



Canada/CAUBO

By George Dew

The introduction and ongoing support of APPA's Facilities Performance Indicators (FPI) in the Canadian context is a real success story, and participation within Canada is strong and building. This positive show of support for FPI would not have happened without the leadership and assistance of CAUBO.


CAUBO—the Canadian Association of University Business Officers—is a volunteer-driven organization that represents the administrative function of virtually all Canadian universities (CAUBO is the Canadian counterpart to NACUBO in the United States). Member committees provide direction and subject matter expertise, with each committee typically focused on one or two major projects at any given time. A small national office in Ottawa, Ontario, with the support of consultants as required, offers administrative, analytical, and project management functions for these projects.

Historically, from its origins over 75 years ago, CAUBO largely worked in finance and related areas. Beginning in the mid-2000s, in response to growing demand from other functional groups for national representation, this mandate was expanded, and in 2006 a Facilities Management Committee was created. From the start, a significant part of this committee's effort was directed toward what was then known as APPA's Facilities Core Data Survey.

BUILDING AWARENESS AND ADDING VALUE

One of the newly formed committee's first activities was the development of a Facilities Management seminar, offered as a pre-conference session in conjunction with CAUBO's 2007 national conference. This was an occasion to build awareness of the sur-





vey and in particular of its reporting capabilities and its value for benchmarking purposes. A hands-on session led by past APPA President Maggie Kinnaman gave participants the opportunity to try it for themselves with expert guidance, seeing for themselves how they could benchmark results against peer groups.

As stated in the session description, the objective was to “offer suggestions on the ways to get the best value for the time spent collecting and entering the data.” This has become and will continue to be a recurring theme in our work to encourage the use of the FPI survey. It isn’t enough to simply make members aware of the survey; we have to acknowledge that completing it takes significant effort, and we have to help them find ways to demonstrate the value received in return.

Of course, the value received is also dependent on the comparability of the data across institutions, and the committee put significant effort into reviewing Canadian results and identifying inconsistencies. A review of meeting minutes from the time reminds us of the questions that were raised and the progress that has been made in some areas.

It also reminds us that this is an iterative process—many data cleansing issues raised in 2007 are still with us. Some of the areas where progress has been made include:

Currency conversion: Initially, amounts entered in Canadian dollars were converted to U.S. dollars for reporting. This in fact did not seem to improve comparability—it is difficult to determine an effective single conversion rate for a year given fluctuations in exchange rates, and a significant portion of expenses (e.g., labor) are constant in local currency regardless of the exchange rate. With APPA’s agreement, Canadian results are now kept in Canadian dollars; report users can apply their own conversion rate where a conversion makes sense for their own analysis.

Carnegie classification: Canadian universities are not part of the U.S.-based Carnegie classification system. This was actually an easy one to solve: the Carnegie definitions are clear enough that someone familiar with our institutions can quite easily review them and note which group they should fall into. So we did.

The CAUBO Variations

In order to understand how a national organization like CAUBO operates, it is important to understand the political context in which Canadian universities function. Our member universities are all publicly funded by and accountable to their respective provincial governments—there is no federal department of education, and the federal government’s influence on higher education is indirect. As a result, the Canadian FPI participants do not form a “cohort” in the way you might usually use the term. CAUBO is certainly not in a position to mandate participation or require a specific approach to data collection and utilization, and participants don’t have a common set of reporting requirements.

What they do have in common, however, is an increasing emphasis by funders on accountability and reporting, and an increased need to demonstrate to those funders that they are receiving value for money. Our role is to ensure that the FPI helps them to do this. To the extent that CAUBO and its Facilities Management Committee are able to improve data consistency, increase participation, and demonstrate how to best make use of the results, our members will continue to see this value.

Language issues: About one-fifth of our member universities have French as their working language, making it difficult for them to participate in an English-only survey. Beginning in 2009, CAUBO had the definitions and module help files translated, and we have continued to update these as major changes are made. It is still not ideal—francophone members now complete the survey in English while looking at the translated definitions—but it’s a step forward and helps to encourage broader participation.

There was also a note that committee members would review the survey and comment on any “Canadianization” required. This is a theme that we revisit regularly—some terms and definitions seem to be universal while others require interpretation according to local practice. Identifying these and ensuring consistency in their usage is one more way in which we can improve the resulting data.

REVIEWING AND IMPROVING

The efforts to increase the visibility of the FPI and participation by our members accompanied the need to seriously review the data and determine where improvement was needed. The Facilities Management Committee completed reviews of Canadian reports and worked to improve these where errors were identified, but at the same time recognized that a broader review could not be effectively done by volunteers. In light of this, CAUBO engaged Ernest Hunter, a qualified FPI advisor, to complete a thorough review of the Canadian data in comparison with the entire data set, and to identify anomalies and recommend areas for further review.

In something of a good news/bad news scenario, this detailed analysis gave us a clear and repeatable methodology for data review and identified those data points that could become a focus for improvement. It also gave us a better idea of the magnitude of effort that would be required to obtain comparable data in all areas of the survey. It became apparent, again considering the resources available, that we would be best to first identify the causes of inconsistencies in the more important parts of the survey.

This led, in 2010-11, to a pilot project involving six member institutions

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in a detailed review of their data collection processes and their understanding and interpretation of the survey definitions. These institutions engaged Dan Leslie and Dave Riddell, both FPI advisors with extensive senior facilities officer experience in the Canadian university system, to assist the six institutions in completing the survey, identifying data gaps, and fixing any problems with definitions and inconsistencies in their data collection methodologies. These were then extrapolated to provide recommended approaches for use by all participants. At the same time, the consultants reviewed the survey itself for questions that may not be relevant or well placed in the survey to best meet Canadian university needs.

Participants in the pilot study were:

- Carleton University
- Dalhousie University
- University of Alberta
- University of Calgary
- University of Regina
- University of Saskatchewan

Not only did these institutions support the project, they did so at their own expense, and we thank them for their contribution to our continuous improvement effort.

The resulting report provides clear recommendations for consistent interpretation of key data definitions, for specific Canadian practice in completing the survey, and for further steps in training and development to build on the improvements made to date. This report is intended to be used by participating members and so was distributed widely; it is also available on the CAUBO website at www.caubo.ca/fpi.

MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

APPA members will certainly understand that participation in and support for the FPI are not “one shot” activities. When combined with the realities of limited volunteer resources, CAUBO’s Facilities Management Committee necessarily takes an iterative approach, pushing for improvement in one area at a time and revisiting key points as necessary. In keeping with this approach, the committee is now planning two projects for the coming year or more—one looking at FPI inputs and one at outputs.

The first of these—perhaps recognizing that our support to members has been somewhat ad-hoc to date—will work to define and establish an annual cycle of activities tied to the FPI survey. It will establish a multi-year plan to create support mechanisms that could include participant training, data validation, a process for refining and documenting the Canadian interpretation of definitions, and an approach to providing regular interaction and support to the APPA team for further developments.

The second project, reaching back to the requirement for reporting to funders and to senior administration, will work to identify ways in which the FPI data can be used to improve operational effectiveness and accountability. This exercise will focus on key operations—maintenance, custodial, grounds, and waste management services—and will provide members with benchmarks, tools for analysis, and recommended practices.

So, what kinds of data points seem to require a specifically Canadian interpretation? At the risk of perpetuating certain stereotypes, snow removal is one of them. The survey currently includes this in the “Other” cost category; the pilot study report recommended that our members report it in the Grounds module to ensure that this major expense has appropriate visibility.





Through the support and leadership of CAUBO, the participation rate of Canadian institutions in FPI is 40% as compared to the general rate of 21% across APPA. It is only with extensive broad-based participation that the data and benchmarking truly become universally supported and trustworthy benchmarks cited nationally and internationally. APPA is growing the FPI participation rate slowly and consistently, but cohorts such as Canada that can provide the important leadership to enable and encourage broader participation will help us all and take FPI to the next level.

It will likely be the first in a series of similar projects, so that ultimately we will be able to offer a toolkit that will allow facilities managers to readily apply the available data to understand and manage their operations in all of the areas covered by the FPI survey and report.

THE VALUE OF DATA

The need for trustworthy and comparable data is a growing need and theme of increased accountability and transparency across campuses. With increased financial pressures on higher

education around the world, all governments, students, parents, and indeed our own internal institutional communities are looking for more data to validate the fairly large portions of our budgets that are required to keep facilities and operations at a quality to support recruitment and retention and ensure the continuation of quality teaching and research.

FPI is the most comprehensive and broad-based data gathering and reporting system for educational facilities. Canadian institutions through the support and leadership of CAUBO have embraced it as a benchmarking tool and look forward to continued improvements on how it can be used to effectively lobby for the funding necessary in our institutions. ☎

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