

Peer Institutions as an External Source of Institutional Quality

California State University, Stanislaus

DRAFT

Overview

The Office of Institutional Research, the Office of Faculty Affairs, and the Office of Assessment and Quality Assurance at California State University, Stanislaus worked in collaboration to identify potential peer institutions as a means for placing institutional data in a context that allows for comparisons of similar universities.

The goal was to generate a manageable list of peer institutions, desirably 10 and no more than 15. Also, the integrity of the process for identifying peer universities was a key element of the planning and discussions. While planned uses for peer institutions may require the identification of subsets of relevant variables from the overall list of institutional elements, no attempt is made to select those elements that provide the most advantageous comparisons for CSU Stanislaus.

The use of peer institutions as an external source of validation became more imperative for several reasons. First, the university's strategic planning process was revised and its strategic plan updated under the direction of the new president in fall 2005. Secondly, the university began its reaccreditation process during 2005-2010. Finally, the university's assessment program has gained in sophistication and depends upon an objective, external benchmark to provide a context and validation of its quest for improvement of quality.

Through consultation with the Provost's Deans Council and the President's Cabinet, descriptive elements deemed essential for the selection of peer institutions were identified. Several lists of peer institutions that resulted from the elements were refined to ensure that the identified peer group reflected the mission, objectives, and values of CSU Stanislaus.

CSU Stanislaus chose to use peer institutions for comparison, those most similar in mission and relevant characteristics. At the same time, the university participates in peer comparisons because of its membership in various external organizations. These external organizations include the Carnegie Foundation Classification System, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) in collaboration with the Education Trust, the National Survey of Student Engagement, and the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange as part of the Center for Institutional Data Exchange and Analysis. Each of these organizations has strong interest in collegiate outcomes and investigates factors that lead to college success. Their statistical analyses provide independent benchmarks that CSU Stanislaus uses to evaluate its educational processes and outcomes.

There is no known national methodology for determining peer institutions, although the research literature identifies a few examples of approaches employed by various American universities. These methods range from those that are highly statistical to those that are based solely on qualitative judgment. CSU Stanislaus has employed a method that is both criteria and data driven. Criteria were selected based on availability (e.g., IPEDS), simplicity, and a review of criteria used in other national comparative studies. Ultimately, administrative judgment was used for the final selection of peer institutions.

Initial Identification of Peer Institutions

Two data sources were used to develop the initial group: the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and U.S. News and World Report. Initially, the selected variables for generating a list of peer institutions were headcount (6,000 – 12,000), Carnegie classification of Master's 1, urbanization codes 2-5 on IPEDS, U.S. News and World Report ranking of America's Best Colleges in 2005, and inclusion of at least 5 Hispanic Serving Institutions.

The initial results yielded a list of 33 universities, 5 from California, and 16 states outside California. Twenty nine of the universities ranked in the top tier of their respective regions, and four were in tier four of their respective regions.

Refined Identification

The university administration and faculty leadership examined the validity of the initial list to determine if those variables yielded universities viewed as comparable on the most essential characteristics as CSU Stanislaus. As a result, the list was refined and expanded to include the following variables:

Classification and Size

1. State-supported
2. Urbanization code -- (between 2-5 on IPEDS)
3. Carnegie classification -- Master's 1

Size

4. FTES enrollment
5. Headcount enrollment
6. U.S. News and World Report ranking of Best Colleges

Mission

7. Hispanic serving (Hispanic students as percent of all students)
8. Mission (# number of students in certain majors)
9. first-time, full-time degree/certificate seeking undergraduates

Costs

10. Tuition and fees revenues per FTES
11. Percent Pell grants of total scholarship and fellowship expenditure for fiscal year

Finance

12. Instruction expenses per FTES
13. Total operating expenses
14. Operating expenses for salaries and wages
15. Average amount of federal grants received

Faculty

16. Percent of full-time instructional faculty that have tenure

Accreditation

17. Accreditation – NCATE and AACSB accredited programs

Peer Institutions

The final peer institutions list includes x universities (See Attachment A).