To Benchmark or not to Benchmark: Should We Do Peer Comparisons in Academic Library EDI Assessment?

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Introduction

Benchmarking can broadly be defined as "the act of measuring the quality of something by comparing it with something else of an accepted standard."[1] In general, definitions of benchmarking highlight the aspects of comparison and improvement that serve as the basis or main goal of the assessment approach.[2] This process of making comparisons across items based on a set of standards has been applied across a number of fields, including business and industry and higher education. While benchmarking is seen as a means of helping an organization improve, it does have its detractors, as concerns surrounding the benchmarking process, the selection of standards, and the use of findings have been noted. This conceptual paper delves into the potential application of benchmarking to a specific area in academic libraries: the assessment of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). This paper will address the role of benchmarking in academic libraries, the potential application to academic library EDI assessment, and implications for future academic library assessment practices.

Benchmarking in Higher Education

Benchmarking has long been used in higher education as a means of assessing higher education institutions, usually with the goal of making improvements.[3] Within the literature, the focus is often less on whether or not benchmarking is taking or should take place, but rather on

the approach being taken. All manner of approaches, including efficiency analysis trees,[4] data envelope analysis,[5] item response theory,[6] time-driven activity-based costing,[7] and alignment analysis,[8] have been applied to the benchmarking process. The focus of a benchmarking assessment can also vary, ranging from sustainability efforts,[9] energy usage, and emergency preparedness, to the assessment of specific programs and programmatic practices, such as management and engineering. While not a major focus of benchmarking, some efforts to benchmark EDI in higher education have been found. Most of these efforts appear to be for specific programs or disciplines, and not attempts to benchmark across institutions for EDI indicators.

Benchmarking in Academic Libraries

Academic libraries, as integral parts of higher education institutions, participate in benchmarking practices within their institutions. But more broadly, academic libraries have also engaged in benchmarking within the library and information science (LIS) field. Some benchmarking efforts are undertaken as part of research studies where groups of academic libraries are identified and compared across services, programs, or collections.[10] The three most known instruments that offer benchmarking assessment opportunities are the Academic Libraries Survey (ALS), administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and integrated into the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System;[11] the ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey, administered by the ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey Editorial Board;[12] and the ARL Statistics survey, administered by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).[13]

The ALS

The ALS has been in existence since 1966, administered by the NCES on a 3-year cycle through the Higher Education General System until 1988, shifted to IPEDS on a 2-year cycle until 1998, conducted independently every 2 years from 2000 – 2012, and reintegrated back into IPEDS in 2014 and placed on an annual collection timeline.[14] The current focus of ALS is on library resources (collections), services (circulation, ILL), and expenditures (salary & wages, materials, operations and maintenance) for academic libraries in the US, District of Columbia, and outlying areas, though only libraries with expenses of $100,000 or more provide extended details of expenditures in the survey.[15] Data previously collected related to staffing was moved to the broader IPEDS Human Resources section for institutions.

ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey

The ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey (AALTSS) has a history highly entwined with the ALS. Officially ACRL began publishing their University Library Statistics yearly in 1980, switching to odd years in 1988 to coincide with ALS collecting in even years.[16] In 1998 ACRL released annual survey results using an instrument from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), with a shift in 2015 to incorporate items collected on the ALS.[17] The current survey includes questions from the ALS and additional questions about academic libraries and library trends, with a new trend covered each year.[18] Unlike the ALS, where EDI indicators are not included, the trends and special questions section of the AALTSS have offered some opportunities to collect data on EDI indicators with the potential for benchmarking. Most recently, the 2024 special section focused on physical accessibility of library spaces;[19] though these special sections won't allow for long-term benchmarking as these topics may not be addressed again on a cyclical basis.

ARL Statistics Survey

The ARL Statistics survey dates back to 1908 and is the "oldest and most comprehensive continuing library statistical series in the United States and Canada."[20] Collected data focuses on ARL member libraries' expenditures, staffing, and service activities.[21] The data collected has been fairly steady over the years, with major changes in the survey coming in 2012 and recent efforts designed to help align the survey with other ARL programming and with key initiatives, including diversity and inclusion.[22] With this in mind, the most recent survey included an open ended question asking member libraries for suggestions on integrating EDI into the metrics in four areas, broadly including access, materials about historically underrepresented populations, recruitment of historically underrepresented populations into the field, and representation of historically underrepresented populations in information resources.[23] This appears to represent the first attempt to fully integrate EDI indicators into one of the more standardized sources of benchmarkable data about academic libraries.

EDI Assessment in Academic Libraries

As noted, EDI indicators are not a common aspect of major benchmarking opportunities offered to academic libraries. EDI assessment in academic libraries has traditionally been done either internally by individual institutions, or broadly as part of research projects. When done internally, EDI assessments tend to focus on collections,[24] organizational climate,[25] training,[26] and the library's physical and digital presence.[27] Within descriptions of completed EDI assessments, often shared in the literature as case studies, libraries typically detail not only the results of the assessment, but also the development of the instrument used to complete the assessment.[28] As noted by Morgan-Daniel et al., the creation of the assessment tool for a project to review inclusive language on their library's website, LibGuides, and signage was time consuming but with the benefit of creating a tool that could be generalized and used by others.[29]

However, the need to take time to create an assessment tool and the lack of standardized instruments for EDI assessment could serve as a deterrent for some academic libraries hoping to engage in EDI assessment.

ClimateQUAL, ARL's Organizational Climate and Diversity Assessment, does offer academic libraries one option for a large-scale evaluation of EDI aspects related to organizational climate,[30] but the instrument is limited to a focus on organizational climate – one aspect of EDI. And while the instrument is normed based on previous libraries that have completed the assessment,[31] this norming is designed to support interpretation of results,[32] rather than to offer opportunities for peer to peer comparisons.

The Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Self-Assessment Audit (DEISAA)

The Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Self-Assessment Audit (DEISAA) instrument was originally created by the author in 2017 for a medical library interested in assessing both their EDI efforts in terms of status (were they doing the work) and progress (were they moving forward with the work). The initial instrument consisted of six sections: strategy, structure, processes, people, rewards, and external efforts and two rating areas: status and progress. This version of the instrument (Version 1) was shared more broadly in 2018 as part of a pilot with eight academic libraries interested in testing out the audit for their own institutions. This pilot led to some changes in the instrument and the creation of Version 2 which featured the same six sections but only used one rating area that focused on just the status of the EDI activities. The change in the rating approach highlighted the instrument's potential use as a baseline tool. Extensive use of the audit with individual libraires resulted in the creation of the current version of the audit (Version 3) that includes two additional sections focused on accessibility for library users and accessibility for library employees.

Outside of the pilot study to test out the feasibility of the original instrument as an EDI assessment tool for multiple libraries, the DEISAA has not been used to compare different libraries' EDI efforts. The pilot study itself was not a true comparison of libraries' scores on the DEISAA, but rather an attempt to look at the interrater agreement within each piloting library. The interrater correlation coefficient (ICC) was calculated for each piloting library and these ratings were compared to determine whether the suggested process of having two to three employees complete the DEISAA independently would lead to reliable ratings for the library.[33] The pilot revealed poor agreement across raters, with ratings impacted by a number of factors, including position in the library and length of tenure.[34] The pilot also led to the current suggested process for completing the audit which includes all employees and relies on group discussions to reach consensus on ratings. No other attempts to compare ratings and scores on the DEISAA were considered until discussions with the Oberlin Group of Libraries reopened the possibility of the DEISAA serving not only as a baselining tool for an individual library, but also as a benchmarking tool for peer libraries.

The Oberlin Group of Libraries Project

The Oberlin Group of Libraries is a nonprofit organization of 88 liberal arts colleges and small universities in the United States who focus on discussing and sharing information around current issues, accomplishments, best practices, and challenges facing their libraries.[35] The Group relies on standing committees and working groups to complete many aspects of their work. One of those groups is the Diversity, Equity, and inclusion Working Group.[36] It was this group that reached out to the author in April 2023 with interest in the potential of the DEISAA as an auditing tool that the member libraries could adopt for their own use. An initial conversation firmed up the group's interest in utilizing the instrument and the group began to plan for the

process of adapting the instrument for their use. It was during the planning phase that the possibility of using the instrument to benchmark across the member libraries was raised as a possibility. In the author's consulting role, they were asked about the feasibility of benchmarking, sparking a deep dive into the literature around benchmarking and an in-depth consideration of the author's experiences with and knowledge of the DEISAA.

The Trouble with Benchmarking in EDI Assessment

The author's anecdotal response to using the DEISAA to benchmark for the Oberlin Group of Libraries' EDI audit project was negative. Based on the piloting experience with Version 1 of the audit, making comparisons for the sake of benchmarking would not make sense, and the literature offers some support for this response. An OECD benchmarking study of higher education performance across multiple countries found that some factors impacted the ability to make true comparisons, including level of country debt.[37] Though the OECD report suggested that indicators, including country debt, were comparable, the results were often contextualized around why some countries might struggle with higher education performance due to those comparable indicators.[38] As noted by the OECD project team, the ability to make comparisons often hinged on data being collected consistently and utilizing a common method.[39]

This common method of collecting data is an aspect of comparing EDI data that is currently missing, as there is no national or standardized way to collect this data. Currently there is not even an agreed upon set of EDI indicators shared by a large number of libraries, an issue shared by other fields.[40] Even though the DEISAA would offer a shared instrument for data collection, during the planning phases of the Oberlin project it was determined that some changes would be needed to make the instrument work for each library, and while each library would be focusing on EDI, each library would rely on their own definition of EDI, along with

other small changes in wording to align the instrument with the structures of the libraries and their home institutions. With these changes, benchmarking for future individual progress tracking would be possible,[41] but what about comparative benchmarking?

Limited Benefits of EDI Comparison

In standard benchmarking assessments, the indicators used for comparison are represented by concrete variables, measured at the ratio level, meaning they are quantitative and have a true zero point; and operationalized so that everyone agrees and understands what is being counted or measured. This allows the indicators to be compared across institutions, as the institutions are essentially collecting the same data, regardless of contextual factors, which may be important, but do not impact how the indicator is measured or counted. The impact of context on the usefulness of quantitative data has been noted in higher education contexts [42] and libraries. As noted by Buset et al. in their description of a health sciences libraries' benchmarking project, though they collected quantitative data to compare across their libraries, "Comparing numbers did not bring useful information into our project partly because numbers were extracted from different contexts."[43] When ISO standards were utilized, the libraries had more success with their comparisons.[44]

With an EDI assessment instrument like the DEISAA, contextualization is key. Quantitative data is collected on an interval rating scale rather than ratio, and while institutions may agree about the definition of terms found on the instrument, the ratings will be based on individual and group experiences within a specific institution. So, while libraries could compare their ratings on the DEISAA across different institutions, the difference between a rating of a 1 or a 2 on an item or within a section of the instrument won't actually tell the library that they need to improve in that area. It will just tell them that they are currently not putting as much

effort into that EDI activity compared to another library. Given that the level of effort will be dictated by a number of contextual factors, including missions and strategic plans, simply seeing a difference in numbers will not be useful. Similarly, two libraries with the same rating on an item will only see that they agree on the level of effort they are putting into that EDI activity, but what that effort entails is likely to be very different and only potentially seen in the additional qualitative data collected on the instrument.

If libraries do choose to utilize the DEISAA or other EDI-themed assessments for comparative benchmarking, the main thing to avoid is becoming defensive about their work when compared to others or to begin trending toward the average,[45] phenomena that have been noted with benchmarking assessments. Being told that you aren't doing as well in one aspect of EDI as another institution, on the surface could suggest a gap or area for improvement but could be construed as a sign of failure. Libraries need to dig deeper and explore the reasonings behind their lower scores. This more in-depth review could show the library that the reason they are not investing time in that particular EDI effort is due to the structure of the organization itself, and not due to a lack of interest. Depending on the context, there could simply not be a need for the library to engage in that EDI activity or collect data on that EDI indicator.

Next Steps & Implications

If LIS has a true interest in having libraries benchmark across EDI indicators, a much larger endeavor will be needed in order to make this possible. An initial decision will be needed to determine which EDI indicators could be benchmarked. Potential indicators related to EDI could include identity elements of library employees (race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, religion, socioeconomic status, relationship status, etc.), or focus on EDI within library collections, acquisitions, programming, exhibits, instruction, reference,

professional development, recruitment, and outreach.[46] Given that some of these areas are already broadly collected as part of established LIS surveys, pursuing integration of EDI benchmarking into these surveys, as ARL has started to do, could be one possibility.

Another possibility could be taking a different approach to benchmarking EDI assessment results that focuses on sharing rather than comparing, a process bolstered by careful selection of peer institutions.[47] When comparing the results of the piloting libraries in the Oberlin Group of Libraries EDI assessment project, some themes did arise that could help other libraries to know what to look for or what areas may be most of interest based on the audit. In particular, a need for more strategic assessment and improved communication were seen as common concerns across most of the libraries. This type of comparison could help to surface potential EDI trends so that other libraries could more easily identify key areas to focus on, especially given that the work of EDI can be wide-ranging and leave many wondering where to begin. Finally, utilizing ratings on an instrument like the DEISAA to identify libraries that may be excelling in some areas of EDI work could help to identify best practices that other libraries could consider for their own libraries. This type of benchmarking would not make comparisons to indicate where one library was doing better than another, but rather it would share suggestions for potential projects or approaches to projects that other libraries could consider if their organizational structure, mission, and goals aligned.

Conclusion

Attempting to benchmark EDI across academic libraries may prove to not be a viable option or a useful endeavor, though attempts to do so are arising. But experience suggests that the answer to the question "To benchmark or not to benchmark?" should be not. As noted by the OECD project, "…patterns of performance across different domains are unique to individual

jurisdictions, limiting the utility of overall system performance judgements across countries".[48] If we translate this to academic libraries, we should expect that patterns of performance across different libraries will be unique to individual institutions, which would limit the utility of making judgments about overall performance across libraries. But if libraries choose to focus less on comparing performance around EDI and more on sharing successes, communicating across institutions,[49] learning from each other[50] and building partnerships,[51] including identification of potential projects and processes for engaging in the work,[52] then a type of EDI benchmarking might be possible.

Notes

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