



INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH FACULTY DEVELOPMENT: 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 shows why supporting a data- and research-based faculty development program is one of the best means to increase student engagement and success.

INTRODUCTION

Any student success initiative that underestimates the pivotal role played by faculty members in matters related to student engagement and learning is likely to fail. What happens in the classroom—the quality of teaching that sparks engaged student learning—is critical.

When faculty are familiar with the research about how people learn, including pedagogies that have an impact on student success, they become more effective and confident teachers. Faculty members are experts in their field of study or discipline; for many, teaching has not been a formal part of their training. Good faculty development brings relevant scholarly work on teaching and learning to faculty attention and invites reflective inquiry on teaching in relation to what we want students to learn and what they are actually learning. Interpreting data on students' learning, examining student work, and honoring colleagues' hard-won teaching expertise really matters. No faculty development program will thrive that sets out to “fix” faculty.

Most universities and colleges are still not organized with learning in mind. Typically, the faculty research and reward system devalues teaching expertise; student affairs and academic affairs, natural collaborators when student success is the objective, rarely communicate. Yet, as the campus teams highlighted in this brief discover, faculty are keen to fine-tune their teaching if more students will become engaged learners. When given the chance, faculty members are also keen to work in collaboration with other colleagues whose commitment to student success and quality learning is as passionately held as their own. The best faculty development programs provide opportunities to puzzle through experiences and questions with colleagues in ways that lead to new insights, strategies, and experiments. If these conversations are organized following a predictable pattern, faculty learning communities become an integral and valued part of campus life and a forum for institutional change.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

BETHUNE-COOKMAN UNIVERSITY

Bethune-Cookman University is a private, Historically Black University (HBCU) located in Daytona Beach, Florida. The University takes pride in its holistic approach to education, designed “to develop in students a desire and capacity for intellectual and professional growth, leadership and service to others.” Among its 3,100 students, 1,200 are in their first year.

Although the university traditionally treated entering students as a discrete group with special needs, a number of factors led to a dynamic new direction for its Freshman College. Along with the appointments of a new president committed to improving the first-year experience and a new dean for the Freshman College, NSSE findings revealed that entering students were less engaged in learning than upper-division students. This revelation became the evidence—and the catalyst—for creating an intensive faculty development program focused on student engagement. The objective has been to provide entering students with a student-friendly introduction to the university while addressing their academic, social-cultural, and leadership development needs.

The institution’s BEAMS team, which included one faculty member from each of the university’s eight schools, developed a comprehensive plan for faculty development: workshops would be delivered directly to schools during school meetings; faculty could attend workshops organized by the Faculty Development Center, often with invited guest speakers; and colleagues who attended conferences focused on student engagement would lead sessions on what they learned. With the support of external funding, this program has been further enriched through the establishment of a series of professional development sessions geared to those teaching in the Freshman College but open to all interested faculty and staff. The sessions are divided by faculty and staff who teach the Freshman Seminar I courses; faculty teaching English, math, and reading; and faculty from the eight schools who teach introductory courses. By emphasizing communities of practice, faculty development has been deeply rewarding and productive.

In launching the faculty development program, the BEAMS team followed—and continues to practice—a cardinal rule: successful faculty development programs are faculty driven. The college’s schools endorsed the BEAMS project, and each dean chose a representative to serve on an expanded BEAMS team and eventual advisory committee for the Faculty Development Center. These representatives bring forward recommendations for faculty development and disseminate information and teaching techniques at school meetings.

The synergy created by drawing colleagues from the eight schools, institutional research and planning, the Faculty Development Center, and student affairs for the original BEAMS team has not fizzled. The entire campus is far more attentive to students’ experiences of learning, not only those in Freshmen College. A new campus vision is emerging, one in which graduates will be known for their abilities as compassionate “transformative leaders” for social justice—a learning outcome Bethune-Cookman’s namesake would surely endorse.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY—DOMINGUEZ HILLS

California State University—Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) is a public, Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Most of the 11,000-plus attendees are first-generation college students, 80 percent of undergraduates transfer from area community colleges, and 89 percent of freshmen arrive academically underprepared.

CSUDH BEAMS team members from student life, academics, and institutional research sketched out an ambitious vision: a poorly attended introductory course on higher education, “University 101,” would become the centerpiece of a determined effort to change freshmen retention rates. The five-year plan called for decisive action on eight fronts, including increased opportunities for faculty development.

The anticipated debut of the collaboratively built version of University 101 faced a formidable challenge when fiscal constraints meant that the number of sections proposed would have to be reduced. In a gesture that inspired other administrators and faculty to lend support, senior administrators volunteered their time as instructors. Four sections were offered, then 12. The enriched curriculum made a difference: 78 percent of University 101 students continued to their second year compared with 53 percent for freshmen not in the success course. The data and figures showing revenue loss when students do not continue convinced the Faculty Academic Senate and the provost to require all 1,200 freshmen to take University 101 by fall 2009.

A unique feature of the faculty development component of the CSUDH BEAMS plan is the multiple entry points for faculty to become engaged by degrees, depending on available time, experience, and interests. A high-profile speaker series, "Becoming an Engaged Community of Learners," features four higher education experts each year whose interviews at CSUDH's television studio are posted on the Center for Teaching and Learning webpage. Each guest also addresses how administrators can support faculty and student affairs personnel in their engagement efforts at the Provost's Luncheon Seminar attended by senior administrators, deans, and selected chairs. A campus community workshop follows this luncheon.

Other options include an annual faculty success seminar for new faculty who receive course release time to attend a monthly, three-hour seminar on pedagogies of engagement. Faculty and staff discuss practices that foster engagement during a brownbag luncheon Faculty Forum, and faculty receive support in preparing research proposals for external juried competitions at a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Seminar. Because CSUDH is the national resource center for active and cooperative learning, faculty can attend training in collaborative learning pedagogies led by the nation's best practitioners.

UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

From adult literacy to graduate school, the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), also an HBCU, is committed to broad-based access to higher education: 70 percent of entering students are first-generation college attendees, 80 percent work part time, and 75 percent require foundational work on math, reading, and writing.

The UDC BEAMS team—the creation of the Myrtilla Miner Professional Development Academy (MMPDA), named after the school's founder—had to serve multiple institutional needs: (1) a network of faculty, staff, administrators, and students who met at the University Scholarship Series on student retention (MMPDA's precursor) pursuing a university-wide means to address UDC's persistent 30 percent retention rate for entering students; (2) a new student retention plan called for a 5 percent increase to this rate annually, tying student retention to the need for increased professional development on teaching and learning; and (3) UDC BEAMS team members recognized that much could be accomplished if an urban campus could become a caring community. MMPDA is the crown jewel of UDC's student retention effort and has become a continuing education think tank for improving curricula and services related to engagement and enhanced student learning through the vibrant exchange of ideas and best practices.

The hard, grassroots work of institution-changing professional and faculty development occurs between MMPDA meetings as colleagues from departments and schools move their initiatives forward. Among many noteworthy practices, three are now institutionalized. The first is a professional development day during which faculty are invited to present best practices and add their names to each department's list of faculty involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning; faculty consult these lists and mentor one another. The second is a much-anticipated annual public poster session at which faculty and students jointly present their research, and a jury selects the top three posters; students receive a voucher for text books and faculty receive money toward attending teaching-related conferences. The third initiative is led by Student Affairs, where one hundred randomly selected first-time, full-time freshmen students are grouped in teams of five that meet every two weeks with a team of three mentors representing faculty, staff, and administration. A retention plan whose theme is "Creating connections for student success," was implemented and the results are impressive. The retention rate for entering students nearly doubled within a single year: 58 percent for 2005–06 compared with 30 percent for 2004–05.

COMMON CONCEPTS

Successful faculty development programs are purposeful, faculty-driven, and informed by data on student engagement and learning. Each BEAMS team highlighted in this brief invited the campus community to discuss data about their students in relation to benchmark practices for student engagement and attainment. Understanding what this data meant for practice, specifically teaching and learning, became the impetus for organizing ongoing education for faculty and others involved in the BEAMS projects.

As one reads the more detailed accounts from which this practice brief is drawn, shared approaches are presented along with some common faculty development practices:

- **Pedagogical practices are introduced in relation to the research on how people learn.** When selecting teaching strategies, faculty are invited to take the same scholarly approach to teaching and learning that they do in their other scholarly work.
- **Existing good work is valued and made public.** Faculty are invited to present their best practices at forums where there is an opportunity to discuss how to adapt these ideas and, for those interested, follow-up activities such as mentoring systems are already in place.
- **Student retention is addressed by focusing on the quality of students' learning experiences.** Teams of faculty are invited to design high-interest, integrative curricula that develop students' academic abilities in the context of doing college-level work.
- **What students are learning is examined in relation to expected learning outcomes.** Workshops are offered at which actual student work is examined and conversation is focused on teaching effectiveness and ways to provide constructive feedback.

- **Hard-to-solve dilemmas based on faculty's experiences of teaching are addressed.** Sessions are organized to discuss troubling issues related to student learning at which the intent is to provide networks of support for both students and faculty.

- **Work is assessed in relation to data and plans are refined.** Continuous improvement through continuous assessment is an integral part of BEAMS work, including faculty development, for which recommendations for improvement are solicited and acted on.

CONCLUSION

An entire campus engages and educates its students in the learning required for our times—but it is in the classroom where powerful experiences of learning are the enticement, the reward, for persistence. The faculty development programs put in place by these and other BEAMS institutions provide faculty with new skills and opportunities to engage students in innovative and exciting ways. They represent broad-based faculty commitment to new practices. For all involved in this process, those leading the efforts and those being asked to participate, such change can be daunting. The recommendation Terry O'Banion made to colleges involved in the League for Innovation in the Community College's pioneering work on student- and learning-centered institutional change is especially wise. He invites us at all levels of an institution to ask a simple question before proceeding to act: "How does this (policy, decision, practice) enhance or support student learning?" By making student learning central to their change efforts, the BEAMS teams have crafted initiatives that, above all, honor faculty commitment to student success.

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