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Benchmarking in American Academic Libraries

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## Benchmarking in Libraries

Reduced funding and customer demand for the best possible service require libraries to strive for continual improvement. Benchmarking is a useful tool for evaluating current performance and finding new solutions. Benchmarking can be done to find a new procedure or improvements to an existing procedure. Benchmarking can also be used to set a standard or goal for service or productivity. This paper will outline the steps necessary to carry out a benchmarking project.

### *Beginning a Benchmarking Project*

Before beginning a benchmarking project the library must clearly establish which process will be studied. Establishing a plan for how study results might be used is also critical. Many benchmarking studies are done to provide information to funding agencies. Data from the 2001 Medical Library Association benchmarking data is suggest for use in supporting funding for new services, such as consumer health services. Data from this study is also suggested for use in defending the floor space allocated to libraries, defending the number of staff employed in libraries, and for placing a value on journal collections (New York-New Jersey Chapter of the Medical Library Association, 2003). The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NTIS) Research Library carried out a benchmarking study in 2001 to prove the need for increased funding to maintain journal collections. Key factors used to support the argument for increased funding were average expenditures per customer, items purchased per customer, and cost per journal. These figures were then compared to data from peer institutions, the NTIS library showed the lowest spending per customer, the lowest number of items purchased per customer, and the highest journal cost (Deutsch and Silcox, 2003).

When benchmarking is used to support or defend a specific item, deciding what factors to study becomes fairly simple. When the goal is to improve service overall, however, identifying the process to study can be more difficult. Processes which negatively impact customer satisfaction are prime candidates for a benchmarking study (Besterfield, Besterfield-Michna, Besterfield, and Besterfield-Sacre, 2003, p. 211). Customer satisfaction can be assessed using comment cards, customer questionnaires or surveys, or focus groups. (Besterfield et al. 2003, p. 62-67). It is important not to overlook internal customers when analyzing customer satisfaction. Library employees other libraries in a library system are important internal customers. Interactions between internal customers can impact the quality of service experiences by external clients, the library's users (Besterfield et al., 2003, p. 58).

The library's collection of materials is critical to providing customer service. Benchmarking can be used in in collection development to compare collections at different libraries. OCLC's Automated Collection Assessment and Analysis is an excellent tool for comparing collections (OCLC 2002). The libraries involved in a collections assessment project can either choose to set individual benchmarks for each library or to develop the shared collection of a group of libraries as a whole. Comparing library collections with accepted benchmarks is also a good way to ensure that quality materials are provided to customers. Widely accepted selection aids, such as the Brandon/Hill selected lists, can be used as a benchmark to evaluate collections. The Brandon/Hill list allows the librarian to identify 'core' titles that should be in all health sciences collections (Mount Sinai School of Medicine, 2003).

#### *Collecting the Data*

Once the process to be benchmarked has been identified, planning can begin for the data collection phase of the benchmarking project. The process to be studied must be thoroughly