditation organizations and funders. The issue of quality assurance gathered focused energy as online distance education came to be seen as a serious challenge the accepted standard bearer – traditional, classroom-based education. Therefore, faculty and administrators invested in a culture of traditional, classroom-based education can be identified in the list of stakeholders.

MarylandOnline

MarylandOnline (MOL) was established in late 1990s as a not-for-profit consortium of 19 community and four-year colleges and universities to facilitate sharing of online courses among members institutions (Shattuck, 2007) and to "leverage the efforts of individual campuses that were committed to the expansion of online educational opportunities in Maryland through collaborative activities" (Legon, 2009, p. 1). MarylandOnline is a voluntary organization that includes presidential level appointments from each member institution to sit on the Board of Directors. The primary work group is the Distance Leaning Initiatives Committee (DLIC).

In addition to facilitating the smooth inter-institutional sharing of online courses, members of the DLIC discussed quality assurance and shared faculty development resources. Many DLIC members had been doing so since 1994 when they problem-solved in collaboration with College of the Air. As hands-on practitioners (faculty and distance learning program coordinators/directors), their work included course design, student