

Techniques for Assessing Student Learning and Development in Academic and Student Support Services: Tips From and For Practitioners

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Chapter 7 – Performance Indicators and Benchmarking

Reminder: The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a rigorous research level discussion of performance indicators and benchmarks. The purpose is to provide basic information about both and to demonstrate how they can be used effectively for student learning and development assessment in academic and student support services. Included in the chapter is basic information for implementation, thus this chapter is fundamental and introductory in nature. More sophisticated scholarly information can be found at the end of this chapter and in references at the end of this book.

This chapter will be a bit different from the others, for in this chapter, we will be focusing more on the considerations for using performance indicators and benchmarking to assess any student learning and development outcome, rather than discussing whether it is the appropriate choice for your particular outcome. The purpose of such an illustration is not to discourage you in using performance indicators and benchmarking to evaluate student learning. Rather, we just want to present some considerations for you prior to your use of them.

What is Benchmarking?

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) have written a comprehensive chapter on benchmarking in their book, *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners*. In this chapter you learn a great deal about benchmarking. In an attempt to not re-iterate everything they discuss, we will provide the highlights and some examples of how benchmarking can be used to assess student learning and development in the co-curricular.

Spendolini (1992) defines benchmarking as a “continuous systematic process for evaluating the products, services, and work processes of organizations that are recognized as representing best practices for the purposes of organizational improvement.” (p.9) You can see by this definition and the definition of assessment posed in chapter two that there are similarities behind the purpose of benchmarking. Both benchmarking and assessment are about improvement and both definitions stress the importance of a systematic process in order to evaluate. While assessment, defined in chapter two and benchmarking both focus on “products, services, and work processes”, benchmarking highlights a comparative evaluation of products, services, and work processes based on best practices or to establish best practices. The assessment process described in chapter 2 is not necessarily concerned about comparing its products, services, and work processes with

that of another's units, be it inside the institution, outside the institution, or outside of higher education.

What are the Implications for Using Benchmarking to Assess Student Learning and Development?

The primary point of all this is to explain that when you are using benchmarking in your assessment plan, you are committing yourself to comparing your results with other best practices, be they inside your institution, outside your institution, or outside of higher education. The reason we make this point so strong is not to ask you to declare a value judgment as to whether this kind of comparison is good or bad (indeed, we find benchmarking extremely valuable for many of our services and processes and thus, use it whenever we are able), but to make note of it in your assessment planning because when you benchmark, you are choosing to make the results of your findings public. That is sort of the whole point.

While we highly encourage transparency in assessment, we also recognize that organizationally, that may be suicide for some institutions, particularly if you are just beginning with implementing systematic assessment. Furthermore, if you choose to benchmark, benchmarking services and processes sometimes feels a little less vulnerable than benchmarking a product such as student learning and development.

While we recognize that benchmarking student learning and development is extremely controversial and should be approached with great care and attentiveness, we don't want to end here with the conversation of whether it should or should not be done. That is for you to decide. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate considerations for you when making your own decision about benchmarking your student learning and development outcomes.

Considerations for Using Benchmarking to Assess Student Learning and Development

- 1) Is your organization ready to share publicly the evidence you have for meeting student learning and development outcomes?
- 2) Would it be valuable for you to benchmark the services and processes that contribute to the student learning and development outcomes prior to benchmarking your student learning and development evidence?
- 3) Prior to benchmarking, have you educated your constituents about what benchmarking means and how the information is used to make decisions for improvement?
- 4) Do you have access to the tools that will help you benchmark responsibly? (e.g., the National Surveys of Student Engagement, **EBI** surveys, **American Association of Health Educators** surveys - - see chapter 12 for more information)
- 5) Have you already discussed the various scenarios among your key administrators about how you plan to use the information and how they may be able to assist you?
- 6) Will the evidence that you are using to evaluate whether you have met your learning outcome be "benchmarkable"? In other words, if you want to compare the evidence to demonstrate your students have learned how to think critically

with another program's students or another institution's students, what evidence are you presenting for comparison? Will that other institution have the same evidence? Often, benchmarking efforts fall apart because we are not comparing similar types of "data" and this – they cannot be compared.

After addressing these considerations and deciding that benchmarking is still a good idea, think about the following steps to implement benchmarking.

Steps in the Benchmarking Process

(Adapted from Upcraft and Schuh, 1996)

- 1) Define the outcome you want benchmarked
- 2) Make sure benchmarking is appropriate
- 3) Determine what to benchmark – what is the evidence that will help you understand the learning and development outcome. How will you gather it and analyze it? How will you report it?
- 4) Choose who should be involved in the benchmarking project
- 5) Select comparable organizations to benchmark against - either from within the institution, from another institution, or from outside higher education
- 6) Determine funding for the benchmarking project
- 7) Ensure that all constituents are properly educated about the value and use of benchmarking
- 8) Discuss scenarios of potential results with key decision-makers
- 9) Submit data to organization conducting the benchmark
- 10) Get results back, interpret them and make decision and recommendations
- 11) Strategically disseminate findings and action plan for improvement.