

A Small College Uses the FPI

By Clay Shetler

In 1989, I returned to my alma mater, Goshen College, to become director of facilities, after a 20-year absence that included some additional education and experience in the construction industry. While I got the job because of my management and construction experience, I quickly realized that construction and operations are different things.

MEASURE TO MANAGE

So why would a small college with less than 1,000 students and a little over 800,000 gross square feet (gsf) take the time to participate in APPA's Facilities Performance Indicators (FPI) Survey? Couldn't this information be obtained by just using common sense? I started my position believing that, and simply wanting to manage an efficient department, but gradually I came to understand what Peter Drucker once said: "You can't manage what you can't measure."

As the new facilities director, it was clear to me that the facilities officers I wanted to model myself on knew a lot more about their physical plant operations than some of their peers. They knew how their staffing compared to the other campuses they wanted to benchmark against. More importantly, they knew what their costs were. They knew maintenance costs per square foot (SF), custodial costs per SF, energy usage, and acres per grounds worker. They knew a great deal more than I did about my campus. These facility officers seemed to be much more successful at managing their operations. So as I began connecting with the people whom I saw as leaders in the field of facilities management, I sought more. Where did I find these people? At APPA conferences, at the APPA Institutes, and at regional and state APPA gatherings. This is where I began asking questions about how to improve and how to better lead the facilities organization at Goshen.

I also learned whom Goshen College considered its peers. With a list of 31 schools, I began calling and talking with each of the directors who would talk with me and find out various things about their facilities: inventories, staffing levels, acres main-

tained, and so on. Then I developed spreadsheets to see how my campus compared against the other campuses. This was time-consuming and left many other questions unanswered. It also quickly demonstrated that we all had various ways of pulling our numbers together. There was a problem with consistency.



Working at a small campus, I didn't have a lot of support staff and didn't have a lot of time for phone calls, data entry, or graphs. I needed help. I thought about hiring someone to help with benchmarking, but we simply did not have the budget to bring in an outside expert to provide us with an executive summary of what was going on with our campus and how we compared with other campuses. I continued to struggle until 2005, when APPA introduced the FPI.

USING FPI TO DEMONSTRATE AND NEGOTIATE

The FPI provided us with a standard set of measures, many of which were already in my spreadsheet, and several that weren't. It required more data and more help. Given that my vice president liked getting the benchmark data, I asked for that help.

The person at our campus who assisted with assessment and institutional research was enlisted to help provide data for the FPI. This solution addressed several issues: my time gathering the information, the accuracy of the information, and the credibility of the information that would ultimately be shared with others participating in the FPI. So, instead of my job getting harder with the scope of the FPI, it got a little easier. My focus then changed to getting accurate information from our utility manager and sustainability coordinator, who reported to me. The three of us, working together each year, made it possible to submit needed information to the FPI Survey. It was a good working relationship.

How did we use the FPI and the benchmarking?

- To help justify increases in the level of staffing that would be required as we built new buildings and as we added to the acres of maintained landscaping and athletic fields.
- To help justify and explain our staffing levels every time the college needed to make cuts to the institutional budget.
- To see how we compared with others related to energy usage and costs per SF, and to track how well we were doing in lowering our costs as we implemented our new strategies and projects for reducing energy usage.

With the FPI, we were able to access the benchmarking information we wanted to gather. It was organized and could be graphed easily and compared against that of our peers who participated in the survey. But that was also a problem—many of our peers did not participate in the FPI as often or as regularly as we would have liked. It made comparison difficult, so we used the FPI differently, and likely more effectively. We still gathered data, but we focused on benchmarking against ourselves. That is, we tried to see if we were moving in the direction the board and administration wanted us to move.

With the FPI and the other information we gathered, our facilities organization was able to “get a seat at the table.” I was often told that I brought more helpful data to the meetings than other campus department heads. This information was used to evaluate the job we were doing with the workforce we had. It also demonstrated the fact that we had too many gsf per student compared to our peers, which translated into more costs per student for facilities than our peers, even though our actual maintenance, custodial, and grounds costs per SF was equal to or lower than that of our peers. We also used the FPI

to see how we compared to others relative to energy usage and costs per SF, and to track how well we were doing in lowering our costs as we implemented our new strategies and projects for reducing energy usage. We knew our stuff.

So the next question you might ask is, “Were we able to defend our staffing when the college budgets needed to be reduced?” Not always. We still lost staffing to protect programs and faculty—that’s why the college has facilities. Thus, when we had to take reductions, we used the FPI information to renegotiate the services we could commit to, and we were better able to explain why we couldn’t fix everything that needed attention or replacement.

I recently asked my new vice president how she used the FPI. She said, “The data helped to show institution leaders that we (the Physical Plant) were managing a large amount of square footage at a cost that was consistently lower than benchmark reports. This helped inform decisions about staffing changes and service expectations in times of limited resources.”

FPI AND STRATEGIC DECISIONS

I started my employment at Goshen College 28 years ago, wanting Goshen College to be a model of efficiency and an example of how a small college campus could have clean buildings, beautiful grounds, and well-maintained buildings with a limited budget. I knew right away that we would never run out of work, but what I hadn’t thought about was what happens when the enrollment falls too many years in a row and budgets need to be reduced. Or what would happen when we overbuilt to counteract our declining student enrollment, added more programs, and continued to struggle with tighter budgets. Currently Goshen is focused on increasing enrollment, balancing the budget and bringing back the services we have sacrificed, and addressing the deferred maintenance and modernization needs.

The FPI has helped me do my job and has helped the college make some strategic decisions. It’s free to APPA members, and it provides important facility data to set goals, track progress, and document success (even if it means reductions in staff or other resources). Based on my experience with the FPI, every college or university should be using it. ☞

Clay Shetler recently retired as director of facilities at Goshen College in Goshen, IN. He can be reached at clayes@goshen.edu.