

Benchmarking for Academic Excellence

First in 2009 Coordinating Council's Benchmarking Committee
May 2003

Miami has responded to the challenge of First in 2009 Goal 8 (Benchmarking) by asking every academic department, program, and office to use benchmarking concepts and practices to evaluate its own overall success, develop plans for achieving improved outcomes, and assess the effectiveness of its plans and practices.

Evaluating Overall Success

In the first phase of this extensive effort, all 59 academic units identified six to ten peer and aspirational programs. This process enabled them to gauge their effectiveness relative to successful programs nationwide. It also helped them identify their own strengths and opportunities for improvement. Endorsing this benchmarking practice, University Senate changed Miami's policy for academic program review to state that when a department is being reviewed at least one external evaluator should be from the department's peer or aspirational programs.

Developing Benchmarking Plans that Adopt Best Practices

Next, 55 of Miami's academic units were asked to prepare three or more benchmarking plans that adopt best practices in ways that relied solely on the unit's existing resources. (Four departments are on a delayed schedule for this task because they are reorganizing.) In response, 98% (54) of the units created a total of 218 thoughtful and inventive plans.

- 86% (187) of the plans are targeted at achieving First in 2009 Goals 1 through 5, which speak to the heart of the University's academic mission.
- The remaining 14% (31) of the plans focus on other ways of increasing effectiveness.
- Through support provided during the process, many departments substantially increased their knowledge of benchmarking concepts and practices.
 - In their first submissions, only 27% of the units presented fully developed plans.
 - 69% have now submitted more complete plans; the other 4% are still revising.
- Although it's too early to assess the results of most plans, some have already produced significantly improved outcomes. Examples include the following.
 - The Honors Program increased by 30% the number of Honors students completing theses.
 - In the Richard T. Farmer School of Business Administration, the Buck Rodgers Leadership Program expanded opportunities for students and increased student membership by 70%.
 - The Physics department tripled applications to its graduate program, cut its admission rate in half, and had 100% of its admission offers accepted (up from 40% in 2002).
 - The First-Year Experience Committee of the First in 2009 Coordinating Council benefited greatly from benchmarking while designing the new Choice Matters program, which helps first-year students make intentional decisions about their academic and extracurricular commitments.

Assessing Plans and Practices for Continuous Improvement

Two major goals of the academic benchmarking initiative are to increase Miami's attention to assessment and to enhance the University's assessment expertise. For each of their benchmarking plans, departments were asked to create assessment criteria and methods for determining the plan's effectiveness. Next year, a new task force will extend Miami's assessment and benchmarking capacity by developing a University-wide plan for assessing student learning outcomes, an essential step in the continuous improvement of Miami's already strong academic programs.