



The Quality Matters Program, as seen in *Education Week's* January 12, 2011 Special Report on the Emerging Policy Debates in Virtual Education, "Crafting E-Curriculum that Inspires" www.edweek.org/go/elearning-report3 (pages 5,6)



Setting Expectations

After crafting standards for higher education, group turns to K-12
BY KATIE ASH

New standards outlining online-course design for grades 6-12 aim to guide developers of online and hybrid courses and provide a resource for educators and administrators to evaluate the quality of existing e-courses.

The rubric of standards, released in August 2010, was created by the Annapolis, Md.-based Quality Matters Program, a nonprofit organization known for its course-design standards for virtual learning in higher education and for its peer-review process used to ensure quality in postsecondary online courses.

Established in 2003 through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the group's postsecondary rubric is the most widely used benchmark of online-course design for higher education in the United States.

Now, the organization is moving into the K-12 arena.

"From the very beginning, there were questions as to whether [the postsecondary] standards could be applied elsewhere," said Ron Legon, the executive director of Quality Matters Program. In 2008, the organization struck up a partnership with the Orlando-based Florida Virtual School to build a standards rubric for grades 6-12.

"The standards pulled ideas from existing K-12 virtual-learning standards such as those published by the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board, the Vienna, Va.-based International Association for K-12 Online Learning, and the Washington-based Partnership for 21st Century Skills."

RON LEGION

Over the next year and a half, researchers conducted an extensive literature review and a handful of pilot projects to gather information before crafting the new rubric, said Mr. Legon.

The standards pulled ideas from existing K-12 virtual-learning standards such as those published by the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board, the Vienna, Va.-based International Association for K-12 Online Learning, and the Washington-based Partnership for 21st Century Skills. Then they tried to make their new standards address K-12 issues more specifically, tackling such topics as parent-teacher communication, privacy issues, and reading levels, Mr. Legon said.

"Our standards are very focused and very detailed on the elements of the course, which is unique as compared to the other standards," he said. "Our emphasis is more on input—the design and building of the course and motivating faculty to think about best practices and what they can do to improve what they're doing online."

Because of their specificity, the standards will be revised every two years to keep them up to date, he said.

EVALUATING QUALITY

Stacey Rimmerman, an instructional design, research, and evaluation professor at Capella University, an online education institution based in Minneapolis, and an education consultant, helped create the rubric and hopes it will help educators make good decisions about purchasing online courses.

"Most of the teachers and the district administrators aren't trained to offer an online course, and there's no additional funding [to develop them], so what they're going to end up being forced to do is to purchase courses," said Ms. Rimmerman.

"They need to be able to evaluate them for their own district," she said, "which is why [the standards] seemed particularly important to me."

Lining up standards with potential courses can provide a good measure of course quality, said Mickey Revenaugh, the senior vice president of state relations for the Baltimore-based online-course provider Connections Academy, which serves about 20,000 students across the country.

"There's very little data about whether a course works," said Ms. Revenaugh. Educators can get some idea of a course's effectiveness through end-of-course tests, or Advanced Placement tests for AP courses, she said, as well as the number of

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students who completed the course, but "it's all still kind of subjective and input-driven."

"Standards really help [educators] make a good, safe bet that something's high-quality," she said.

In fact, a paper released by the New York City-based National Bureau of Economic Research, or NBER, in June of last year found that some college students, particularly male, Hispanic, and struggling students, performed worse in a Web-based course than a face-to-face course, contradicting a 2009 meta-analysis of online education research by the U.S. Department of Education. That earlier review found that students in online courses or hybrid courses (a mix of online and in-person learning) performed as well as, or better than, students in face-to-face classes.

The results of the NBER study were based on roughly 300 students in an introductory microeconomics course.

LINKING ACADEMIC CONTENT

In addition to the online-course standards the International Association of K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL, has developed, the group provides a service to schools by setting up review committees to help determine the quality of online courses before districts purchase those courses, said Susan D. Patrick, the organization's president and chief executive officer.

Similarly, the Quality Matters Program also provides training sessions on how to implement its standards and apply them to existing online courses to evaluate quality.

In addition to course-design standards, academic-content standards, which vary from state to state, are equally important when reviewing online courses, online-learning experts say.

Cheryl Vedoe, the chief executive officer of Seattle-based Apex Learning, which provides online courses to 207,000 students, said her company uses content standards as the foundation for its online courses.

"When we develop online courses, we literally do start with the [content] standards," she said. "We look at the content standards for a number of key states that are representative of the content standards across the majority of states, and we actually build our course outline, scope, and sequence based on those standards."

The courses then go through a review process by the Gig Harbor, Wash.-based independent standards reviewer EdGate to identify any gaps in the standards, Ms. Vedoe said.

"Clearly, any course, regardless of what medium it's taught in, needs to address [content] standards," said Ms. Revenaugh of Connections Academy. In fact, aligning online courses with each state's standards is one of the most costly and labor-intensive parts of creating an online course, she said.

That challenge is one reason why online-course providers are closely watching the Common Core State Standards Initiative and the work to craft common assessments matched to its standards.

"It's incredibly exciting for anyone working in online learning serving students across the states," Ms. Revenaugh said. ■

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Editorial & Business Offices:
Suite 100, 6935 Arlington Road
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301)280-3100
Fax Editorial (301)280-3200
Fax Business (301)280-3250

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E-Course Standards

The Quality Matters Program, a nonprofit organization that researches and develops standards for online-course design, outlines several standards that need to be met to ensure online courses are well crafted. Highlights of those standards follow:

1. The overall design and expectations of the course are made clear to the student at the beginning of the course. For instance, students should be informed of how to get started, how to access course components, and what prerequisite knowledge and technical skills they should have, as well as the "netiquette" expected for online discussions, e-mail interactions, and other communications.
2. Learning objectives, which have measurable outcomes aligned with content standards, are clearly stated and explained. Students should receive clear instructions on how those objectives are to be met.
3. Assessments, which should be consistent with course activities and resources, should be sequenced, varied, and appropriate to the content being evaluated. The grading policy for the course should be clearly stated, and students should have opportunities to engage in "self-checks" or practice assessments with timely feedback from the instructor. The criteria for how students will be evaluated should be stated clearly and specifically.
4. Instructional materials are authoritative, current, and appropriately chosen for the level of the course. They should have sufficient breadth and depth and meet state and local content

standards. The materials should also be of an appropriate reading level, balanced and bias-free, and properly cited. Students should understand the relationship between the materials and the learning activities.

5. Meaningful online interactions between the teacher and students, among students, and between students and course materials are employed to motivate students and foster intellectual commitment and personal development. Students should know what to expect from their teachers, such as how long it will take to receive feedback on an e-mail message or an assessment, and they should know what kind of interaction is expected of them during the course.

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6. Course-navigation features and the technology employed in the course foster student engagement and ensure access to instructional materials and resources. For example, the course should take advantage of available tools and media, encourage students to be active learners, and provide instructions on how to access resources.
7. The course clearly identifies policies and services for students with disabilities and outlines the technical support available. Course instructions should also include information on how the institution's academic and student services can help students reach educational goals, as well as answer any basic questions about research, writing, or technology use.
8. The face-to-face and online course components are accessible to all students. That means there are equivalent alternatives to visual or auditory content in the course material for students with hearing or visual disabilities, the computer screen offers adequate readability, and the course pages have self-describing and meaningful Web links.
9. The course is aligned with state standards and fulfills any mandated communication or information required by the state or school district.