



## ALIGNING MULTIPLE CAMPUS INITIATIVES: 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 how aligning multiple campus initiatives can facilitate action plan implementation and ultimately result in increased student engagement and success.

### INTRODUCTION

Few institutional projects operate in isolation. Institutional effectiveness and student success depend increasingly on the ability of our institutions to link systems and programs (both internal and external) to accomplish their mission and to produce desired student outcomes. Aligning multiple initiatives promotes greater efficiency in the use of human and financial resources, reinforcement of goals and outcomes, continuity, synergistic support for ongoing work, and the development of new ideas. Lack of alignment creates fragmentation of effort, duplication, missed opportunities for reinforcement and support, and wasted resources.

Achieving BEAMS project goals demanded alignment of work across each institution. No single project, no matter how effective, could alone accomplish the work planned on BEAMS campuses.

The alignment of multiple campus activities or programs was a central focus of the BEAMS projects profiled in this brief. Whatever their specific campus activities, these projects shared a common imperative to connect the BEAMS work to larger institutional priorities. Such alignment was necessary for various reasons. Some projects needed to align themselves with other efforts to garner resources and leverage; others were motivated by external forces, such as a pending accreditation visit; and, for still others, the need for internal institutional changes sparked collaboration and linkage. In some instances, alignment was needed for a combination of these reasons. Whatever the primary motivator or approach used, the desired outcome in all cases was student success.



## INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

### INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN INDIAN ARTS

The Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is located in the midst of one of the most diverse concentrations of Native peoples in North America. As a designated Tribal college that serves Native students from around the country, the institution has created a distinctive cultural learning environment. The IAIA BEAMS team emerged from changes at the college, including the development of its first baccalaureate degrees, which required a revision of the general education program. Data confirmed the perception that this program was not adequately serving students. The needed work—to create a set of overarching goals and learning outcomes for students and to embed those goals in academic programs—became the focus of the IAIA BEAMS team. Three major outcomes were identified: (1) revise all general education courses to reflect the new goals and learning outcomes, (2) revise the “Native Foundations for College Success” course to serve as the anchor for a new general education program, and (3) create a rubric system to assess whether goals and values of general education have been addressed. The IAIA BEAMS team quickly realized that these outcomes could not be accomplished without aligning its work with that in several other areas on campus.

What did alignment look like at IAIA? First, the IAIA BEAMS team discovered that it needed a new campus vocabulary that encompassed Native cultural approaches to the learning process. It came up with four broad concepts—*aesthetic, metaphoric, creative, and critical*—that developed into the building blocks for the general education program. The new vocabulary permeated the entire campus, generating an institutional conversation about learning through a Native-cultural lens. Second, the Native foundations course was reenvisioned to extend its role in general education, becoming a resource coordinated with other courses across the institution and serving as a primary area for the early integration of cultural perspectives in the IAIA curriculum. Work with faculty and administrators on these changes required an ongoing dialogue to redevelop instructor requirements for delivering the new general education program.

The successful revision of the general education curriculum was directly related to the IAIA BEAMS team’s efforts to align its work with the entire campus community. Various areas of the campus involved in the alignment process included the Learning Support Center, a student advisory

board, the academic dean, and the dean of students. Crucially, those involved in the BEAMS project developed materials that others at the institution saw as valuable. As a result, the department chairs were willing to use the overarching BEAMS goals in all academic assessment. The course plan and syllabus for the Native Foundations for College Success have been revised according to the stated project goals, and during fall 2007, the institution assessed whether these changes resulted in the desired outcomes.

### NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY

Norfolk State University (NSU) is Virginia’s largest Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Using the NSSE benchmark “enriching educational activities,” the NSU BEAMS team set out to develop a common set of outcomes for various academic initiatives across the institution and to align these activities with the university’s general education goals. Over the years, NSU had created an array of new university-wide initiatives aimed at enriching the education of its students. These initiatives included (1) a service-learning project; (2) the American Democracy Project, a national project that aims to help ensure that democratic ideals and values are incorporated into the curriculum; (3) academic support committees focusing on the general education core, an orientation course for entering students, and advising and retention; and (4) a technology support team. The university also established the office of first-year experience and the Center for Global Education. While all these worthy efforts were focused on enriching the education experience for students, the university recognized that the efforts were fragmented and sometimes too narrowly targeted. The NSU BEAMS team set out to create a common set of curriculum-embedded measures and outcomes for both curricular and co-curricular activities.

The project—called E3 (also known as Enriching Educational Experiences)—became a major focus for the institution, linking to simultaneous work on the institution’s regional accreditation process, most notably the preparation of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The NSU BEAMS team learning outcomes related to both curricular and co-curricular activities and supported perfectly the focal point for the QEP. The BEAMS team incorporated the alignment of curricular and co-curricular activities as a new strand in the 2004–05 strategic plan. In this case, alignment meant becoming engaged in a variety of specific action agendas, including (1) creating a common learning outcomes mapping process for the general education courses, (2) developing an assessment plan for service

learning activities that connect student outcomes to the curriculum, (3) producing a report on E3-related activities for the *NSU Graduating Student Exit Survey*, and (4) launching a project Web site to provide information for the campus initiatives. These efforts are paying off in a more robust assessment process, new data collection, and a better sense that NSU students are effectively engaged in learning.

#### **NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY**

North Carolina Central University (NCCU), also an HBCU, is growing, thanks to aggressive recruiting, competitive tuition, and quality programs and services. Its location in North Carolina's Research Triangle has led to higher enrollments and new programs. Despite this success, the university recognized that it was struggling with retention. Informed by institutional data and its NSSE results, the NCCU BEAMS team tackled this important campus issue. Specifically, the project targeted the creation of a Comprehensive Academic Success Enhancement (CASE) Center as its primary vehicle for improving retention efforts. CASE was created as a multifaceted entity that would help the university align existing offices and programs affecting retention. Designed to provide coordinated processes and information flow related to both individual students and policies, CASE encompassed 18 components: learning communities and bridge programs, community service learning, academic advising, community college partnerships and transfer students, freshman orientation, undergraduate and graduate admissions, residence life, scholarships and student aid, library services, health services, tutorial services, student accounting, university testing, academic support, residential life, general education curriculum, honors program, and registration.

To help these 18 components understand how alignment works most effectively, the NCCU BEAMS team developed a flow chart showing links across the various retention players and created a way to connect student service issues and academics. As it continued to make itself valuable to the institution, the NCCU BEAMS team group became a subgroup of the Institutional Retention Management Team, further embedding its work into the fiber of the school. The important work done at NCCU has been recognized by the state of North Carolina, which provided the institution with \$221,000 in fiscal resources for 50 students to assist the Summer Bridge component of CASE in 2007. NCCU is one of two state institutions slated to receive \$500,000 from the state for a 2008 Summer Bridge program for 100 students.

#### **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON—DOWNTOWN**

The University of Houston—Downtown (UHD) is an urban Hispanic-Serving Institution. The typical UHD freshman comes from a family that has little previous experience with higher education, commutes to school, and is employed. About 85 percent of first-year students are placed into one or more developmental courses. UHD joined the BEAMS initiative because NSSE and other data revealed the need to give early attention to students in such areas as time use and academic planning. A clear mandate called for the university to be more effective in helping new students take full advantage of the academic opportunities at UHD.

The initial focus of the UHD BEAMS team was to align the many activities related to new student orientation. In recreating the new student orientation process, a strong working relationship was needed between student affairs and academic affairs, and one of the project goals embraced by both of these areas was to modify and expand the institution's community-of-learners format. This student-academic affairs alliance ensured high visibility, resources, and time-on-task. The UHD BEAMS team linked to the university's Achieving the Dream initiative and to the statewide Closing the Gaps program to improve minority enrollment. This institution-wide alignment of efforts took a major leap when the work of the UHD BEAMS team became intertwined with the institution's Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation QEP. In fact, the UHD BEAMS team, slightly enlarged, became the QEP work team.

Several factors contributed to the success of UHD's work, but a significant one was the "culture of evidence" approach stimulated by the initial use of NSSE data. This approach had a ripple effect that caused a greater focus on the assessment and use of data for decision-making across the institution. Through its efforts at alignment, the UHD BEAMS team was able to achieve a successful SACS visit, implement the UHD Freshman Success Program, and gain support for increasing the number of instructors available for gateway courses, along with other outcomes. At UHD, what started as an attempt to "merely" achieve greater effectiveness by linking related orientation activities evolved into an alignment of programs that affected the institution's overall ability to orient, retain, educate, and graduate its students.

## COMMON CONCEPTS

What can other institutions take away from the work of these four BEAMS projects? The projects teach or reinforce the following concepts:

- **Alignment requires a clear, shared vision about the desired end results or outcomes.** In all four institutions, the BEAMS projects fit into larger institutional goals and priorities, leading to buy-in from administration and faculty. BEAMS success meant success for other projects and for students.
- **Effective alignment takes advantage of timing and both internal and external priorities.** For several of the projects, timing was crucial. External needs such as accreditation or state mandates and internal pressures presented by new programs or the concern over issues such as retention can be key focal points to unite otherwise fragmented activities.
- **Programs and people are eager to align with others that have something to offer.** The benefits of alignment or coordination need to be clear to all. Additionally, alignment of institutional programs needs to produce a return on investment in student learning, retention, or other areas that could not be attained without the joint efforts of the various parties.

- **Program positioning and people are the keys to successful alignment.** Program champions are important to successful alignment. Although this was not mentioned in the program sketches, each of the four BEAMS projects had either an administrator or a key faculty member as an advocate. It does matter where a particular effort is housed and administered. Connections to administrative units that can support the work with both human and financial resources can effectively leverage other efforts.
- **Good information and effective communication are essential to establish and maintain collaboration.** Information sharing, good reporting, and creative communication spark interest and build trust across programs. In each of the projects cited, there was a steady flow of information to administrators and faculty through the use of Web sites, campus town meetings, workshops, seminars, visits by BEAMS consultants, and more. Open communication and appropriate feedback are essential because of the complexity of alignments that cross a variety of areas on campus.

## CONCLUSION

Programmatic alignment continues to be necessary for campuses to successfully serve students and especially to ensure strong learning outcomes. Campus programs, such as these BEAMS projects, need to become skillful in aligning programs that can have an impact on student learning and improve institutional effectiveness.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY  
1320 19TH STREET, NW, SUITE 400  
WASHINGTON, DC 20036  
202 861 8227 TEL  
202 861 9307 FAX  
WWW.IHEP.ORG

### BEAMS CONTACT

MELISSA DEL RIOS  
MDELRIOS@IHEP.COM

### SUPPORTED BY

LUMINA FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION  
30 SOUTH MERIDIAN STREET, SUITE 700  
INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46204  
317 951 5300 TEL  
800 834 5756 TOLL FREE  
317 951 5063 FAX  
WWW.LUMINAFOUNDATION.ORG

PGPB01200803-2KBM

