



CULTIVATING GENERATIVE CONNECTIONS, COMMITMENT, AND ENGAGEMENT AMONG CAMPUS CONSTITUENCIES: A PRACTICE BRIEF BASED ON BEAMS PROJECT OUTCOMES

ABOUT THE BEAMS PROJECT

During 2003–07, the Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students (BEAMS) project fostered data-based campus change initiatives at more than 100 four-year Historically Black, Hispanic-Serving, and Tribal colleges and universities to increase student engagement and learning. Each campus committed to analyzing the scope and character of its students' engagement by participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and implementing well-designed action plans to improve student engagement, learning, persistence, and success. The Summer Academy—an annual gathering of representatives from various colleges and universities for collaborative work aimed at increasing access and success in higher education—provided dedicated time for BEAMS teams to identify solutions that could influence institutional and national higher education policy and practices. BEAMS is a partnership between NSSE and the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education, which is managed by the Institute for Higher Education Policy. BEAMS is supported by Lumina Foundation for Education.

This practice brief is one of a series highlighting schools' successful practices during the project's five years of data collection and action plan implementation. These briefs accompany a monograph that details the process BEAMS institutions used to craft and implement data-driven action plans to improve student success. The practice brief series outlines effective practices that can be replicated in postsecondary institutions interested in pursuing data-based change and increasing student engagement, learning, and success. This brief shows how creating campus connections and garnering faculty, staff, and student buy-in can facilitate action plan implementation and ultimately result in increased student engagement and success.

INTRODUCTION

To be successful in their endeavors, BEAMS teams had to cultivate buy-in to pave the way for securing resources from their institutions and commitment from colleagues to embrace different ways of working. Buy-in is the process of making relevant connections and gaining people's understanding, commitment, and actions in support of a project's vision and goals. Securing buy-in requires a focus on relevant outcome promises, benefits, and priorities that matter to the resource holders and other key constituencies.

Making a credible and compelling case requires moving beyond technical and logistical project details toward relevant stories about student success, conjuring provocative possibilities. Many have noted that strategic stories of a positive future are the best means for securing buy-in. When key constituents can visualize outcomes that matter to them, the case is made.

Ultimately, buy-in is a function of the extent to which key constituents perceive that they have been involved in the conception, design, and rollout of a project. Without buy-in, proposed changes confront suspicion, confusion, frustration, resistance, and anger, as many argue instead for the status quo or their own preferred approaches. Failure to secure buy-in from the right people—primary influencers and potential champions—at the right time can cripple a project or render it dead before it can begin.

To fuel resilient commitment, primary stakeholders need an ongoing role that strategically keeps the initiative high on their radar screens. This practice brief reviews the experiences of four institutions that have made buy-in campaigns a priority. It highlights the strategies they used to secure buy-in through cultivating understanding, commitment, engagement, and dedication in support of their projects' success.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY

Cheyney University is an Historically Black College and University of about 1,450 students in Cheyney, Pennsylvania. The Cheyney BEAMS team members listened carefully to the voices of their students through their NSSE responses and discerned the need for a project targeting three benchmarks: Levels of Academic Challenge, Enriching Educational Experiences, and Supportive Campus Climate. At the 2006 Summer Academy, the Cheyney BEAMS team deepened its study of NSSE data with student educational progress data and a systematic review of the student success literature. The team conducted university forums on low retention rates to sharpen awareness and create buy-in from the campus community.

After much exploration and deliberation, the Cheyney BEAMS team developed a comprehensive set of interventions, “The Cheyney University Holistic Student Development Experience,” to address academic preparedness, academic challenge and success, academic performance, retention, and graduation. After securing a two-year \$500,000 grant from the state, the Cheyney BEAMS team rolled out its vision for student engagement and success in fall 2007. With a primary focus on first-year students, the core components were a Summer Bridge program, enhanced academic mentoring center, academic major learning communities, enhanced service-learning opportunities, parent education workshops and training, and access to national data and resources on effective retention strategies.

The Cheyney BEAMS project is firmly integrated into broader campus goals, grounded in credible data, and supported by senior administrators—including some who are BEAMS team members. These features, in addition to ongoing resource development work, underscore sustainability as a high priority. The BEAMS initiative has fostered strong cross-campus communication and collaboration in the interest of student engagement and success. Cheyney continues to use an affinity-oriented colleague approach, with students, faculty, and staff leaders working in task forces with their respective colleagues to mobilize interest and sustain commitment. The Cheyney community has embraced the retention initiative. Faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni have volunteered to engage in cooperative experiences to enhance students’ college experience. This collaborative effort supports Cheyney’s motto: “Retention is everyone’s business.”

HASKELL INDIAN NATIONS UNIVERSITY

Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) in Lawrence, Kansas, is a tribal college that serves an average of more than 1,000 students each semester. Its students represent the spectrum of culturally diverse, federally recognized tribal nations in the United States. Since starting its work at the 2004 Summer Academy, the HINU BEAMS team has focused on improving academic challenge and rigor. To cultivate broad buy-in, the team has worked to increase campus-wide awareness of these topics, exploring promising strategies that are appropriate for their context and can effectively enhance student success. The focus has been to shift from a deficit-learning model to a relevant academic success model, involving students as co-inquirers and establishing a dialogue-oriented community of inquiry.

HINU has persisted through many starts and stops to craft a student engagement and success project congruent with the institution’s vision and cultural ways of being, doing, and engaging. The HINU BEAMS team used the 2007 Summer Academy to build on and weave together its many strands of student success efforts over the years. This culminated in “Beginning to End: Retention To Graduation,” a comprehensive intervention plan grounded in Native American cultural rhythms—structured learning communities, rituals, processes, and practices. The initiative aims to place each student in a well-supported niche with academic and social safety nets. The supportive academic environment envisioned includes realignment and amplification of the existing freshman orientation seminar, creation of four clan-like student cohorts (by alphabetical order), and coordination of counseling and residence hall programs.

The project starts with new freshmen as the first step in a larger program that will grow with students through all four years of college. A counselor is assigned to each of the four student “clans” to coordinate activities and services; students remain with the same group throughout their tenure at HINU. In addition to enhancing student success and increasing retention and graduation rates, Beginning to End is a vehicle for improving school spirit and motivation for all students as well as faculty, staff, and friends of the university. As the Beginning to End report notes, “Education, engagement, and life opportunities will become Haskell culture, and the college will become a top-tier tribal college.”

UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO—HUMACAO

The University of Puerto Rico—Humacao (UPRH) is an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) that is part of the University of Puerto Rico system, serving more than 4,200 students. At the 2004 Summer Academy, the UPRH BEAMS team crafted an ambitious plan focused on enhancing student, faculty, and staff interactions, as well as increasing student participation in educational enrichment activities. From the beginning, the team put together an expansive campus buy-in campaign that included a series of dialogues with various university constituencies about how to support student learning.

Over time and through extensive deliberations with campus colleagues, the initial plan was narrowed in focus yet broadened in reach. It is now more fully integrated with other campus initiatives to provide a solid and sustainable foundation for moving forward. The revised plan was prompted by the need to focus the scope while addressing a lack of integration and coherence among activities proposed by three key campus community segments: academic affairs, student services, and administrative affairs. A more collaborative and integrated BEAMS project plan—the Committee for the Integration of Student Services (CISE) emerged, reflecting input from institutional leadership and offices responsible for directly serving student needs. UPRH BEAMS team members found that the CISE agenda gave them many opportunities to integrate the efforts of groups of offices and officers and improve service delivery.

Increasing student engagement and learning by building a collaborative data-grounded culture of continuous improvement continues to be the primary focus of UPRH initiatives. CISE has spawned the Student Success Project, a comprehensive student-centered institutional framework based on the ASI Model: learning (aprendizaje), service (servicios), and research (investigación). The Student Success Project recognizes, respects, and responds to student needs by strengthening teaching and services through constant research and assessment of institutional offerings. The BEAMS initiative has evolved from an issue-specific project to an institution-wide project with BEAMS principles at the center. UPRH now has a holistic campus-wide framework for student development, learning, and success.

UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO—MAYAGÜEZ

As a part of the University of Puerto Rico system, the University of Puerto Rico—Mayagüez (UPRM) is an HSI that focuses on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, serving more than 12,800 undergraduate and graduate students. At the 2006 Summer Academy, the UPRM BEAMS team focused on a coordinated campus-wide initiative to increase and enhance student-faculty interaction across the undergraduate experience. Initial concerns about data quality and student participation led the team to expand its action plan to include deeper scrutiny of the NSSE data. In addition, the team committed to solidifying its evidentiary base through triangulation with other data sources (student focus groups and institutional data). The team has invested extensively in strengthening its case for the project mission through an extended awareness-raising and commitment-building campaign across the entire campus community.

The team has conducted presentations across campus to orient counselors, students, faculty, and administrators to the BEAMS project and to disseminate the campus NSSE data. The campaign also recruits members for ongoing task forces to improve student-faculty interaction. Access to the campaign's message has been greatly enhanced by a Web site that includes the community orientation presentation as well as direct access to the UPRM NSSE 2005 data for all benchmarks by academic college and class rank. In August 2007, UPRM's Project FIFE (Fomentado la Interacción Facultad-Estudiante/Promoting Student-Faculty Interaction), an outgrowth of BEAMS, was officially launched in a one-day retreat involving more than 80 faculty, counseling staff, and students.

As a result of these efforts, the BEAMS external consultant observed that a constructive debate is occurring among deans, faculty, counselors, and students, and that the work of the BEAMS team is well known to the university community. To date, the UPRM BEAMS team project team has focused on implementing a multifaceted, campus-wide campaign to nourish a generative, collaborative culture of dialogue and inquiry with student engagement and success at the center. With sustainability as a priority, these deliberations are occurring in special presentations by the team as well as through ongoing structures like task forces that work both within and across affinity groups.

COMMON CONCEPTS

BEAMS teams have shown great commitment and remained engaged through often convoluted journeys toward their project visions. Many have demonstrated resourceful persistence through several metamorphoses of their projects. They have kept their eyes on the ultimate prize: students and their success. Doing so required a willingness to hold the envisioned project “script” lightly so that emergent insights, voices, and views could be meaningfully engaged and incorporated.

Strategically configuring the BEAMS planning team. Ensuring that key stakeholder voices, views, and vantage points are included from the beginning reduces critical blind spots in the project focus and planning processes. To the extent that the team embodies such connections, buy-in is built in at the front end.

Keeping the WHO-factor—human systems dynamics—high on the project team’s radar screen early, as well as throughout the project development cycle. This involves mapping the sociopolitical landscape represented by interconnections among those who are to be educated/mentored/counseled, those who provide those services, those who supply the resources to underwrite the service delivery systems, and those who judge the appropriateness and efficacy of such systems.

Brainstorming and mapping relevant segments of the campus population with a vested interest in the project’s issues and outcomes. Specifically, the team identifies primary influencers on its campus and makes sure their needs for representation, relevant information, and service are addressed appropriately. This increases prospects for proactively engaging them as potential project champions.

Crafting campus action plans with real campus audiences in mind. Project plans are more likely to engage campus decision makers and other resource holders if tied to their concerns, such as spotlighting the alignment of the project with strategic plans or accreditation self-studies. The path to buy-in is facilitated through responsively linking the new and different to the familiar and credible.

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Linking projects to ongoing campus work to frame project work as an add-IN and not simply an add-ON to already full plates.

Given the multifaceted, time-crunched work agendas of so many institutions, staff must make strategic choices for involvement in generative, potentially high-impact actions to leverage their limited available time, resources, and energy.

CONCLUSION

Buy-in matters. Failing to appropriately attend to sociopolitical campus dynamics can erode prospects for a viable initiative. Doing so summons mindful scrutiny of the initiative and constructive collaboration among key constituencies.

A foundational task is flexibly navigating the relevant contours and appropriate pacing of such features within one’s context. To minimize counterproductive delays, project teams have had to be clear about which constituencies must have buy-in and when. They have had to refine their “antennae” for scanning and identifying untapped reservoirs of need to increase prospects for sustainable buy-in. They spotlight connections to what key constituencies already respect, value, and perceive as important, relevant, and needed.

Sustaining buy-in is especially difficult in severely under-resourced institutions where employees wear multiple hats—teaching, counseling, administrative, and other duties. Though challenging, such multitasking can be turned into a change resource, since such people already embody multiple vantage and leverage points. What appears a weakness of overextension can be transformed into a strength.

To enhance success prospects, BEAMS project teams have had to stay focused on the ultimate prize of student engagement and success, yet remain open and responsive to the needs of multiple campus constituencies.

