

FEATURE

New Benchmarking Assessment for Student Activities

By Joseph Pica and Darlena Jones, Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (MO)

The dramatic increase in assessment in student affairs has gained even more momentum during the past year. Every academic and student affairs division is being pressed to provide evidence of how their efforts contribute to the quality of a student's educational experience. Resource allocation decisions are more and more becoming dependent on the ability of program administrators to prove their impact, as well as their efficiency. During the past seven years, the Association for College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I), the Association for College Unions International (ACUI) and the Association of Fraternity Advisors (AFA) joined with Educational Benchmarking (EBI) to offer assessments to their members. The assessments generate the information they need to provide evidence of their contribution to the educational mission and improve their performance over time. This year, the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) is joining its fellow student affairs professional organizations in offering benchmarking assessments to its members.

New Assessment for Student Activities Programs

The first initiative in this partnership was the development of the NACA/EBI Student Organization Leader Assessment. This assessment was designed to measure the learning outcomes for students who hold positions of leadership in student activities organizations. This NACA/EBI Student Organization Leader Assessment was piloted last spring and is being made available to all student activities organizations this fall. This new benchmarking assessment will provide student activities professionals with the information they need to:

- Demonstrate their contribution to the educational mission
- Support acquisition of resources
- Continually improve the impact of student activities on the college experience

Principles Behind the New Benchmarking Assessment

Design and Analysis for a High-Quality Assessment

NACA and EBI created a credible quality instrument that provides an accurate understanding of the impact of

leadership positions on student development. The outcomes of this survey were designed to answer the following important questions:

- **How do the leaders of student organizations view their leadership experience?** This survey utilizes *Leadership Reconsidered* standards that measure outcomes of a student leadership experience. A full analysis, including factor and question means, is automatically provided.
- **Do all students perceive your program the same way?** The survey collects demographic and profile information from each respondent to better understand sub-populations' perceptions of their learning experience.
- **What are the differences in leadership experience among student activity categories?** Analysis provides insights on the leadership experience by allowing comparisons within student activity categories.
- **In which areas should your school invest time and money for greatest improvement?** The assessment identifies which aspects of leadership experience contribute most to student development. This analysis identifies for schools where they should invest time and energy to improve the value of the leadership experience.
- **How can your school measure improvement?** Continuous improvement is driven by continuous assessment. Each subsequent assessment that a school conducts will provide student activities' professionals with the feedback they need to evaluate the effectiveness of past initiatives and inform the development of new initiatives. Longitudinal analysis and trends are provided.

Challenge of Long Held Beliefs

Benchmarking studies provide a comprehensive internal and comparative evaluation of performance serving to identify strengths and weaknesses. Educators (and others, as well) have a tendency to overestimate their strengths and underestimate their weaknesses. Little progress can be made when performance evaluation is left to a debate based solely on experience and anecdotal evidence.

Benchmarking studies provide comprehensive, credible results to guide and motivate those in a position to have the greatest impact on quality improvement. When professionals review benchmarking results, inevitably two types of conclusions are reached.

First, a good percentage of the results reinforce what professionals already believe, based on their previous education, training and experience in the field. This falls under the category of "we knew this all along." This is to be expected from professionals who have years of experience. The difference is that now there is credible, comprehensive, comparable evidence to support what was previously opinion or supposition.

Second, professionals are inevitably presented with results that challenge their long-held beliefs. These results are typically questioned because the evidence is contrary to long-held assumptions. Once the credibility of the results has been established, professionals face the challenge of integrating the new information into their overall view of performance. These results typically have the greatest impact on the improvement process. Credible results provide evidence for professionals to rethink their assumptions about strengths and weaknesses. It requires them to incorporate new insights into a revised perspective of problems and opportunities.

Benchmarking results challenge previously held beliefs and challenge professionals to address the issues most critical to improved efficiency and effectiveness.

Informed Decision-Making

Few organizations have unlimited resources to invest in all aspects of their operation. Each year, educators are faced with making resource allocation decisions that will result in the accomplishment of their mission. One of the major barriers to change is the inability of managers to shift resources from historically established budget lines. Stakeholder benchmarking studies can provide information that details the level of performance as well as the importance of factors to stakeholders' perceptions of quality. Identifying low performance factors that have great impact on perceived quality allows managers to focus their attention and deploy their resources in the most efficient and effective manner. It prioritizes for the decision-maker where an investment of resources will have the greatest impact on improving performance in the eyes of key stakeholders.

Resource allocation decisions are more and more becoming dependent on the ability of program administrators to prove their impact, as well as their efficiency.

It is essential to understand both areas of strength and weakness and the importance of the factors to overall satisfaction of stakeholders. For example, the factor with the lowest performance score may not be the factor that is most important to constituents' overall satisfaction. By identifying the factors that are predictors of overall satisfaction in order of importance, educators are able to identify exactly where their resources will have the most positive impact on performance. Simply stated, it is possible for benchmarking studies to identify where managers should invest their resources to have the greatest positive impact on performance. Solid evidence of performance and identifying which factors are important for improving quality provide managers with the evidence they need to shift resources.

The results will provide you with meaningful analysis that permits quick understanding of major findings. In the first few minutes of review, you should know where change is needed to improve your overall program. More in-depth review of each individual factor, question and demographic will provide a deeper understanding to enhance your planning process. The assessment provides findings:

- That confirm your current beliefs
- That challenge your current beliefs
- On issues that are important to your campus (e.g. academics, demographic differences, etc.)
- That identify areas where change will improve the effectiveness of your program

- That identify areas for celebration (e.g. progress made, areas in which you excel compared to others)

Value of Benchmarking

Benchmarking is a process that provides perspective on the meaning of your assessment scores by providing comparisons between your program and other similar programs. Consider these benchmarks:

- **Benchmarks Comparing to Similar Programs:** These benchmarks reveal how your program compares to other similar programs. A mean score of 4.53 on a 7-point scale may be a cause for celebration when compared to other programs that scored lower. On the other hand, that same score could also become a challenge to improve if your program is performing lower than others.
- **Benchmarks Comparing to Aspirant Programs:** These benchmarks reveal how your program compares to other programs that you aspire to be like.

Value of Longitudinal Trends

Assessment leads to the development of an improvement plan based on the findings. Follow-up assessments permit you to determine if the action taken has moved you in the right direction. Longitudinal comparisons give weight to arguments of needed improvement and also provide evidence of good performance. A regular cycle of assessment helps to keep you on track.

Motivation of Staff

Even the most well-intentioned faculty and administrators become frustrated and discouraged when they receive little feedback regarding the impact of their efforts. Benchmarking motivates staff in four ways:

1. **It reinforces performance.** Evidence of good performance is an opportunity to congratulate and reward staff for a job well done, serving to reinforcement and motivate staff to maintain and improve performance.
2. **It identifies mission critical factors essential for quality improvement and provides staff with evidence of where their efforts will have the greatest positive impact on improving performance.** Benchmarking results identify for staff the areas that are most important for improving overall performance on mission critical factors. Identifying areas where the performance is below that of peers/competitors has the effect of challenging the staff to improve performance by tapping into their natural competitive nature.
3. **It provides meaningful performance comparisons.** Comparative results with selected peers remove all doubt that it "can't be done by anyone else better than we are doing it." With evidence that others perform at a higher level, staff typically rise to the challenge and commit themselves to improvement.
4. **It provides continuous assessment.** With a continuous benchmarking process, staff members come to know what needs to be improved and recognize how and when their performance will be assessed in the future. Knowing performance will be measured and evaluated over time has proven to be a powerful motivator.

Creation of Action Plans

Describing performance is not enough; the results analysis for the NACA/EBI Student Organization Leader Assessment will identify the factors that, if improved, will lead to greater student development. This in turn will enable student activities professionals to create action plans that detail the initiatives to implement.

Although it may seem logical that raising low scores will increase the effectiveness of your program, that is often not the case. You must be guided by the portion of your assessment that identifies the areas that have the greatest impact on the overall effectiveness of your program. Improving in those areas will improve your program.

The Priority Matrix summarizes the main findings of the NACA/EBI Student Organization Leader Assessment on a single page. In this report, all factors are categorized into one of four areas:

- **Top Priority:** Factors that have high impact on overall effectiveness but are lower performing than the goal value that is established.
- **Maintain or Improve:** Factors that have high impact on overall effectiveness and your performance is higher than the goal. Factors in this area can still be improved but are already performing very well.
- **Monitor:** Factors that have little or no impact on overall effectiveness and performance is low. Monitor these factors to ensure that they don't decline, but don't expend precious resources in these areas.
- **Maintain:** Factors that have low or no impact on overall effectiveness but your performance is higher than the goal value. Consider moving resources from these areas into areas that have greater impact on overall effectiveness.

From this report, resource allocation can be made that places resources into the areas that have the most impact on overall effectiveness.

Leveraging Results for Positive Change

Conducting an assessment and simply reviewing the results does little to improve your program. You must implement an improvement plan and use the results to drive change. The following are some suggestions for using assessment findings for continuous improvement.

- **Share the results:** Share the information with staff, supervisors and students. Simply offer the findings alone, rather than your conclusions, and ask others to comment on why they believe students responded as they did and how improvement could be made.
- **Focus on what is most important:** Focus on areas that have the greatest impact on the overall effectiveness of your program. Help others understand the need to put efforts into those areas. Gain their commitment to support change and enlist their help in developing ideas.
- **Establish improvement goals:** Using assessment findings, establish specific improvement goals for the coming year. Seek approval of the goals using the evidence from your assessment to support your plan.
- **Design a plan:** Combine your results with the input and advice you have collected to develop and implement an improvement plan.
- **Monitor implementation:** Work closely with others to put the plan into action. Establish a timeline for progress and check and assess progress often.

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- **Reward performance:** As your plan succeeds, share the credit.
- **Reassess:** Conduct your assessment again to confirm progress and collect additional information for future improvement. Celebrate successes!

With Assessment Comes Empowerment

Participation in the NACA/EBI Student Organization Leader Assessment can lead to program improvement, but it's not always easy. Doing what you've always done will only get you the same results. In order to improve, you must first be willing to change. High quality assessment gives you the power to dispel myths, provide evidence, and point the way to positive change. Change is possible when you are empowered to act on solid evidence instead of react to assumptions and misinformation. You have the power to decide. The NACA/EBI Student Organization Leader Assessment was designed to provide you with information to make decisions and allocate resources to have a direct positive impact on student activities.

To learn more about the NACA/EBI Student Organization Leader Assessment and other EBI assessment tools contact Melanie Monteleone, Project Director (mmonteleone@webebi.com), or visit: www.webebi.com.

About the Authors

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