

# Key Practices Supporting PDP Success: PDP Benchmarking for Continuous Improvement

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## About FirstGen Forward

[FirstGen Forward \(FGE\)](#) is the center for first-generation student success— your premier source for evidence-based approaches, data-informed strategies, professional development, and research. Together, we are building community and belonging through the FirstGen Forward Network, knowledge creation and evidence-based practices, and thought leadership and advocacy, transforming higher education and the student success landscape guided by a first-gen lens.

## Acknowledgement and Purpose

This initiative was made possible through generous support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, whose commitment to advancing equity in higher education aligns with the goals of FirstGen Forward and the [Postsecondary Data Partnership \(PDP\)](#). As part of a comprehensive effort to strengthen data-informed practices, this project encompasses a range of activities designed to help institutions close equity gaps and improve student success. One key component is a series of case studies examining how colleges and universities leverage PDP data to support first-generation students. By highlighting the experiences of Metropolitan State University of Denver and Tusculum University, this research surfaces effective strategies, common challenges, and opportunities for scaling impact. These insights will inform future resources, training, and tools that empower institutions to maximize the potential of PDP in driving equitable outcomes.

## What is Benchmarking?

Benchmarking is a structured process of comparing an institution's performance with peer institutions to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. In the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP), benchmarking uses standardized metrics and shared definitions to help institutions measure student progress, identify equity gaps, and evaluate institutional effectiveness. By transforming raw data into actionable insights, benchmarking enables institutions to guide decision-making with evidence rather than assumptions.

### Benchmarking within the PDP is designed to:

- Evaluate progress toward strategic goals.
- Inform data-informed policy and practice decisions.
- Highlight areas in need of improvement.
- Advance equity and student success through evidence-based analysis.

Benchmarking with PDP transforms data into direction, helping institutions lead with insight rather than intuition.



# Why Benchmarking Matters

Benchmarking is essential because it provides context for institutional performance. Without comparison points, data can be misleading or incomplete. Benchmarking helps institutions:



## Identify Performance Gaps

By comparing key metrics against top-performing peers and national norms, institutions gain a clearer sense of where improvement is needed. Gaps that may be invisible in internal-only reviews become more apparent through comparative analysis.



## Drive Continuous Improvement

Benchmarking produces insights that inform targeted improvements. Institutions can refine internal processes, improve student support, and strengthen operational efficiency by focusing on areas revealed through comparisons.



## Adopt Best Practices

High-performing institutions often model effective strategies that can be adapted. Benchmarking allows institutions to learn from successful peers, accelerating progress and strengthening institutional capacity. It is important to note that these practices are not one-size-fits-all. Institutions should thoughtfully adapt best practices to fit their unique mission, student population, and overall context.



## Set Realistic, Evidence-Based Goals

Benchmarking gives institutions a grounded understanding of what is achievable. Evidence-based targets align institutional efforts with student success, mission, and operational context.

# Benchmarking as a Continuous Improvement Cycle

Benchmarking is not a one-time task; it is an ongoing cycle of analysis, action, monitoring, and refinement. The PDP provides a structured, repeatable process that ensures institutions measure progress consistently, evaluate results over time, and adapt strategies based on evidence.

## Six Step Process

- 1 Establish objectives
- 2 Select benchmarking partners
- 3 Gather data
- 4 Compare and analyze
- 5 Review and refine
- 6 Track and repeat

Each step builds toward a culture of continuous improvement, with Step 6 feeding directly back into Step 1.

## Step 1: Establish Objectives — What to Benchmark Matters

Benchmarking begins with clarity. Before diving into comparisons, institutions must decide what they want to measure and why, because the right metrics drive meaningful insights into actionable change.

### Key Principles:

- What you benchmark is just as important as why you benchmark it.
- Leadership should be actively involved in selecting metrics aligned with strategic goals.
- Focus on metrics that reflect student success, equity, and institutional performance.

### PDP Benchmarking Metrics Include:

- Credit Accumulation Rate (CAR) - Are students earning credits at a pace that supports timely completion?
- Credit Completion Ratio (CCR) - Are students successfully completing the courses they attempt?
- Outcomes - Are first-generation students completing their degrees in six years?
- Retention and Persistence - Are students staying enrolled and progressing?
- Transfer - How effectively are students transitioning between institutions?

Benchmarking these metrics provides a multifaceted picture of student progress and institutional performance. Institutions may choose to focus on a single priority metric or examine multiple measures together, depending on their goals. In practice, many institutions of higher education find value in reviewing several metrics in combination to identify patterns, surface equity gaps, and understand relationships between measures.

That said, the most effective approach is intentionality. Institutions should align their selection of benchmarking metrics with their strategic plan, student success goals, and equity priorities. For example, an institution aiming to improve on-time graduation may focus on CAR and CCR, while a college emphasizing transfer pathways might prioritize transfer and persistence metrics. Using institutional priorities to guide metric selection ensures benchmarking efforts are purposeful, manageable, and actionable.

## Step 2: Select Benchmarking Partners — Choose Wisely

With more than 600 PDP institutions from all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico, peer selection is essential for meaningful benchmarking. You must select five institutions to benchmark against in the PDP, and the quality of your insights depends on the relevance of your comparison group.

### Key Selection Criteria:

- Geographic relevance: state, region, or service area
- Institutional type: 2-year or 4-year, public or private
- Student demographics: composition and equity priorities
- Strategic alignment: similar missions, challenges, or goals

### Common Pitfalls to Avoid:

- Selecting peers based on prestige rather than similarity. Choosing highly selective or high-profile institutions may seem appealing, but it often results in misleading comparisons and unattainable benchmarks.
- Overemphasizing a single characteristic (e.g., geography alone) without considering other contextual factors that shape student outcomes.
- Ignoring institutional mission alignment, which can distort interpretations of performance metrics.

Note: First-generation data is optional outside the FirstGen Forward Network, meaning not all institutions outside the Network include this variable.

Insight: Thoughtful peer selection ensures your benchmarking yields actionable insights, not just data comparisons.

## Step 3: Gather Data — Use What PDP Does Best

The PDP standardizes and visualizes data, supporting consistent measurement across institutions. Most institutions use PDP dashboards to track progress, identify equity gaps, and monitor outcomes over time, making it a powerful foundation for benchmarking.

### PDP dashboards allow institutions to:

- Access reliable, comparable metrics
- View cohort-based student outcomes
- Identify equity gaps using disaggregation by race/ethnicity, Pell status, enrollment intensity, and more
- Support actionable insights for planning and decision-making

This creates a strong data foundation for analysis in later steps.

# Interpreting, Acting, and Sustaining Benchmarking Results

## Step 4: Compare and Analyze — Turning Data into Insight

Benchmarking is more than collecting numbers; it is about interpreting them to uncover opportunities for improvement. This step matters because comparison reveals performance gaps, strengths, and trends. Analysis helps institutions understand why differences exist and how to respond.

### Institutions should ask:

- Where do we outperform or underperform peers?
- What groups of students are disproportionately affected?
- What institutional practices might explain these differences?

PDP dashboards support comparative and disaggregated views that reveal underlying inequities or progress patterns.

### How to Use PDP for Analysis:

- Leverage PDP dashboards to compare your metrics with selected peers.
- Examine disaggregated data to identify equity gaps across student groups.
- Look for patterns in credit accumulation and completion, retention and persistence, and outcomes.

Insight: Effective analysis transforms benchmarking from a data exercise into a strategic advantage.

# Step 5: Review and Refine — Making Benchmarking Actionable

Benchmarking becomes valuable when institutions discuss results collaboratively and refine strategies based on what they learn. This step ensures that data leads to informed action.

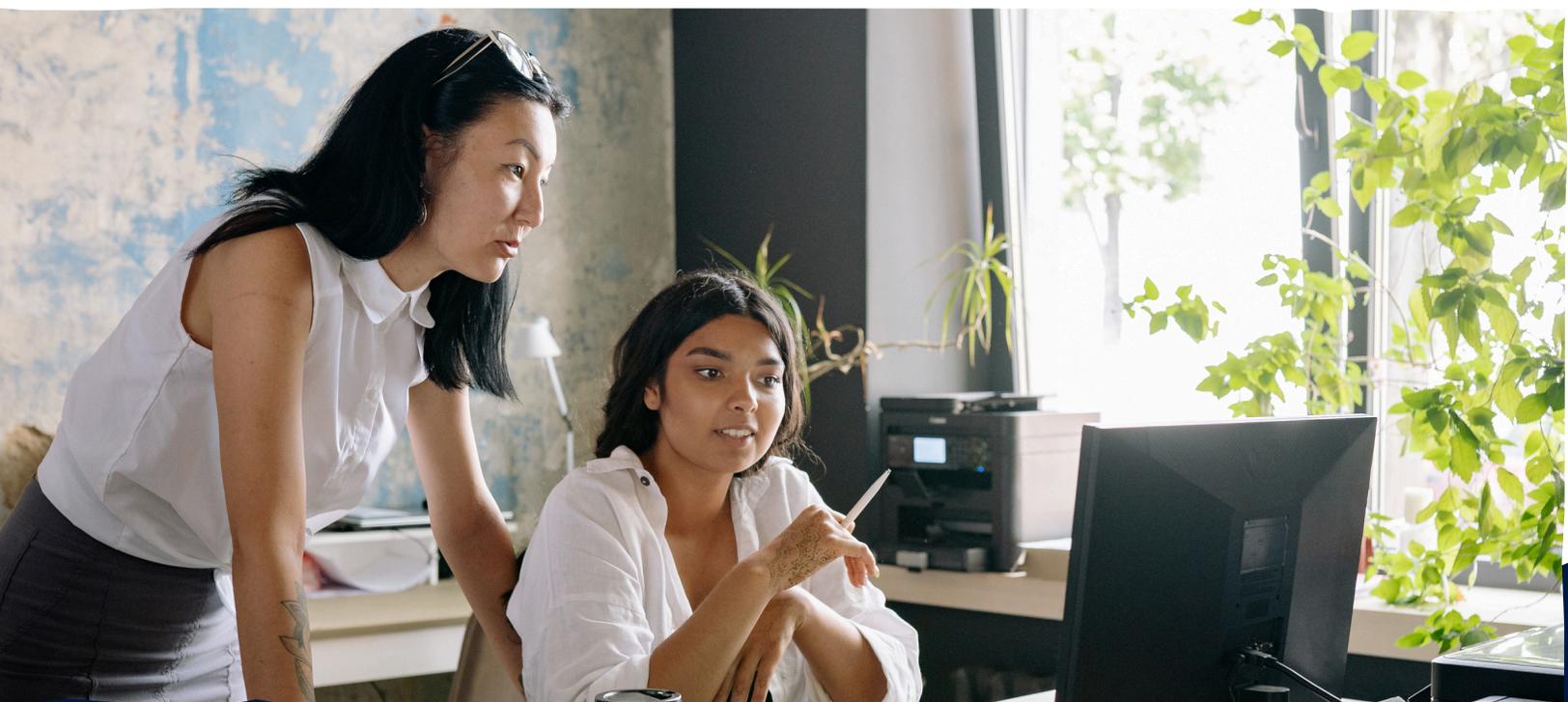
## Why This Step Matters:

- Data alone doesn't drive change, dialogue, and decisions do.
- Reviewing results helps identify what's working and what needs adjustment.
- Refining your benchmarking strategy ensures relevance and impact.

## Key actions include:

- Sharing findings with leadership, faculty, advisors, and student support teams
- Facilitating conversations about implications and opportunities
- Adjusting goals, peer sets, or metrics for relevance
- Documenting insights and action steps for accountability

This transforms benchmarking from a data exercise into a coordinated improvement strategy.



## Step 6: Track and Repeat — Benchmarking as a Continuous Improvement Process

Benchmarking is a feedback loop, not a finish line. Institutions return to PDP dashboards over time to monitor whether implemented strategies are improving outcomes.

### Tracking results helps institutions:

- Measure progress against goals
- Monitor changes across student subgroups
- Identify areas where adjustments are needed
- Strengthen accountability and institutional learning

Repeating the cycle ensures benchmarking remains adaptive and aligned with evolving student needs and institutional priorities. Step 6 naturally leads back to Step 1, where objectives are refined based on new insights. When institutions treat benchmarking as a living process, they build momentum for sustainable improvement.

## Conclusion

The PDP Benchmarking Process provides a robust, standardized, and equitable framework for institutions to understand their performance, learn from peers, and drive continuous improvement. When institutions engage fully in the six-step cycle, benchmarking becomes more than comparison—it becomes a tool for transformation, supporting sustained progress in student success, equity, and institutional effectiveness.