Benchmarking

Benchmarking, broadly defined, is the process of comparing your library or organization's performance to peers to determine areas for improvement. It can also allow you to highlight areas where your library does exceptionally well. Benchmarking can inform strategic planning and support everyday decision-making in libraries.

Data analysis is essential for benchmarking and library advocacy, but it can sometimes feel daunting. The U.S. has more than 9,000 public libraries and it can be hard to know where to begin. PLA has invested in research to identify ways to better communicate and display key metrics related to internal decision-making to support the public library field's benchmarking needs.

Benchmark is designed to facilitate peer comparisons so that *all libraries* may easily access the wealth of data about their own performance and that of their peers.

Facilitating Peer Comparisons

Benchmarking has its roots in the private sector and businesses seeking a competitive advantage often apply this practice. Public libraries do not compete with each other for patrons and, in fact, sharing information and resources is a foundational value of librarianship. With Benchmark*,* a library can see at a glance how its performance compares to its peers and all public libraries. This alone can help a library make data-informed decisions about how to allocate resources or plan changes to service. The goal of benchmarking in this instance is not competition, but field-wide improvement.

Each U.S. public library has been assigned to a **primary peer group** of similar libraries based on key characteristics including region, legal basis, locale, and demographic characteristics of the community the library serves. These peer groups are statistically valid. The libraries within a peer group are not all exactly the same, rather they share similar characteristics that impact library outputs and outcomes. You can view the resource on Peer Groups to learn more about how these were created.

The design of the data visualizations within Benchmark makes it easy to compare your library's performance to others. When you look at the charts in Benchmark, as in the example below, you will see reference points for your library's primary peer group. You will also see reference points for "all," which aggregates data from all public libraries in the U.S. Subscribers can use the filters in the Data Dashboards to narrow down the "all" data to make comparisons to other

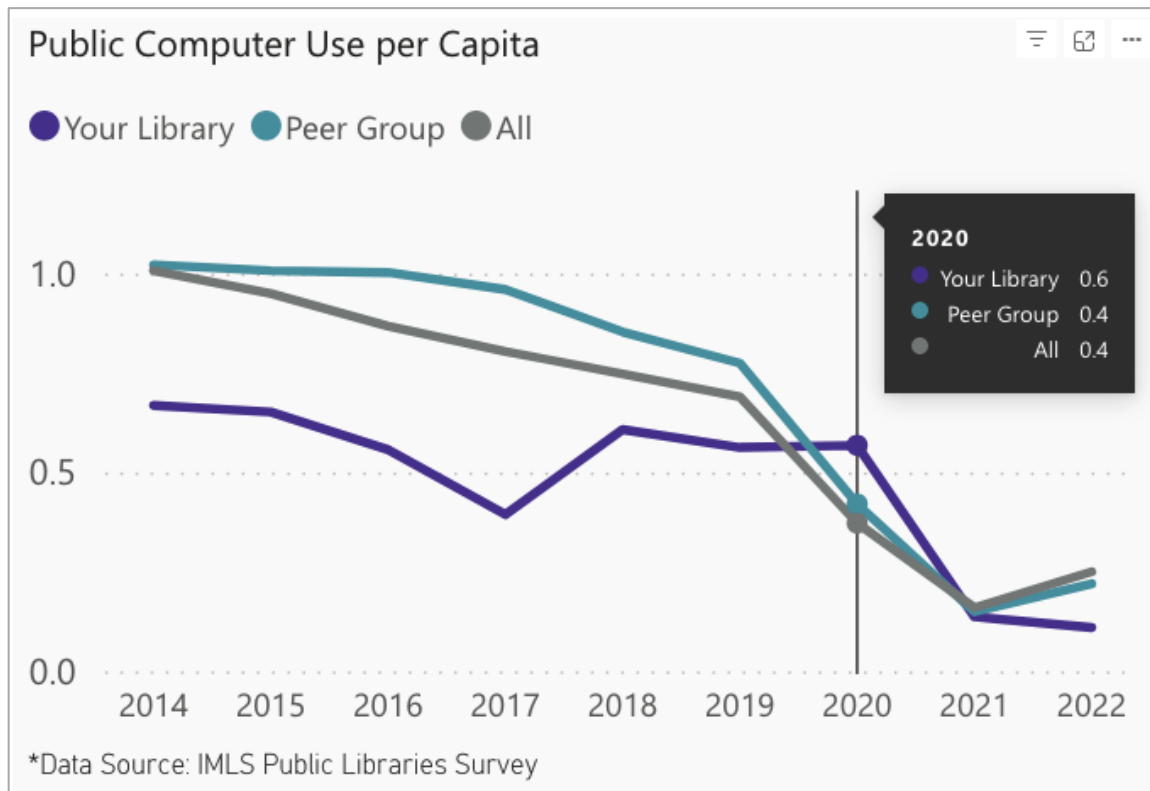libraries based on selected characteristics. Review the tutorial on the Data Dashboards to learn more.

Figure 1: An example of a line chart showing a peer comparison

The Benchmarking Process

Peer comparisons can help you understand your library's performance at a particular point in time. It can also provide insights for improvements over time.

Looking at the data carefully and comprehensively may spark new thinking about how a library can work to better meet its strategic goals and community needs over time. You probably already have ideas of areas for improvement! The data does not replace your knowledge; it can instead help you hone it and share it with others. Start with a commitment to improve and then consider a few questions:
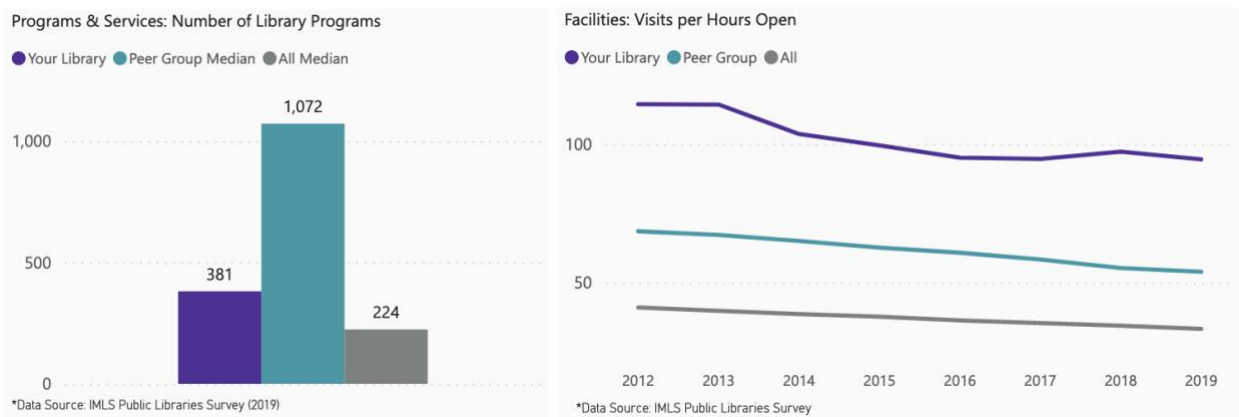
1. *What area(s) will you focus on and why?* Your library might choose areas connected to a strategic plan or areas where your library's metrics seem consistently lower than peers.

2. *What indicator(s) need to improve and why? How will you determine success?* For example, if your library wants to improve its reach for children and young adults, then increasing both the number of programs offered for those audiences and attendance at them might be success metrics.

3. *How will you implement changes? What factors may limit your ability to affect change?* Not everything is within the library's control to change. Focus on what you can change and what will make the most difference for your patrons and community.

Continue to collect and compare your library's data to evaluate the changes you are making over time.

For example, the charts below show that this library offers fewer programs than its peers, despite the fact that it has more visits per hour than other libraries in its peer group or nationwide.

Perhaps, with further exploration, this could yield useful evidence for advocacy. The library could make a case for additional funding to support programming for certain audiences or in areas where there is a clear community need.

Remember, evaluation and benchmarking are on-going and iterative processes. PLA will continue to add new data to Benchmark as it becomes available, making it easy for you to document improvements at your library, among your peers, and across the public library field.

Additional Resources

Patricia Keehley and Neil Abercrombie*, Benchmarking in the Public and Nonprofit Sectors: Best Practices for Achieving Performance Breakthroughs* (Jossey-Bass, 2008).

Ivy Group, "Who's Comparing? Benchmarking Library Performance" (2018): https://ivygroup.com/blog/benchmarking-library-performance/