



Honing the Competitive Edge of Quality: Ensuring Future Sustainability by Building on the Lessons of 2020

Summary Report • August 4, 2021

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About the Summit

On June 30, 2021, Quality Matters hosted senior academic leaders from a broad spectrum of higher education institutions to help us better understand, and facilitate the way forward, for quality in U.S. higher education. The context for this national conversation was a moment in time when glimpses into a post-pandemic landscape afforded us the opportunity of both hindsight and foresight. Hindsight to recognize disparities in student access and success well before, but exacerbated by, the pandemic and the foresight of demographic and financial challenges on the near horizon for higher education. We considered these past and future perspectives, of course, in a current environment of broad political, social, and ecological challenges that impact how we work together for positive change.

Senior leaders served as moderators, panelists, and participants in this national conversation. During this event, we posed three broad topics and a set of problems to solve.

The System’s Role in Creating Inclusive Learning

- Student displacement and disaffection caused by the pandemic — and exacerbated by the demographic and lifestyle shifts ahead — require a broad, purposeful, and integrated approach to building community. What is the role of the state higher education system in this?

Engaging and Rigorous Learning

- High-impact practices to engage students are not new but will be required to meet new and evolving stakeholder expectations. How might we meet these expectations?
- A focus on what students know and can do, and measuring such learning, is fast becoming an imperative. How do we move beyond traditional learning models and away from high-stakes assessments in ways that better recognize student achievement?

Rethinking Quality in a Competitive Landscape

- With evolving federal and regional accreditation, state policies, and learner expectations, how do we implement the kind of technology and human infrastructure required to consistently deliver quality at scale?

Moderators framed the discussion for the panelists who represented a broad mix of institution types and missions. Subsequent small group discussions in breakout rooms enabled robust conversation with participants, giving us a better understanding of how senior leaders see the road ahead. Following the summaries of each of the three conversations in this report, we offer our own observations about the issues and their implications.

Top Takeaways

There is no turning back. In spite of the tug of tradition, the imperative to ensure academic continuity throughout the pandemic required higher education to replace inertia with ingenuity – if imperfectly. The past is unretrievable and the now is untenable. The only way is forward.

We can't do it alone. A principled approach, based on collaborative and collegial engagement, is how we can address the constraints of higher education's iron triangle (i.e., cost, access, quality) to achieve quality and access at scale. This requires a student-focused perspective, beyond any single institution, as we find a balance between what we do independently, customized to the institution, and what we do together.

Institutional cultures can be levers for, or barriers to, change. Moving forward in a principled approach within our institutions and systems requires a respect for the level of organizational change that is required, especially a way to adapt the culture and rethink practices, make them stick, and engage faculty in new ways.

We must move with intentionality. Through our community's response to the pandemic, and especially from our students, we discovered a lot of things we probably should have known already. We need to step up and act intentionally to address the challenges we now recognize.

The problems to be solved – at least the ones solvable by higher education – are primarily structural and cultural. They are not technological. Once we have clarity on how we change our institutions to drive and support quality, we can find technologies to accomplish it.

Quality Matters has been working with educational institutions for over 15 years to improve the quality of online/digital education and student learning. Our approach has been to provide readily actionable and adaptable tools and processes to help educators apply research-supported quality standards to courses and programs. Today, we find ourselves in a situation where the pace of change, significantly accelerated by the emergent pivot to remote and online education during the pandemic, has outstripped the pace of new research. We look now to those academic leaders most responsible for the quality of education at their institutions to learn how they are identifying quality imperatives and moving their institutions forward.

We identified some critical problems to solve and invited these senior leaders to help us better understand the path forward and the innovation challenges they face. It is critical that quality standards and best practices in meeting new expectations become integral to the definition of overall institutional quality. As QM continues to broaden and deepen its quality assurance efforts across more than 1500 institutions and 30 countries, we need both the practitioner and leadership perspectives on the challenges ahead. This convening confirmed for us that the path to quality will always be customizable but it's only with a shared understanding of a common direction that we can work together at the scale necessary to address the challenges we face.

To support the opportunity for robust conversation and engagement, we invited a relatively small number of senior leaders to participate in this inaugural convening. This allowed us to limit the number of individuals in each of the four small group discussions following the panel session to less than 20. Invited were leaders from 2-year and 4-year, public and private, minority-serving, fully online, and primarily campus-based institutions as well as system offices.

We learned a great deal from those participating and describe this in the following sections of this report. The most rewarding outcome was to see the real and widespread commitment to change and the intentionality in which new challenges are being approached. These leaders demonstrated what it means to be student-centered, yet were forthcoming about what they are still trying to figure out. We heard their call for action. Specifically, we need to work together, sharing what works, to move forward in the ways that best serve students.

There was significant agreement about the increasingly competitive landscape for online education and the fact that our modalities for interacting are not keeping up with the demand for the pace of change. While students have come to expect and demand both flexibility in and quality of online learning, not all institutions want to meet that demand and most are not ready to do so at scale. And without scale, the investments required are likely not sustainable.

Dr. MJ Bishop, Associate Vice Chancellor and Director, William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation, University System of Maryland

Dr. Bishop directs the University System of Maryland's Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation, established in 2013. It conducts research on best practices, disseminates findings, offers professional development for faculty and administrators, and supports the 12 public institutions that are part of the system as they scale academic innovations.

Dr. Aminta H. Breaux, President, Bowie State University

As the visionary 10th president of Bowie State University since July 2017, Dr. Breaux brings more than 30 years of experience to the position. She currently holds various local, regional, and national leadership positions, and is committed to building on the legacy of Maryland's oldest HBCU.

Randall Dawson, Acting President, St. Philip's College (SPC)

Mr. Dawson joined SPC to teach kinesiology before becoming department chair in 2010 and Dean of Arts and Sciences in 2015. Randall became Vice President for Academic Success in 2018 and Acting President in March 2021. He earned a bachelor's degree from Washburn University and a master's degree at Pittsburg State University.

Dr. Gregory W. Fowler, President, University of Maryland Global Campus

Prior to joining UMGC, Dr. Fowler served as President of Southern New Hampshire University Global Campus. He also held senior-level academic and administrative positions at Western Governors University and Hesser College in New Hampshire.

Dr. Yakut Gazi, Associate Dean of Learning Systems, Georgia Tech Professional Education

Dr. Gazi oversees the design, development, delivery, and continuous improvement of credit and non-credit online courses at Georgia Institute of Technology. She is a member of the Quality Matters Academic Advisory Council. Her higher education experience spans over 27 years in four countries.

Dr. Daniel Greenstein, Chancellor, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

Dr. Greenstein serves as chief executive officer of the state's system of 14 public universities, serving 90,000+ degree-seeking students and thousands more enrolled in certificate and other career-development programs. Greenstein previously led the postsecondary success strategy at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He also served as Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Programs for the University of California (UC) system and has led several internet-based academic information services in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Doug Lederman, Editor and Co-Founder, Inside Higher Ed.

Mr. Lederman has won three national awards for education reporting from the Education Writers Association. He previously spent 17 years at The Chronicle of Higher Education and began his career as a news clerk at The New York Times.

Dr. Mark David Milliron, Senior Vice President and Executive Dean of the Teachers College, Western Governors University (WGU)

Dr. Milliron is an award-winning leader, author, speaker and consultant who works with a variety of organizations from universities to government agencies across the globe. In addition to his work with WGU, he helps catalyze positive change in education through his service on the boards and advisory councils of leading-edge education organizations.

Dr. Kara Monroe, Provost and Senior Vice President, Ivy Tech Community College

Dr. Monroe holds a B.S. in Mathematics Education from Ball State University, an MBA from Jones International University, and a Ph.D. in Higher Education Leadership from Capella University. Dr. Monroe's research interests include Creative Problem Solving, needs of adjunct and contingent faculty populations, the use of technology in education, and innovative methods for teaching and learning.

Dr. Heather F. Perfetti, President, Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Over the course of her career, Dr. Perfetti has made an impact in numerous areas of higher education, including academic and student affairs, faculty affairs, legal and regulatory affairs, strategic planning, policy development, and innovative, organizational change management. She joined the Commission in January 2015 and served in positions of increasing responsibility before being named as President-Elect in June 2019.

Dr. Landon K. Pirius, Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, Colorado Community College System

As the Chief Academic Officer for CCCS, Dr. Pirius provides strategic leadership related to all aspects of academic affairs, student affairs, CCCOnline, and institutional research for the system's 13 colleges. Previously, he was the Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs at North Hennepin Community College in Minnesota. He has also served in a variety of leadership roles at Inver Hills Community College, Minnesota State University, Mankato, and Walden University.

Dr. Vernon C. Smith, Provost, American Public University System

Dr. Smith is a pioneer in online courses and programs, as well as an early adopter in the use of big data for predictive modeling to promote student engagement and success.

Thomas Stith, President, North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS)

Prior to his selection as President of NCCCS, he was district director of the U.S. Small Business Administration, where he led the federal agency's \$16 billion response to COVID-19 in North Carolina. Stith served as chief of staff to former Gov. Pat McCrory and was a three-term city council member in Durham.

Dr. Darlene Williams, Vice President for Technology, Innovation, and Economic Development and Associate Professor, Northwestern State University

Dr. Williams also serves as Chair of the Louisiana Board of Regents eLearning Task Force. As a consummate professional educator, she provides leadership in a way that regards faculty and students as the key to Louisiana's future.

Dr. Alison Wrynn, Associate Vice Chancellor, California State University

Dr. Wrynn's work is focused on ensuring compliance with systemwide academic policy, state and federal laws related to higher education, and the university mission. She also provides guidance to Provosts and AVPs of Academic Programs on academic policy matters and questions regarding general education, curriculum development, implementation, and maintenance. She has also held multiple leadership positions in the CSU System and served as a faculty member.

[See full bios of panelists and moderators](#)

Conversation 1: The System's Role in Creating Inclusive Learning

Moderator: Doug Lederman, Editor and Co-Founder, Inside Higher Ed

Panelists: Daniel Greenstein, Chancellor, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

Landon Pirius, Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, Colorado Community College System

Thomas Stith, President, North Carolina Community College System

Alison Wrynn, Associate Vice Chancellor, California State University

The goal of this session was to understand the role college and university systems can play in creating inclusive learning environments that give all students a chance to thrive and succeed. State systems, to varying degrees, have the structures and practices in place to help move the needle collectively for their campuses and their students in ways that would be challenging for unaligned, individual campuses to do on their own. But in the teaching and learning sphere, particularly, cultural norms and faculty authority may limit the system's influence.

The panelists, representing community college and university systems, set the stage for the discussion. This first session represented the broadest, and in some sense the most comprehensive, view of the landscape ahead. Through examples and evidence, the ensuing conversation about the role of the system revolved around the need to serve and support institutions so they can serve and support their communities. How that mandate could be achieved, or needed to be achieved, was a key subject of discussion.

Regardless of the conceptual model offered — systems as an innovation catalyst, vision-setting facilitator, policy-setting change agent, collective voice for advocacy, or network collaboration hub — panelists described the importance of the system in driving collaboration and integration that can play a critically important role in scaling innovation and driving quality. As Dr. Alison Wrynn, Associate Vice Chancellor, California State University, stated “We need to do more to ensure that online education that is going to continue in our system is of the highest quality it possibly can be.” Dr. Wrynn and the other panelists shared what they see as imperatives for the future, the benefits a system can bring and the challenges to maximizing those benefits, and their aspirations for moving forward.

Imperatives for the Future:

- Institutional infrastructure (technology and human capital) investments required to meet evolving student expectations are not affordable in current campus financial models. As Thomas Stith, President, North Carolina Community College System, noted, “You must first have the infrastructure in place to deliver online education.”
- As enrollments decline now and in the future with demographic shifts, doing more with less will require collaborative, cost-sharing models that enable all students in a state to be equally well-served.

Benefits of a System:

- Perspective — Systems bring a broader, more inclusive, and rationalized perspective on the set of unique institutions that make up the system.
- Resources — Systems are better positioned to acquire and leverage various stakeholder resources, especially at the state level. Providing a unified voice for the colleges can enable key external partnerships.

“ We need to do more to ensure that online education that is going to continue in our system is of the highest quality it possibly can be. ”

— Dr. Alison Wrynn, Associate Vice Chancellor, California State University

- Economies of scale — Systems can provide shared services and in other ways leverage the system size to reduce costs for campuses.

Challenges for the System Role:

- “Us vs. Them” mentality and ingrained culture — System leadership is often, and traditionally, seen as synonymous with centralization and control and in opposition to a decentralized model that supports and respects institutional control.
- System structures — The way state systems are structured, varying significantly by type of governance and decision-making purview as well as the role of system CEO, can pose barriers to driving innovation across campuses.

Aspirations:

- Address fixed-pie assumptions by overtly demonstrating respect and support of individual campuses.
- Create collaborative and collegial opportunities to negotiate needs for customization and decentralization vs centralization vs integration.
- Align institutions and make them accountable for one another rather than, or as well as, to the system office.

“ Statewide workforce partners don’t want to work with 13 different colleges — they want to work with one. ”

— Dr. Landon K. Pirius, Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, Colorado Community College System

Small Group Conversations

The conversations in the breakout rooms revolved around the job to be done in higher education, how we can approach it, and the challenges of doing so. Student expectations for flexibility and quality, the requirements to be able to meet those expectations, and the economics of doing so at scale were topics around which there was strong consensus across the breakout groups. Rationalizing programs across systems is one challenge and another is rationalizing the learning modalities provided to students. When is it important for students to be together synchronously — on-campus or virtually — and when is asynchronous a better fit for both the learning experience and student expectations?

Discussion revolved around the increasingly competitive landscape for online education and the fact that our modalities for interacting are not keeping up with the demand for the pace of change. While students have come to expect and demand both flexibility in and quality of online learning, not all institutions want to meet that demand and most are not ready to do so at scale. And without scale, the investments required are likely not sustainable.

Federal stimulus funding can help institutions start to move forward, but if it’s not used to advance towards a more digital future, institutions will regress. The system perspective in rationalizing resource investments and their ability to achieve economies of scale across institutions can be critical to institutional success but such conversations are hard to hold and harder to find agreement among seemingly competing interests and perspectives. Who are the right people to involve and how do you have the conversation? There was also recognition that other external stakeholders (e.g., institutional and programmatic accreditors and workforce partners) play an important role in how institutions work independently, and with systems, to move forward in meeting student expectations.

Observations

Institutional strategic plans post-pandemic include a dual focus on digital quality and access that promote student success and completion. These plans are unlikely to be scalable or sustainable across all programs by institutions operating on their own. **In an increasingly competitive market, differentiation is both critical and costly.**

“ Competition in higher education is hard.I think the most important thing to address is how to rationalize academic programs offered across the system ...what should be offered and taught where, how delivered, and by whom? And how do we leverage technology and other assets so that students anywhere in the system can access any programming at any time. ”

— Dr. Daniel Greenstein, Chancellor, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

- The conversations reflect what we learned in our [Changing Landscape of Online Education \(CHLOE 6\) Survey](#). Institutions are shifting priorities to better serve students who expect more flexibility in delivery modality and meet the increased demand for online education. The survey showed 57% of institutions across all sectors are reevaluating their strategic priorities relative to the role of online learning, with most citing plans to expand online course and program options. Others are aiming to provide more flexibility to students via various modes of instruction.

This survey is consistent with others in the field that suggest a majority of institutions are planning to design and deliver more online programs with a focus on improving quality and prioritized support for online students. These widely shared institutional priorities raise the very concerns expressed in the small group conversations — that the market is not projected to support the necessary investments within individual institutions. For most institutions, competition for students is local or regional — even online. Some [studies show](#) that a majority of students enroll within 50 miles of home and recent student survey data indicates that the pandemic experience might increase this preference. **The investments in quality required to compete for the same students in the same or similar programs will not be supportable. More collaborative and integrated approaches to serving students within state or regional markets will be needed but those conversations are very difficult to have and even more difficult to find a framework to reach consensus.**

QM shares some of the challenges and opportunities of higher education systems.

- Like systems, QM has a broad and varied constituency, requiring balance between customization and consistent, shared experience. Determining where to draw the line between what institutions need to customize QM to their own contexts and the key benchmarks and goals that need to be held constant for all in order to drive positive change is an ongoing challenge. Some of the system’s institutions can indeed “build a better mousetrap” but doing so often undermines the ability of the entire system to move forward.
- Institutions that have joined QM as part of a system vary in the extent they make use of the system network for collaboration. Almost half of QM’s 1200 U.S. higher education member institutions engage with us as a part of a system. Some only take advantage of the reduced membership fees that are afforded through a system membership but otherwise work independently. In contrast, those institutions that work collaboratively within and across their higher education system in QM implementation — sharing costs and resources — are achieving greater quality outcomes at a lower cost. This speaks to the efficacy of inter-institutional collaboration within a system, around a common or shared framework.
- Also similar is QM’s efficacy as a boundary-spanning external resource useful in delivering comparative evaluation. **Our experience is that if institutions can agree on common goals for what students need and a basic decision-making framework (e.g., a Rubric), having an entity that shares the goals and consistently applies the framework is at least defensible to, if not appreciated by, internal stakeholders. Everyone is held accountable to the same agreed-upon standard. It’s a politically and practically expedient way to have a tough conversation. Having such an entity that can also leverage financial resources, such as a higher education system, can be a game-changer.**

Conversation 2: Engaging and Rigorous Learning

Moderator: MJ Bishop, Associate Vice Chancellor and Director, William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation, University System of Maryland

Panelists: Aminta Breaux, President, Bowie State University
Mark David Milliron, Senior Vice President and Executive Dean of the Teachers College, Western Governors University
Vernon C. Smith, Provost, American Public University System
Darlene Williams, Vice President for Technology, Innovation, and Economic Development and Associate Professor, Northwestern State University

This discussion was framed around a definition of engaging and rigorous learning that asked us to consider how we:

1. Reach the students we have without presupposing who our students should be.
2. Value the experiences/prior knowledge learners come with instead of assuming everyone is coming in with a “blank slate.”
3. Help learners articulate their educational goals and avoid exclusively defining student success for learners as degree completion.
4. Connect the dots between school and career rather than give minimal attention to career support and curricular cohesion.
5. Provide relevant learning opportunities that are explicitly co-curricular as well as curricular instead of implicitly communicating that learning stops outside the classroom.
6. Measure what learners know and are able to do rather than measure content recall.
7. Communicate to stakeholders the competencies learners acquired rather than what was taught.

Panelists were asked about the kinds of things their institutions are engaged in to become more student-centered and to move forward for the future, especially as we are advancing our thinking around structural racism and other barriers that impact student success. The responses were appropriately unique to the institution, their missions and student body, and the intersection with key stakeholder groups. At the institution level, a student-centered focus clearly meant thinking deeply about the needs of their students throughout the pandemic as well as what an increasing digital future will both enable and require.

For **Western Governors University’s (WGU) Teachers College**, it meant a deep-dive, design-thinking initiative to redesign the experience for large numbers of learners in previously on-ground clinical placements. Since WGU’s program is mapped to teacher licensure in all fifty states, they had to individualize plans for clinical placement and fieldwork to meet state requirements in each state. They also used technology (e.g., virtual reality) to provide learners with critical experiences, particularly focused on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Social Emotional Learning contexts, which were not available to them even before the pandemic pivot. **WGU’s approach was to leverage design thinking to reimagine their program as not simply a collection of classes, but as Dr. Mark Milliron, Senior Vice President and Executive Dean of the Teachers College, Western Governors University suggested, “a family of experiences from your first through final experiences with that student.”** According to Dr. Milliron, “This re-imagination work helped us to survive and thrive, and we’re not going back...

“ A way forward is to leverage design thinking to design experiences where you up the quality and make it sustainable. ”

— Dr. Mark David Milliron, Senior Vice President and Executive Dean of the Teachers College, Western Governors University (WGU)

A way forward is to leverage design thinking to design experiences where you up the quality and make it sustainable.”

Bowie State University (BSU), the first historically Black university in Maryland, faced two crises simultaneously — the pandemic and the social injustice in the country. **The university was challenged to find ways to enact its familial and nurturing culture — “a hugging campus” — in a virtual environment**, while maintaining a smaller number of critical in-person experiences on campus. Their approach relied heavily on communication to ensure connection, transparency, and engagement as well as technology to encourage students to deepen their knowledge through experiential learning. These are all changes that BSU will build on. “We’re not going back to where we were pre-pandemic,” stated Dr. Aminta Breaux, President of Bowie State University, “and instead will use these new experiences to springboard forward. It’s important to stay true to your values and institutional mission, especially when there is so much uncertainty. That helped us stay strong as a community..”

For **Northwestern State University**, a relatively rural university, supporting their students included working closely with business and industry stakeholders to ensure students know how to apply their academic knowledge to the workplace. In this case, **the university has stepped into the role of a boundary spanner to connect academic work and employer needs, creating an increasingly important bridge that provides students with opportunities to apply what they are learning to their job.** This work required not just a rethinking of the curriculum — both technical and “soft” people skills — but also the intentional development of experiential opportunities to advance student learning and their employability. The deployment of critical feedback mechanisms and other metrics helps the university continue to evolve its efforts. “It takes all of us to identify what type of strategic change is necessary,” shared Dr. Darlene Williams, Vice President for Technology, Innovation, and Economic Development and Associate Professor, Northwestern State University. “As a system, we need to establish and understand benchmarks so we know the goals we are working towards.”

For the **American Public University System**, historically a military-serving institution, their focus has long been on the adult student and acknowledging prior learning. During the discussion, Dr. Vernon C. Smith, the university’s provost, highlighted the importance of “respect and belonging and inclusion ...for a diversity of experiences and lives.” **Critical for their learner community is recognition of where the students are, what they bring to the table, and recognizing and translating awarded credit and credentials into meaningful pathways.** This all supports that institution’s explicit recognition that learning happens outside of the classroom as well as within it.

The panelists discussed various ways in which their institutions seek to create, provide credit for, and/or validate learning experiences that happen outside the classroom. These included techniques such as competency-based, non-credit opportunities for demonstrating knowledge and skills; authentic assessment; experiential learning experiences that include co-curricular, work, volunteer, life, etc.; and helping students demonstrate knowledge and skills through student-developed portfolios and expanded, competency-focused transcripts. They noted the need to develop a culture that embraces the validity of learning outside the classroom to ensure the adoption and success of such techniques.

Small Group Conversations

The conversations in the breakout rooms focused on two major topics: 1) what it takes to create and/or improve better student engagement, in ways consistent with institutional culture and mission, and how student assessment practices can impact

“ It takes all of us to identify what type of strategic change is necessary. ”

— Dr. Darlene Williams, Vice President for Technology, Innovation, and Economic Development and Associate Professor, Northwestern State University

this; and 2) the challenges with creating and/or credentialing co-curricular learning opportunities. Throughout the discussion, the critical role of faculty as well as the need to be student-centered in approaches were emphasized.

The discussion about student engagement in online learning reflected institution-customized approaches, the important role of faculty in student engagement, how academic integrity software can work against student affect and engagement, and how course design (many QM Standards support engagement) can positively impact engagement. Some caution was expressed about how we evaluate our success in this area. **We should be disaggregating our student and faculty feedback — unpacking this data — to ensure we are serving everyone and that overall positive satisfaction rates and outcome data don't disguise student populations we aren't serving as well.** In other conversations, many participants recognized the imperative for, but identified the specific challenges of, designing, supporting, and assessing experiential and co-curricular learning. Some experiential opportunities may be institution or program-specific but we need a process to evaluate and credential that can be scaled across the institution.

Observations

- Improving our ability to provide engaging and rigorous learning requires customized, institution-specific approaches for the same reasons that our ability to scale solutions for online student support encourages the involvement of higher education systems. It's about targeting and deploying the most impactful expertise and/or set of resources required to solve the problem. A design-thinking approach to student needs works best when there are specific students and contexts in mind. Whereas, solutions that need to be scaled for efficacy require a boundary-spanning perspective.
- Faculty, and how they communicate and engage with students, can make a significant difference to the connectedness and engagement that students feel. **The transition to a more digital future may change the faculty role and how it is executed but the criticality of the faculty-student relationship remains. Faculty remain the human face of learning even, or especially, in a technology-mediated classroom.**
- Redesigning the student experience for a more digital future doesn't just mean moving courses online. It requires rethinking programs as a "family of learning experiences" and being intentional about the context in which the learning occurs.
- Engagement and rigor aren't just classroom concepts — whether online or on ground. **If we are thinking about the whole student and a more holistic approach to education, then we need to figure out how to assess student engagement in all forms of learning.**
- How we measure student success should be inclusive of a diversity of outcomes and assessed for all types of learners. **At QM, we are trying to lean into the concept that it isn't quality unless it is quality for all.** Student learning, feedback, and outcomes data need to be disaggregated into different student populations to better understand and improve differential impacts.

Conversation 3: Rethinking Quality in a Competitive Landscape

- Moderator:** Yakut Gazi, Associate Dean of Learning Systems, Georgia Tech Professional Education
- Panelists:** Gregory Fowler, President, University of Maryland Global Campus
Kara Monroe, Provost and Senior Vice President, Ivy Tech Community College
Heather Perfetti, President, Middle States Commission on Higher Education
Randall Dawson, Acting President, St. Philip's College

“ You now see the phrase ‘regardless of modality’ throughout our standards, and institutions are leveraging their work with QM as one mechanism to show the tie back to meeting accreditation standards. ”

— Dr. Heather F. Perfetti, President, Middle States Commission on Higher Education

In this session, we explored how institutions that have engaged heavily or broadly in QM were thinking about quality and how they should be defining, pursuing, and scaling quality (including and beyond) QM initiatives in the future. We invited leaders from institutions that have already begun to think more widely in terms of quality and know that scaling quality isn't as simple as taking a practice that works in one small unit and replicating it elsewhere — that **scaling quality requires rethinking the structures and policies that drive quality**. We also wanted to know how quality is being perceived and driven by key stakeholders and external expectations in a changing landscape.

Panelists discussed their thoughts on quality at scale by describing the way their institutions think about the ecosystems across which they work. Increasing access and quality, or increasing access with quality, requires a shared understanding and acceptance of goals by the stakeholders or partners in the work. The **iron triangle** of access, quality, and cost can be at least flexed, if not broken, by being intentional. This can be accomplished with shared vision, mission, and specific goals, identifying the metrics that matter most, measuring them appropriately, and acting on them in ways inclusive of diverse learner populations. **Achieving this at scale is a challenge for several reasons, including the need to ensure all the actors in the ecosystem share the solutions as much as they share the vision.** Solutions can be targeted. For example, providing free textbooks and/or [open educational resources](#) to students to create equal access to a critical tool at the start of class or implementing inclusive methodologies for learning assessment of prior and co-curricular learnings. Executed at scale, these solutions flex the **iron triangle** to improve quality while expanding access.

Accreditors can support this work by setting quality standards that provide flexibility and support innovation. With most institutions pivoting to online during the pandemic, and adding distance education to the scope of their accreditation, they need leeway to address the challenges but also to embrace and extend the faculty and institutional learning that happened. The role played by teaching and learning centers and the increased attention to faculty professional development are key. We need to stay focused on conversations that allow us to evaluate and assess quality. Importantly, panelists underlined the difference in quality in Emergency Remote Learning (ERL) and pre-planned and purposely-designed online learning. **Students aren't interested in repeating the ERL experience and institutions will need to align with an existing quality framework or create one to make clear that the ERL experience will not be the norm going forward.**

Small Group Conversations

All breakout conversations addressed the topic of quality at scale, albeit with different foci for the challenges and opportunities of doing so. The first room discussed deliberate ways to build community. These included ensuring faculty engagement,

using language approachable to all students, and meeting students where they are. Most of the conversation revolved around the importance of instructional designers in this work for digital learning. The efficacy and relative scarcity of instructional designers is a challenge in scaling quality courses and the conversation focused on addressing this challenge.

In the next breakout room, the focus was on breaking the **iron triangle** through the broad use of open educational resources to drive down student costs and to scale access to quality courses through the use of Master Courses or courses built on templates aligned with Quality Matters. **“If faculty help to build the Master Course as a community, they will have buy-in,”** shared Smith. **“I call that collegial production. Or collegial online course production. Collegial production is the beginning of scalability versus an individual faculty craft production model.”**

The third breakout room focused on Middle States Commission on Higher Education’s perspective on the role of accreditors in supporting the move to online learning, ways institutions maintained and demonstrated quality (including the way they leveraged their work with QM), and the critical need to provide student support. A number of the participants provided examples of the types of student support that were needed and identified the challenge of providing this at scale. They highlighted the growing need for after-hours support and service on-demand but indicated that tracking students and providing personalized support at scale requires investment and deployment of AI-powered tools like chatbots and commercial customer relationship management software like Salesforce.

Finally, the last breakout room discussed competition, student success, and scale. Institutions need to identify and focus on their desired online profile in ways that address the needs of the students in the institutions’ markets. When institutions serve the same or similar markets, they can’t avoid competing with one another. **“We compete with all San Antonio area public colleges and universities,”** noted Randall Dawson, Acting President, St. Philip’s College.

Student support and professional development provided at scale is a big challenge, as is ensuring the efficacy of the investment and effectiveness of the impact. Evaluating success, including student feedback, of initiatives is important for making future improvements.

Observations

- Cutting across all conversations, student support was identified as an imperative for success. If we want to ensure quality and access at scale, we have to be intentional in designing digital learning experiences with the kinds of support required for **all** the learners we serve.
- The **iron triangle** can be manipulated, if not broken, if we work together on ways to scale initiatives that increase student access or lower their costs and increase quality. It will require solutions that are broadly accepted across an institution’s ecosystem and that engage faculty in new or different ways.
- We heard about the need to rethink how we design and develop learning – the materials, tools, and platforms we use; the ways we evaluate whether and what learning has occurred; and the ways we support students in more inclusive and holistic approaches. The challenges to institutional culture, structure, and tradition codified in policy will need to be addressed.
- There was little interest in addressing the issue of institutional competition, as most participants recognized that meeting the outlined challenges will require increased collaboration. That being said, the approaching fiscal and demographic realities need to be recognized. **As budgets shrink and the looming enrollment cliff threatens to decimate our current revenue streams, institutions will need to hone their identity and the way they differentiate it based on those realities. Doing so may enable them to be more strategic about with whom they collaborate and on what.**

“ Collegial production is the beginning of scalability versus an individual faculty craft production model. ”

— Dr. Vernon C. Smith, Provost,
American Public University System

Where Do We Go Next?

If there is no going back, and the way forward is advanced by collaboration, our next steps should explore how we do that. **“It is up to us to figure out the solutions and share best practices. Don’t assume everyone of us going through this new normal has everything figured out. We have never done this before,”** emphasized Dr. Aminta Breaux, President, Bowie State University. **“To the extent that we could share information and support each other, it will help us make great progress as we are still facing so much uncertainty as we prepare for the next academic year.”**

We identified a set of topics elevated in this convening that warrant further discussion to collaboratively develop solutions. As Dr. Kara Monroe, Provost and Senior Vice President, Ivy Tech Community College, so eloquently stated, **“Far too often we assume we’re all unique, when we’re really all trying to solve the same problem.”** Here are some of those challenges:

- Promoting, and appropriately supporting, program differentiation rather than competing against each other with identical programs, trying to reach the same students.
- Credentialing co-curricular learning opportunities and adopting Prior Learning Assessment processes in ways that can be scaled.
- Developing data discipline that encourages us to disaggregate data on student learning, feedback, and outcomes into different student populations to better understand and improve differential impacts of our initiatives.
- Addressing the relative scarcity of instructional designers and increasing the awareness of their instrumentality in scaling quality courses.
- Improving scalability through the use of Master Courses (i.e. online courses replicated for teaching by different faculty) developed using a quality framework with faculty participation.
- Identifying and addressing the structural and cultural changes necessary to deliver at scale the student support that is critical for digital learning.

In keeping with our commitment to translate our discovery into actionable and adaptable tools and processes, we offer the following as a QM plan of action:

- Hosting “next step” conversations.
- Creating action research opportunities and tools to encourage data collection, disaggregation, and use in quality improvement towards inclusive excellence and equity in outcomes.
- Encouraging approaches to scaling student support, including support through appropriately prepared faculty and through QM Program Certification for online learner support, teaching support, and learner success.
- Providing more explicit support for a “collegial production” model for Master Courses and template courses.
- Engaging the QM Instructional Designers Association in awareness and advocacy for the role of instructional designers in scaling quality online learning.
- Supporting innovation by working more closely with accreditors and other regulatory bodies to align and recognize quality in online education.

We sincerely appreciate the time and contributions of all who participated in the Summit. The ideas, initiatives, and challenges shared have deepened our understanding of the issues higher education institutions face in advancing quality to meet new expectations. We have also identified one critical solution — collaboration — and look forward to continuing to work together to best meet the evolving needs of students today, tomorrow, and in the future.

“ When students start to struggle, is this institution prepared to support them and their needs, in this online/virtual state? It’s not the content -- it’s about the support of mentors, coaches, advisors, etc. Do we have these pieces in place when they start to struggle? ”

— Dr. Gregory W. Fowler, President,
University of Maryland Global Campus

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