Quality Matters Connect

Piloting a QM-Inspired Quality Assurance Process for All Online Course Offerings at a Midsized University

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This session shares the far-reaching impact a QM Consortium relationship can have on a large university campus. With more than 300 online courses offered in any given semester, finding a way to manage quality assurance is a daunting task. Faculty collective bargaining agreements can restrict what access an institution has to review faculty courses, so the university worked collaboratively with the faculty union to reach an agreement of minimally invasive online course review. Leveraging the expertise of faculty who had participated in the APPQMR and the access to QM support that a statewide consortium provides, a pilot initiative was developed to review the online courses using a checksheet, based on online teaching best practices and QM key themes. Certainly this initiative requires a good deal of time and effort, but the process is yielding data supporting the quality of online courses and stimulating broader interest in QM resources.

Learning Objectives:
After this session, attendees will
1. Explain the difficulties associated with managing online course quality at a midsized, residential university with multiple online courses and programs, created and certified for delivery over a period of more than a decade.
2. Identify an example of a state-level QM Consortium and list the functions of said consortium.
3. Outline the quality assurance practices implemented by BGSU that utilize the QM Rubric ideals.

Planned interactions: visual presentation, consortium quiz, audience Q & A

Though I will use PPT or Prezi to display visual cues, these will be graphics supporting ideas and not static text read from the screen. In addition, audience involvement will be encouraged in interactive elements (map of US...where are the consortiums?; sharing of % of QM involvement in participant campuses; strategies to broaden impact) and Q & A portion.

Intended audience: University Faculty or Administrators

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Bowling Green State University (BGSU), a residential campus in the Midwest, has an average enrollment of 20,000 students each year. As most institutions of higher learning, BGSU has been offering online courses for more than a decade, with multiple online programs also in the university mix of majors. Currently, the eCampus component of the university champions these completely online degrees, overseeing student advisement, marketing, and instructor support.

Quality Matters has been a key initiative in the evolution of online course and online program design since BGSU's online course development and deployment began, as the State of Ohio has a QM consortium (http://www.qmohio.org/) and BGSU is a part of this QM subscription. The consortium is the largest in the country, with over 60 member institutions. This consortium provides an efficient and affordable way of conducting online course reviews through a peer reviewer bartering system. In addition, it also assists in the coordination of Quality Matters training for institutions that would like to host a variety of workshops, such as face-to-face Applying the QM Rubric (APPQMR) and Improving Your Online Course (IYOC). As a consortium member, more than 100 BGSU faculty members have completed the APPQMR, and several courses have completed QM reviews. In addition, all online courses were reviewed via an extensive internal curriculum review process before they were first approved for delivery.

Over the years, the number of courses offered online has continued to grow, with new faculty being added each year who sometimes teach online. Since BGSU is a residential campus, students select courses in a variety of formats (f2f, blended, online) and the expanse of online offerings necessarily presents the reality of many courses being taught by faculty that may or may not have participated in the APPQMR workshop. Because many courses approved for online delivery have been "on the books" for 10-20 years, the courses are most likely being taught by those who did not initially design the course. The courses span a large array of disciplines and departments, making the oversight of these courses problematic. When the university provost asked BGSU's eCampus office how the quality of the entire online course offerings were being monitored, the response was, "We don't really have a process."

Faced with a directive to develop a process for reviewing all online course offerings, our QM connections were the logical starting point. While the university could not require all online courses to go through formal or informal QM reviews, (the required resources, even with the consortium supports, would be extensive) using the key ideas from the QM Rubric, familiar to a large percentage of the faculty, would provide a valuable structure. Since the Higher Learning Commission, BGSU's accrediting body has formally stated that Quality Matters might be a focus for Innovation Proposals for campus improvement, the university administration was supportive of somehow infusing QM ideals in the review process. As a consortium member, QM materials and key elements could be shared across our campus, following the QM Limited License Agreement.

As the Office of Online & Summer Academic Programs began to solidify the process, plan, and expectations for this directive, 14 course peer reviewers were identified. These faculty members were considered master online instructors, completing the APPQMR workshop and teaching online courses for many years. These faculty members were asked to participate by using the developed checksheet, based on online teaching best practices and QM principles. Faculty union negotiations, focusing on the issues of academic freedom and faculty autonomy, narrowed the course reviews to "syllabi reviews" considering allowing reviews of the complete course shells to be too invasive. While the syllabi reviews are only considered a light touch, taking less than an hour to do, at least this type of course review moved the university closer to monitoring the quality of all online course offerings.

With more than 300 online courses offered each semester, course reviews for all seemed daunting. The administration agreed that the team should begin with the TAG (Transfer Articulation Agreement) courses and then proceed to the BGP (Bowling Green Perspective) courses, undergrad classes that were required for all bachelor degrees for reviews. The first iteration of courses included the following:

ARTH 1450	Western Art I
ARTH 1460	Western Art II
ASTR 2010	Modern Astronomy
BIOL 1010	Environment of Life
BIOL 1080	Life in the Sea
CHEM 1000	Introduction to Chemistry
FN 2070	Introduction to Human Nutrition
GEOL 1000	Introduction to Geology
GEOL 1040	Earth Environments
GERO 1010	Aging, The Individual and Society
MUCT 1010	Exploring Music
MUCT 1250	Exploring Music of World Cultures

After meeting with the faculty peer review team, sharing the checksheet and discussing appropriate protocols, the process of gathering syllabi for the identified courses began. Peer reviews used a SignUpGenius page to select the courses they would be willing to review. Two reviewers were then assigned to each course. Reviewers had the option of communicating with each other during the review, or completing the review on their own and submitting it to the Office of Online & Summer Academic Programs when complete. Reviewers were encouraged to only spend an hour or two per review and to note "unable to determine" as a response on indicators where syllabus evidence was not sufficient to yield a decision. These measures were implemented late in the 2017 spring semester, with hopes that the first round of reviews would be completed for the next fall semester.

Final results and conclusions about how this process is working will be discussed during the QM conference in September. The checksheet with be shared, as well as faculty and peer reviewer feedback to date. Although these activities are not nearly as rigorous as a QM course review, in the words of the Online Programs Directors, "It's better than nothing." The influence of Quality Matters in the steps taken to assure quality in a large university environment is noteworthy. Faculty peer reviewers for this initiative were identified from the pool of those faculty completing the APPQMR workshop and the checklist development for course review give a nod to the QM Rubric key components. It is hoped that reviewing EVERY online course in this manner stimulates more interest in QM participation, and eventual QM Course Reviews across the campus.

How can quality of online courses at a large public university be assured?