Excelsior College: A Community of Quality

The Beginning: We began with small groups, a soft roll-out and a few course reviews," recalled Joan Mikalson, Associate Provost for Student and Faculty Services, Excelsior College, when asked how Excelsior implemented Quality Matters. "We ensured a clear division of roles among participating faculty and, as QM spread, offered resources, mentoring and training." While Excelsior had developed its first online graduate courses in the late 1990s and undergraduate courses in 2004, the institution began its relationship with QM in the summer of 2011. "We sought a standard that would ensure the development and use of high-quality courses in our programs and, as QM is a national standard in use by so many institutions, decided to subscribe."

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Though she would later come to appreciate the support available through Excelsior's team-based course development model, Joan, who also served as a QM Research Colleague (2012 – 2014), began as something of a 'lone ranger' developing and delivering online courses as an assistant professor in the School of Human Services at Springfield College and, later, with her colleagues.

On Excelsior College: Excelsior College - a regionally accredited, not-for-profit private institution with accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education - offers undergraduate and graduate degree and certificate programs through its Schools of Business and Technology, Health Sciences, Nursing, Liberal Arts and Public Service. "We offer over 550 distance education courses matched to our degree requirements, over 60 examinations that may be taken for credit and the assessment of prior learning gained through experience and education," said Joan. "Excelsior also offers non-credit courses through its Center for Professional Development." Of its 39,000 students, approximately 10,000 take advantage of its online courses.

Quality Matters Implementation At Excelsior: Excelsior wanted to ensure buy-in when implementing QM and created a system of shared responsibilities among its faculty. It also designed systematic checks and balances within the QM program from the autonomy of the Office of Student and Faculty Services (OSFS) in course reviews and training. "Excelsior College administrators do not administer course reviews," she remarked.

Faculty support is important to those invested in QM. "When we see potential land mines, we meet one-on-one to troubleshoot existing and potential issues," Joan said. "Our most experienced QM-trained faculty are available in-the-moment to those new to QM."

Excelsior courses are rigorously designed; faculty program directors oversee the course development process. "No single faculty member develops a course," Joan said. "We have course development teams comprised of a Subject Matter Expert, Instructional Designer and a Course Development Specialist." Excelsior also has its library staff involved in the kick-off and subsequent development of its courses.

Excelsior works to integrate QM into all aspects of its course development process. "We have formed a QM Coordinator 'Team' with tracks of specialization," Joan reported. This team includes the Data Quality Specialist, Assistant VP for Online Education, Administrative Assistant for Online Education and the Associate Provost for Student and Faculty Services. Each person shares oversight and responsibility for course reviews, reporting, billing and training. "We also have a QM Committee co-chaired with representation from the Center for Online Education and a Faculty Program Director rotated between the Schools." Excelsior's 'QM Committee' is a college committee housed under the Provost whose members include instructional designers, instructional faculty, course developers and faculty program directors. The committee is responsible for implementing changes to course templates identified through the course review process. Members are Applying the Quality Matters Rubric (APPQMR) and Peer Reviewer Course (PRC) trained, with three master reviewers.

> **"We've made a campus-wide commitment to providing resources for training our faculty, instructional designers and staff via enrollment in the Applying the Quality Matters Rubric workshop, Peer and Master Reviewer Courses." – Joan Mikalson**

This has not only provided an economy of human resources and time, it has also de-politicized the process, since no single unit 'owns' QM," Joan continued. "Units across the College share responsibility for QM implementation and training, from internal and subscriber-managed course reviews to billing and reporting related to progress toward meeting QM's rigorous course design Standards." The course development review process is shared between the Center for Online Learning, the Schools and the Office of Student and Faculty Services. Courses are built to align with QM Standards and are mapped to model research-supported, student-centered best practices.

Excelsior has developed a cadre of in-house "trainers" to offer face-to-face and online training for all faculty program directors, teaching faculty, subject matters experts (SMEs) and staff. The current training team is comprised of two instructional designers, one director of assessment and the Executive Director from the Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Assessment. Additionally, each of its five Schools has peer reviewers.

(QM Coordinators pictured right (l to r): Joan Mikalson, Jennifer McVay-Dyche, Theresa Garland, Betsy Brennan)

Tensions, however rare, do exist. "While I've observed an inherent industry tension that has, on occasion, spilled over into presentations at QM conferences – often related to the cultural differences between faculty and instructional designers – that has dispersed at Excelsior," she remarked proudly. "We have an excellent rapport between these roles, which may be attributed to shared responsibility in the implementation of Quality Matters at our institution."

There were other challenges. "Initially, we over-committed in our implementation plan," she said. "The overwhelming number of informal course reviews were time-consuming, and there was a cost involved with using underprepared reviewers." She also cited the intensity of the online APPQMR as a factor that led to participant burnout. "We also struggled with planning time to make some of the changes recommended in the course reviews," she said. "Revisions for our courses and course development are planned and blocked years in advance." With the release of the new rubric, Excelsior adapted its revision process and made subscriber-reviewed course recommendations a priority to update syllabus, course and module templates immediately.

Institutional Accreditation: Efforts to ensure its continued accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education were helped by the QM process. "We are very happy with our decision to adhere to QM's course quality Standards; this helps us view quality through a research-supported, learner-centered lens," Joan said. Excelsior College President John Ebersole recently recognized Joan's professional contribution as a QM Research Colleague, calling Quality Matters 'the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval' for online education.

Continuous improvement, a QM staple, is part of the process at Excelsior. "Our QM-Certified Course Review Manager annually collates all course review comments, which helps identify patterns and themes," Joan continued. "We use this feedback to revise our course development templates to better match the principles laid out in the Standards and value the feedback loop the course reviews help us complete." Excelsior ultimately embeds QM Standards in its syllabi, module and course shells. Most recently, the College revised its student course survey to map to the QM standards.

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The Future: Joan and the Excelsior team are beginning to imagine possibilities for the school's next phase of QM development. "We're in the final year of our four-year implementation plan and hope to implement goals for program certification across the College," she said. "We are delighted to announce that after four years of hard work, Excelsior College has earned QM's institutional recognition and will post the QM logo to its website."

Joan envisions an environment in which institutional support for faculty professional development is common. "Faculty can benefit from taking the specialized workshops related to learning outcomes and alignment," she says.

Excelsior is being proactive in its pursuit of continuous improvement with QM. "We're building a course developer orientation for our subject matter experts," she says. Joan also sees "value in course developers taking the APPQMR workshop." Joan further envisions "modular" delivery of the online APPQMR workshop, believing that altering its current two-week continuous configuration will improve participant outcomes.

Excelsior is also interested in what QM has in store for its community. "The new concept of QM Program Certification is very interesting to us," she said. "We are waiting to see what the QM Program Certification Study Group discovers." This program, she believes, would "potentially mean broader recognition of our efforts and offer greater scale to programs and the institution at large." The potential for progressive levels of program certification – committed and certified – could mean progress over a number of years. "It's also exciting to target certain areas of recognition in which Excelsior may be more 'ready' or more strategic, including learner support, learner success and faculty support."

Joan Mikalson, Associate Provost of Student & Faculty Services: JMikalson@excelsior.edu
Betsy Brennan, Data Quality Specialist: bbrennan@excelsior.edu