SETTING BENCHMARKS OR TARGET GOALS

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND, OFFICE OF ASSESSMENT

At UNE, academic programs and co-curricular units typically either set their own benchmarks or use their accreditor's benchmarks or licensure exam rates as standards for programs with specialized accreditation. Whichever the benchmarks used, UNE encourages programs and co-curricular units to annually reflect on their benchmarks, modify those target goals as needed based on the performance data, and challenge themselves to set aspirational goals that, with more time and effort, they can meet.

ROBUST AND RIGOROUS BENCHMARKS MAY INCLUDE TWO COMPONENTS:

1. The proportion of students that the program or co-curricular unit aims to meet the target goal
2. The baseline percentage or score the program or co-curricular unit aims to achieve.

When using direct measures, consider this formula for setting a benchmark: ____% of students will achieve ____% or higher on the rubric criteria of [the assessment measure] that is aligned with the student learning outcome.

Here's an example:

- 85% of students will achieve 75% or higher on the rubric's written communication criteria of an essay that is aligned with student learning outcome #1 (Students who successfully complete the program will be able to communicate effectively in a professional environment through written reports).

When using indirect measures, including those that assess students' self-reported sentiment, consider this formula for setting a benchmark: ____% of students will select [either "agree" or "strongly agree"] on [the assessment measure] that is aligned with the student learning outcome.

Here's an example:

- 85% of students will select either "agree" or "strongly agree" in question #3 on the post-orientation survey that is aligned with student learning outcome #3 (First-year students who successfully complete orientation will be able to identify on a campus map the university support service offices, including Library Services, Student Academic Success Center, and Student Access Center).

HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN SETTING THE BENCHMARK'S TWO COMPONENTS:

1. On the Proportion of Students that the Program or Co-Curricular Unit Aims to Meet the Target Goal

Suskie (2018) argues, "For basic, essential learning goals, aim for almost all student work to meet your standard" (p. 301). In other words, for the key learning outcomes, strive for all students to achieve the stated level of learning that the program or co-curricular unit defines in the second component of the benchmark. "Some learning goals are so basic, essential, or vital to health and safety that we want absolute assurance that *every* student graduates with minimally adequate achievement of them" (p. 301).

LEVY (2021) IDENTIFIES THREE BUCKETS TO CONSIDER WHEN SETTING TARGET GOALS:

TARGET GOALS	DEFINITIONS
EXPECTATION TARGET	A target goal, grounded in historical data, that the program or co-curricular unit expects to achieve.
ASPIRATIONAL TARGET	A practicable goal, based on slightly lower baseline data, that the program or co-curricular unit aspires to achieve.
STRETCH TARGET	A more challenging goal that will require more of the program's or co-curricular unit's focus and effort to achieve.

2 On the Baseline Percentage or Score that the Program or Co-Curricular Unit Aims to Achieve

Choosing a source to compare your students' scores depends on a variety of situational factors. Suskie (2018) identifies the following five standard types, and their advantages and disadvantages. She advises starting with local standards, and then adding other standards over time as "multiple perspectives give a more balanced picture of student learning" (p. 297).

STANDARD TYPES	DEFINITION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
LOCAL STANDARDS	Previous or current scores from learning activities or courses at this institution.	Faculty have had input, buy-in, and ownership of the standards.	Hard-to-measure outcomes, especially those that evaluate students' self-reported sentiment, may result in unreliable data that would thus provide unreliable standards.

STANDARD TYPES	DEFINITION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
EXTERNAL STANDARDS	Scores are set by, e.g., disciplinary associations, accreditors, licensure or certification exams.	• External associations have done the work to set the standard. • Some audiences (e.g., employers, policy makers) view these standards as more credible.	External standards may be aligned with published tests or additional learning outcomes that don't align well with the internal curriculum.
PEER COMPARISONS	Scores from internal or external peers who had the same or different learning experiences, e.g., in-person v. online format, full-time v. part-time students.	Provides an additional and sometimes fresh perspective.	• Students from peer groups might not have had similar experiences. • Peer program or college might have a different mission or learning outcomes, or used a different rubric or measure.
VALUE-ADDED COMPARISONS	Internal pre- and post-test scores that measure learning from the time students entered the program to when they completed it.	• Documents learning changes over time that can show students' educational value added or the learning gaps. • Can also provide benchmarks if programs don't have local, external, or peer comparisons.	• Employers may find this data less compelling than external standards. • The value-added method doesn't account for student growth as a result of external factors outside the program (e.g., off-campus job, club involvement). • The error of margin of the value-added method tends to be larger. • The method typically misses measuring transfer students.

STANDARD TYPES	DEFINITION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
HISTORICAL TRENDS	Peer scores from prior successive classes (typically used for baseline data).	Useful in measuring the effectiveness of interventions made in a course or program.	Programs may have difficulty in collecting meaningful data amid changes over time of students, curricula, and pedagogies.

SOURCES:

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