

Improving Local Government Performance Through Benchmarking

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For those familiar with benchmarking and performance management, David Ammons' work and impact in public administration need no introduction, particularly in assessing local government performance from both academic and practitioner perspectives. In his latest book, *Improving Local Government Performance through Benchmarking*, Ammons outlines both a call to action and a roadmap to move "beyond metrics" commonly used in local government by adopting "best practice benchmarking." Building on previous work focused on performance measurement (Ammons, 2020), *Improving Local Government Performance through Benchmarking* outlines a comprehensive overview of best practice benchmarking – often referred to as "process benchmarking" or "ideas benchmarking" – in a way that is both theoretically rigorous for those who study and teach in the realm of local government and public finance, yet is practically grounded for managers, supervisors, and budget directors who wish to implement best practices oriented towards achieving better outcomes in public organizations. In all, this book provides a much-needed service by filling a gap in the literature, establishing a framework for scholars who wish to conduct further research on benchmarking, while also challenging local leaders to adopt a more comprehensive orientation to performance management and strategic decision-making in a way that is both approachable and actionable.

Improving Local Government Performance through Benchmarking is organized in five major sections: Benchmarking Overview; Metrics Benchmarking; Best Practice Benchmarking; Issues in Benchmarking; and The Leadership Imperative. In Part I: Benchmarking Overview, Ammons (2025) provides a comprehensive introduction to Benchmarking as a Concept and Benchmarking in Local Government, in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. This section provides readers with a history and overview of benchmarking, including its origins in the private sector

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and its development and adoption in the public sector. It is here that Ammons addresses and delineates the major focus of the book — the distinction between *metrics benchmarking* and *best-practices benchmarking*. In the traditional sense, benchmarking focused on metrics that quantify the outputs and performance of governments and organizational units, often specific to internal targets or common measures across comparative communities. The best practice approach takes benchmarking a step further, using performance as a baseline, but shifting the focus for local governments to “*how they are able to achieve superior performance,*” rather than simply on “*what performance results different organizations are able to achieve*” (Ammons, 2025, p. 20).

In Part II, Ammons (2025) provides an overview of the classic *metrics* approach to benchmarking, including the strategic choices communities often have to make in adopting benchmarking initiatives (Chapter 4); common responses to benchmarking results from public administrators and elected officials, as well as the public (Chapter 5); and, finally, the processes by which metrics are reported and utilized by local governments (Chapter 6). This section poses several important questions for local officials wishing to adopt baseline metrics, including choices related to comparison cases, which services to assess, the complexity and sophistication of measures used, and the rigor and speed with which communities prepare comparable data, with specific examples such as the adoption of cost accounting measures to compare data across benchmarking partners accurately. Additionally, Part II provides important insight into how governments use data, the perceptions it can generate, especially among elected officials and the public, and the ways results are used, ranging from accountability and oversight to performance improvement.

In Part III, Ammons (2025) moves beyond metrics (or “plain vanilla” benchmarking, p. 107) and their usage to the core tenets of the book, focusing on best practices aimed at achieving excellence by identifying and adapting to top performers within a relative category or through a comprehensive set of measures. In Chapter 7, Ammons outlines the five steps in *best practice benchmarking*: deciding what to benchmark; identifying partners; gathering information; analyzing information; and, most importantly, implementing for effect to bring about desired changes (pp. 112-132). Chapter 8 provides key insights, particularly for practitioners, focusing on “Best Practice Benchmarking in Action,” which presents case studies both in the United States and internationally where organizations have been particularly successful at identifying, implementing, and achieving significant improvements in service delivery.

Part IV covers a range of common issues in benchmarking and barriers to success for local governments, including: “unlearning” common pitfalls and predispositions when it comes to benchmarking (Chapter 9); limitations due to the preference of only benchmarking with similar communities and organizations (Chapter 10); the tradeoffs of using tools such as “report cards” for accountability, performance, and improvement (Chapter 11); understanding and addressing defensiveness and resistance to benchmarking that often occurs during the process and in the reporting of results, as well as how to address those criticisms (Chapters 12 and 13); dealing with the threat of isomorphism that is a common critique of governments, particularly those limited to simple metrics (Chapter 14); identifying and assessing the various awards given to communities related to successful benchmarking and quasi-benchmarking activities (Chapter 15); and, finally, addressing what Ammons (2025) refers to as “faux benchmarking,” which often includes subjective measures such as citizen surveys, the presence or absence of a process or service, and indicators or outcomes that are generally outside the control of local officials (Chapter 16).

Finally, Part V focuses on “The Leadership Imperative,” which outlines ways in which leaders can influence benchmarking success, creating an organizational culture that embraces continuous improvement through adopting best practices, increasing the potential for success throughout these processes, and helping communities realize the value of best practice benchmarking (Chapters 17 and 18).

Overall, *Improving Local Government Performance through Benchmarking* effectively strikes a balance between academic work and an applied toolkit for those working in public service. For scholars, Ammons (2025) provides a comprehensive overview and updates on recent research related to benchmarking and performance management, and has opened an avenue for future research on the development of theories of benchmarking and on the assessment of the adoption of best-practice benchmarking. For local government scholars in the United States, this book provides several examples and case studies, as well as relevant research in the international context, which, until recently, has arguably been lacking in the Americanist literature. Additionally, as a teaching tool, each chapter includes discussion questions that allow professors and students to engage with the text in meaningful ways.

For practitioners, this book is approachable and provides important considerations, examples, and case studies that can be adopted and implemented in any local government setting. Paired with earlier works (e.g., Ammons, 2012) that focus more on the “nuts and bolts” of benchmarking, this book is an invaluable companion in developing an orientation and mindset geared towards best-practice benchmarking. Though this work is not specifically targeted to those in public finance, it offers valuable examples and case studies. Ammons (2025) notes that benchmarking is frequently used when making or justifying budget requests, whether to bolster high-performing departments or to supplement those requesting additional resources. Drawing on experience with the North Carolina Benchmarking project and other communities, it is common for budget and finance managers to be involved in the benchmarking process, whether those communities have an outcome-oriented budgeting process in place or those managers are simply more oriented towards efficiency outcomes. From a technical standpoint, Ammons (2025) cites practical examples of effective benchmarking, such as adopting common cost accounting measures to ensure more uniform reporting and comparable results.

The book also provides insightful examples of local governments that have effectively leveraged data to reduce costs in their communities. For instance, drawing from experiences in North Carolina, Winston-Salem was able to cut over \$750,000 (in 2024 dollars) from an inefficient solid waste collection process, Wilmington was able to trim \$75,000 from recycling operations, and Concord was able to avoid a 10% rate hike with a contractor by using measures related to service quality and costs in comparable communities. These practical examples all highlight takeaways that can be insightful for those wishing to implement a more data-driven process to identify potential cost savings. Additionally, Ammons (2025) advises reconsidering several measures related to local finances, noting that benchmarks for “expenditures alone are a poor proxy for performance” (p. 243). For example, while avoiding property tax or rate increases are often regarded as an example of operational efficiency, these may actually reflect declines in service quality, deferred maintenance, or staff attrition — all potentially indicative of poor managerial practices rather than successful outcomes.

In all, *Improving Local Government Performance through Benchmarking* is an approachable, practical guide for those working in local government, researching it, or preparing students for careers in local government. Through his summary of the literature, case studies, and best practices based on decades of experience, Ammons successfully argues that while

comparing metrics is a necessary starting point, it is insufficient for solving the complex problems facing many local governments. As noted earlier, while this book may not be a “standalone” resource for students or practitioners wishing to develop a comprehensive list of metrics or learn more about the intricacies of implementing a benchmarking program, it is a vital resource for understanding, framing, and avoiding many of the common challenges faced by local governments wishing to develop or improve upon their existing benchmarking and performance management initiatives. For scholars, Ammons provides a framework for future research on this topic, noting the absence of, or grounding in, a unifying theory of benchmarking, and lingering questions related to isomorphism. He also identifies the need for more research that is less focused on the diagnostic nature of metrics and more on the prescriptive nature of best-practice benchmarking — in this case, moving beyond the mere adoption of these tools and toward research that focuses on their successful implementation and the necessary conditions required to translate mere metrics into better governance in our communities.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that no conflicts of interest relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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