

The Impact of the Quality Matters Professional Development  
on Teaching across Delivery Formats

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the impact of professional development workshops for online course design on faculty's pedagogical practices in online, face-to-face (f2f), and blended instructional modes. It specifically focused on trainings offered by the Quality Matters (QM) organization on a rubric for assessing quality in online course development. A mixed-methods analysis of survey data collected from 2,148 participants in QM workshops over a three-year period (2012-2015) demonstrated that, across all three teaching modes, participants revised learning objectives, improved course alignment, and paid greater attention to communication with students. Additional benefits from participating in QM training related to specific modalities. Common online and blended impacts included changes in assessment practices as well as in modifying course materials to be more compliant with accessibility standards. In f2f settings frequent changes involved redesigning learning activities to increase learner-learner interaction.

## **Introduction**

Quality Matters (QM) publishes a rubric of quality indicators used in a peer review process to promote continuous improvement in online course design. It also offers multiple professional development workshops, both online and face-to-face (f2f), which teach participants how to use the rubric to review and improve online courses. Almost all individuals who take QM workshops have some involvement with online course design and teaching. Many also teach in blended and f2f settings. The study described in this report investigated the ways in which participation in a QM professional development program influenced instructors' f2f, online, and blended teaching practice.

## **Purpose of the Research**

As online learning in higher education becomes more common, the number of faculty who move from f2f teaching to online teaching has also increased. Studies examining this shift have investigated barriers and incentives to faculty participation (e.g., Shattuck, 2012), changing faculty roles (e.g., Beaudoin, 1990) and faculty development needs and initiatives (e.g., Eib & Miller, 2006). Much less research has been conducted on the ways in which teaching and developing online courses have influenced instructors' professional practices in other modalities (i.e., f2f and blended). This report describes a research project that investigated how a set of faculty development workshops for online teaching and course design influenced the teaching practices of participants across three modalities: online, f2f, and blended.

Much has been written about faculty development programs for online teaching. A recent study by Meyer (2013) reviewed 68 journal articles and five books on the subject. Few of those works investigated the impact of the training on the participants' f2f teaching, although there are two notable exceptions. Koepke and O'Brien (2012) surveyed and interviewed faculty who completed an online training program for teaching online and found that participants used the training to incorporate new pedagogical strategies into both their online and f2f teaching. McQuiggan (2012) conducted an action research project during a two-semester professional development program for online teaching. Some

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faculty participants in that program planned changes in their f2f teaching and shifted toward a more learner-centered viewpoint. The current study adds to this small body of work.

The QM quality assurance organization exists to promote continuous quality improvement in online learning environments (Quality Matters Overview, 2014). The bedrock of those efforts is a faculty-based peer review process for online and hybrid courses. In addition to overseeing these peer reviews, it also conducts multiple professional development workshops to teach participants how to use the rubric to review and improve online course design. Many workshop participants also teach in f2f and blended settings. This research project focused on the following research questions:

1. Do QM professional development workshops have an impact on pedagogical practice in f2f and blended/online teaching modes?
2. What types of pedagogical changes in their f2f and blended/online teaching practice do instructors report as a result of developing expertise with the QM approach?

### **Method**

Data for this study were collected by means of an online survey disseminated via Qualtrics (2015) to 22,859 individuals who had participated in at least one QM professional development workshop over the three years prior to October, 2015. Quantitative questions covered teaching experience, the types of QM workshops in which respondents had participated, and QM reviewer status. Respondents were also presented categories of possible pedagogical changes they had experienced as a result of implementing the QM approach. Open-ended questions asked respondents to describe a learning activity or teaching strategy that they implemented in their online or blended teaching. Respondents who taught f2f were also asked to describe such an activity from their f2f teaching. A copy of the survey instrument is included in the Appendix.

Frequency distributions were conducted on the quantitative data using SPSS (n.d.) software. Text responses from the open-ended questions were analyzed using a combination of open (inductive) and pre-structured (deductive) codes (Jansen, 2010). The eight QM general standards (Quality Matters Overview,

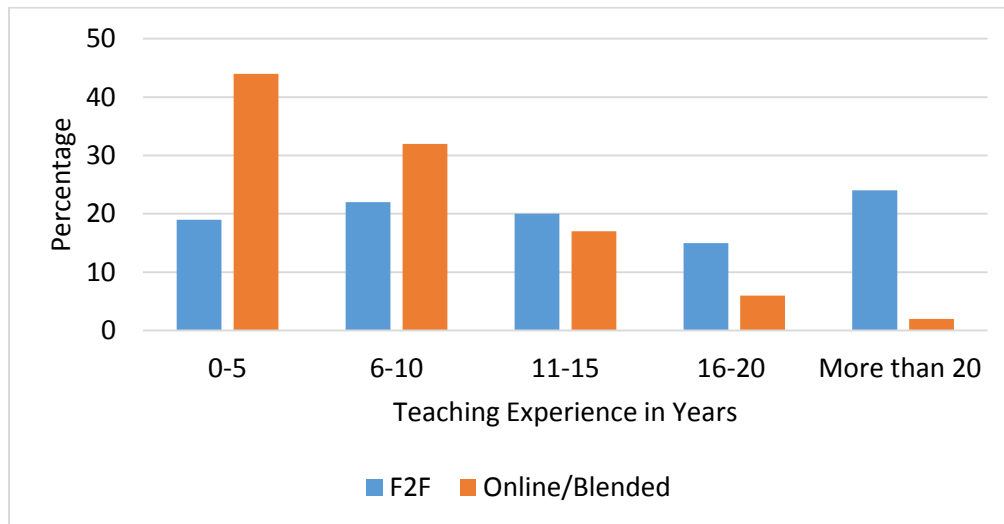
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2014) were used as pre-structured coding categories. Inductive coding was used to develop specific codes within each category and to create additional code categories. Two different researchers independently coded the data, comparing their emerging results regularly to converge on a set of codes that applied equally well to online, blended, and f2f teaching experiences.

## Results

### Professional Backgrounds

The survey was completed by 2,148 individuals, resulting in a response rate of 9.4%. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents taught in an online or blended format, while 85% taught in a f2f format. Eleven percent had non-teaching roles such as instructional designer, faculty developer, or media specialist. Years of teaching experience was evenly distributed among the f2f instructors. In the online/blended group, the majority of respondents had fewer than 10 years of experience. Demographic comparisons are shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: Comparison of f2f and online/blended teaching experience in years*

Respondents who did not teach, either online or f2f, were presented with a separate question asking them to describe their role in online learning. Eleven percent of the total respondents, 245 individuals, were non-teachers. Table 1 shows the statements these individuals described themselves.

Options	Percentage
I design/develop online/blended courses and programs	42
I consult with leaders, instructors, designers on online/blended courses and programs	31
I provide teaching support for online/blended courses and programs	24
I am currently not involved in online/blended courses but want to/plan to	23
I provide technical/student support for online/blended courses and programs	21
I provide multimedia and graphic design support for online/blended courses and programs	20
I manage/direct/coordinate online/blended courses and programs	16
I conduct research on online/blended courses and programs	14
I administer/lead my organization's online/blended courses and programs	7

*Table 1:* Non-teaching roles involving online learning sorted by frequency of respondent selection

### Workshop Participation and Professional Development

Respondents were presented the following list of workshops and asked to indicate which they had taken and rate the level of influence on their professional or pedagogical practice:

- Applying the QM Rubric (APPQMR)
- Peer Reviewer Course (PRC)
- Designing Your Online Course (DYOC)
- Designing Your Blended Course (DYBC)
- Improving Your Online Course (IYOC)
- Teaching Online-An Introduction to Online Delivery (TOL)
- Design That Welcomes Your Students (ST1/7)
- Connecting Learning Objectives and Assessments (ST2/3)
- Using Instructional Materials and Technology to Promote Learner Engagement (ST4/5/6)

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- Addressing Accessibility and Usability (ST8)

Respondents were also given the option of writing in an “other” workshop. Seven percent of the respondents selected this option. The top three write-in workshops were the Master Reviewer Certification course, one of the Facilitator certification courses, and the Rubric Update. By far, the most frequently selected workshop among the choices presented was the APPQMR, taken by 92% of the respondents. Following that was the PRC at 49%, aligning roughly with the 47% of respondents who were also QM Certified Peer Reviewers. The PRC also had the highest number of “Extremely Influential” ratings with 47% of the respondents who had taken it choosing that rating. Following that were ST2/3 (45%) and ST8 (44%).

Regarding other methods used to improve their teaching, the most frequently selected options were talking with colleagues at their own institution (84%), experimenting with teaching strategies and observing the results (73%), and reading research literature on teaching and learning (71%). Respondents were also given the option of writing in an “other” method. A frequently mentioned method was enrolling, in the past or present, in credit-bearing courses or programs in higher education.

### **Impact on Online/Blended Teaching**

Two open-ended questions were presented asking respondents to describe a specific example or critical moment in their online/blended teaching and their f2f teaching when they implemented a new teaching strategy, learning activity, or practice as a result of learning about the QM Standards. The question focusing on online/blended teaching was preceded by a multiple choice question asking respondents to identify areas in which they may have made changes. The areas offered as options comprised the eight QM General Standards, as shown in Table 2, along with the percentage of online/blended instructors who selected that option. Among the 1897 instructors who taught in an online or blended format, Standard 1 was chosen most frequently (71%), followed by Standard 2 (67%) and Standard 5 (63%).

<b>Options</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Standard 1: Course Overview and Introduction	71
Standard 2: Learning Objectives (Competencies)	67
Standard 3: Assessment and Measurement	58
Standard 4: Instructional Materials	55
Standard 5: Course Activities and Learner Interaction	63
Standard 6: Course Technology	42
Standard 7: Learner Support	47
Standard 8: Accessibility and Usability	57

*Table 2:* Pre-identified areas of change and percentage of frequency reported for online/blended teaching

Examining participants' 1429 open-ended responses revealed multiple other ways that QM influenced faculty's online and blended instructional practices. Most frequently, they reported adding or revising components of the course introduction or overview (12%). Next, they reported a growing awareness of accessibility guidelines and concentrated efforts to improve the accessibility of course materials (11%). This was especially true of multimedia materials, as many participants mentioned adding closed-captioning and transcripts to video. Finally, the third most frequent code related to strengthening the alignment between objectives, activities, and assessments (8%), as participants reviewed and mapped their courses to ensure connections between these components and course competencies.

Finally, a limited number of respondents (6%) indicated that they did not modify their teaching practices after participating in QM workshops. Most simply wrote in "not applicable" (3%). Further analysis of the qualitative data indicated several potential factors motivating a lack of reported impact, including participants' previous knowledge of QM principles from other educational avenues (e.g.; degree programs) (1%), coupled with few online or blended teaching opportunities after completing QM training



(.5%). A markedly small sector expressed that learning about QM had no positive impact on their pedagogy (1%).

### Impact on F2F Teaching

The open-ended question about changes in f2f teaching was preceded by a multiple choice question consisting of possible impacts identified by an earlier study (Kearns, 2015) that instructors had experienced as a result of teaching online. Respondents selected all applicable options. This question was answered by 1868 individuals who currently taught or had taught in a f2f format. The options are shown in Table 3, along with the percentage of f2f instructors who selected a particular option.

Options	Percentage
I have reflected on my teaching goals and objectives	70
I have redesigned a learning activity or assessment	60
I have become more aware of the way I communicate with my students	51
I have added and/or eliminated course elements	48
I have added between-class activities such as videos, quizzes, and online discussion	44
I have restructured the sequencing of course elements	40
I have questioned my assumptions about how students learn	35
I have added more group activities	27
I have changed the way I conduct class sessions	27

*Table 3: Pre-identified impacts on f2f teaching sorted by frequency of respondent selection*

Among the 1121 respondents who provided a written description of how learning about the QM approach influenced their f2f teaching practice, the most frequently reported impact, at 18%, involved improved alignment among activities, assessments, and objectives. Following that, 13% mentioned increasing learner-learner interaction with activities such as collaborative team projects and think-pair-share exercises. Responses in this code category also included references to providing more opportunities

for class discussion, both online and in the classroom. The third most frequent code, at 10%, had to do with communicating expectations to students. Responses in this category mentioned being more explicit about course policies in the syllabus and providing more detailed instructions for assignments.

### **Discussion**

Two open-ended survey questions asked participants to describe a specific example in their teaching when they implemented a new teaching strategy, learning activity, or practice as a result of learning about the QM standards. One question covered online/blended teaching and the other addressed f2f teaching practices. Although the questions addressed different delivery modes, the use of the eight standards provided a robust set of categories into which most of the comments could be grouped. The only additional code categories that were necessary to create were those related to alignment, no change, and activities specific to f2f teaching such as flipping the class and reusing online materials for f2f students.

#### **Impact on Online/Blended Teaching**

Regarding how the QM approach influenced online and blended course design or instruction, respondents overwhelmingly reported adding or revising their course introduction and orientation materials. They made the course overview more comprehensive by incorporating instructor welcome videos, providing additional resources for learner support, and clarifying course policies and expectations. The following examples illustrate instructors' willingness to prime students for a successful online learning experience through greater transparency from the course outset:

- “After adopting QM, I quickly embedded many more resources and information in my syllabus to help learners get started on the right foot, and to make sure that they had access to key institutional, academic, and student support services.”
- “After taking the Peer Reviewer course I have changed the course to provide students with a complete overview of what to expect in the course, including activities, how they will interact

with each other, how they will interact with the instructor (me), as well as technical issues that need to be addressed prior to beginning working on the course materials.”

QM training seemed to play an instrumental role in helping instructors re-evaluate their courses from a student perspective, allowing them to detect gaps in the introductory information they provided. As one instructor said, “I looked at my online course from the eyes of the student and made adjustments to make it easier to follow.”

Furthermore, greater attention to the student learning experience led to broader changes in instructors’ use of the learning management system (LMS) to organize course content in more meaningful ways. Many reported streamlining their course structure for optimized navigation, making the course more user-friendly and intuitive through the use of headings, folders, and simplified menus. The following comments exemplify this tendency:

- “I’ve adapted a “linear” approach to LMS course design so that students are able to progress through the course in an intuitive, sequential way.”
- “I redesigned the pages so students need to navigate less and everything is just in one page, including the learning objectives and activities for the week.”
- “I have tried to make sure that course materials are well organized so that students can find things easily and follow the schedule.”

In line with making course content and learning materials more usable for all learners, instructors reported a growing awareness of accessibility guidelines after learning about the QM rubric. In particular, they discussed altering instructional materials to comply with ADA accessibility standards by using closed captioning, color contrasts, headings, and multiple document file formats for screen readers. Their heightened attention and sensitivity to accessibility is evidenced in the following examples:

- “I have a better understanding of accessibility requirements and have implemented WCAG 2.0 strategies into courseware design - not just to meet requirements - but to provide meaningful content to those students needing alternate content.”

- “Now when I am creating course materials, I think "accessibility" first. I use the html editor in D2L - making sure I use the Headings tool. This makes any work posted online more easily read by a screen reader.”
- “I'm much more aware of accessibility standards for students with disabilities. All my videos now are closed captioned, I always include alt text with graphics, and I don't post jpegs of text anymore, I only use PDF or Word files.”

Another common change indicated by respondents was greater attention to how individual course components aligned to course goals. This involved mapping the relationships between course objectives, activities, and assessments to ensure that the proposed course goals could be mastered by students. As one instructor said, “Before my QM training, I did not include module-level objectives in my courses. Now all of my courses are centered on them, and the alignment to the course-level objectives is direct.”

In addition to rewriting their objectives to be more clear and measurable, many respondents reported explicitly sharing them with students in a variety of ways, through charts, tables, and matrixes posted within module introductions. This seemed to make the learning experience more purposeful for students and motivated increased participation:

- “I created a document that for each module details the learning objectives, tasks, and assessments. I used first person Q&A language, such as "What will I learn this week? What do I do? How will I know how well I have learned?"
- “Before the QM course, I did not list the learning objectives with the exercise itself. By including it, the students (and I) are reminded of the purpose behind the exercise.”

A general shift toward better instructor communication about student learning was evident in other reported impacts. These responses included making assignment instructions more explicit and using rubrics to inform students of grading criteria and expectations. Overall, exposure to QM principles motivated positive changes in online and blended instruction primarily in the areas of course overview, learning competencies, learner support, course technology, and accessibility and usability.

### **Impact on F2F Teaching**

Among respondents who contributed a description of how learning about the QM approach influenced their f2f teaching practice, the most frequently reported impact was attention to alignment, examples of which are provided in the following comments:

- “While I had moderately effective learning objective and interesting activities, my courses were missing alignment, especially in terms of assessment. One course at a time, I examined and aligned my courses.”
- “Looking at objective alignment has caused a measurable change in every course I teach, because it forced me to look at the assumptions I was making about what [the students] were learning based on what they were being given.”

Not only did respondents sharpen their focus on objectives but they also reported putting greater emphasis on sharing objectives with students as a way of helping students succeed:

- “Makes more sense to students when they can see how each activity/assignment is linked to a unit/module objective, and then to a course objective.”
- “During the class introduction, instead of simply communicating the course / lesson objectives, I now review the course / lesson objectives with the students using a Socratic dialog to ensure understanding.”

Another change made by instructors to help students succeed was the addition or enhancement of formative assessment methods:

- “I put self-assessment instruments on my face-to-face course websites so the students could rate themselves in preparation for exams. This was because of the QM standard for providing self-assessment opportunities.”
- “Added ungraded quizzes for material that was taught face to face so students could reflect on their progress.”

- “I began assigning a pre-lecture online quiz, and found that the students came to class more prepared than when I hadn't used the quizzes.”

Adding formative assessments was just one way in which a greater appreciation for the student point of view manifested itself. As one instructor said, “I have paid more attention to putting myself in the students’ shoes, so to speak, to see how materials and course objectives and work is perceived from their perspective.” A commonly mentioned outcome resulting from this trend was the clarification of instructor communications to students, exemplified by the following comments:

- “I have thought more about how my directions may be interpreted by students. It has caused me to be very specific and think from a student's perspective so that things are not vague.”
- “I use clear course objectives and rubrics for each assignment. Prior to my QM training, I relied on lots of assumptions without realizing it.”

Giving feedback to students was another area influenced by instructors’ increased awareness of the student perspective. Several respondents reported following the QM model for “providing feedback in a constructive manner that is sensitive to a learner's development:”

- “The first thing that comes to mind is how the PRC training changed the way I give feedback to students. I am now so much more aware of how my tone impacts my students.”
- “I make a stronger effort to begin all critiques with specific concrete examples of the things the student has done well--both in class and on assignments.”

In addition to the sharpened focus on learning outcomes and a greater appreciation for the student perspective, many respondents reported increasing their use of active learning strategies in their f2f classes. Comments in this category often referred to learner-learner and/or learner-content activities, as shown in the following:

- “I have incorporated more group activities, allowing the students to be more in control of their learning.”

- “Learning to solve math word problems is very difficult for students. I have found that student collaboration helps, because students can frequently explain their process of problem solving to other students better than I can.”
- “I have students write reflection papers based on guest speaker presentations rather than simply having them listen to the presentation.”
- “I found that adding discussion boards, with specific guidelines for interactions, allows students to provide more in-depth responses than they do in class.”

Other changes in this category included reducing lecture time and changing the pacing of in-class activities. Respondents also reported making greater use of their learning management systems to extend student learning between class sessions.

### **Conclusion**

The most commonly reported impact across all teaching modalities was increased attention to alignment of course components. This held true for online, blended, and f2f teaching. Its emergence as an important takeaway for workshop participants is not surprising given its emphasis within the rubric, (i.e., required alignment among five of the eight general standards). Clearly, individuals who participate in QM’s workshops come away with not only a greater awareness of alignment in terms of the benefits it can provide, but also a solid set of internal guidelines for operationalizing the concept in their courses.

Alignment among course objectives, activities, and assessments has been a bedrock concept in instructional design for decades. Cohen’s (1987) meta-review demonstrating its significance led him to call it a “magic bullet” for teaching and learning. Unfortunately, academics beyond schools and colleges of education are often not exposed to the concept during their first years as instructors. This study has shown that, for many instructors, the QM professional development program not only provides an effective set of guidelines for designing online courses, but also equips them with important foundational knowledge for teaching across multiple delivery methods.

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## Appendix

### Quality Matters Impact Survey

For the purpose of this survey, we will use course format definitions based on the Course Format Chart included in the Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric Workbook:

- Face-to-face: 100% of the course occurs face-to-face in regularly scheduled sessions.
- Blended: Approximately 25% to 75% of the course occurs face-to-face with significant portions of the course delivered online.
- Online: 100% of the course occurs online with few, if any, face-to-face meetings.

1. Which of the following Quality Matters workshops have you completed? For each workshop you have taken, please rate the extent to which it has influenced your professional/pedagogical practice. (Use this Likert scale: 1– not at all influential, 2– slightly influential, 3– somewhat influential, 4– very influential, 5– extremely influential, NA)

- Applying the QM Rubric (APPQMR)
- Peer Reviewer Course (PRC)
- Designing Your Online Course (DYOC)
- Designing Your Blended Course (DYBC)
- Improving Your Online Course (IYOC)
- Teaching Online-An Introduction to Online Delivery (TOL)
- Design That Welcomes Your Students (ST1/7)
- Connecting Learning Objectives and Assessments (ST2/3)
- Using Instructional Materials and Technology to Promote Learner Engagement (ST4/5/6)
- Addressing Accessibility and Usability (ST8)
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

2. Have you taught or do you currently teach face-to-face courses? Yes/No (If No, **skip to Question 6.**)

3. How long have you taught face-to-face courses?

- Less than one year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- More than 20 years

4. Please identify which of the following impacts you have experienced in your **face-to-face teaching** practice as a result of learning about the Quality Matters standards.

- I have questioned my assumptions about how students learn
- I have reflected on my teaching goals and objectives
- I have restructured the sequencing of course elements
- I have added and/or eliminated course elements
- I have redesigned a learning activity or assessment

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- I have added between-class activities such as videos, quizzes, and online discussion
- I have added more group activities
- I have become more aware of the way I communicate with my students
- I have changed the way I conduct class sessions
- I have experienced other impacts not mentioned above (Please describe): \_\_\_\_\_
- I have not experienced any of the impacts mentioned above

5. Please provide a brief description of a specific example or critical moment in your **face-to-face teaching** when you implemented a new teaching strategy, learning activity, or practice as a result of learning about the Quality Matters standards.

6. Have you taught or do you currently teaching online and/or blended courses? Yes/No (If No, **skip to Non-Teaching Question.**)

7. How long have you taught online and/or blended courses?

- Less than one year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- More than 20 years

8. The following list includes the eight Quality Matters standards. Please indicate in which of these areas you have made changes in your **online or blended courses** as a result of learning about the Quality Matters standards. Please choose all that apply.

1. Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives (Competencies)
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Instructional Materials
5. Course Activities and Learner Interaction
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility and Usability
9. None of the Above

9. Please provide a brief description of a specific example or critical moment in your **online or blended teaching** when you implemented a new teaching strategy, learning activity, or practice as a result of learning about the Quality Matters standards.

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10. In addition to participating in Quality Matters professional development workshops, which other methods have you used to improve your teaching practice across all course formats?

- Experimenting with teaching strategies and observing the results
- Reproducing the teaching strategies used by your instructors when you were a student
- Working one-on-one with an instructional designer
- Attending face-to-face workshops and conferences within your institution
- Attending face-to-face workshops and conferences outside of your institution
- Participating in online workshops hosted by your institution
- Participating in online workshops hosted outside of your institution
- Talking with colleagues from your own institution
- Talking with colleagues from other institutions
- Reading research literature on teaching and learning
- Seeking new teaching strategies from Web-based resources
- Following guidance from a mentor
- Other, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Are you a Quality Matters Certified Peer Reviewer? Yes/No

### Non-Teaching Question

1. Which of the following best describes your role in online/blended courses and programs? Please select all that apply.

- I administer/lead my organization's online/blended courses and programs
- I manage/direct/coordinate online/blended courses and programs
- I design/develop online/blended courses and programs
- I provide teaching support for online/blended courses and programs
- I provide multimedia and graphic design support for online/blended courses and programs
- I provide technical/student support for online/blended courses and programs
- I consult with leaders, instructors, designers on online/blended courses and programs
- I conduct research on online/blended courses and programs
- I am currently not involved in online/blended courses but want to/plan to
- Other, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

### End of Survey

Thank you for your participation in this survey. It will inform our understanding of the impact of the Quality Matters professional development program.