

The Promise and Perils of Space Benchmarking

Benchmarking is one tool among many that shapes and informs space planning. We have insights to share and 30 years of space data to draw upon. Let us help you realize the promise of space benchmarking — while avoiding the perils.

What is benchmarking?

Benchmarking is a term often invoked by higher education leaders for many different reasons. Broadly, it refers to comparative evaluation of specific attributes using data from other institutions considered “peers,” reflecting criteria defined for the comparison itself. Through this frame, any number of institutional characteristics can be compared, such as – but certainly not limited to – class sizes, student demographics, acceptance and graduation rates, sponsored research funding, endowment size, and student services. At a time of increasing competition, changing demographics, fiscal constraint, and calls for accountability, peer benchmarking analyses offer the promise of developing comparative context, useful not only for operational purposes but also questions of research, sustainability, marketing, admissions, and much else.

Specifically, what is space benchmarking?

We at Rickes Associates believe that the promise of benchmarking is in the power of thoughtful quantitative and qualitative comparisons to influence institutional decision-making and inspire new strategic directions. This is especially true when it comes to institutional space. Even with recent abrupt shifts to online learning amid the disruption of COVID-19, the physical space of the campus remains where the core mission of an institution traditionally takes place. Carefully developed space benchmarking comparisons can enrich campus space planning exercises at many scales, and furthermore demonstrate how higher education’s rapid shifts are being borne out in three dimensions.

Understanding any institution through the lens of quantitative comparison requires care. A thorough space benchmarking exercise requires judicious selection of peers, collection of relevant and complete data, and recognition of any important caveats or differentiating factors between institutions that may impact comparison. While institutions may have certain attributes in common (e.g., within the same state system, similar research activities, academic focus, selectivity, etc.), there are often diverse differences stemming from unique circumstances, including strategic priorities, demographic and political differences, or local economic factors. A broad, high-level approach to space comparison, centered on the populations that use space and the area of the space in question, establishes an evaluative bridge between characteristically dynamic, changing, and diverse institutions.

One beneficial metric for benchmarking institutional space uses institutional full-time equivalent student (FTE) enrollment and assignable square footage (ASF) as inputs, resulting in an overall ratio of space to occupants. Student FTE is used instead of faculty FTE due to the great variation in student-to-faculty ratios across institutions, as well as the typically significant disparities in faculty space “footprints” between disciplines. ASF figures are used instead of gross square footage (GSF) in order to compare programmable campus space directly; this is refined further by excluding residential spaces and parking, the two space inventory elements that vary most from one institution to the next.

This approach is applicable regardless of mission (e.g., community colleges, liberal arts colleges, research universities), architectural style (e.g., Collegiate Gothic, Georgian, Brutalist), or other factors. These comparisons can inform and guide many different discussions about an institution’s current space distribution, its future space needs, and how it measures up against other institutions, including agreed-upon peer institutions as well as bandwidths specific to particular institutional types.

What are the perils of space benchmarking?

Benchmarking is best understood as one tool among many that can shape needs for institutional space. When considering a space benchmarking exercise, there are three key caveats to keep in mind:

Benchmarking can tell you “what is.”

Space benchmarking is a rough indicator that provides valuable impressions of how a campus’s spaces compare to those at peers, as well as the broader continuum of higher education institutions, in the current

moment. The interpretation of “what is” is subjective and worthy of discussion—does a comparatively low ratio of a given kind of space suggest efficiency, or underinvestment? Is a comparatively high amount of space for a certain function appropriately generous, or potentially wasteful? In terms of space, what does “average” mean compared to other institutions?

Benchmarking doesn’t tell you “what should be.”

By itself, space benchmarking is not and should not be construed as prescriptive. The perspective it can provide for institutional decision-making around space is best understood as a reflection of many physical, economic, demographic, organizational, and cultural variables. Therefore, space benchmarking should be understood as most accurate in the aggregate, encompassing all of the types of space that comprise the contemporary higher education institution. Space allocations for specific functions may vary significantly across institutions as a result of many reasons; for example, varying proportions of classroom space across a group of peer institutions might reflect outmoded classroom configurations and/or limited investment in upgrading instructional space. Similarly, different faculty agreements may result in differing proportions of space allocated to office uses; one institution’s Division I Athletics space requirements would diverge from that of another who competes in Division III.

Benchmarking relies on data, and data is variable!

In order to be meaningful, benchmarking requires relevant and current data inputs, typically including:

- Approved list(s) of institutional peers, identified with clearly-defined criteria for inclusion
- Up-to-date space inventory data, cataloging all assignable institutional spaces appropriately. (While different institutions code and aggregate space differently, a client’s space inventory nonetheless supplies an essential baseline for comparison.)
- Enrollment data, facilitating the creation of metrics that can be normalized across institutions

How can Rickes Associates help you realize the promise of space benchmarking?

As with all of the services we offer, our ultimate goal is to equip you with the knowledge and insight necessary to enhance operations and promote efficient stewardship of institutional space. Whether as a standalone analysis, or as part of larger space optimization and master planning studies, our space benchmarking approach can deliver on the promise of an appropriate and useful comparative context, while avoiding underinformed conclusions and other common perils. To support these efforts, we have developed a space benchmarking database spanning over 600 institutions across North America and beyond. Reflecting our 30 years of experience, this data-rich resource is a key tool we can deploy to support your space planning investigations.

However, in case your benchmarking questions require a deeper or more targeted dive, no problem! In addition to our internal data resources, we commonly provide focused research, including evaluation of institutional and system planning documents, IPEDS data, and other resources that can inform space benchmarking discussions. A tailored data-gathering approach may also include direct outreach to institutional peers, including online survey platforms.

To demonstrate some of the basic capabilities of our space benchmarking database, we have created an interactive calculator for you to try. This tool shows the full range of ASF per student FTE for each institutional type represented in our database; within these, most institutions are typically concentrated in smaller bandwidths specific to each range. To see how your institution compares, simply enter your institution’s student FTE and ASF data, exclusive of housing and parking. You can also adjust the inputs as you see fit, reflecting planned or prospective changes in enrollment and square footage. Taking these factors into account, how might your institution’s position vis-à-vis others evolve in the future? We’d be happy to discuss what such shifts could mean—feel free to reach out!