

How BENCHMARKING Can Help Us IMPROVE WHAT WE DO

JODI LEVINE LAUFGRABEN talks to
JOSEPH A. PICA and RANDY L. SWING

ASSessment in higher education is no longer the purview of a few campus research professionals, nor is it just what happens at the end of a course or program. Institutions are in fact now looking to assess many of their processes and procedures at nearly every step, and for that purpose some are turning to an approach known as *benchmarking*. A practice drawn from the corporate world, in which organizations identify similar organizations against which to compare their practices and achievements, benchmarking has found its way into higher education.

In spite of benchmarking's increasing popularity,

many people in higher education have lots of questions about how exactly it works and what it can help them achieve. So that we could learn more, *About Campus* asked Jodi Levine Laufgraben, an administrator at Temple University who has used benchmarking, to talk to two people who have been studying and using this approach. She recently sat down for a conversation with Joseph A. Pica, cofounder and cochairman of Educational Benchmarking, Inc., and Randy L. Swing, codirector of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, both of whom had recently collaborated on the First-Year Initiative benchmarking survey. Here is what they had to say.

LEVINE LAUFGRABEN: *Benchmarking* is a term now frequently used when campuses talk about assessment. Tell me a little more about how it works and what it does.

RANDY SWING: Let me provide a specific example of benchmarking at work. First-year seminars are now found at over 90 percent of American colleges and universities. It is no surprise to anyone that these courses are not all equal in terms of the learning outcomes they produce or the quality of methods they use in delivering the course. To make meaningful comparisons of first-year seminars requires developing an accurate way to identify peer institutions—institutions that are similarly situated in terms of the first-year seminars they offer. Once peers are established, meaningful comparisons of learning outcomes can be made. So for the First-Year Initiative survey we had to develop a method to accurately describe a first-year seminar so that peer matches could be made from those descriptions. For example, it wouldn't be very helpful for a one-hour seminar to compare its outcomes with a three-hour seminar; obviously when students have three times more exposure to the "treatment," the outcomes are greater.

JOSEPH PICA: Yes, that's right. It is essentially a way to compare your outcomes against someone else's. As Randy mentioned, however, it is important that what is being compared be similar; otherwise, the comparison isn't meaningful. A small, relevant comparative group allows you to better understand and gauge your performance.

LAUFGRABEN: Some people would argue that benchmarking shifts the focus too much to what other campuses are doing. What's the purpose behind such comparisons?

PICA: Benchmarking is a particular way of making comparisons that provides a great reality check. It allows you to set realistic goals and, yes, to tap the competitive spirit of your staff to perform as well as their peers. It also allows for the identification of best practices. Institutions that consistently perform exceptionally well can be easily identified, and through further investigation of the top-performing programs, the common elements to superior performance can be identified and shared.

SWING: Unfortunately many educators think that comparing outcomes between institutions in the same Carnegie Classification is adequate. In my opinion, Carnegie Classifications are usually too broad to be meaningfully relied upon for establishing benchmarking peers when comparing program-level or student-level outcomes. Thinking again about first-year seminars, a three-hour course at a comprehensive university may be very similar and an appropriate peer comparison to a three-hour course at a research intensive university—they may even use the same textbook. So, one specific aspect of benchmarking in higher education is the development of ways to provide meaningful context for survey results by establishing appropriate comparison groups. To do otherwise produces data that aren't believable and will not lead to change.

PICA: The ultimate goal of benchmarking is improvement over time. There are key criteria within benchmarking that are necessary to drive improvements in performance. Omitting any of the essential elements diminishes the effectiveness of the assessment. This is an example in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is the combination of all the elements that allows benchmarking to have its impact across the country.

LAUFGRABEN: What are those key elements of benchmarking?

PICA: There are six. First, benchmarking survey instruments must be *comprehensive*. They have to measure what the professionals in the field believe captures the essential elements that affect the quality of the experience. These elements should be linked directly to the mission of the program. Next, there needs to be *credibility* in the process. You have to have confidence in a national instrument that is developed by experts in the field, that it is valid and reliable, and that the methodology is statistically sound. Of course benchmarking has to be *comparative*. You must be able to self-select a set of peers (to ensure an "apples to apples" comparison) relevant to calibrating your performance. Benchmarking must address both *performance* and *importance*. It must describe performance in absolute and relative terms; but more important, it must also identify what elements have the

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greatest impact on improving overall effectiveness.

The most important element of benchmarking is *confidentiality*. Confidentiality ensures participants' anonymity and restricts the results to purposes of continuous improvement and excludes the use of results for marketing purposes. Being humiliated in public when performance is in need of improvement and is publicized has never been a big motivator for people. It doesn't do much for morale and it doesn't provide people with any information that is going to allow them to be better. It takes courage to assess yourself under the best of circumstances. It takes courage to want to take criticism about how to be better. Certainly you aren't encouraging people to take this risk when there is the potential that results will be misinterpreted in a public environment that will reflect on their work in a very simple number or ranking. This is a much more complicated world than "1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and so on."

The last element of benchmarking is *continuous* assessment. The combination of comparisons and regular assessment over time provides the information and benchmarks to drive continuous improvement. Benchmarking once and never again is likely not worth the effort or energy.

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SWING: The First-Year Initiative survey, for example, is confidential, comprehensive, and credible, so first-year seminar program administrators can conduct comparable assessment without fear that the results will be used to punish low performance or to purposefully make someone look bad. It really is assessment for improved student outcomes. In contrast, published ranking systems, which are not intended to be confidential (and seldom are comprehensive or credible) often fail to produce improvement because there is strong motivation to "fix the numbers" rather than improve the underlying educational processes.

I agree with Joe that one-time assessment doesn't yield the same kind of results that continuous assessment yields, but in higher education we are starved for systematic feedback to determine how our efforts affect student learning. Even the first administration of the First-Year Initiative survey provided information that led to change or confirmed current practices for most of the participating campuses.

LAUFGRABEN: So, what are some other examples of established benchmarking studies? Specifically, it would be interesting to hear what kind of analysis the participating campus receives from those doing the studies.

PICA: Within higher education, Educational Benchmarking, Inc., currently conducts benchmarking assessments in all sorts of areas—some academic, such as management education, teacher education, engineering education, nursing education; and others related to student life residence halls, college and university student unions, and fraternities and sororities. Each participant receives a customized, comparative analysis of results based on their self-selected set of six peer-competitors. While the amount of analysis varies based on the types of analysis options selected, typically the results analysis notebooks are more than four hundred pages in length. Beginning with the executive summary through extensive detailed analysis, the goal for reporting results is to provide a relative perspective on performance and identify where efforts should be invested to improve effectiveness. Results are provided by each factor and by

demographic elements of the population. A single piece of analysis, the Priority Matrix, identifies in one chart which factors, if improved, will have the greatest impact on overall effectiveness.

LAUFGABEN: You talked briefly earlier about published rankings that are used to compare colleges and universities to one another. Could you describe in greater detail how benchmarking is different?

PICA: The difference is simple: when continuous improvement is the goal, anonymity provides both administrators and students with the confidence to respond honestly, recognizing that honest feedback is at the core of improvement. When public rankings are involved, program administrator and students alike are motivated to share the most positive results. The confidentiality element of the benchmarking assessment provides both program administrators and students with the protection they need to risk providing and soliciting honest responses, and the opportunity to address real issues associated with real improvement. There is an inherent conflict between assessments that are used to publicly rank and assessments in which the sole purpose is continuous improvement. The difference lies in the intent and purpose of the assessment. I contend that improvement is predicated upon gathering honest, candid feedback from stakeholders. For this to occur, they must believe that their anonymity will be ensured and that the results will not negatively impact the reputation of their program or institution.

The reputation of the stakeholders' program (and therefore the perceived value of their degree and their ability to leverage their credentials in the marketplace) is influenced by how positively they respond. If the results are used to publicly rank the institution, the stakeholder will benefit from the positive results, compromising their motivation to be honest. For the same reason that we protect the anonymity of those providing the feedback, we must also protect the anonymity of the programs gathering the feedback. No program wants to risk the consequences of negative survey results being publicly distributed. As the director of a top master's in business administration program for ten years, I understood the pressure to produce positive results for the rankings.

SWING: Rankings do not tell institutions that are not top rated how to get there. Good benchmarking helps identify best practices among similarly situated institutions or courses.

LAUFGABEN: The way it is described, benchmarking seems to require significant commitment on the part of the institutions that undertake it. Where does benchmarking fit with all of the existing assessment activities that colleges and universities are engaging in?

PICA: Benchmarking provides a framework for developing a comprehensive strategic assessment strategy. For example, as a diagnostic tool, it can identify where more in-depth assessments should be focused. Once the benchmarking assessment calibrates performance and identifies the elements that have the greatest impact on effectiveness, administrators are able to focus their other assessment efforts on gathering information to better understand the critical elements that drive improvements in overall effectiveness.

SWING: As a director of assessment at Appalachian State University, I discovered that it is easy to generate numbers. A survey given to the entire first-year class of students could produce more data than could be analyzed in months. What is hard is figuring out which data are important and helpful. Benchmarking provides context and perspective—otherwise a number is just a number. Benchmarking is a process that turns numbers into information that can inform change or confirm current practice. I'm not interested in producing tons of undigested data. I became really sold on benchmarking when I saw the gains business schools and residence life programs had when they participated in benchmarking for three or more years. I'm convinced that benchmarking is a motivational process that leads to improvement when many other forms of assessment seem to only fill up file cabinets and bookcases with unused reports.

LAUFGABEN: Both of you are stressing that benchmarking is about collecting information on which to base decisions about improvement. How can campuses—more specifically, stakeholders within the program being assessed—determine where to start?

SWING: Begin with the intention to change. If you don't have any intention of changing, benchmarking isn't

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going to help you. If you want to improve, then it is important to select a tool that measures what is important, that produces data you can trust, and provides appropriate comparisons. The point is that you collect the evidence that pinpoints where you need to change or that confirms your current practices.

PICA: Benchmarking is a perfect place to start your assessment process because it is a diagnostic tool. It provides a broad perspective within a comparative context of performance and specifically identifies where future efforts should be focused to improve effectiveness. It serves to point you in the right direction. Practitioners face the realities of limited resources. They need information that will allow them to focus their scarce resources where they will have the greatest impact on improvement. They will also benefit from the experience of other benchmarking participants who are creatively developing and implementing new initiatives.

LAUFGRABEN: Benchmarking, then, is an investment in the future of a program, process, or product. What benefits can someone venturing in expect?

PICA: Benchmarking, conducted within the principles outlined earlier, provides the process and information necessary to calibrate performance with a self-selected set of peer-competitors, and to identify what factors have the greatest impact on improving overall effectiveness and customized comparative results for each staff member. The goal is to place the right information, at the right time, into the hands of those in the best position to initiate improvement. The bottom line is that in benchmarking studies that have been conducted for four or more years, there is statistical evidence of improvement. While results vary across institutions, I believe benchmarking provides the best opportunity to initiate and sustain a program of improvement.

SWING: One of my favorite assessment quotes comes from Trudy Bers: “You don’t fatten a pig by weighing it.” She is right of course that you don’t improve education by measuring it unless you make use of those measurements. It is what you do with the information from measurement that matters most. When measurements are placed in proper context, they show us what is possible to achieve and they are incredibly motivational for educators.

What Benchmarking Measures

THE TWO benchmarking studies described here provide examples of the kinds of things benchmarking measures and how it measures them.

A national resident survey conducted by the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) and Educational Benchmarking (EBI) asked residents to rate on a scale from one to seven their satisfaction with and opportunities for participation in programs in the residential setting. Housing and benchmarking experts together designed the study. For example, they were asked to rate their satisfaction with:

- RA’s efforts to get to know them
- Opportunities to participate in educational programs
- Extent to which living in a residence hall

enhanced their ability to resolve conflicts

- Extent to which living in a residence hall enhanced their ability to understand the consequences of drug use and abuse

Once the data are collected from this survey, EBI sends each participating institution an individualized analysis of their results along with comparison to a set of self-selected peer institutions, their Carnegie class institutions, and all participating institutions to help them determine how they compare to these groups. Housing professionals have used these findings to confirm, or rethink, the services or educational opportunities they offer students.

Another national survey, The First-Year Initiative, has been administered over the past three years by EBI and the Policy Center on the First Year of College. This study was designed to determine how students perceive

LAUFGRABEN: Because everyone gets involved in the benchmarking process, it does seem there is an opportunity for individuals at every level to feel a sense of ownership in this assessment process. Is this the case?

PICA: By putting the results into the hands of the staff members who are “in the trenches,” they become educated about the power of assessment. They begin talking among each other about creative ways to be able to improve areas of greatest impact. Programs are able to identify the staff with the highest performance and facilitate their sharing their “secrets” for success so that all might benefit from their insights. The most powerful aspect of benchmarking is how the results are used. I strongly believe how they are used by supervisors is the most significant determinant of the impact on improvement. Staff will embrace and feel a level of ownership of the benchmarking process if the results are used to improve their performance rather than evaluate or rate their performance. When you first begin benchmarking, it is counterproductive to hold staff accountable for their past performance. They can’t change what has already transpired, so making them feel bad for their

shortcomings will only serve to disengage them from the assessment process.

I strongly believe that, initially, benchmarking assessment should be positioned as a tool with the sole purpose of providing staff with the information they need to improve, and not be used as an evaluation that determines raises and promotions. Staff must be given the opportunity to review their feedback and develop new strategies and interventions in their quest to improve. After staff members have participated in a few iterations of benchmarking assessments, have had ample opportunity to receive feedback, have identified where they need to improve, and have been supported by management in their efforts to improve, then benchmarking results can be used to evaluate performance.

SWING: The process becomes part of the intervention. “I can’t wait to see if we moved the score because we did X.” That is a whole different attitude about assessment than “Oh no, we are going to be evaluated again.”

Interestingly, benchmarking can also serve to empower administrators at all levels. Benchmarking sup-

important components of first-year seminars, a course that now exists in 90 percent of U.S. colleges and universities. The survey’s goal is to help institutions determine what variables were associated with course effectiveness, engagement with their institution, and self-reported gains across multiple learning measures. The variables being measured include teaching practices, course content, number of credit hours, type of course, and grading practices. To design the multi-institutional study, EBI and the Policy Center drew from the most commonly cited goals of first-year seminars as reported in national surveys conducted over several years by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. These goals have consistently focused on academic skills, social skills and intellectual development, building quality relationships, and enhancing familiarity with campus resources.

In 2002, First-Year Initiative data was collected from 1,961 sections of first-year seminars at 72 institutions. In total, 41,294 students completed the FYI survey at the end of their seminar experience in fall 2002. Perception questions are also on a 7-point Likert scale.

Students responded to items such as:

- This course or experience improved my writing skills
- To what degree are you accepted by students at this college or university?
- This course has improved the degree to which I identify solutions for complex problems
- To what degree is it easy for you to make new friends at this college or university?
- This course or experience increased my understanding of available library resources

As with the resident survey, participating institutions are provided individualized analysis for their institution and comparative results from several institutions. Participants also receive a prescriptive analysis that identifies which factors, if improved, would have a positive impact on course effectiveness.

—RANDY SWING

ports fact-based decision making. It increases managers' confidence in making decisions. Since benchmarking assessments generate initiatives to improve the high-impact factors, managers need to assess on a regular basis to be able to identify the efficacy of their interventions. Improvement is an iterative process driven by regular feedback.

LAUFGABEN: My campus has participated in the First-Year Initiative survey for two years. For us, an important benefit of a benchmarking study is that in addition to the comparison with peers, it has been an important source of internal comparison. We can study ourselves over time. It's looking both outside and inside that drives the improvement. I assume you've seen that elsewhere.

SWING: When you benchmark against your peers you know the context of your results, but there is something special when you can add to that external assessment an internal assessment component. Identifying the course with the highest learning outcomes provides opportunity to involve high performers in future faculty development sessions as one example of using data to improve program delivery of services.

LAUFGABEN: A natural follow-up to the benefits question is the issue of costs. What are they?

SWING: First, there is no such thing as the perfect assessment and certainly not a perfect and cheap one. Because benchmarking demands confidential exchange of institution-level data, there are costs for a competent third-party data manager. The real cost in assessment is when you pay for assessment that produces data that are not meaningful. Cost certainly must be weighed against how meaningful the data are.

LAUFGABEN: There seems to be a risk of campuses focusing too much on how well they are doing compared to their peer institutions and losing sight of comparing with past performance at their own institution. What can an institution do to keep its eye on that work as well?

PICA: Benchmarking must provide external and internal comparisons. I have been encouraged by the response I have experienced over the past nine years from higher education professionals as they try first to improve based on their own previous performance and then to set realistic goals in terms of their peers and competitors. First and foremost, programs need to improve in relation to their past performance. We have to remember that this is a continuous process, and in my experience I have never seen an institution achieve its goals in a single year. Benchmarking is an iterative process, so the goal is to continuously improve. With progress comes optimism and confidence—elements that feed success.

SWING: All of that is important. Comparing yourself to a group that will make you look favorable doesn't make sense. And an aspirational group is fine to look up to, fine for modeling, but how much can you learn by comparing yourself to campuses that aren't like you? What you need to do is compare yourself with other institutions that are doing the same kinds of work as you and compare your current performance to your past performance.

LAUFGABEN: One overall criticism of assessment is that campuses go through the activity and then nothing ever comes of the information. Either the data are set aside and never analyzed or a report is written and never shared. If campuses are investing in benchmarking studies, how can they use this information most effectively and efficiently?

PICA: The ultimate goal is to improve, and assessment is simply the tool we use to achieve this goal. I have found that you have to begin with assessments that are founded on the right principles—for instance, they follow the confidentiality practices and possess the elements that we know are associated with success. Indeed, following only a few of the principles will dramatically decrease the assessment effectiveness. I've found that the process of learning the principles behind the assessment and the strategies for leveraging the results to initiate and sustain

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improvement are as essential as the assessment itself. As educators we should be the first to recognize that there is a learning curve to leveraging assessment for change. More practically, it takes time to begin to absorb the meaning from results. To truly understand the results, you need to spend hours reviewing and thinking about what they mean. There is no substitute for spending time with the information. The more familiar you become with it, the more pictures start to come off the page and you start to be able to see the patterns that illuminate your understanding of the environment.

SWING: Think of the life realities of most higher education administrators. They are very busy people. A first-year seminar director, for example, will be serving the needs of a large cohort of students, working on curriculum and faculty development, teaching, and managing an array of program details. On top of having limited time, most come to the position because of their demonstrated expertise in teaching and connecting with students; it is rare that these people also have expertise in assessment. The end result is that they need to partner with assessment specialists rather than invent an assessment plan from scratch. Campuses are best served when they can share assessment results with the teachers who have direct responsibility for delivering the program to students. One way to improve reporting is to organize and synthesize information so that the key points are obvious. Using factors, groups of questions that form key concepts, is very helpful. Again, people will be moved to action only if they understand what to do to create improvement. We need to make sure that we disseminate information, not raw data.

LAUFGABEN: It sounds like you are advocating for a dissemination strategy that emphasizes positive results and opportunities for improvement. Isn't it the reality, though, that many people look at assessment reports and focus only on what isn't working?

SWING: Benchmarking studies should not be used to rank faculty or to beat up on low performance. It could be that everyone is performing above average.

PICA: If conducted following the principles noted earlier, the results will identify where performance is lacking and what will have the greatest impact on improving effectiveness. We often mistakenly make the assumption that our low performing factors are what we need to improve in order to have an impact on our overall effectiveness, and I have rarely found this to be the case. More often than not there will be factors or elements that the students are very dissatisfied with but that have little impact on the overall effectiveness of the course. This is why including an analysis of impact of the factors is so essential. Most people want to fix the lowest performing factors, and this can often be a waste of time and energy. It's all about maximizing the return on your investment of resources, and benchmarking is specifically designed to provide the information you need to accomplish this task. Set expectations for people. Let those involved in the program know that you don't expect them to go to the top of the scale in one step. Change is an incremental process and you don't want to set unrealistic expectations.

LAUFGABEN: Can administrators use benchmarking results to improve the status of a program on their own campus?

PICA: Information from benchmarking studies can help gain the confidence of the people who control the resources. They will have greater confidence that they will get a return on their investment because the program is taking the time to figure out how it can become better. You have evidence that says this is where we should focus our energy and what we should do to improve. You are not just going in trying to convince them on your goodwill with a plan that's not focused or grounded.

SWING: My definition of good assessment is that it either confirms current practice or informs change. I've looked at the evidence and am convinced that benchmarking has a clear history of creating improved performance in higher education settings, including student services and academic offerings.

