



GAINING SUPPORT FROM CAMPUS LEADERS: 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 made a commitment to analyze the scope and character of its students' engagement by participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and to implement well-designed action plans intended 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, and is supported by Lumina Foundation for Education.

This practice brief is one of a series highlighting key practices undertaken by some of the many successful BEAMS schools during the project's five years of data collection and action plan implementation. These practice briefs accompany a monograph that details the process BEAMS institutions used to craft data-driven action plans and to implement those plans to improve student success. The purpose of the practice brief series is to outline effective practices that can be replicated in postsecondary institutions interested in pursuing data-based change and increasing student engagement, learning, and success. This particular brief demonstrates how garnering support from campus leaders can facilitate action plan development and implementation to ultimately result in increased student engagement and success.

INTRODUCTION

Commitment from an institution's top leadership is an essential requirement for successful institutional change projects. Change initiatives that affect student attainment usually take time, because they rely on multiple activities that need to permeate the institutional culture. In addition to providing support and resources, campus administrators need to be sufficiently engaged with the initiative to demonstrate its importance to the entire campus. Verbal support usually is not sufficient. The university leadership needs to actively promote collaboration so that the project gains broad support from key stakeholders.

The campus examples discussed in this brief were all successful in garnering this necessary support from top administrators. This support took different shapes and forms, but in all cases, essential leadership actions ensured the success of these projects. In some instances, it was the president who initially charged a group with designing a project to improve student success. Whether or not it began with the president, in all cases, senior leadership remained involved throughout the implementation of the project and demanded information regarding progress toward the stated goals. When transitions in the senior leadership occurred, the institutionalized, broad-based projects were able to demonstrate their intrinsic importance for the campus and the value of ensuring their continued support. New presidents embraced the student success initiatives, because they saw their connections to the university mission, benefits for the campus, and value as promising projects that would bear fruit under their leadership. Although changes in leadership can create discontinuity, the well-grounded projects were able to continue without disruption because they had become a central component of the institutional fabric.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

ALBANY STATE UNIVERSITY

Albany State University, a four-year institution located in the southwest part of Georgia, is part of the state's university system. Classified as a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), its current student enrollment is 4,033.

NSSE results indicated that student engagement for most variables was higher than that of similar institutions. The negative benchmark findings were related to diversity, number of papers written by senior students, and number of hours spent on academic work outside class. Student interaction with faculty and advisors was quite high, indicating that faculty members would be the best group to increase student engagement in specific academic areas.

The university also realized the importance of using data for decision-making. When a new president came on board, the Albany State BEAMS team recognized the importance of connecting the goal of increasing faculty-student interaction to a new strategic plan and the core values of the institution. After participating in the strategic planning process, the team identified the creation of student-faculty learning communities as a framework for students and faculty to productively interact. The strategic planning process helped the team to identify a project that had presidential and campus-wide support.

To ensure buy-in, the project team was expanded to include representation from key stakeholder groups. The team used an innovative competitive proposal process to build faculty support for the learning community initiative. Through presentations to the Faculty Senate and an electronic call for proposals, faculty members were invited to submit grant proposals to design learning communities. The proposal selection committee included representatives from each college. Six proposals were selected to start in fall 2007. An assessment instrument and the results from the next NSSE administration will be used to evaluate the success of the learning communities and to inform decisions regarding next steps. Albany State's learning communities are in the beginning stages of implementation, but by focusing efforts on garnering buy-in and aligning their work with a new president's goals, the BEAMS team has ensured sustainability of this initiative.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY—FRESNO

California State University—Fresno (Fresno State), a comprehensive regional university, and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) is one of the 23 campuses of the California State University system. Its student enrollment is more than 21,000 and it has approximately 1,200 faculty.

Fresno State's project came out of the Student Success Task Force, a broad-based task force charged by the president to identify initiatives that support student success. The Task Force reports to the president and is co-chaired by the vice president for academic affairs and the vice president for student affairs. The group has 20 members, including (1) faculty and student affairs staff; (2) the heads of institutional research, assessment, and planning; and (3) representatives from the Learning Center. When the NSSE data showed that the campus needed to increase faculty-student interaction, the Student Success Task Force identified the development of a Mentor Institute as a sound approach to promote that interaction. Identifying at-risk students and placing them with a mentor became a high priority.

A broad-based team of administrators, faculty, staff, and students formed the project team. Their implementation plan included vision and mission statements, goals, objectives, and a listing of activities to be undertaken. Milestones and timelines were established and individuals responsible for carrying out the activities were identified. Monthly reports to the Student Success Task Force kept the team focused on the project. The team successfully launched the Mentor Institute in 2006 and added a virtual component, an online mentoring program that uses social networking software. The combination of presidential support and accountability to the Student Success Task Force helped the team successfully institutionalize the Mentor Institute.

INTER AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO—SAN GERMÁN CAMPUS

San Germán is a private comprehensive university and the only residential campus of the Inter American University System. With approximately 44,000 students enrolled, it is one of the largest private university systems in Puerto Rico and the United States. San Germán, an HSI, is located in the western part of Puerto Rico; its current enrollment is approximately 5,500 students.

To address student success, San Germán created a Campus Learning Center (CLC). The Center was designed to provide a space for mentoring, advising, and sharing ideas, and connecting faculty, staff, and students to teach, learn, and serve. A campus-wide professional development plan based on identified best practices was one of the critical components of this project. In addition, plans for the Center included the development of technology-based instruction modules to supplement and improve student academic skills.

The chancellor selected team members and gave the project her enthusiastic support. In the beginning, the team spent time and effort to secure multilevel administrative and campus-wide buy-in. Presentations were made at different levels so the entire campus community would be informed. An important component of this project was the understanding that student services and academic affairs must work together to have an impact on student success. At the most recent Summer Academy, the chancellor, along with other senior administrators, actively participated in all activities. By working closely with the team to define necessary changes for improvement, the chancellor further demonstrated her commitment to the project.

Because of senior administration support, San Germán was able to secure resources from a grant in support of the CLC. This grant provided the campus with the necessary funding to conduct training and bring resources to the Center. The Center is now perceived as the means to create a campus-wide community of learners that will ensure student success.

TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

Located in Nashville, Tennessee State University (TSU) is a comprehensive, urban, land-grant institution, classified as an HBCU. Its current enrollment is 8,800 students.

As in the case of the institutions mentioned previously mentioned, NSSE data at TSU confirmed the need to improve the engagement of students in meaningful learning experiences both within and outside the classroom. The university chose as its project goal to increase student engagement and learning through a structured community service, service-learning, and civic engagement program. It linked this goal to the work being done by the Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, which started in 2004.

A presidential transition provided the opportunity to include the president in the Summer Academy and gain his support. The BEAMS team aligned the project with the strategic plan and with accreditation requirements, ensuring that the goals of the project were compatible with the existing academic culture. Presidential support, along with support from other top administrators, was essential to the success of the team's effort. The project also obtained resources based on its documented improvements and Title III funding to support the project's initiatives.

The project has evolved over time, bringing on board the vice presidents for academic affairs and student affairs in a new collaboration to build on current service-learning initiatives and to focus on the first-year program. A learning communities initiative has also been added. The culminating activity of student orientation will be the first TSU Community Service Day, involving first-year students working in teams on service-learning projects, both on campus and in the surrounding community. The team's effort and the support from the president has led TSU to significant short-term successes, including serving as the nation's first HBCU to help establish and house the office for its state Campus Compact, sharing its service-learning expertise with others.

COMMON CONCEPTS

The institutional projects highlighted in this brief teach and reinforce the following concepts:

- **Support and commitment from campus leaders is a central component for achieving success in project implementation.**

Because of this support, projects were able to secure grants and necessary resources for implementation. When top administrators actively participated with the teams and asked for progress reports, it became clear to the campuses that they valued the project and its success. Promoting the use of data for analyses, to gauge progress and make improvements, was central to obtaining leadership support for these projects.

- **Campus leaders played a crucial role in ensuring that project teams had sufficient time to develop and implement well-crafted action plans.**

Participating in the Summer Academy was critical in helping teams rethink what they were doing, learn from others, and gather best practices. Top administrators who participated in the Summer Academy were able to share first hand the benefit of their projects and the value added to their campuses and to see the importance of team time in developing creative ideas for change. Returning home from the Summer Academy proved challenging to some teams in the face of multiple responsibilities. Finding time to do the work was in some instances difficult, and buy-in from high-level administrators was important to ensure that projects progressed.

- **While leadership support is central to successful campus change, it is also important to garner support from a wide range of stakeholders and share responsibility.** Getting buy-in was in most cases a slow but necessary process. For this goal, teams made presentations, gave reports, and shared information with different constituents. Teams were expanded through the addition of new members. In several cases, the project became a joint effort of academic and student affairs. Improving student attainment became everybody's responsibility. One team summarized it with the following statement: "We believe it is important for this project to be implemented both from the top down and from the bottom up, and for a broad representation of university constituents to feel ownership."

CONCLUSION

The teams from the four universities described in this brief showed extraordinary commitment and leadership. They realized that projects had to be congruent with institutional values. They understood that projects needed to evolve, become more focused, and attract new participants. The objective was never to finish the project fast, but to achieve solid transformation over time. Support from campus leadership gave these projects the credibility to move forward and seek support for sustainability. In the end, support from campus leaders was particularly important, but it was commitment from many sectors and strong team work that made these projects successful.

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