

The Quality Matters Program

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INTRODUCTION

The Quality Matters™ Program (www.qualitymatters.org) is a set of standards (or rubric) for the design of online college-level courses and the online components of hybrid/blended courses, and a peer review process for applying these standards. The Quality Matters Rubric is based on recognized best practices, built on the expertise of instructional designers and experienced online teachers, and supported by distance education literature and research. The goals of the program are to increase student retention, learning and satisfaction in online courses by implementing better course design.

HISTORY

The Quality Matters project was initiated by the MarylandOnline (MOL) consortium, a voluntary, not-for-profit, educational association of two and four-year institutions in Maryland. MOL was established in 1999 to leverage the efforts of individual campuses that were committed to the expansion of online educational opportunities in Maryland through collaborative activities. MOL and its members cooperate to support and maintain a portal for online programs and courses in Maryland, engage in joint faculty training initiatives, develop joint online programs, share online courses through a seat bank arrangement, and pursue federal, state and foundation support for a variety of distance learning initiatives. One of these initiatives is the Quality Matters project.

In the spring of 2003, MOL submitted a proposal to the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) for the creation of a rubric for the design of online courses and a peer review process for evaluating and improving existing online courses.

The title of the proposal was: “Quality Matters: Inter-Institutional Quality Assurance in Online Learning.” FIPSE awarded MOL \$509,177 over three years (September 2003–August 2006) to carry out the project. The agency was interested in this proposal among many that

involved quality assurance in online education because of the prospect of developing standards that would be inter-institutional and inter-segmental and the peer-to-peer structure of the proposed course review process. This proposal held the promise of a quality assurance tool that was both scalable and replicable, criteria that are fundamental to the FIPSE grant program.

The collaborative nature of the project operated at several different levels. The co-principal investigators, Mary Wells, Director of Distance Learning at Prince George’s Community College and Christine Sax, Assistant Dean of Social, Behavioral, Natural, and Mathematical Sciences at the University of Maryland University College, personified the inter-segmental character of the initiative. Experienced faculty and support staff from throughout the MOL institutions served on the various committees scanning the research and best practices literature, developing the rubric standards and a training program for peer reviewers, testing and refining preliminary versions of the rubric, etc. External institutional and organizational partners across the U.S., including the Kentucky Virtual University (now the Kentucky Virtual Campus), the Michigan Virtual Community College Consortium, the Sloan Consortium, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), advised the co-directors as the project moved through its various phases.

During the second year of the grant, the co-principal investigators began making presentations at state, regional and national conferences. These presentations generated widespread interest in the Quality Matters Rubric and evaluation process. In 2005, MOL received several awards, including the WCET Outstanding Work (WOW) Award and the

USDLA 21st Century Best Practice Award. In the second and third year of the grant, peer reviewer training to develop a cadre of reviewers attracted participants from 158 different institutions spanning 28 states. More than 700 faculty and instructional development staff were training during this period. Trained peer reviewers served on the first rounds of course reviews, but also

brought their experience back to their home campuses. Several MOL institutions made formal commitments to review and enhance their online courses using the Quality Matters Rubric, and a variety of institutions across the country began to adapt the QM Rubric and review process to serve their own agendas for online course development and quality assurance.

During the final year of the grant, September 2005 – August 2006, MOL conducted a study of options to continue the Quality Matters initiative beyond August 2006. The outcome of this investigation was a decision to continue the Quality Matters Program as a self-supporting activity of MOL through institutional subscription and fee-for-service revenues. Early in the second year of operation on this basis, the Quality Matters Program has more than 250 institutional subscribers from 37 states and has conducted training for more than 4,500 faculty and staff. Through a statewide subscription option, QM is poised for continued rapid growth. As the program and the QM Rubric continue to evolve, the program may also attract support from some of the many institutions that have adapted the freely available QM materials from the grant period.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY MATTERS

The goal of the Quality Matters project was to improve student learning, retention and satisfaction in online courses through better course design. The project was designed as a collaborative, faculty-driven initiative, with faculty developing the standards, carrying out the reviews, providing advice to instructors and working together with instructors to make existing online courses more effective. The project leaders did not envision the creation of “perfect” courses, or a perfect set of standards. Rather, they foresaw that application of the rubric would improve courses, and that repeated reference to this evolving set of standards would make courses progressively better.

Another founding principle, which continues to drive the Quality Matters Program is the need to reflect the results of academic research on effective learning in the standards. While the initial standards and subsequent modifications have been based on the insights of teams of experienced online teachers and instructional designers and the best practices standards promulgated by

accrediting bodies and national organizations, the QM standards have also been tested for consistency with the conclusions of the educational research literature regarding factors that improve student retention rates and focus their efforts on activities that increase learning and engagement.

THE QUALITY MATTERS RUBRIC

The Quality Matters Rubric consists of eight general standards that define quality expectations for the basic elements that go into the design of an online or hybrid course. These general standards cover

1. The Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Resources and Materials
5. Learner Interaction
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility

Under each general standard are a number of specific standards that deal with discrete course elements. The specific standards are stated in succinct language, but they are annotated with more detailed explanations of their intent and examples of good practice. The annotations provide guidance to instructors, course development specialists, and course reviewers who are attempting to interpret and implement the standards. The inter-relationships among the standards are highlighted in the annotations through the identification of standards that should align with each other in a well designed course.

A point system is associated with the specific standards, with some standards given more value than others. Those assigned the greatest number of points are considered essential standards and must be satisfied for a course to meet overall Quality Matters standards.

The Quality Matters Program collects feedback regarding the scope and language of the rubric and its annotations from users and trainers on a continuous basis. Periodically, the rubric is subjected to a thorough review and updated as needed. The current 06-07 version is scheduled for replacement in 2008.

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