Benchmarking in Higher Education

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What Is Benchmarking? Definitions Vary Depending On Perspective

Innovation – comparing to provide new insights to inspire and motivate useful and profound change.

Above all benchmarking is a process of comparison.

Types of Benchmarking

Two Typologies:

1) General (Yarrow & Prabhu, 1999), continued
   - Diagnostic Benchmarking
     - A “health check”
     - Characterizes an organization’s performance status
     - Identify areas for improvement
     - Performance benchmarking can be the first stage of Diagnostic Benchmarking (CCSSE & CSEQ)
Types of Benchmarking

1) General (Yarrow & Prabhu, 1999), continued
   - Process Benchmarking
     - Most expensive and time consuming
     - In-depth comparison of specific core practices at two or more institutions
     - Identification of “best practices” in an “aspirational peer” to develop specific improvement strategies

2) Higher Education (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996)
   - Internal
     - Making comparisons between units within the institution
   - Generic
     - Making comparisons between institutions that share similar organizational practices and procedures (e.g., NCCBP, Kansas Study)
   - Competitive
     - Making comparisons between institutions that are direct competitors (may or may not be similar e.g., JCCC & DeVry, Brown Mackie, etc.)

The Difference Between Benchmarking & Benchmarks

- A process of comparing quantitative indicators of activities, functions, & operations.
  - Graduation rates
  - Costs per credit hour
  - Fall-to-fall retention
- Emphasis is on the activities involved in compiling comparative data and discussing findings internally to assist an institution in evaluating its own performance compared to that of peers.

Benchmark – A metric or standard; the actual measurements/data collected to carry out benchmarking. Benchmarks may be:
- A threshold or minimum acceptable standard
- Aspirational; a goal an institution wants to achieve
- A definition of the norm – e.g., the average of peer institutions on a given measure

All of which may assist in institutional improvement.

Limitations of Benchmarks & Benchmarking

Two Categories of Limitations:
1) Limitations of Data/Technical Limitations

2) Limitations of Culture: Individual Colleges and Community Colleges as a Whole
Limitations of Data

1) Data definitions and standards
   - Significant misinterpretations can be made if data definitions and standards are not the same across comparing institutions
   - Two challenges
     - A clear data element definition
     - Consistent collection and coding of raw data to align with the definition

2) Differential State Funding Formulas
   - States vary in the ways community colleges are funded
     - Majority from local sources
     - Majority or all from the state
     - Combination
     - Sometimes these variations exist within a state – KS for example
   - Differential funding by discipline
   - Funding issues may be an important consideration when selecting institutions for peer comparisons

3) Statewide contracts & regulations that limit institutional flexibility
   - Statewide faculty contracts (MN & MA)
     - Limit institution’s ability to set salaries, benefits, & workloads
     - Implications for the KS Study
   - Some statewide regulations might actually strengthen value of benchmarks – same placement test & cutoff scores would make comparisons of students’ performance in remedial & first college level courses more meaningful (in-state)
     - Implications for NCCBP in SUNY colleges

4) Comparison of Instructional Costs
   - Collective bargaining agreements
   - Salary placement factors
   - Factors used to determine raises
   - Geographic differences
   - Instruction by full-time vs. adjunct faculty
   - Budgeting policies and practices
   - Implications for KS Study

   All of these factors must be considered when comparing instructional costs

5) Measuring Success
   - Course Level
     - Passing grade
     - A, B, or C
   - Graduation Rates
     - Limitations of the IPEDS cohort
   - Transfer Rates
     - Definition of the Denominator/who’s in the cohort
Limitations of Data

5) Measuring Success, Continued
- Remedial/Developmental Ed.
  - Success in dev. courses/sequence
  - Matriculation in college-level courses
  - Success in college-level courses
  - Program completion/transfer
- To successfully benchmark student success it is critical that data definitions be clear, unambiguous, and agreed upon by participants.
  - AND –
  - That data are collected and reported in accordance with those definitions

Limitations of Culture

1) Willingness/Ability to Adopt or Adapt Processes From Another Institution
- Faculty & staff must be willing to take an honest hard look at organizational structures, policies & practices
  - May be entrenched
  - May be well-intended
  - May involve long-time faculty & staff
- Overcoming resistance to change/inertia
- Influence of politics/internal alliances
- Spare the messenger

2) Accepting Surprises
- Be willing to challenge Institutional “truths”
  - Evolved over time and become widely accepted
  - May (or may not) have accurately depicted reality in the past
  - Usually unexamined (purposefully or not)

3) Examining the New
- Often colleges have not examined themselves in certain areas, particularly in comparison with other institutions
  - Resource limitations
  - "never came up"
- Achieving the dream colleges are required to examine achievement differences among racial/ethnic groups
  - Some had never done so
  - Each participating institution now has the potential to compare its students’ achievement with other institutions in the initiative

4) Reporting Rather Than Responding
- Enthusiasm for benchmarking may end at the reporting stage
  - More often the case when benchmarking is externally driven
  - Or when there's a need to demonstrate data-based decision making (e.g. reaccreditation self-study), whether it's actually occurring or not!
- For benchmarking to be really effective it needs to be carried out in the context of an ongoing continuous quality improvement effort (measure → make changes to improve → re-measure)

5) Uniqueness and Local Nature of Community Colleges
- Community colleges are expected to respond to local community needs and characteristics
  - Can lead to resistance to benchmarking because "nobody else is like us"
Limitations of Culture

6) No demand for comparative ranking to attract students
   - Many four-year colleges & universities compete for the same students
     - This facilitated the development of national ranking schemes (U.S. News & Peterson’s Guide; national data set)
     - Thus easier for four-year institutions to accept regional/national data sharing consortia
   - Not the case for community colleges
     - Thus we don't have a "culture" or tradition of this type of activity
     - Makes it more difficult to persuade colleges of the advantages and value of benchmarking

Examples of Higher Education Benchmarking Tools

- The **ACT Student Opinion Surveys** include multiple surveys designed specifically for two-year colleges. There are surveys for target populations including adult learners, entering students, alumni, and non-returning students. ACT also offers surveys that assess opinions about specific college services such as academic advising or financial aid.

- The **Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)** measures the extent to which students in community colleges are engaged in the life of the campus. CCSSE has identified five benchmarks, each including a cluster of individual items, which are major indicators of the colleges’ success in engaging its students.

- **Noel-Levitz** offers a variety of surveys with multiple scales for assessing the perceptions of enrolled college and university students. Specific target population surveys include the adult learner and online learners.

- The **Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)**. The IPEDS surveys include institutional-level benchmarking opportunities on enrollment, program completion, faculty and staff, and financial indicators at the institutional level.

- The **Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)**, developed by (APLU) and (AASCU), concentrates on consumer information related to undergraduate education in three broad areas: consumer information, student experiences and perceptions, and student learning outcomes.
The National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity (Delaware Study) focuses on four-year college and university faculty workloads and instructional costs by department and faculty type (e.g., tenure/tenure track, teaching assistant, other) and permits participating institutions to compare their workloads and costs.

The American Productivity and Quality Center provides its Open Standards Benchmarking CollaborativeSM (OSBC) research process. The OSBC database contains over 1,200 performance metrics across multiple business functions and includes data from more than 7,000 global submissions.

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) Key Indicators Tool (KIT) provides a customized benchmarking report for each CIC member institution with 20 indicators of institutional performance in four key areas: (1) student enrollment and progression, (2) faculty, (3) tuition revenue and financial aid, and (4) financial resources and expenditures.

The Institute for College Access and Success College Insight project provides user-friendly profiles with detailed information for almost 5,000 U.S. colleges and universities, and aggregates data to provide indicators of college affordability, diversity, and student success on campus to policymakers and the public.

The Kansas Study of Community College Instructional Costs and Productivity (Kansas Study) was designed and implemented as a community college analog to the Delaware study.

The National Community College Benchmark Project (NCCBP) collects and reports institutional-level data on approximately 130 benchmarks covering all important aspects of community college programming, practices, and outcomes.