THE COUNCIL OF
INDEPENDENT COLLEGES

CIC'S BENCHMARKING SERVICES
GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING COMPARISON GROUPS

CIC's benchmarking tools, the Key Indicators Tool (KIT) and Financial Indicators Tool (FIT), provide benchmark comparisons for an institution to national medians, and to the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles regionally for indicators of institutional performance. Comparisons for each indicator are also provided by enrollment size and financial resources. CIC's Comparison Group KIT and Comparison Group FIT offer additional comparisons for up to two customized smaller sets of institutions selected by the institution. Each comparison group consists of between 5 and 25 private, not-for-profit colleges and universities in the United States. This document provides general guidelines for selecting comparison groups for benchmarking purposes.

Using customized comparison groups provides external benchmarks, or standards, to conduct targeted assessments of institutional performance, identifying areas of weakness and strength, as well as to evaluate the position of the institution among a field of specified colleges and universities. The comparative data provided in such benchmarking reports are useful in setting strategic goals for the institution, assessing effectiveness, guiding policy development, and justifying specific programmatic priorities and expenditures.

There are many motivations and resulting criteria for selecting comparison groups. Comparisons based upon institution type, performance measures, or perceptions of quality are essential for understanding the strengths of an institution as well as the challenges that face it. Judgments about these strengths and challenges will be influenced by the group or groups an institution selects for comparison. These selections should be driven by the strategic goals of the institution. Using strategic goals, a comparison group may be selected to track institutional performance based on perceived strength or competitive advantage, such as graduation rates or student-faculty ratio. Alternatively, a comparison group may be selected to monitor progress on achieving a particular strategic objective, such as stronger financial performance or higher faculty salaries.

Examples of common types of comparison groups are:

- **Peer Groups:** Institutions selected are similar—though not identical—on key criteria, such as mission (e.g., type of students served), type (e.g., baccalaureate or masters level), scope (e.g., specific academic program offerings), or some other descriptive characteristic, such as enrollment size or setting. Care should be taken in defining an acceptable range of similarity.

- **Aspirational Groups:** Selected institutions reflect characteristics that are deemed desirable and represent strategic goals that the selecting institution is aiming to achieve. The particular set of institutions varies depending on the specific aspirational objectives. One approach is to select institutions that perform in the next quartile on a particular measure of interest (e.g., instructional cost per student).

- **Competitor Groups:** Institutions are chosen that are competitors for students, faculty, or financial resources. They may not necessarily be similar on other criteria, such as size, mission, or program offerings. One example is a group of institutions to which entering students also applied, commonly referred to as cross-application institutions.

- **Predetermined Groups:** The selection of these institutions is determined by some existing affiliation, such as a specific geographic location (e.g., state or region), membership in a consortium or association, belonging to an athletic conference, or having the same religious-affiliation.

Another important consideration is the size of the comparison group. For predetermined groups, this is less of an issue. Other groupings may vary. Too few institutions can distort an institution's relative position since changes in indicator percentiles for a smaller number of institutions are generally more extreme than for a larger group. Too many institutions will add a degree of complexity to the comparisons that will limit their usefulness. While a range of 5 to 25 institutions is possible for CIC's Comparison Group KIT or FIT, most institutions will select a group of 10 to 15 institutions.

Examples of existing comparisons groups for an institution are also available from external sources. The annual IPEDS Data Feedback Report sent to college and university presidents is based on a peer group determined either by the National Center for Education Statistics or the institution itself. The Data Feedback Report may be viewed online at the IPEDS website: nces.ed.gov/ipeds. In addition, College Results Online identifies peer groups to provide comparisons on six-year graduation rates. Up to 50 similar intuitions are identified based on a set of institutional characteristics. These peer groups are available at www.collegeresults.org.

The process of deciding who will select the comparison groups could be as important as the actual selection of the institutions to be in the comparison groups. Ideally this is a collaborative effort involving key campus decision-makers that will make use of the benchmarked data. The admissions office will likely have different concerns than academic affairs or development. Bringing diverse perspectives together prior to selecting the types of comparison groups and the criteria that will be utilized will lend more useful benchmark comparisons, and will enable the institution to better fulfill its mission and achieve its strategic goals.

No single comparison group can provide all of the meaningful comparative data needed for an institution. Furthermore, selecting institutions for a particular comparison is a fluid process that must be tested and amended over time as the strategic objectives of the institution evolve and the characteristics of institutions change over time. Thus, a periodic review process is desirable to ensure that the comparison groups selected still serve the institution's needs best.

For a more complete discussion of comparison groups, as well as a bibliography, please consult chapter six in *The Primer for Institutional Research*, edited by William E. Knight, published by and available through the Association for Institutional Research (www.airweb.org).