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# NATIONAL BENCHMARKING AND ACCREDITATION

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Using Benchmarking Data  
for Regional Accrediting



National Community College  
**Benchmark Project**

[www.nccbp.org](http://www.nccbp.org)

# Using Benchmarking Data for Regional Accrediting



*The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality. Accrediting agencies, which are private educational associations of regional or national scope, develop evaluation criteria and conduct peer evaluations to assess whether or not those criteria are met.*

---U.S. Department of Education



## Importance of Using Benchmark Data in Accreditation Reports

“The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality. Accrediting agencies, which are private educational associations of regional or national scope, develop evaluation criteria and conduct peer evaluations to assess whether or not those criteria are met.” – U.S. Department of Education

The goal of accreditation is to ensure quality education, but how do institutions demonstrate that their initiatives have met the mark? Benchmarking data is ideally suited to illustrate those “acceptable levels of quality.” It can be used to show:

- Areas where your college excels over its peers
- Improvement over time
- Justification for choosing specific quality improvement initiatives
- Progress on Key Performance Indicators

## How Data Can Inform Accreditation Reports

Although each regional and professional accrediting body develops its own criteria, some requirements intersect. All regional accrediting agencies require that colleges and schools provide evidence of institutional effectiveness. In this white paper, we will focus on that criterion of institutional effectiveness and how benchmarking data can help develop your accreditation case.

## REGIONAL ACCREDITORS

Accrediting agencies are organizations (or bodies) that establish operating standards for educational or professional institutions and programs, determine the extent to which the standards are met and publicly announce their findings. These include both regional and national or specialized accrediting agencies. The largest of the accrediting entities are the 6 regional accrediting bodies who encompass the vast majority of public, and not-for-profit and for-profit private educational institutions in its region.

**Higher Learning Commission (HLC)**  
[www.higherlearningcommission.org](http://www.higherlearningcommission.org)

**Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)** [www.msche.org](http://www.msche.org)

**New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)**  
<http://cihe.neasc.org>

**Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS)**  
[www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org)

**Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC-WASC)**  
[www.accjc.org](http://www.accjc.org)

**Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)**  
[www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)

The SACS resource manual defines “institutional effectiveness” as “the systematic, explicit, and documented process of measuring performance against mission in all aspects of an institution.”

“Institutional effectiveness” is a common term within the higher education community, but the role it plays in decision-making varies across academia. The term was coined by the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SACS) in the 1980s as part of their description of accreditation requirements. The SACS resource manual defines “institutional effectiveness” as “the systematic, explicit, and documented process of measuring performance against mission in all aspects of an institution.”

While the language may vary, all regional accrediting bodies now have criterion standards language based on concepts of institutional effectiveness. Examples include:

- “provides evidence of improvement based on analysis” (SACS)
- “analysis of best practice models and benchmarks applied to improvement efforts” (Middle-States)
- “learns from its operational experience and applies that learning to improve its institutional effectiveness, capabilities, and sustainability, overall and in its component parts.” (HLC)
- “institution systematically collects and uses data necessary to support its planning efforts and to enhance institutional effectiveness” (Northeast)
- “institution identifies performance gaps, it implements strategies, which may include allocation or reallocation of human, fiscal and other resources, to mitigate those gaps and evaluates the efficacy of those strategies” (WASC)
- “demonstrates clearly defined procedures for evaluating the integration and significance of institutional planning, the allocation of resources, and the application of capacity in its activities for achieving the intended outcomes of its programs and services and for achieving its core theme objectives” (Northwest)



## Benchmarking Data

Relevant benchmarking data can help you respond to these requirements.

The largest benchmarking project for community colleges, NCCBP takes a “balanced scorecard” approach to community college benchmarking, offering a diverse set of more than 150 metrics. Since 2004, NCCBP has collected data from more than 260 community and technical colleges each year.

Over the past decade, the NCCBP benchmarks have been revised by an advisory board of institutional researchers and college executives to reflect the unique character and missions of America’s two-year colleges.

Other possibilities for finding benchmarking data certainly exist. Professional organizations, publications, and exploring peer college websites are all ways to obtain benchmarking data. In addition, some colleges may do their own benchmarking research by surveying their peers.

## Case Studies Using NCCBP Data

NCCBP data reports allow member institutions to choose both national and regional data reports, define their peers based on institutional criteria, and generate a best performers report and summary charts.

Using institutional effectiveness as a guide, the case studies below illustrate how NCCBP data can support student success, resource allocation, and curriculum decisions. Note that the school names featured in the cases are fictitious; however, the implications for the use of data are genuine.

- ***Student/student services staff ratio***

Middle-America Community College redesigned its budgeting process to better align its resources to its core mission and to areas of the college earmarked for enhancement.

Student services, specifically counseling and advising, was one area of concern and potential enhancement. The college used a national report generated from the NCCBP benchmarking study to determine goals for appropriate staff funding levels and staff ratios to enhance this area of the college. The college also evaluated the national report on student satisfaction and engagement to measure overall success on several new initiatives.

The National Higher Education Benchmarking Institute (Benchmarking Institute) is the most prominent and largest provider of community college benchmarking and peer comparison services in the country.



- ***Distance Learning Outcomes***

East Coast Community College has experienced a surge in online course offerings and enrollments over the past four semesters, but school-wide data revealed a dip in student success and completion rates. The question for NCCBP: was this dip in student success indicative of a national trend in online education at community colleges?

The provost requested that institutional research run an NCCBP peer report to include data from both regional and national community colleges of comparable size. The college found that their student success and completion rates were well below regional and national norms. As a result, it launched a series of academic improvement strategies to support students in the online environment and faculty who are transitioning their teaching to online courses. Using NCCBP data, the college continues to monitor the success of these initiatives and their impact on student success and completion rates.

- ***Student Performance***

Somewhere South Community College faculty went through an extensive curriculum revision of its general education core. The new curriculum was implemented in the last academic year, and the curriculum revision committee wanted to assess student success rates in core academic skill areas identified in the curriculum revision. The committee examined regional-only peers to evaluate comparative data on student performance.

Overall data indicated strong student performance in most of the core academic skills, with one minor exception. The committee took this data back to the faculty for discussion and deliberation on curriculum implications. The curriculum committee continues to monitor student performance through regional peer data.

## NCCBP Benchmarks

NCCBP members can create national, regional and peer comparison reports based on the following normed benchmarks:

### Completion and Transfer for Full-Time and Part-Time Students

- Certificate and degree completion rates
- Transfer rates
- Performance at transfer institutions

### Retention and Persistence

- College-level course retention and success rates
- Developmental course retention and success rates
- Fall-spring and fall-fall persistence rates

### Student Performance

- Success rates in core academic skill areas
- Developmental student success in first college-level courses
- Institution-wide grade information
- Distance learning outcomes
- Distance learning sections and grade distributions

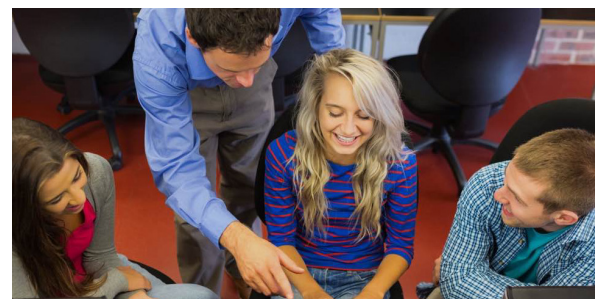
### Satisfaction and Engagement

- Noel-Levitz, CCSSE, and ACT student satisfaction and engagement ratings
- Educational goal attainment

### Job Market

- Career program completers' employment status
- Employer ratings
- Business and Industry productivity

NCCBP delivers a robust peer-reporting and national norm-referencing tool that allows community colleges to compare their performance against their peer institutions, identify opportunities for improvement, and communicate their own school's commitment to students and academic mission.



NCCBP offers ideal opportunities to add support for accreditation initiatives through data designed to support decision making on campuses.



### Other Institutional Effectiveness Metrics

- Average credit section size
- Cost per credit hour and FTE student
- High school graduate enrollment rates
- Human resources statistics
- Instructional faculty load
- Market penetration rates
- Minority participation rates
- Student/faculty ratio
- Student/student services staff ratio
- Training expenditures per employee

As the previous examples demonstrate, NCCBP data can be used to support evidence and data-based decision making in areas such as:

- Changes to campus policy
- Campus-wide improvement strategies
- Allocation of resources based on college goals and mission
- Changes to strategic plans/goals
- Changes to data collection techniques
- Setting expectations based on peer comparisons

The result: NCCBP delivers a robust peer-reporting and national norm-referencing tool that allows community colleges to compare their performance against their peer institutions, identify opportunities for improvement, and communicate their own school's commitment to students and academic mission. In addition, a best performers report shows the institutions with the highest scores on the various benchmarks and provides an executive report for college presidents and chancellors. In total, NCCBP offers ideal opportunities to add support for accreditation initiatives through data designed to support decision making on campuses.



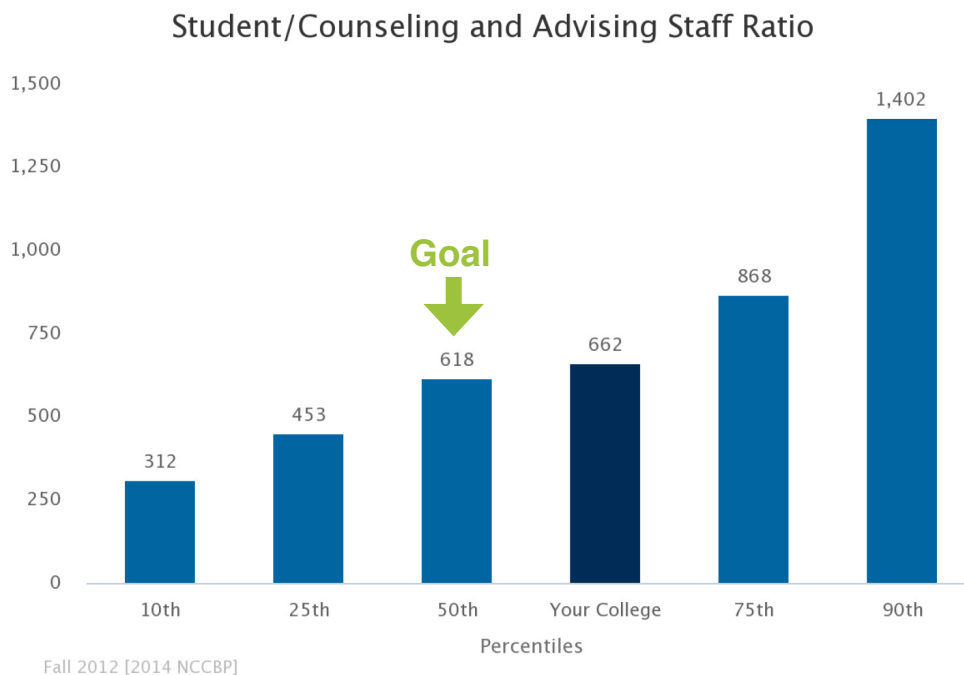
## Samples for Presentation of Data

NCCBP allows its members to pull the tables and charts directly from the website and incorporate them in accreditation reports or internal documents. Below are some samples on how to do this.

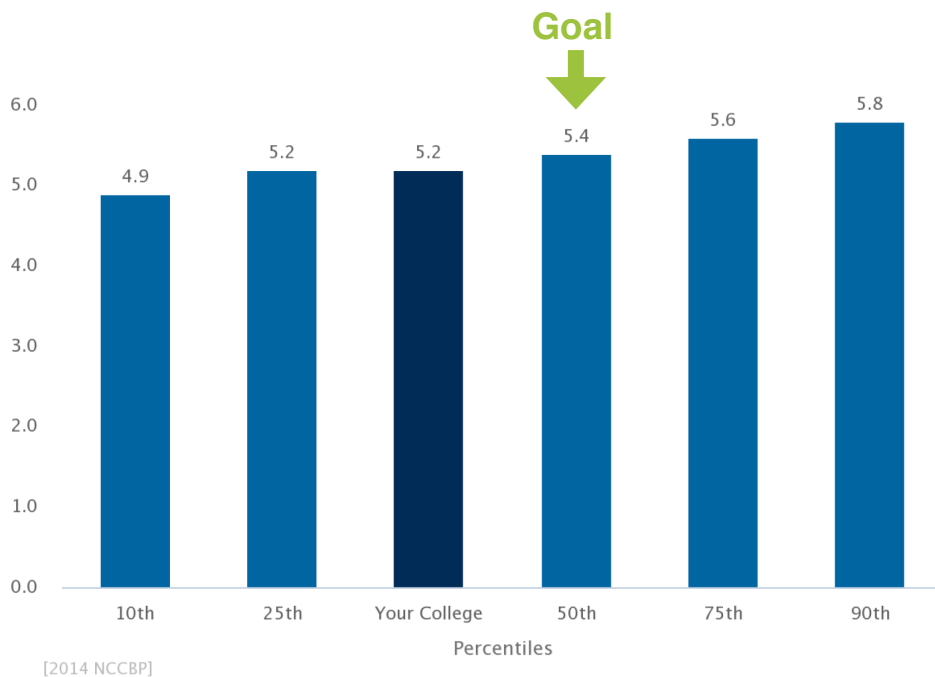
- **Setting Goals--Student/student services staff ratio**

Middle-America Community College determined that in 2012 it had 662 students per FTE staff in counseling and advising. Using the data from NCCBP, the college established a target that focused on the 50th percentile. The goal was to move to a model that would have one counseling/advising staff member for every 600-618 students. Looking at their Noel-Levitz student satisfaction with academic advising/counseling showed a score below the median, so a corresponding goal of improving their score to 5.4 was set.

Using benchmark data to help set goals ensures that the goals are achievable. Using a combination of metrics (student/staff ratios and satisfaction) gives a fuller picture of the service. The charts show the national aggregate data from the 2014 NCCBP and where Middle-America College fits into the picture. As Middle-America CC devises initiatives to effect changes to their counseling and advising programs they can use the NCCBP data to track their effectiveness.



## Noel-Levitz: Satisfaction with Academic Advising/Counseling



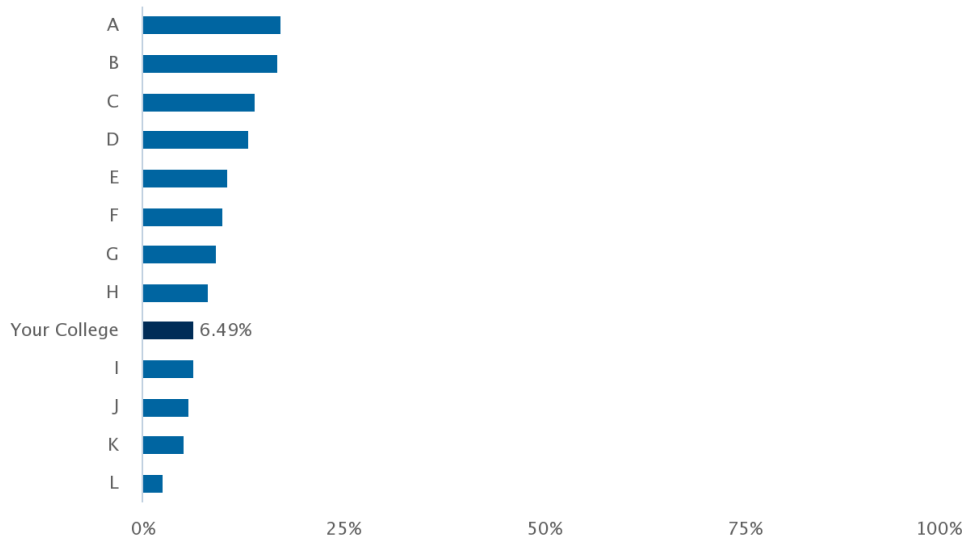
### • *Illustrating Changes Over Time – Distance Learning Outcomes*

East Coast Community College ran an NCCBP report on Distance Learning Outcomes on 2010 data and again on 2012 data after academic improvement strategies were implemented to improve student success and completion rates. The same set of peers were selected, which included public, suburban colleges that had enrollments of 5,000 to 7,000 students, similar to East Coast Community College's 6,329 students.

In 2011, East Coast Community College implemented additional advising and engagement initiatives related to their online course offerings. The 2012 data shows that the initiatives implemented were successful. Using benchmark data gives credibility to the results in a way that just reporting your own data could not. Moving completions up less than 1% doesn't sound like a big accomplishment until it is shown compared to the peers.

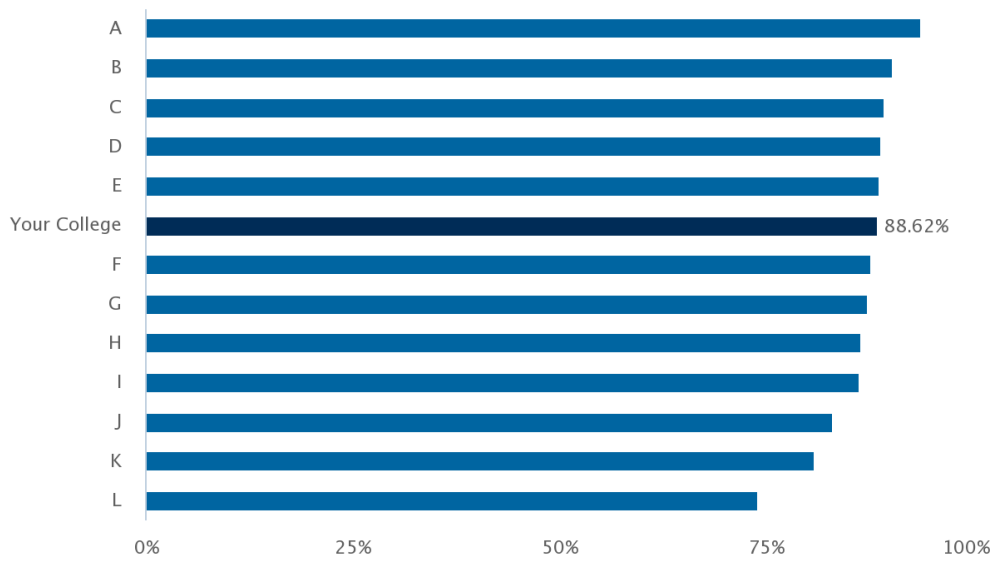
In many cases using peer comparison data gives more pertinent benchmarks. In this example, selecting peers similar in size, location, and in control (public, private or proprietary) gets a peer group that offers about the same amount of distance learning opportunities.

Distance Learning: % of Credit Hours



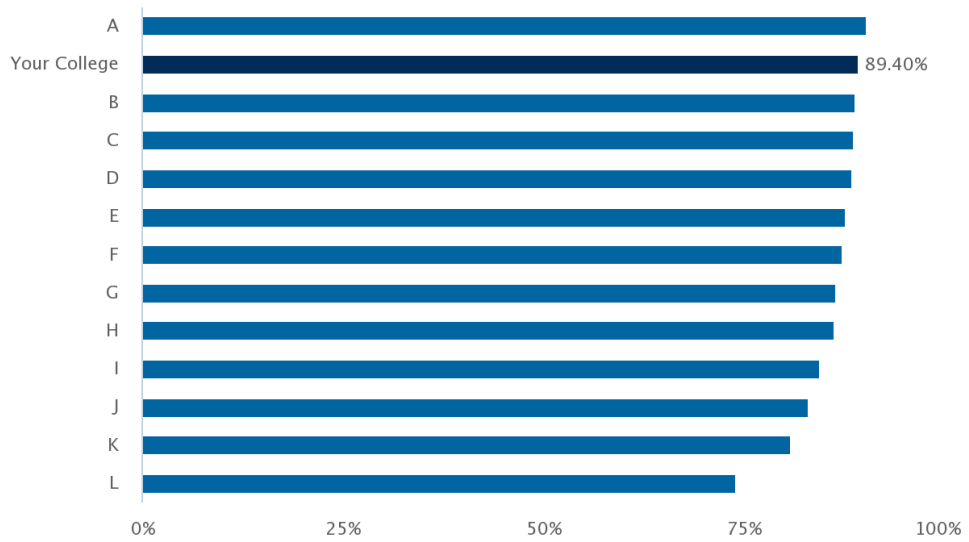
Distance Learning: % Completers

2010



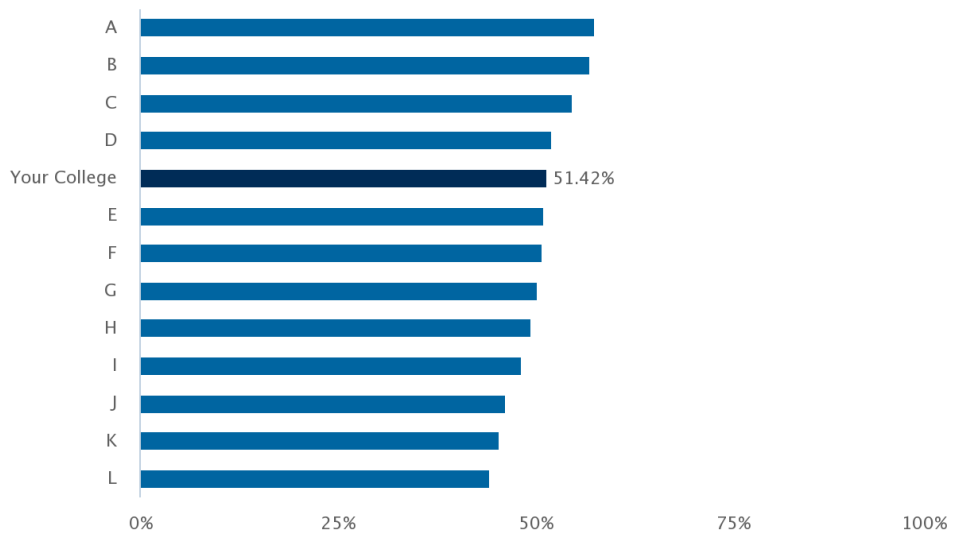
2012

Distance Learning: % Completers

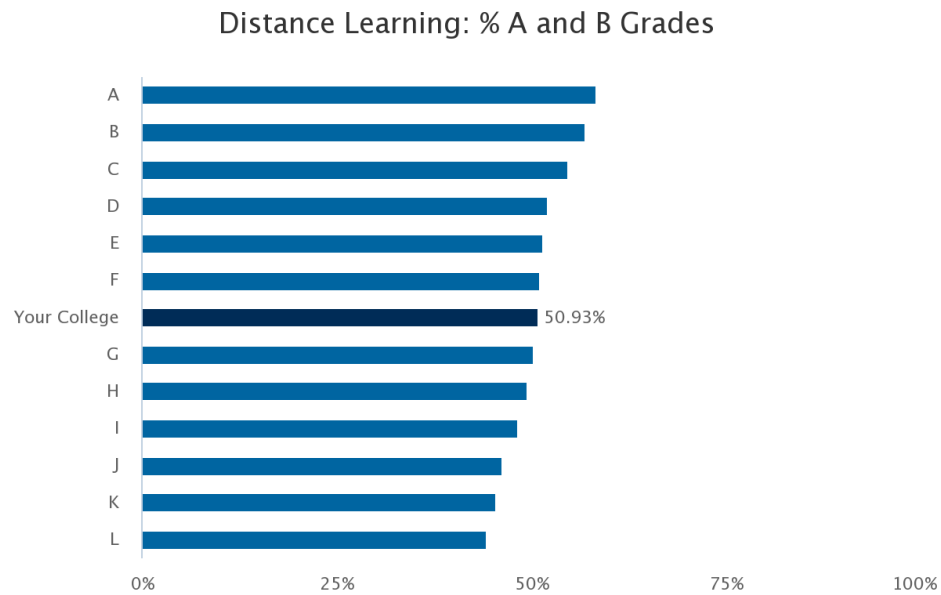


2010

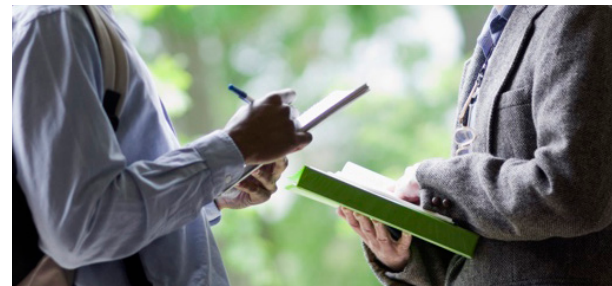
Distance Learning: % A and B Grades



2012



In many cases using peer comparison data gives more pertinent benchmarks. Selecting peers similar in size, location, and in control (public, private or proprietary) gets a peer group that offers about the same amount of distance learning opportunities.



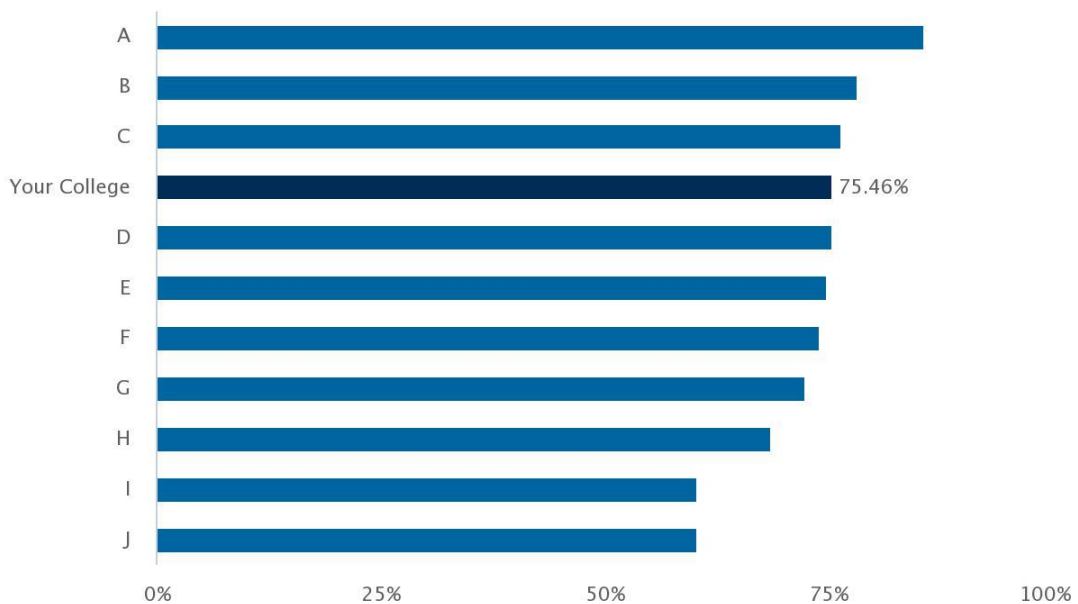
- ***Showing Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement--  
Student Performance: Using the Peer Comparison Tool***

The NCCBP Peer Comparison Tool can be used in a variety of ways. Colleges can choose peer groups by name or by demographic characteristics.

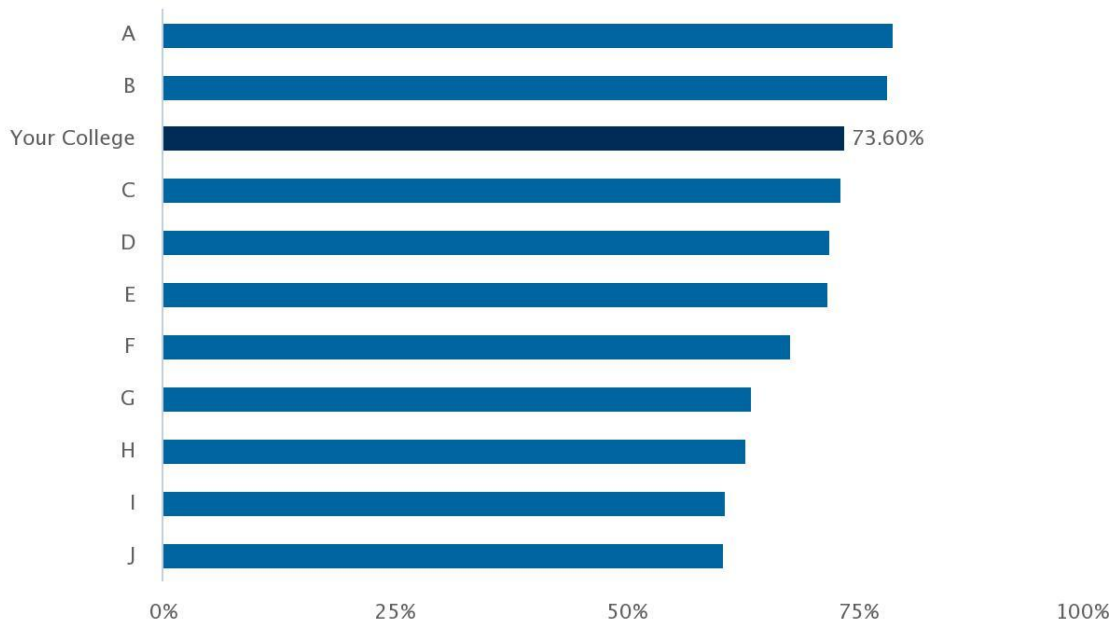
For example, Somewhere South Community College, a public college located in a very small southern town, wanted regional-only peers. It seeded its peer group with colleges in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina. To refine its group, peers were also limited to rural and public colleges.

Copying the charts directly from the NCCBP to use in accreditation documents allows Somewhere South CC to illustrate that it has excellent success rates in the core academic skill areas of Composition I and Algebra compared to its peers. However, the report shows the college needs improvement in speech classes where student success rates are well below the median of peers. Using benchmarking encourages transparency by showing areas where a college excels and where it needs improvement.

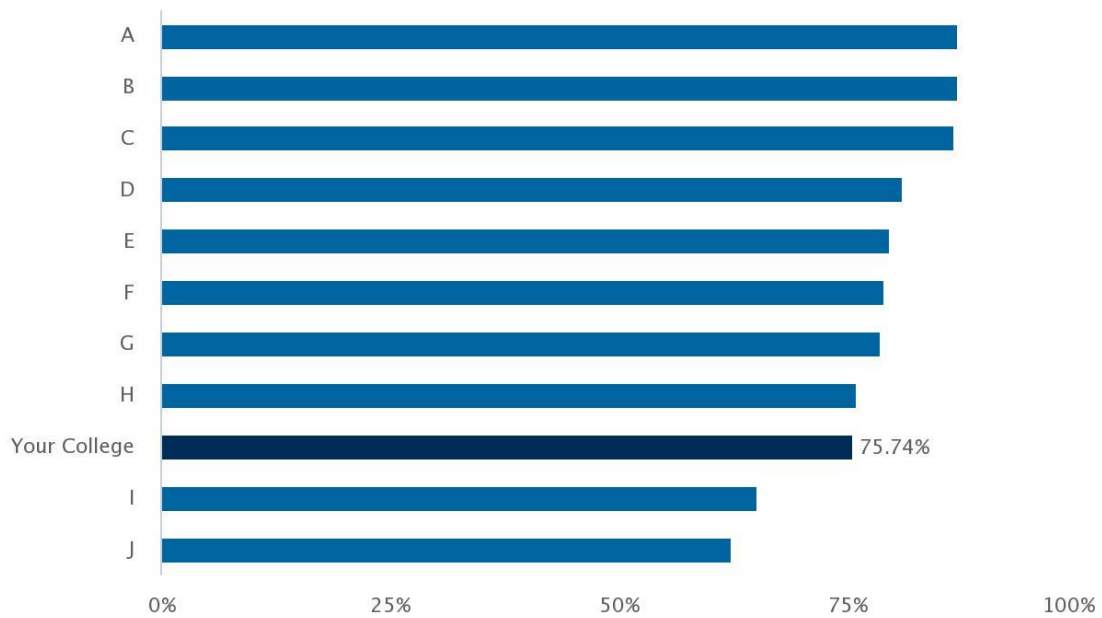
Comp I: Enrollee Success Rate



## College Algebra: Enrollee Success Rate



## Speech: Enrollee Success Rate



Benchmarking allows colleges to tell the whole story of their institutions to regional accrediting bodies and address compliance requirements with federal and state reporting. By providing the metrics, benchmarks and data, the college can leverage the institution's story of continuous quality improvement.

**Here are several reasons to participate in the benchmark projects:**

- Benchmarking reporting can assist the campus in data-driven decision making.
- Benchmarking data can be used to discover opportunities for improvement and set goals.
- Benchmarking data provides institutional level benchmarks established by regional and national trends.
- Benchmarking reports provide credible answers to external constituencies, such as trustees, state boards, legislators, and funders.
- Participation in benchmarking projects demonstrates transparency to students, faculty, parents, and the community.
- Benchmarking data provides community colleges with a proven and relevant yardstick to help them measure their progress and chart their direction.





## National Higher Education Benchmarking Institute

The National Higher Education Benchmarking Institute (Benchmarking Institute) is the most prominent and largest provider of community college benchmarking and peer comparison services in the country.

The Benchmarking Institute was founded at Johnson County Community College, in Overland Park, Kansas, in 2003. Initial funding to create the institute was obtained from the Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). This funding established "The Kansas Study," which has since been renamed "The Cost and Productivity Project." The Cost and Productivity Project provides discipline-level data and benchmarks on instructional costs and workload. Colleges use benchmarks for staffing plans, academic program planning and assessment, and documentation of compliance for accreditation purposes.

At the same time, the National Community College Benchmark Project (NCCBP) was conceived with financial support from Johnson County Community College. Today, the Benchmarking Institute is self-funded by memberships to pursue its research projects. In total, the Benchmarking Institute has worked with more than 450 community colleges. In addition to the Cost and Productivity Study and the NCCBP, the Benchmarking Institute initiated the Workforce Training Benchmark Project and its most recent project, Maximizing Resources for Student Success.

Two additional projects provide benchmarking opportunities for community colleges. The Workforce Training Benchmarking Project collects national metrics on the efficiency and performance of the non-credit divisions. The Benchmarking Institute's newest project, Maximizing Resources for Student Success, was developed with funds from a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant and researches community college costs at an activity level.



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Dr. Sheri H. Barrett is the director of the Office of Outcomes Assessment at Johnson County Community College. Dr. Barrett's career spans large multi-system institutions, four-year liberal arts, and the community college environments. Dr. Barrett is active in accreditation serving as a peer evaluator for both regional and specialized accrediting agencies.

**Dr. Lou Guthrie, director, National Higher Education Benchmarking Institute**

Dr. Lou Guthrie is the director of the National Higher Education Benchmarking Institute at Johnson County Community College. Dr. Guthrie has extensive benchmarking and business effectiveness consulting experience with Fortune 500 companies and international financial and development institutions. Dr. Guthrie has higher education experience as an assistant professor at Oregon State University, and as an instructor at Virginia Tech and Longview College.





**[www.nccbp.org](http://www.nccbp.org)**

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