Identifying Peer Institutions: Utilizing the New Carnegie Classifications and Other Web Resources

By
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PACRAO -- July 2006

Extract: This article will discuss the new Carnegie Classifications and other web resources useful for identifying peer institutions. By selecting and tracking peer institutions on selected benchmark data assists enrollment professionals and the administration in understanding how your institution compares to peers on strategic enrollment indicators.

Identifying Peer Institutions:
Throughout the year enrollment professionals focus their creative and managerial energies on achieving institutionally approved enrollment goals (headcount, credits, net revenue, enrollment mix, etc.) for each term of the institution’s calendar. Once fall term instruction is underway, the moment comes when the administration seeks information on how effectively enrollment goals have been met and how the college measures up in comparison with its peer institutions. When identifying peers, it’s important to understand the focus for the comparison group, as more than one set of peer groups may be utilized by an institution. There are various kinds of peers, such as:

♦ Comparable: Similar institutional level (two-year vs. four-year), control (e.g. private not for profit vs. public) and enrollment profile characteristics.
♦ Aspirational: Institutions with similar institutional characteristics, yet are significantly different in several key performance indicators, such as significantly higher graduation rates or endowments.
♦ Competitors: Based on cross applications, institutions may have significantly different institutional characteristics, yet a significant percentage of your applicants choose to attend another institution.
♦ Consortium: If your institution belongs to a consortium, this may be another peer group for review.

For the purpose of this article, the term peer or comparable institutions will be used interchangeably. These institutions tend to share the same Basic Carnegie Classification (e.g. Master’s Institution vs. Associate of Arts) along with one or more of the other five Carnegie categories, in addition to similar graduation rates and enrollment mix (e.g. percent full-time vs. part-time).
During my review of potential peer institutions, the following web sites proved useful. This article will discuss each website and briefly, the type of data available. Websites to be reviewed:

1. Carnegie Classifications and select similar institutions
2. National Center for Educational Statistics (IPEDS)
3. Economic Diversity of Colleges

Carnegie Classifications:
http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=785

The Carnegie Foundation website provides detailed information on the new classifications that were initiated for 2006. During winter term institutions reviewed their initial classifications and provided feedback for any recommended changes. The information now available on the website includes all final adjustments made to the classifications. The data includes all eligible institutions, provided data was available. The classifications were based on 2003 and 2004 national data on institutional characteristics and activities from sources such as the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Science Foundation, and the College Board.

As you enter this website, first review how your institution is classified by clicking on “Lookup & Listings” and entering your institution’s name. The Basic Classification updates the previous Carnegie Classification, while five additional categories have been added to provide comparisons between types of institutions. The following chart provides the Basic Carnegie Classification (highlighted) and the five new categories, along with a brief description:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Basic Classification</td>
<td>New and expanded definitions for Associate’s Colleges, Doctoral-Granting Universities, Master’s Colleges and Universities, Baccalaureate Colleges, and Special Focus Institutions. Most of these general categories have various sub-groups, for example, Associate-Public-Rural-Small.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Undergraduate Instructional Program</td>
<td>The instructional program classification is based on three pieces of information: the level of undergraduate degrees awarded (associate’s or bachelor’s), the proportion of bachelor’s degree majors in the arts and sciences and in professional fields, and the extent to which an institution awards graduate degrees in the same fields in which it awards undergraduate degrees. For example, Balanced arts &amp; sciences/professions, some graduate coexistence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Graduate Instructional Program</td>
<td>The classification is based on the level of graduate degrees awarded (master’s/professional or doctoral), the number of fields represented by the degrees awarded, and the mix or concentration of degrees by broad disciplinary domain. For example, Single doctoral (education).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 4. Enrollment Profile
By grouping institutions according to the mix of students enrolled at the undergraduate and graduate/professional levels, this classification provides a bird’s eye view of the student population.

*E.g. Very high undergraduate, with less than 10% of the FTE in graduate/professions.*

### 5. Undergraduate Profile
This new classification describes the undergraduate population with respect to three characteristics: the proportion who attend part- or full-time; achievement characteristics of first-year students; and the proportion of entering students who transfer in from another institution.

*E.g. Medium full-time two-year. Fall enrollment data show 10–39 percent of undergraduates enrolled part-time*

### 6. Size & Setting
This classification describes institutions’ size and residential character. Because residential character applies to the undergraduate student body, exclusively graduate/professional institutions are not included.

*E.g. Large four-year, primarily residential. Fall enrollment data show FTE enrollment of at least 10,000 degree-seeking students at these bachelor’s degree granting institution; 25-49 percent of degree-seeking undergraduates live on campus.*

Understanding the instructional focus and enrollment profile at your institution provides the basic foundation for identifying and selecting comparable institutions for further review. Aside from the Basic Classification, the following categories were useful when reviewing Seattle Pacific University’s potential peer institutions, particularly when this information is tied to data gathered from other websites:

- **Undergraduate Profile**: The student profile at the peers needed to be similar to my institution in the percentage of full-time students and entering student test scores. This was important when comparing persistence and graduation rates (available via IPEDS).
- **Size and Setting**: Peers need to be of a similar size (3,000-3,999FTE) and be considered a residential campus.

#### Other Web Resources:
The following sites provide additional sets of data which may inform the decision on which institutions are your peers. In addition, these sites provide information useful for answering the question – how do we compare with others.

1. **National Center for Educational Statistics (IPEDS):**

The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), established as the core postsecondary education data collection program for NCES, is a system of surveys designed to collect data from all primary providers of postsecondary education. IPEDS is a single, comprehensive system intended to encompass all institutions and educational organizations whose primary purpose is to provide postsecondary education. The IPEDS system is built around a series of interrelated surveys used to collect institution-level data in such areas as enrollments, program completions, faculty, staff, and finances.
This website provides two views of the data collected.

- **Executive Peer Tool**, a simplified version of the Peer Analysis System (PAS) presenting data from the IPEDS Data Feedback Report. This is a good place to begin if you are unfamiliar with IPEDS data definitions as it provides an easy method to review summary data on selected peers or graphical representation, as demonstrated below:

**Unduplicated 12-month headcount, total FTE enrollment (academic year 2003-04), and full- and part-time fall enrollment (Fall 2004)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment category</th>
<th>SEATTLE PACIFIC UNIVERSITY</th>
<th>COMPARISON GROUP MEDIAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total FTE enrollment</td>
<td>3,461</td>
<td>3,703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time fall enrollment</td>
<td>3,002</td>
<td>3,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time fall enrollment</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


- **IPEDS Peer Analysis System (PAS)** enables a user to compare a LinchPin institution of the user’s choosing to a group of institutions, by generating reports using selected IPEDS variables of interest. With the complexity of the data, this would be an opportunity to partner with the person/department that completes IPEDS reports for your institution or is the “KeyHolder”.

**Background on NCES website and IPEDS Terms: LinchPin and Keyholder:**

The term LinchPin is used in the IPEDS Peer Analysis System to identify the postsecondary institution that is being compared to other institutions (peers) or that is the basis for any statistical reports generated within the system.

The term Keyholder refers to the person designated as the institution’s official representative. The key holder has the necessary UserID and password to gain access to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data collection system to complete the survey as this person is responsible for entering data and locking the site by each survey completion date.

NCES’s website is useful for gathering data on a variety of factors which may useful in determining which institutions are comparable peers. I recommend partnering with
your institution’s KeyHolder to review the types of data available (e.g. institutional characteristics, enrollment profile, financial aid, etc.) to determine which factors are important to you. Data I found useful when developing a list of comparable institutions included factors tied to enrollment outcomes (e.g. graduation rates, persistence rates) and enrollment mix (e.g. full-time vs. part-time students, percentage of students 25 years of age or older, gender, ethnicity, international student, etc.) since I wanted to only include institutions with similar profiles.

2. Economic Diversity of Colleges:
   http://www.economicdiversity.org/
   This website provides information about the economic diversity, tuition charged, grants and loans received, and other characteristics of undergraduates at about 2,700 public two-year community colleges, public four-year, and private four-year colleges and universities. This site does not include data on proprietary (for-profit) schools, vocational schools that do not award associate’s degrees, or private junior colleges.

   The data sources include the Department of Education (PELL file, FISAP file, NDSL file), National Center of Educational Statistics (IPEDS) and Common Data Set (CDS) questionnaire used by publishers of college guides.

   By combining the New Carnegie Classifications with data available from other reliable websites, you will be able to provide the administration with additional insights into how your institution compares with its peers on key enrollment indicators.

About the Author: Janet Ward is Associate Vice President for Information and Data Management at Seattle Pacific University (WA). The author has over 25 years of experience in higher education administration (community college and private four-year institutions) and has held leadership roles in various professional associations; member of PACRAO’s Writers Team since 2003; served as PACRAO President (1995-96).

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