Improving Student Activity in Quality

Proposal for change looks to enhance student involvement in ASQ

by Armen Ilikchyan and John W. Sinn

Founded in 1998, the ASQ student branch at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio is a student organization dedicated to uniting and educating students from different disciplines interested in the professional area of quality.[1] In addition to BGSU, the branch also was designed to serve students from two neighboring community colleges—Owens Community College and Terre Community College—although it has long served many students who transferred from various other two-year community colleges throughout Ohio and beyond.[2]

The branch, a registered student organization at BGSU housed in the department of engineering technology (DET) and the department of applied statistics and operations research (ASOR)[3], operates under its own annually elected leadership and is sponsored by the ASQ Toledo Section, which offers educational, advisory and financial support to the branch. Each year the senior section provides an allowance to cover some expenses and scholarships to support the student members. Faculty members at BGSU and the colleges also support the branch as advisors. When the branch was formed, it was one of the first ASQ branches and student organizations to be integrated with two-year community colleges.

Since its founding, the branch has hosted various events, usually monthly or bimonthly, targeted toward educating students and promoting quality.[4] Over the years, the members have attended regional and national meetings, and participated in industry-sponsored projects. But it has remained a challenge for the last several years to grow the branch's membership and remain viable. The apparent slowdown in attracting and sustaining new and existing members has been a struggle, similar to what many professional student groups face.[5]

Recently, an opportunity to improve the activity of the student branch was realized following the success of courses and programs offered by the DET and ASOR related to the

quality discipline. The newly implemented and rapidly growing quality systems (QS) undergraduate major[6] and graduate certificate programs in the DET at BGSU, with all courses online, offer potential for change. While not without challenges,[7, 8] online programs offer an expanding area of influence for the field of quality, and rapid advancement of the internet and web-based instructional technologies form an extremely fertile base for developing a web-based student organization in quality.[9]

The proposal

To address the opportunity for improvement within the ASQ student branch at BGSU, a proposal for change was developed and distributed to the executive board members of the ASQ Toledo Section. The proposal was met with unanimously positive feedback from the members, who discussed it during one of the regular executive board meetings in April 2012. Most of the proposed ideas were supported and acted on. Particularly, three major objectives were identified as needing attention:

1. Build a web-based ASQ student community.

2. Simplify student membership registration process.

3. Expand connections between students and practicing quality professionals.

As a follow-up discussion and a test of concept, a web-based meeting with the board members was scheduled in June. Blackboard Collaborate,[10] a web-conferencing tool formerly known as Elluminate Live, was selected as the platform for the virtual meeting following the results of a student-based project for improving the electronic infrastructure of the Quality Systems Educational Collaboration[11] at BGSU. The platform provides voice and video communication over the internet along with the ability to share desktop applications such as MS PowerPoint and an internet browser. Prior to the scheduled meeting, Blackboard Collaborate was successfully used several times to host online class meetings in a couple of QS courses during the spring 2012 semester.

The majority of the executive board members attended the web-based meeting in June. The discussion mainly focused on simplifying the membership registration process for students, and expanding connections between students and practicing quality professionals by building a community webpage. Consequently, a preliminary action plan was developed to begin improving the student branch at BGSU and the connection between the branch and the local senior section in Toledo. A detailed description of the plan and the following implementation results will be reported in a follow-up article. That article also will include results from a group of undergraduate students applying lean Six Sigma tools to improve the ASQ student branch. The project was conducted during the summer 2012 semester as part of the synchronous quality planning course at BGSU.

The remainder of this article outlines ways—as identified during the meetings with the ASQ Toledo Section—the ASQ BGSU Student Branch can become a new model for engaging students and others. Based on the continued support from the ASQ Toledo Section and faculty members at BGSU, it is believed the branch can continue to be transformed into an active, modern and attractive web-based community for future quality professionals. A set of objectives follows as the start of a plan. These objectives are essential to continue improving the BGSU Student Branch as a model system that holds much promise for other branches throughout the country, and could provide ways to improve section performance.

The objectives

Each of the three objectives provided as the main focus of work to be done at the BGSU Student Branch offers a unique potential improvement.

1. Build a web-based ASQ student community. All QS courses and certificate programs at BGSU are web-based. Most students in the program are nontraditional students from U.S. territories, including military bases. A web-based community is needed to allow QS students to access the student branch materials, communicate and collaborate with other members, and participate in various branch activities. This will be accomplished through four steps or actions:

1. Build an easy-to-maintain website.
2. Keep materials on the website up to date.
3. Embed electronic communication and collaboration tools in the website.
4. Ensure the branch maintains an active presence in social networks.

Steps one and two are critical because student organizations function based on student volunteers—thus ease of maintenance is a key requirement. Materials to be included on the website are the charter, membership and recruitment information, and annual program planning for events and functions.

Step three is important because one of the main reasons for the electronic emphasis is to serve both students on campus and those at a distance. Appropriate communication and collaboration tools would be required to enable email, chats, news postings and video streaming from presentations. Bullet 4 is intended to provide a strong social presence and functions for all because this is an important part of all student organizations. Essentially, the goal is to construct and implement electronic systems that enable students from afar to experience the student organization similar to what is offered for students on campus.

2. To simplify the registration process. The current procedure for registering a new student member with the ASQ BGSU Student Branch consists of the following steps performed by the student, the advisor and the Toledo Section:

1. Student downloads or obtains the application form from branch advisor or branch leadership.
2. Student prints the form if downloaded.
3. Student fills out membership form.
4. Student or branch leadership scans and digitizes the paper application.
5. Student or branch leadership emails the digitized application to the branch advisor.
6. Advisor signs the Toledo Section check request form (to cover the first year membership fee).

7. Advisor emails the check request form, along with the digitized application, to the ASQ Toledo Section treasurer.
8. Treasurer writes the check, and sends it and the application to ASQ headquarters.
9. Three to four weeks later, the student receives a membership card indicating successful registration.

These steps have proven to be a distraction to all and an impediment to effective student recruitment. One of the main reasons the steps are the way they are is because the Toledo Section supports the student member for their first year of membership, and steps six through eight are currently necessary to accomplish this. We recommend changing this process, following a simplified alternative that involves the student:

1. Navigating to the ASQ homepage.[12]
2. Completing the electronic application for student member.
3. Paying the membership fee.

The alternative approach to registering a new student member is much simpler and faster. But it deprives the student of taking advantage of the free first-year membership, which is supported by the Toledo Section currently. The student, of course, still can request a reimbursement for the membership fee payment, but the process then becomes complicated and less doable.

Therefore, to keep the registration process as simple as possible and allow the student to take advantage of the paid first-year membership, a special arrangement should be considered between the ASQ Toledo Section and ASQ headquarters:

- The first-year membership fee is automatically waived as the student registers on the ASQ website.
- The ASQ Toledo Section pays the fee after the fact based on the number of registered new student members.

This alternative registration process would exclude the student entirely from the financial transactions between ASQ Toledo Section and ASQ headquarters, thus reducing the required registration steps.

3. Expand connections between students and practicing quality professionals. A professional opinion is extremely important to any student. Universities and colleges provide students with fundamental knowledge in their fields of interest, but only by communicating with industry professionals can students fully understand all aspects of their future career.[13] Currently, a connection between QS students at BGSU and practicing quality professionals exists through the ASQ Toledo Section and ASQ BGSU Student Branch. This connection mainly occurs when students visit events organized by the Toledo Section, such as monthly dinner meetings. But the connection is infrequent and is limited to students located in the Toledo area. To expand this important connection, the following should be considered:

- **Build an online communication infrastructure that connects ASQ student members directly with practicing quality professionals in the Toledo area.** This can be done by the ASQ Toledo Section in the form of a webpage (part of http://www.toledo-asq.org) that lists profiles of quality professionals who agree to have that information displayed. Each profile could include the name, contact information, short biography and list of professional interests.[14] Students can visit the webpage to review the profiles, ask questions via email, request assessment of their resumes and portfolios, and seek co-op opportunities.

- **Form a committee of practicing quality professionals for assessing students' projects.** Most of the current QS courses at BGSU are project-based. Throughout a semester, students are working in teams on a project, applying various lean Six Sigma tools. When the project is completed, each team generates a final report or model system, and submits it to the instructor as a portfolio of accumulated work by individuals in teams.[15] At this point, the report also can be submitted to a committee of practicing quality professionals, specifically formed for assessing students' work. Their feedback could then be distributed back to students independently from the instructors' feedback.

- **Arrange regular student presentations during ASQ Toledo Section meetings, and perhaps at regional and national quality congresses and meetings.** Although students have occasionally been invited to present their work during past section dinner meetings, this should be a more regular event. A system should be designed to allow remote students to do presentations via teleconferencing, and the same should be considered as part of regional and national ASQ events.

It must be noted that much of the electronic infrastructure identified in the proposal is pivotal to accommodating broader professional connections in the future.

The future

Student branches, like most student organizations, are challenged in many ways and many may not be achieving total success. In addition, university campuses and education systems of all levels and types are currently experiencing a variety of changes and will continue to in the future.

This proposal has outlined several recommendations for consideration at the branch, section and national levels as a way to strengthen the branch and the future of ASQ. The recommendations have been discussed with Toledo Section leaders over the past several months, and many of the recommendations are being considered and acted on by the section members, BGSU faculty and students. These recommendations could be part of establishing a model for running student branches in the future. Stay tuned for a follow-up article reporting the implementation and progress of the proposed ideas.

References and Notes

1. John W. Sinn, "Education and the Future of Quality," *Quality Progress*, July 2002, pp. 69-73.
2. George MacRitchie and John W. Sinn, "The 2+2 Enhancements Process," *Quality Progress*, January 1998, pp. 55-58.
3. ASQ Bowling Green State University Student Branch, *ASQ Student Branch Constitution*.

4. Examples of the student branch past activities are available at www.bgsu.edu/colleges/technology/faculty/sinn/ASQ%20page.htm (case sensitive).

5. Interview with Sherri Orwick Ogden, Enrollment Services Manager in the College of Technology at BGSU, July 25, 2012.

6. The new online QS undergraduate major is a degree completion program designed expressly for science, technology, engineering and mathematics associate degree holders. This has become quite popular with the Community College of the Air Force attracting approximately 40 majors since its launch in the 2010-2011 school year.

7. More information about quality systems graduate certificate is available at http://cobl.bgsu.edu/programs/qs_certificate/index.php.

8. More information about quality systems 2+2 online bachelor's degree completion program is available at http://cobl.bgsu.edu/programs/qual_systems/index.php.

9. John W. Sinn, "A Quality Major," *Quality Progress*, October 2002, pp. 24-29.

10. More information about Blackboard Collaborate is available at www.blackboard.com/platforms/collaborate/products/blackboard-collaborate/web-conferencing.aspx.

11. The Quality Systems Educational Collaboration is explained at www.bgsu.edu/colleges/technology/faculty/sinn/FAQ's%20BGSU%20QSEC%2011-4-09.pdf (case sensitive).

12. ASQ student membership registration page can be accessed at http://asq.org/membership/individuals/student.html.

13. ASQ Toledo Section executive board meeting, April 5, 2012.

14. Example of a webpage containing online profiles can be seen at www.bgsu.edu/colleges/technology/fac_staff_dir/page43219.html.

15. Examples of students' quality systems project portfolios are available at www.bgsu.edu/colleges/technology/faculty/sinn/studentpro.htm.

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