

EDITOR'S NOTES

Within the last two decades, institutions of higher education have come under increased pressure to become more accountable to their various constituencies, including regional accrediting agencies, state governing boards and legislatures, business and industry, and the general public. Indeed, as Banta (1999) notes, "Never before has higher education been subjected to such close scrutiny by public stakeholders" (p. 1). In response to this scrutiny, community colleges and other institutions have created initiatives to assess institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Such quality assessment efforts in the community college sector include the League for Innovation in the Community College's Institutional Effectiveness Task Force and accompanying monograph (Doucette and Hughes, 1990) as well as their Learning Outcomes for the 21st Century project (Wilson, Miles, Baker, and Schoenberger, 2000); the American Association of Community College's *Core Indicators of Effectiveness for Community Colleges* (Alfred, Ewell, Hudgins, and McClenney, 1999); and the National Center for Higher Education Management System's monograph, *Assessment in Community Colleges: Setting the Standard for Higher Education* (Banta, 1999).

Implied in these initiatives is the expectation that, at some point, colleges will be able to focus externally and gauge themselves against similar data from comparable peer institutions. Until recently, however, few data collection and reporting processes were available to help community colleges gather information on comparable peer institutions on a national basis. In the last few years several new initiatives to collect and share data across the two-year college sector have been designed and implemented. This volume of *New Directions for Community Colleges* highlights four of these initiatives. These four were selected because they represent relatively new efforts designed specifically for community colleges and because they focus on areas of particular interest to two-year institutions. All four initiatives are in different stages of development and have been designed in very different ways. For example, one of the initiatives highlighted in the volume—the Kansas Study of Community College Costs and Instructional Productivity—involves data that primarily address institutional efficiency, while the other three address institutional effectiveness. As well, the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement were designed to produce data that are statistically representative of community colleges nationwide and can therefore be generalized to that population. They can thus be characterized as having

relevant statistical properties such as reliability and validity, and their data are appropriate to analyze for determination of such things as significant difference and effect size. The other two projects—the Kansas Study of Community College Instructional Costs and Productivity and the National Community College Benchmark Project—are in much earlier stages of development and are currently working to increase the size of their institutional participant dataset. In fact, since the underlying purpose of the two latter projects is to enable participating colleges to select groups of comparable peer institutions and benchmark against them, issues of representativeness and specific statistical properties of the data collected and reported may not even be relevant. Additional information regarding these issues may be found on individual project Web sites.

This volume is comprised of four major sections, each with two chapters. The first chapter in each section introduces and describes one of the four initiatives and is authored by individuals directly involved with the design or implementation of that project. The second chapter in each section describes how a participating institution or state system used data from that initiative, paying particular attention to ways in which the data and information were used for assessment, benchmarking, institutional improvement, planning, management, and decision making. This volume exposes readers not only to these relatively new, innovative national data collection and benchmarking consortia, but also to best practice examples of how data and information from these four initiatives have been used.

The volume begins with the initiative addressing institutional efficiency, the Kansas Study, then presents the three initiatives that primarily address institutional effectiveness. In Chapter One, Patricia Sumner and Regina Brewer describe the design, development, and implementation of the Kansas Study of Community College Instructional Costs and Productivity, an annual nationwide examination of how much full- and part-time community college faculty teach and at what cost. In Chapter Two, George Malo and Ellen Weed report ways in which Kansas Study data are used for program improvement and regional accreditation requirements in individual institutions and state systems.

In Chapter Three, Julie Bryant describes the content, development, and implementation of the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) and explains its importance and utility for community colleges. She discusses ways in which the SSI can assess student experiences both inside and outside the classroom and how it can provide a campuswide assessment of institutional strengths and challenges. In the following chapter, Anne Kress recounts how Santa Fe Community College, using information provided by the SSI, has been able to identify student priorities and target initiatives in areas of importance to students. She describes how, through regular assessment, repeated review and dissemination of results, and an active commitment to institutional improvement, the college has implemented programs leading to marked increases in student satisfaction.

Chapter Five, by Kay McClenney, offers an overview of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), and describes its five benchmarks of effective educational practice. Using CCSSE reports and data search tools, community colleges can benchmark their performance on key indicators related to teaching, learning, and retention. In Chapter Six, Scott Balog and Sally Search describe how Tallahassee Community College, through faculty workshops to discuss the results of CCSSE and state accountability data, implemented a quality enhancement plan involving careful assessment of data, research into best practices, and extensive faculty involvement.

Chapter Seven, written by Ralph Juhnke, describes the design and development of the National Community College Benchmark Project (NCCBP), which collects and reports a wide array of data on community college instruction, student outcomes, workforce development, minority participation, distance learning, faculty workloads, cost, and human resources, and which allows live, real-time peer selection and benchmarking. In Chapter Eight, Terri Manning and Brad Bostian discuss how Central Piedmont Community College has used NCCBP data to learn about and work to improve its retention and course withdrawal rates.

Benchmarking can be an essential tool for community college assessment and improvement. However, benchmarking is not without its share of challenges. Chapter Nine, written by Trudy Bers, outlines the limitations of both the process of benchmarking and the resulting benchmarks themselves. The volume concludes with a chapter by Caroline Sheldon and Nathan Durdella, who provide a list of resources and information on community college benchmarking that will be useful to practitioners eager to implement the practice at their own institution.

Institutions considering the use of benchmarking and benchmarks should understand the ways in which they are different from locally developed assessments of efficiency and effectiveness. For example, locally developed assessments can reveal much about the strengths and weaknesses of an institution and provide a rich source of data and information on which to base continuous improvement efforts. Those assessments cannot, however, provide any information about institutional quality in the larger context; that is, how successful the college has been in relation to its major goals and activities. That type of information can only come from an external examination of the college through comparisons with peer institutions and benchmarking.

Finally, it is important that colleges understand the costs involved in participating in peer comparison and benchmarking initiatives. In some cases there are real monetary costs—for example, enrollment or participation fees may amount to several thousand dollars per year. In all cases there are human resource and workload costs. All benchmarking initiatives require careful collection and reporting of data by participating institutions. The degree of the data collection and reporting burden will depend on the

sophistication of the institution's management information system and the ability of institutional research (or other) staff to extract data from that system. In any case, colleges need to be aware of these costs and take them into consideration before embarking on a benchmarking project. That said, participation in peer comparison and benchmarking initiatives such as those described in this volume can greatly enhance a community college's efforts to improve teaching and learning, policy development, and planning and management. The institutional benefits resulting from participation in projects such as these far outweigh their inherent costs.

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References

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