

## Benchmarking

Benchmarking is the process of comparing your program to the best practices as evidenced from the work in comparison programs. The result of the process typically results in the establishment of minimum standards (i.e., “Benchmarks”) for achievement.

A benchmark is a surveying term referring to established measurement used to determine new measurements for mapping future work. Thus, a benchmark, at its base, is a process of determining “a standard by which an item can be measured or judged” (Schofield, 1998, p. 13). To be clear up front, what educational benching marking is NOT is a specification of a singular performance standard for all students or professors. Just as a singular standard for home plumbing would often be inappropriate for various conditions, any singular standard for education would undermine the very values of education. Thus, be forewarned that people misuse “Benchmarking” as a political totem for jeremiads (bitter laments) against educators.



### **Educators must rise above deficient rhetoric.**

The calls for educational benchmarking came with the late 20<sup>th</sup> century quality management movement (Camp, 1989; Hussey, 1995). Most attribute the start of that movement to the Xerox Corp. Some thirty years into the quality management movement by 2015, most every organization has a quality management program of one sort or another. Not surprisingly, there is an entire cottage industry of consultants and software programs to service the quality management movement. Some prefer to use the term ‘change management’ in place of ‘quality management.’ Regardless, the key idea is mostly to focus more on **improving processes** in place of a singular accounting of costs and products. Naturally, educational experts around the globe see a process orientation as a natural fit with educational institutions: Education does not lean toward simplistic accounting of costs and widgets.

### **How can we establish benchmarks?**

**When preparing a rubric**, educators often use the term “benchmarks” to refer to the minimum standards for passing an assignment. Some authors prefer that rubrics start at the minimum. Most, however, also include descriptions of failing student work. The real question is: Where did you get those standards? The best option is to consult with colleagues at comparison schools to arrive at what you agree would be discipline standards for student work on common assignments.

**When comparing programs**. The key is to be able to establish what is common and what is unique. The goal for developing benchmarks for program comparisons is to balance between having a unique vision and being consistent with your discipline. There are a number of ways to argue for how your program is both consistent with the discipline yet novel in the approach.

Warning: Attempts to reduce benchmarking to a singular indicator or two (such as institutional ranking or graduation rate) foster a false impression that those indicators are the sum and substance of benchmarking.

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