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ARTICLE

Benchmarking Your Orientation Program

Frank P. Ardaiole

Benchmarking is an ongoing means for systematically measuring and comparing the work processes of one institution to another by bringing an external focus on internal activities, functions, or operations. Its purpose is to give managers an external standard for evaluating the quality and cost of their institution's internal activities and processes. The author presents a description and example of the application of Performance Indicator Process Benchmarking to orientation programs.

As the bustle of summer orientation ends, the annual review of the evaluations of the year's orientation program usually begins. Typically, an instrument is administered to the freshman participants, and these results are often compared with past years' evaluations. Assuming the results are mostly favorable, most orientation committees will simply fine-tune the programs as they plan for the next year. Incremental changes for improvement are thus accomplished. However, benchmarking, a relatively new method of evaluation, has the capability to provide richer results than the typical evaluative surveys. There are ongoing efforts to adopt benchmarking to various institution-wide functional areas, (Ardaiole, 1996a; 1996b), and this article will focus on benchmarking methods for orientation. An exhaustive search indicates this is the first attempt to move benchmarking from theory to practice in a specific student affairs arena.

Benchmarking Defined

In recent years, benchmarking, which has its roots in industry, has moved into the higher education arena. Benchmarking is an ongoing means for systematically measuring and comparing the work processes of one institution to another by bringing an external focus on internal activities, functions, or operations. Its purpose is to give managers an external standard for evaluating the quality and cost of their institution's internal activities and processes. Benchmarks are performance measures, while benchmarking is the process that moves beyond the measures toward improving institutional-based functions. Defined by Spendolini (1992), benchmarking is a "continuous systematic process for evaluating the products, services, and work processes of organizations that are recognized as representing 'best practices' for the purpose of organizational improvement" (p.9). It can give orientation directors an external touchstone for evaluating the quality and cost of their activities and processes.

"Benchmarking in and of itself is not a means by which an institution can improve

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its administrative cost and quality. Instead, benchmarking helps an institution to identify where its opportunities for improvement may be, to quantify the magnitude of those opportunities, and to identify those institutions that perform a process particularly well to facilitate an improvement effort" (NACUBO, 1995, p. 25). Simply described, benchmarking ideally attempts to answer the following questions:

- *How well are we doing compared with others?*
- *How good do we want to be?*
- *Who is doing the best?*
- *How do they do it?*
- *How can we adapt what they do to our institution?*

Although benchmarking is used as a means to establish a key measure in total quality management (TQM) and quality improvement processes (QIP), its process is different from TQM or QIP. TQM and QIP focus on a holistic approach as customer-forming designed to improve the product, thereby improving customer satisfaction.

Benchmarking is also different from re-engineering or business process redesign (BPR). Re-engineering through BPR involves the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of core processes to cause dramatic improvements in performance (Dougherty, et al., 1994). It is best used in orientation when a radical change in the program is required.

While there are many efforts underway to use benchmarking in higher education (Alstete, 1996), the approach presented herein is unique, combining process benchmarking with performance indicators. This approach melds benchmarks and benchmarking with key performance indicators in an efficient, doable process that leads to useful results.

Performance Indicator Process Benchmarking Goals

Benchmarking utilizes comparative data to measure baseline performance in order to enhance the education and development of students. The data collected are not a standard or norm as such, but a measure that reflects the level of resource-support by the institution as well as subsequent accomplishments among selected performance continua. Obviously, an institution that spends much more on its orientation program than a similar sized one should expect better performance results. The goal is to provide a means for Performance Indicator Process Benchmarking that allows looking beyond the actual data for causes that yield more successful results. In this way, unexpected quality improvements gleaned from the process review become the future's enhanced and expected baseline and become the driving force for process improvement.

By focusing on Performance Indicator Process Benchmarking, a specific caution is to realize that the data gathered are not absolute statistical measurements. Performance

indicators are numbers an institution may use to measure its position against peers, success of strategies and tactics, and relative position in relation to past performance. The indicators are baseline data that capture crucial point performance outcomes that the orientation program's stakeholders can understand being used as a performance measurement 'dashboard' indicators. They have severe statistical validity and reliability limits because there is a richness and a diversity to orientation approaches that cannot be reduced to mere numbers. Varying institutional types and missions cause this to happen. This form of benchmarking is often used to try to quantify qualitative processes; the result of which is great imprecision. The results should be anticipated as a limited black and white "snapshot" of a process and not a full-motion, color video. Using the data collected as performance indicators should not be done in isolation nor out of the context from which they were taken. The data collected are performance indicators that should be taken solely as signals with a lack of precision. Just like a dashboard in a car, they are measurements of performance that do not necessarily indicate the reasons something is happening.

Designing Your Orientation Program's Dashboard

Before designing your dashboard with the instrumentation of the performance indicators selected, one must first define the institutional context and type of program. It is especially important to look to institutions that are similar in size and funding, and which have orientation scopes which are roughly comparable. For the reasons presented above, a small private residential institution should probably expect different results than a large land-grant institution. The NODA Data Bank (1996) can provide a rich source of preliminary data for the cohort selection. Also, one should contact selected institutions and request copies of their program outlines and evaluative data. Review of their orientation literature and systematic recording of notes from telephone interviews with the selected counterparts are suggested. Be prepared to share the same level of information about your program to your targeted institutions.

There are several issues of confidentiality and use that should be explored fully regarding the evaluative program and data exchange (Dale, 1995). Any data collected should be treated confidentially and not used outside the benchmarking effort or without explicit permission. Never share information gathered from one institution with another.

Dashboard instrumentation is simply the designation of the questions selected to evaluate an orientation program. These will become performance indicators that lend themselves to process benchmarking. It is assumed that one has evaluated one's own program, usually with a questionnaire administered to the new student participants. Likert scale responses, such as the following, are commonly used to obtain orientation evaluation results:

- *Overall, I would rate my orientation assistant as...*
- *My orientation assistant's knowledge and ability to answer my questions were...*
- *The academic advising I received was...*

- *The organization of the orientation program was...*
- *I would rate the entire orientation program as...*
- *The diversity/cultural differences discussion was a positive experience for me...*
- *From attending orientation, my impression of this institution has improved...*

For illustrative purposes we will work through just one of these questions in the benchmarking model: "The academic advising I received was..." For this illustration, we assume 55% of responding students rated this as 'excellent.'

The Performance Indicator Process Benchmarking Model

Presented below is a step-by-step process model that, when followed, provides a benchmarking methodology that can lead to significant improvements in your orientation program. The process needs to be followed for each selected performance indicator question. As few as five and probably no more than ten questions should provide the necessary information.

Step 1. Level of support. As an informed professional, one must make a judgment of the level of the institution's support; e.g., budget and personnel, level of commitment, or concern for this performance indicator:

- Low* - Not an institutional priority or provided little support.
- Medium* - An institutional priority that receives moderate support.
- High* - An institutional priority that receives significant support.

Assuming academic advising is a high priority for an institution, the results will be more meaningful when compared with similar cohort institutions that also self-report that the institutions give significant support to academic advising during orientation.

Step 2. Cohort results. On a grid, indicate the percentage scores reported from cohort institutions. Assuming a similar question has been asked at each of the cohort institutions comparable to, "The academic advising I received was..." calculate appropriate statistics such as mean, mode and range. This indicates the strength of your academic advising in comparison with others.

Step 3. Discrepancy analysis. Calculate the differences between the selected cohorts' mean, median, and institutional level of support from one's own scores. This indicates the variations from individual institutions as well as from the collective scores of the cohorts.

Step 4. Variance factors. List those factors which contribute to your differences from total cohort scores and from individual institutional scores. This information, available from their literature, provides a more complete understanding of programmatic differ-

ences and data results between your institution and those in the cohort group. Utilize information from the preliminary review of their programs to assist in this process.

Step 5. Practice analysis. Break out and analyze the relevant component parts of the academic advising received by your orientation students. The obvious initial part is the reported customer (student) satisfaction as aggregated from those students who completed the evaluation instrument with the question, "The academic advising I received was..." There are, however, many other component parts that contributed to this summary student evaluation that can be reviewed; e.g., cost, revenues to cover cost, support in relation to other functions, efficiency, effectiveness, cycle time (the time an activity begins to the time the activity ends), quantity (as it relates to cycle time), communication, evaluation, and the satisfaction of internal customers such as faculty and advisors.

Step 6. Discrepancy detail. Describe the reasons that any significant discrepancy exists between your institution and the others. This combines all the above steps. The fuller the explanation and detail, the richer the ultimate results will be.

Step 7. Best practices considered for change. Describe alternate ways for enhancing the functional components associated with academic advising which can be derived from direct comparisons with cohort members. The focus should be on the causes that allow other institutions to achieve better results.

Step 8. Action plans. After determining the reasons for lower scores, outline tactical and strategic actions needed to modify one's current campus operational procedures. Identify a realistic goal for improvement of scores and the desired score from the next year's orientation students. For example, a new target benchmark of students reporting "The academic advising I received was excellent" might be 75%, an increase of 20 percentage points over this year's hypothetical score of 55%. Specificity about costs and personnel responsibilities should be included. A highly detailed plan of action increases the potential for achieving the desired target, which should become the driving force for the next year's orientation program. In this way, a new and enhanced baseline for future performance is established.

Step 9. External review. To insure the integrity and credibility of the steps above, it is suggested that persons other than those primarily responsible for orientation review the results of this benchmarking process. Informed faculty, advisors, students, and other affiliated administrators are possibilities.

Summary

The above *Performance Indicator Process Benchmarking* provides a means to look beyond the actual benchmarks for causes that yield better results. In this way, unexpected quality improvements become the future's enhanced and expected baseline on cam-

pus. The results obtained become the driving force for process improvement on one's campus. This format harnesses the power of benchmarking in a non-threatening manner that will lead to continuous improvement of programs and services for our campuses' orientation programs and students.

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ARTICLE

Student Affairs: A Mission Unto Itself?

Richard H. Mullendore

The text of this essay was derived from a speech to the 1997 Mississippi Chief Student Affairs Officers Conference; thus, it is written in an informal style. This article is meant to provide a wake-up call to our profession as we enter an era that will be unlike any other. We must link ourselves to the institutional academic mission, focus on student learning, and prepare for reengineering and other quality/efficiency efforts.

Higher education is under siege at the present time. Faculty are being attacked, student affairs is being attacked, and research on students indicates that they are not meeting the expectations of their employers either. What I would like to do in this essay is establish a framework in which we explore the role of faculty, gain some understanding of today's students, provide some insights regarding student affairs, and then discuss the implications of this material relative to our own direction in collaboration with academic affairs.

In a book entitled *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education* (commonly known as the Wingspread Report), it is noted that higher education is out of touch with society; it is provider driven; it is institution centered and not student centered; that the best faculty rarely see freshmen; and that the "American imperative for the 21st century is that society must hold higher education to much higher expectations or risk national decline" (Wingspread Group, 1993, p. 1).

At a recent fundraising conference, I was listening to a highly respected, retired professional in the field of student affairs talk about fundraising, and he was asked about the relationship with academic affairs and whether there is some conflict when trying to fundraise when that side of the house is also engaged in this activity. His comment was, "To hell with academic affairs". Many of us, at some point in our careers, have probably wanted to utter those words, but have never had the courage to do so. The statement, however, was made with so much force behind it that I flinched when I heard it, and I was concerned about the tone of voice that was utilized.

Faculty in this country are currently under considerable fire. A 1993 *Wall Street Journal* article entitled "College Teachers, the New Leisure Class" indicated that faculty throughout the country teach an average of 10 hours a week, and this average is considerably inflated because it includes the full time community college instructors who average 15-16 hours. Faculty spend about four hours a week on research and scholarly writing, and they spend no more than eight hours a week counseling students or attending meetings. Faculty also report that they prepare for one hour for each hour of classroom teaching. If you add up those hours, on an average one could conclude that faculty mem-

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