

BENCHMARKING SURVEYS

SEEING THE POSSIBILITIES



Benchmarking is one of many powerful tools that can be used by higher education professionals to make sense of survey results. Benchmarking is the practice of making comparisons in order to drive continuous improvement. To some, using a benchmarking survey is a challenging and complicated endeavor. However, benchmarking doesn't have to be scary. Read on for more information about benchmarking surveys, why they are valuable, and tips for working them into your assessment toolbox!

Three Reasons to Benchmark:

There are lots of practical questions that drive a decision to benchmark. But, regardless of who or what prompts the move, the value of benchmarking can be grouped into three broad categories:



MEANING

- Makes individual performance meaningful
- Gives context to a score
- Identify best practices



MOTIVATION

- Reinforce and encourage high performance
- Challenge overestimation of current performance
- Provide evidence that better performance is possible



IMPROVEMENT

- Provide evidence of impact
- Monitor changes in your performance and/or that of your peers over time.

Four Types of Benchmarking:

While most people commonly associate benchmarking with external comparisons, there are actually four types of benchmarking you can use:



STANDARDS

DEFINITION
Compare results to a standard of practice

EXAMPLES

- Mean score
- Response rate
- Passing rate



INTERNAL

DEFINITION
Compare groups within your institution

EXAMPLES

- Residence halls
- Major or program
- Subpopulations

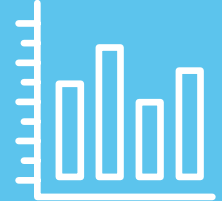


EXTERNAL

DEFINITION
Compare to groups outside your institution

EXAMPLES

- Peers
- Competitors
- Aspirants



LONGITUDINAL

DEFINITION
Compare your results over time

EXAMPLES

- Year-over-year
- Month-over-month
- Week-over-week

Three Types of Comparison Groups:

A vital component of benchmarking for many is the ability to compare to other institutions. But, comparisons can go beyond just your peers:



PEERS

- Who you are like
- Similar in inputs and activities
- Would expect similar outcomes



COMPETITION

- Who you are competing against
- May or may not be similar
- Want similar or better outcomes



ASPIRANTS

- Who you want to become
- May or may not be similar
- Would expect better outcomes

Tips for Selecting Peer Institutions:



USE EXISTING OR PRE-DEFINED GROUPS

Public data sources, like IPEDS, can allow you to define peers by selecting from a wide range of criteria. Or, use pre-defined groups, like Carnegie classifications, conference membership, or geographic criteria like state or urban area.



LOOK OUTSIDE OF INSTITUTIONS

While most comparison groups focus on other institutions, this need not always be the case. For instance, a housing department may want to benchmark against local competition and off-campus housing options on student housing choices, costs, and contracts.



KEEP PEER GROUPS STABLE

While peer groups will need to be re-evaluated over time, keeping short to medium-term stability in your groups will provide a stable benchmark for measuring your own changes over time as compared to your peers.

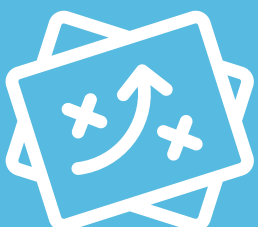


USE DEPARTMENT-SPECIFIC PEERS

While your institutions may have a recommended or defined peer group, it is okay to have a different peer group for your own needs. For example, advising departments may want to look at institutions with similar staffing models.

Key Benchmarking Questions to Ask

Regardless of the data you use or the types of comparisons you make, there are key questions you want to ask yourself to ensure you are getting the most out of any benchmarking efforts.



- Are we measuring important outcomes?
- Are we providing good information so that we can understand our performance?
- Are we using the information to improve our performance?