EDITORS' NOTES

Declining confidence in the academy, combined with increasing scrutiny of higher education by funding agencies, legislators, and the public has compelled academic leaders to improve the extent to which their colleges and universities are meeting goals. The Wingspread Group on Higher Education report (1993), for example, asserted that "Public confidence in the 'people running higher education' has declined as dramatically with respect to education leaders as it has with respect to the leadership of medicine, government, and business" (p. 6).

Taylor and Massy (1996) suggest that given the extraordinary challenges facing higher education, governing boards and senior leaders of educational institutions need to develop new ways to demonstrate the accountability of higher education. They stress that institutions of higher education need strategically developed indicators that "provide an honest assessment of how an institution is doing and where it is heading" (p. xi). They also suggest that appropriate and realistic benchmarks will "enable decision makers to assess an institution's strategic position through comparative analysis" (p. xii).

Benchmarking, a tool that has been used for years in industry, is one approach that higher education leaders can employ to measure the extent to which institutional goals and objectives are being met. To do so effectively, institutions will need to ensure that they are comparing themselves with the proper benchmark institutions. Rush (1994, pp. 84–85) indicates that benchmarking attempts to answer the following questions:

- How well are we doing compared with others?
- How good do we want to be?
- Who's doing the best?
- How do they do it?
- How can we adapt what they do to our institutions?
- How can we be better than the best?

Academic leaders who employ benchmarking techniques must make sure that they compare themselves with select institutions that have similar characteristics. Discussing the importance of benchmarking with appropriate institutions, Upcraft and Schuh (1996, p. 241) stressed that "The key here is to choose institutions, functions, and processes which are comparable to your own." Such dimensions as institutional control (public or private), mission, Carnegie classification, and region of the country are examples of factors that could influence the selection of peer institutions.

The institutional mission can affect "all aspects of the day-to-day institutional life and the future growth and development of the college or university" (Barr, 2000, p. 25), so accurately identifying that mission is imperative in benchmarking. For example, it would make no sense to compare the admissions practices of a public institution that uses an open admissions policy with a selective independent college that relies heavily on SATs.

This volume provides multiple perspectives on the use of benchmarking in higher education. The authors present a conceptual overview and organizational examples of how benchmarking can be used in colleges and universities. Our expectation is that the reader will develop an appreciation of benchmarking as an administrative tool, including a greater awareness of its strengths and limitations. We also hope that administrators or faculty members in higher education will be able to develop their own strategies for using benchmarking.

In Chapter One, Marya Doerfel and Brent Ruben present a comprehensive view of benchmarking. They include best-practice approaches to organizational assessment and improvement in higher education, and they conclude with lessons that can be gleaned from the benchmarking process.

John Schuh describes the use of the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) in Chapter Two. As Schuh demonstrates, the IPEDS relational database can be useful for making informed comparisons of institutions of higher education.

Chapter Three, by Loren Loomis Hubbell, Robert Massa, and Lucie Lapovsky, discusses the use of benchmarking in managing enrollment. Using a case study, they illustrate how benchmarking can help administrators develop strategies for planning and implementing admissions and pricing practices.

In Chapter Four, Robert Secor describes how joining the Big Ten influenced the use of benchmarking at Penn State; it meant more for Penn State than intercollegiate athletic competition.

Richard Novak explores the use of benchmarking in distance learning in Chapter Five. Given the growing popularity of distance learning, Novak stresses that creating meaningful benchmarks is particularly important not only for institutions, but also for regional accreditation associations.

In Chapter Six, Robert Barak and Charles Kniker describe how governing boards can use benchmarking to provide direction for colleges and universities. They include a number of examples from several states.

Robert Mosier and Gary Schwarzmueller discuss the use of benchmarking in student affairs and focus on issues related to student housing in Chapter Seven. They provide contemporary institutional examples of how benchmarking has influenced administrative practice at many institutions.

In the final chapter, Barbara Bender considers the role of campus leaders in the benchmarking process. She notes that without the commitment of college and university leaders, any attempt to address accountability issues through benchmarking will be futile.

The authors provide a wide range of ideas and concepts pertaining to benchmarking. As higher education leaders respond to more demands of the academy, effective benchmarking can make a difference in the decisions pertaining not only to budget allocations, but also to the existence of academic programs. We hope that this volume will help institutional leaders consider the ways that benchmarking can be used to influence the planning, implementation, and evaluation of activities to enhance the quality of programs and services in contemporary higher education.

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Editors

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