

Chapter 21

Integrating Course Quality within a Community of Practice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online institutions continue to seek quality guidelines related to effective course development and quality improvements. The struggle lies in getting support from institutional leaders to implement new ideas. While perseverance and serendipity always play a part when these efforts are successful, a few of Capella's strategies were vital to their implementation of systematic course quality: 1. Selecting a course quality assurance partner that was a good fit, 2. Piloting the program for fit and to build experienced supporters, 3. Forming a core group that was accountable for the implementation, 4. Building a steering committee of senior leaders from across the institution, 5. Nurturing a community of practice with many avenues for genuine participation, and 6. Establishing and being held accountable for measurable goals. This case study describes Capella University's implementation of a course quality system through a community of practice (CoP) model that facilitated genuine buy-in rather than top-down implementation.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Founded in 1993, Capella University (www.capella.edu) is an online university accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. We have built our reputation by providing quality online degree programs for working adults. Approximately 75 percent of Capella learners are currently enrolled in masters or doctoral degree programs, and approximately 25 percent are enrolled in undergraduate programs. As of December 31, 2012, more than 36,000 learners from all 50 states and 61 countries were enrolled at the university. The Capella learner population is often described as “non-traditional” with 95% of learners enrolled part-time and having an average age of 40. Capella is comprised of over 1500 faculty members and over 1200 non-faculty staff members. Among the faculty, 86% hold doctorates. They live in 48 states and six foreign countries. Capella currently offers 145 graduate and undergraduate specializations and 23 certificate programs, covering the disciplines of business, psychology, counseling, social work, education, information technology, healthcare, public administration, and public safety.

In an effort to provide the best possible learner experience and to remain competitive in an increasingly competitive online landscape, online institutions continue to seek quality guidelines related to quality course development. Efforts in online course development were once focused on how to make online learning possible. Today online learning continues to be assessed as an effective approach to education (Sachar & Neumann, 2010) and attention is even more focused on providing quality courses that meet program and university goals as well as commitments to outside accrediting bodies. Capella found itself moving beyond questions of how to develop quality online courses and began exploring options to develop a systematic quality assurance process.

In 2006, Capella began working with Quality Matters (QM), an online course quality assurance organization, with the goal of promoting and improving online education. Capella became a subscribing member of QM and submitted three courses to QM for review by external peer review teams. Over the next few years, Capella’s relationship with QM grew rapidly and in 2010 Capella made an institution-wide commitment to have all courses designed and developed to QM standards, to send courses from throughout the University for Review, and to train faculty and staff on QM course design standards.

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