Benchmarking as an Administrative Tool for Institutional Leaders

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The first seven chapters of this volume discuss benchmarking in various services and functions of higher education organizations. This chapter focuses on the role of college and university leaders in developing and using benchmarking practices to promote institutional change.

Historically, colleges and universities have been viewed as trendsetters and change agents for society at large. They provided leadership in creating and developing products, in basic scientific research, and in advancing scholarship. In the modern era, or what might affectionately be called the technologically supported management era, leadership in advancing organizational development and modernizing management techniques has moved to the business community. Indeed, when it comes to the internal organization or management activities of colleges and universities, they more often resemble battleships at low tide stranded on a sandbar, unable to move or alter direction when any change is contemplated. From a minor adjustment to an academic calendar to a major overhaul of the curriculum, effecting and implementing change in a college or university can be extremely difficult and often results in institutional turmoil.

Evaluating the Need for Institutional Change

Institutional evolution through planned change processes is an organizational imperative. An institution that does not routinely evaluate all aspects of the organization and make the changes necessary to address its shortcomings, from the curriculum to the physical plant, is jeopardizing its future. Whereas performing organizational rituals in the same manner year
after year may be comfortable for internal constituents and possibly even garner support from alumni (Kezar, 2001), those organizations that fail to evolve do not survive. Administrative practices, therefore, must be in place to accommodate the continuous evaluation of an organization’s structure and procedures.

Learning what, if anything, needs to be changed is one of the most challenging aspects of making institutional improvements. Determining institutional direction through the use of deliberate and informed decisions takes time. Informed decision making, however, does not have to mean the extreme painstaking stalemates, or “paralysis by analysis,” that can arise from conducting multiple and repeated studies, semester after semester. As with any research project, for assessment procedures to be effective, the correct issues need to be identified, the right questions need to be developed and asked, and the data need to be gathered and analyzed in a timely fashion (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996). Appropriate structures for enhancing collaborative decision making must be created, and a suitable course of action should be developed based on the data analysis that has been performed.

As Kezar suggests, “Change is not always good, and it is certainly not a panacea for all the issues facing higher education” (p. 8). Given the fact that the longevity of colleges and universities as organizations is due, in large part, to their adherence to their missions and traditions and the backing of loyal followers, institutions must carefully weigh their academic goals and strategic plans when they are contemplating changes (Kezar). It is essential to implement effective assessment processes to ensure that areas needing a mere adjustment, or even those operations that are dysfunctional, can be identified and addressed, while sound institutional processes and structures are supported and maintained.

**Leading by Example**

With the ever present demand for accountability and competing pressures from multiple constituencies for increased resources, effective and prudent academic leaders need to be thoughtful visionaries who can develop feasible solutions to institutional problems. The most important factor in effecting change, ultimately, is the courage of the leaders to identify an institution’s shortcomings, then convey the findings, with potential solutions, to an audience that will include both proponents and adversaries.

Shaw notes that “leaders must direct the assessment effort to identify where the problems lie and what problems are perceived by the people who run the organization” (1999, p. 35). In many organizations, a change in institutional culture will be required to foster an ethos that promotes the provision of quality service across the institution. Operational changes, for example, though requiring a deviation from an institution’s normal practices, can be effected with the motivation and dedication of leaders who are willing to adopt the new practices. Not only must leaders promulgate the
expectations for excellence in institutional practice and ensure that high standards are the norm for the organization, they must do so by setting the example through their own behavior.

As suggested by Lampikoski and Emden, “Messages from management are not enough to maintain innovative behaviour. A leader must behave consistently in ways which will support credos” (1996, p. 134). The values and attitudes that are embraced by an institution’s leaders, as reflected by the work and management of their own offices, will filter through the entire organization and help define the institutional standard. If the senior leaders embrace and promote benchmarking as an instrument to effect change, therefore, the practice will become a part of the organizational culture. When an institution is revising its expectations and procedures to adapt the successful practices of a peer or benchmark institution, the vision and enthusiasm of the leaders is critically important.

Overcoming Resistance to Change

Leaders need to create the organizational networks and relationships to prevail over those individuals and groups that join forces to defeat a proposed change (Kezar, 2001). Commenting on the perils of implementing change, Alstete observes that “benchmarking can help overcome resistance to change that can be very strong in conservative organizations, such as colleges and universities, that have had little operational change in many years” (1995, p. 25). When institutional leaders use benchmarking effectively, they not only can make changes more easily, they can turn the reluctant adversary into a proponent of the new initiative. Benchmarking can help smooth the path for those in leadership roles during the planning and implementation phases of a new organizational function or policy.

A goal may be readily obtainable, but it will require the constant encouragement of those who will implement the organization’s new practices. As suggested in Quality Assurance in Student Affairs: Role and Commitments of NASPA, “quality in education programs and services in higher education begins and ends with individuals. . . . the people of the institution who deliver the educational programs and services” (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2001, p. 3). Whereas extensive consultation is time consuming, collaborative planning and decision making will yield far more effective results than decisions that are made in a vacuum. Writing in A Culture for Academic Excellence, Freed, Klugman, and Fife note that “a quality culture needs leaders who involve and empower employees in continually improving processes” (1997, p. 37).

Successful transformational leaders, through motivating others, are frequently able to accomplish more than they had intended, achieving goals that would not have been obtainable with less effective leaders (Bass and Avolio, 1994). Setting lofty goals may not always be entirely realistic, but the right amount of cheerleading can be an effective catalyst to help transform an organization’s operational culture.
Leadership Styles

In discussing social cognitive theory in organizations and the opportunity for vicarious learning, Sims and Lorenzi suggest that “The ability of individuals to learn by observing others enables them to avoid needless and often costly errors” (1992, p. 142). In fact, it is not unusual for newly appointed senior academic leaders to review and compare the practices of their counterparts at benchmark institutions to learn from their colleagues’ successes and failures. Those who are new to their leadership roles, however, must be cautious when they are identifying which leaders they should consider as comparators, or benchmarks, in terms of leadership style. What works for one individual and institution may not necessarily be applicable for another organization. Student newspapers and the popular media can be useful, especially at institutions with a daily newspaper, to gauge reactions from a variety of constituencies to a senior leader’s public decisions and programs.

Comparability of Peers

In Chapter Two Schuh correctly stressed the importance of identifying the right external peer group in benchmarking. Indeed, when senior leaders employ benchmarking techniques in making decisions, it is imperative that they use the right institutions for the right reasons. Using the appropriate institutions and programs as models, especially schools with higher reputational ratings, can generate an enthusiasm for change that can transform an institution. How many times have we heard the phrase that a college or university could become the “Harvard of the South” or the “Berkeley of the East” as administrators attempt to convince their faculty, students, and staff of the importance of implementing a particular practice? Using benchmark institutions as examples where different procedures or programs have succeeded can help reduce the tension and uncertainty that can arise when changes are being considered.

When benchmarking is used, the practices of peer universities must be studied thoroughly, and great care must be taken to avoid the mere adaptation of the practices of another organization. Every college and university has its own culture and organizational integrity; rote copying the practices of another organization can doom an initiative from the outset.

Benchmarking Locally for Quality Improvement

If institutional leaders willingly recognize the strengths of operations already existing within the university, their ability to identify internal peer groups for purposes of benchmarking will be enhanced. In many cases, when leaders are working with deans and departmental administrators, they
will not need to go beyond their own institutions to identify organizations to use as benchmarks. Depending on the nature of the program or area being evaluated, comparisons with a peer group can be made within the same institution.

In academic affairs, for example, if the political science department needs to revamp its structure, it should provide the department chair with examples of other social science departments whose structures are working effectively. Similarly, in related administrative areas such as auxiliary services, or in student affairs operations, the internal offices with the best practices can serve as the benchmarks for other organizational units that need improvement. If it is the whole social sciences division that needs to be remodeled, using other academic divisions of the university as well as identifying divisions at peer institutions is most likely to provide the best sources for comparison. To guarantee the effectiveness of this process, institutional leaders must take the time to assist the organizational entity being reviewed to identify the appropriate benchmark to use.

In addition, identifying “best practice” departments with intra-institutional benchmarking recognizes those offices that are conducting their business in an excellent fashion. It acknowledges that the departments’ efforts benefit the institution as a whole, and makes a statement of the institution’s appreciation. Great care must be exercised, however, when identifying such benchmark departments. Leaders must be absolutely sure that the operation that has been identified as an exemplary department is really doing what it claims to be doing. The negative consequences of misidentifying appropriate benchmarks can be extremely demoralizing for other departments who recognize the failures of the weaker unit.

**Campus Constituencies and Benchmarking**

In Chapter Three, Loomis Hubbell, Massa, and Lapovsky discuss aspects of the admissions process and focus on establishing tuition rates using benchmarking. Comparability in admissions practices is critically important given the fact that prospective students, as a group, have been conducting informal benchmarking for years.

Applicants and their families, especially those who are informed consumers, compare everything that is sent to them during the college application process. They also study the information that is available through various World Wide Web sites, and exchange anecdotal data gleaned from current students and other applicants. Prospective students compare carefully the quality of service that the institution provides, remember which schools answered telephones cheerfully and returned e-mails in a prompt fashion, and, of course, weigh to what extent students are provided with financial assistance.
Educating Enrolled Students

Relying on the benchmarking skills they honed during the application process, enrolled students continue to use informal benchmarking when they compare their own institutions to those of their friends. From the menus and facilities of the dining halls to student life programming, academic and community facilities, curriculum, and even the academic calendar, student government leaders have always gathered reams of data about other institutions and provided those data to administrators in attempts to influence the practices of their own institutions. Astute administrators can use this practice to the advantage of the institution by training students in the art of effective benchmarking. Campus advisors should provide information to student leaders on which institutions the campus leaders consider to be institutional peers and the rationale for the assessment. Any such analysis should incorporate the institutional mission and the institution’s ten-year goals so that students can understand where their proposed programs and alternative proposals might fit within the overall strategic plan. Students will be more likely to further refine their benchmarking research if they are taught the appropriate methods from the outset.

Educating Governing Board Members

Governing board members, perhaps more than any segment of the college community, including students, conduct the greatest amount of informal benchmarking. Using personal networks and reading about practices at other institutions in the popular press, they often champion institutional changes to mirror the efforts that are undertaken at colleges and universities that they perceive to be more prestigious or more forward-looking.

To resolve, or at least diminish, the institutional envy syndrome, the importance and role of benchmarking as a tool in institutional decision making should be included in new trustee orientation programs. These concepts should be reiterated in some form at annual board meetings but preferably more frequently. The trustee committee structure to incorporate decision-making models that use benchmarking approaches might be used. Special efforts should be made to acquaint board members with the institutions that are considered peers. Schools that are considered realistic competitors should also be identified with the reasons an institution received that status. In addition, trustees should be taught that various disciplines, centers, or programs might need to be benchmarked independently, given their unique or special mission within the organization. Board members should also have the opportunity to learn the importance of institutional comparability by studying institutional memberships in societies and professional organizations, funding practices, student and faculty profiles, governance, collective bargaining, mission, accreditation, and endowments.
Reducing Institutional Envy

Faculty, like students, have broad networks and many opportunities to compare their institutional programs and practices with those of their colleagues. Generally, discipline-based faculty, through attendance at professional meetings, participation in Internet listserves, and myriad other informal channels, can learn the most minute details about how other institutions operate. It is not unusual for faculty, therefore, to question why their own college or university has a problem with a particular issue or function when the matter could be easily resolved by emulating the practices of another school.

Once again, it is imperative that the leaders of the institution discuss the notion of comparability. Although in many instances gathering ideas and support in this manner can be very effective, the extent to which one institution's response to a particular issue is transferable must be weighed carefully, as in all aspects of benchmarking. Also important is the recognition that there will be disciplinary peer groups to consider, not just entire institutional entities. Not all psychology departments, for example, have the same academic or research foci, or even grant the same degrees.

Conclusion

Benchmarking can be enormously useful to influence and shape institutional decisions. Through analyzing the best practices of peer institutions, then adapting and developing programs for their own campuses, higher education leaders can improve the quality of programs and services that they provide.

Strengthening the effectiveness of a college or university may require altering institutional practices and transforming cultures and subcultures that have been in existence for decades. Even the most insightful and visionary leaders will require as many administrative support mechanisms as possible to succeed; benchmarking can be one such mechanism. Through the effective use of benchmarking, institutions can determine the degree to which they are successful as compared with their peer group, identify the areas they need to improve, and develop strategies that will work best for their unique organizational circumstances. Whereas practices and procedures are not necessarily transferable from one peer institution to another, learning from the achievements of peer institutions can be enormously valuable in strengthening existing programs and developing new initiatives.

All benchmarking efforts, of course, must incorporate and complement the vision and mission of the institution. It is up to the leaders to ensure that the college or university is working effectively to achieve its strategic goals, meet its accreditation standards, and realize its mission.
References


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