

INTRODUCTION

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) [standards for accreditation](#) include a requirement for institutions to identify a set of regional and national peer institutions to use in benchmarking their performance on established indicators of student achievement. During the 2022-23 academic year, the Institutional Development, Effectiveness, and Accreditation (IDEA) Council underwent an extensive process that combined professional knowledge and a weighted scoring system to identify eight regional peers in neighboring states, the Rocky Mountain region, and/or the Pacific Northwest region and 8 national peers from across the United States (full method below).

In February 2024, NWCCU released an FAQ document to help institutions better understand expectations around Standards 1.D.2 and 1.D.3. In the fall of 2024, IDEA Council reviewed the guidance and determined the existing peer institution list had been selected using practices generally in alignment with the recommendations in the FAQ document. The council did decide there should be more institutions that participate in the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP), an initiative of the National Student Clearinghouse, which provides benchmarking metrics and capabilities not available from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Two regional peers were changed as a result of this decision, ensuring five out of eight peers in both categories were part of the PDP.

Regional Peers	National Peers
Clovis Community College ^ Clovis, NM	Hazard Community and Technical College ^ Hazard, KY
College of Eastern Idaho * Idaho Falls, ID	Henderson Community College ^ Henderson, KY
Flathead Valley Community College * ^ Kalispell, MT	McDowell Technical Community College ^ Marion, NC
Great Falls College Montana State University * ^ Great Falls, MT	Nashua Community College ^ Nashua, NH
Klamath Community College * Klamath Falls, OR	Pine Technical & Community College Pine City, MN
Lake Area Technical College ^ Watertown, SD	Spoon River College Canton, IL
Lake Region State College Devils Lake, ND	Washington State College of Ohio ^ Marietta, OH
Mitchell Technical College ^ Mitchell, SD	West Virginia Northern Community College Wheeling, WV

* NWCCU member institution

^ Participant in Postsecondary Data Partnership as of 2/7/2025

METHOD FOR IDENTIFYING NEW PEER INSTITUTIONS

IDEA first brainstormed a list of the most important criteria to look for in a peer, such as size of institution, highest degree offered, and location. Once the list of characteristics was finalized, the committee discussed the metrics and acceptable range of values that denote a meaningful similarity to Helena College. The list was further refined to variables available from IPEDS. The committee determined five variables to be used to filter the search and an additional seven variables to use in identifying peers.

Search Filters

The EZ Group feature in the [Compare Institutions section of IPEDS](#) was used to identify a list of 40 potential regional peers using the following criteria to filter the search:

State or other jurisdiction	AK, AZ, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, ND, OR, SD, WA, WY
Sector	Public 2-year
Institutional category	Degree-granting, associate's and certificates
Degree of urbanization (Locale)	City: Small, Suburb: Small, Town: Fringe, Town: Distant, Town: Remote, Rural: Fringe, Rural: Distant
Institution size category	1,000 – 4,999

This search resulted in 40 potential regional peer institutions and 326 peers from across the United States. In order to narrow down the list, the committee established a weighted scoring system.

Weighted Scoring

The scoring system was developed to prioritize the criteria determined to be the most significant factors to consider in identifying potential peers. Size, type of programs, and size/type of community were assigned the highest weights, as the College tends to see itself reflected in smaller two-year colleges offering a mix of general education, trades, and technical programs, in a somewhat remote smaller to mid-size community. Of moderate significance in identifying peers are three key characteristics of the student population: percent of students taking courses full time, percent that are non-traditional age (25 years and older), and percent receiving Pell grants, a metric often used to understand the socioeconomic status of an institution. It was also moderately important to include institutions that do not offer on-campus housing and are not a member of a national athletic association, as both tend to foster a more engaged student body and promote brand identity, both of which Helena College struggles with. Finally, the committee felt it was important to be aware of the gender and racial diversity at peer institutions. Combined with socioeconomic status and age, those four student characteristics represent areas of focus in promoting equity.

The basic weighted scoring system is shown in the table below. A full table with variables, the range of values, points, and weights assigned is located in the appendix.

Variable	Total Points	Weight	Top Score	Percent of Total
Size of institution	3	6	18	14%
Types of programs offered ¹	3	5	15	12%
Size/type of community (Degree of urbanization)	3	5	15	12%
% full-time students	3	4	12	10%
% Pell recipients	3	4	12	10%
Offers on-campus housing	3	4	12	10%
Has sports	3	4	12	10%
% nontraditional age	3	4	12	10%
% women	3	3	9	7%
% people of color	3	3	9	7%
Total	30		126	100%

Scores of regional and national institutions ranged from 122 (the maximum score, 126, would have been an institution that shared all of the same characteristics as Helena College) to 37. Rather than just taking the top eight to ten schools on each list, the committee wanted to be sure the peer institutions were in a variety of geographic locations and truly represented our peers in the higher education landscape. IDEA Committee members each conducted cursory reviews of webpages for potential peers and reported back on their suitability, with the group ultimately deciding on the institutions listed above.

IDEA Committee is looking forward to the first IPEDS Data Feedback report with the new peer institution list, and hopes to identify additional ways to use these peer institutions in measuring institutional effectiveness. The list should be re-evaluated after five years, and the committee plans to use three- or five-year average data in the next iteration of the process.

¹ Carnegie Classification 2021: Undergraduate Instructional Program - Categorizes institutions based on the types of programs offered. For 2-year colleges, it focuses on transfer degrees awarded compared to career and technical degrees awarded

APPENDIX: FULL WEIGHTED SCORING TABLE

Helena College categories are in **bold** and highlighted orange

	Criteria	IPEDS Variable	Categories	Points	Weight	Examples/Definitions
A	Size of institution	Annual unduplicated headcount enrollment (IPEDS 12-Month Enrollment)	1000-2000	3	6	
			2001-3000	2	6	
			3001-5000	1	6	
			>5000	0	6	
B	Programs offered	Carnegie Undergraduate Instructional Program Undergraduate Instructional Program <i>HC AY2021: 68% CTE</i>	Associate's Colleges: High Career & Technical	3	5	More than 53.5% of degrees awarded in CTE programs
			Associate's Colleges: Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical	2	5	
			Associate's Colleges: High Transfer	1	5	Less than 35.8% of degrees awarded in CTE programs
			Baccalaureate/Associates Colleges	0	5	
			Special Focus: Two-Year Institution	1	5	
			Not applicable, not in Carnegie universe	0	5	not accredited or nondegree-granting
C	Size/type of community	Degree of Urbanization (Campus setting)	City: Large	0	5	Phoenix
			City: Midsize	1	5	Tacoma
			City: Small	2	5	GF, Casper, Coeur d'Alene
			Suburb: Large	0	5	Shoreline, WA (suburb of Seattle)
			Suburb: Small	2	5	Santa Fe
			Town: Fringe	1	5	
			Town: Distant	2	5	Wahpeton, ND and Ontario, OR
			Town: Remote	3	5	
			Rural: Fringe	3	5	Kalispell, Sioux Falls & Rapid City, SD
			Rural: Distant	0	5	
Rural: Remote	0	5	Bottineau, ND			
D	% full time students	% full-time students of total undergraduate headcount	<16	1	4	
			16-25	3	4	
			26-40	2	4	
			41-50	1	4	
			>50	0	4	
E	% Pell	% of all undergraduates awarded Pell grants (IPEDS 12-Month Enrollment)	<10	0	4	
			10-14	1	4	
			15-30	3	4	
			31-40	2	4	
			41-50	1	4	
			>50	0	4	

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	Criteria	IPEDS Variable	Categories	Points	Weight	Examples/Definitions
F	Offers on-campus housing	Institution provide on-campus housing	Yes	0	4	
			No	3	4	
G	Has sports	Member of National Athletic Association	Yes	0	4	
			No	3	4	
H	% over 25 years old	% of all students age 25-64 or 64+ (IPEDS Fall Enrollment)	<15	1	4	
			15-30	3	4	
			31-40	2	4	
			>40	1	4	
I	% women	Percent of unduplicated headcount by gender (IPEDS 12-Month Enrollment)	<40	2	3	
			40-65	3	3	
			>65	2	3	
J	% people of color	Percent of unduplicated headcount by race/ethnicity (12-Month Enrollment)	<20	3	3	
			20-30	2	3	
			31-40	1	3	
			>40	0	3	