



STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: 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 highlights initiatives designed to improve student support services at four institutions. The focus on project implementation and accomplishments shows how these projects can be replicated and how an emphasis on the services offered to students during their postsecondary experience can ultimately result in increased engagement and success.

INTRODUCTION

Student support services are critical to student success, especially at campuses that enroll large numbers of academically under-prepared students. These programs assist students in addressing areas of academic deficiency and provide necessary resources to maximize students' intellectual and social capital while in college. These services include, but are not limited to, academic tutorial programs, faculty and peer mentoring programs, academic and career advising, and social and personal adjustment initiatives. Designed to facilitate students' transition into college, promote retention, and lead to graduation, student support services are most effective when they are tailored to match the campus culture and address the needs of the typical student on the campus.

Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) have extensive experience in providing support services that facilitate student success. MSIs both educate large numbers of academically under-prepared students and have a long history of promoting a culture that features student support and success as its central tenet. Several MSIs participating in the BEAMS project have developed effective student support programs, strategies, and policies that are instructive not only for other MSIs but also for all postsecondary institutions.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

Jackson State University (JSU) is an urban, comprehensive, Historically Black College and University (HBCU) with an average annual student population of 8,000. University administrators wanted to improve student retention and graduation through a campus-wide collaborative effort to strengthen student support services. Through an assessment of their students' engagement, it became evident that the students did not feel engaged with the university and were not taking advantage of the support services the university offered. To address these concerns along with problematic probation and retention rates, the university developed an action plan to increase retention rates, levels of engagement, and use of support services.

After numerous meetings with faculty, staff, and students, JSU took a twofold approach to improving student support services and enhancing customer service. First, they focused on promoting an ethos of collaboration on campus. This was facilitated by organizationally reassigning and physically realigning key departments that play significant roles in student achievement, thus creating the division of undergraduate studies, which embodies the first-year experience, Honors College, and University College. This realignment increased student success, reduced the bureaucracy that students encounter, and promoted greater administrative effectiveness. Second, the university created training systems to educate faculty and staff about the breadth of institutional resources and associated processes; therefore, students could acquire appropriate information about navigating campus systems from any university employee. Central to both of these strategies was improving faculty and staff awareness about university resources, policies, programs, and opportunities with the goal of disseminating them to students who would benefit. To illustrate JSU's commitment to this effort, the university president implemented strict customer service policies and procedures.

JSU has witnessed the fruits of its labor and has seen a 46 percent increase in the number of students using tutorial services and a 79 percent increase in the number of students using advising and counseling services. Short-term retention and graduation rates have slightly increased. This success has largely been ascribed to the new collaborative model that pairs first-year faculty advisors with professional advisors, and offers study skills workshops and success seminars. Led by the division of undergraduate studies, this JSU initiative illustrates how well-integrated student support services can cultivate a supportive campus environment and positively affect student success.

KENTUCKY STATE UNIVERSITY

Kentucky State University (KSU) is an HBCU with a liberal arts focus located in the capital city of Frankfort, Kentucky. Enrollment is approximately 2,400 students and degrees are awarded at the associate's, bachelor's, and master's levels. Campus NSSE results and other assessment data indicated that students experienced too much of an administrative runaround when dealing with offices on campus, which lowered student satisfaction and retention. The KSU BEAMS team set out to stimulate a culture change on campus with the goal of promoting a more seamless integration of student support services.

The BEAMS team began by gaining high-level institutional support from the president and provost. Their next step was to identify faculty and staff supporters by convening a campus summit on improving and centralizing academic support services. After the summit, the team created an action plan with an academic success campaign as a central component. An academic success campaign task force was established to improve coordination among various student support services on campus. Key aspects of this initiative included (1) creating a 4-1-1 information center where students could access basic information on financial aid, registration, housing, counseling, and tutoring, among other services; (2) grouping offices with related student responsibilities into close proximity; (3) collaborating more effectively with those who staff front desks in each student service office to understand their responsibilities and provide cross-training; and (4) establishing an academic success center to enhance and coordinate all tutoring services.

The components of the academic success campaign have been implemented and data reveal that results are positive. The BEAMS team was enthusiastic about sharing their successes with faculty and staff to further entrench their efforts and generate energy that would sustain additional improvements to institutional practices, particularly student services. More recent efforts have resulted in the further development of strategic delivery and connection of student support services. Additional faculty have been hired to serve developmental students with best practices. Efforts are also under way to launch a new plan for student assessment and referral to services that address cognitive and affective factors related to academic success.

ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY

Located in San Antonio, Texas, St. Mary's University is a private, Catholic, Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) that enrolls approximately 3,900 students, many of whom are commuters. NSSE results, in combination with other campus data and anecdotal information, indicated that certain student groups, including transfer, part-time, and evening students, were not utilizing academic and support services at satisfactory levels, contributing to higher attrition among these groups. Many campuses encounter challenges in engaging these students at adequate levels, but St. Mary's was undeterred in its efforts to ensure that all students are given adequate support to succeed.

St. Mary's embarked on a project to address students' academic, co-curricular, social, and personal needs. The campus BEAMS team conducted a needs assessment to determine the specific concerns and expectations of the underserved students. Using this data to provide guidance, the team developed a comprehensive, integrated plan to improve their student support services. Taking short- and long-term approaches, the team set out to achieve, in the short term, a review and revision of all student orientation programs, the creation of an online one-stop service center, the exploration of improvements in the advising program targeted for transfer students, and an increase in faculty knowledge concerning university support services to provide accurate information to students. Central to the long-term strategies were developing formative and summative assessment plans for various services and creating a process of regular program reviews.

The primary result of the St. Mary's BEAMS team was the amalgamation of massive amounts of data about how students interact with their student support services. Preliminary mining of that data revealed that the academic advising system will require more attention in future efforts to improve these services. To maximize their efforts, the St. Mary's BEAMS team will continue examining the rich data they have gathered. They also will encourage other areas on campus to take advantage of their extensive assessment activities to learn more about their students. By serving as the foundation for a culture of evidence, this project will result in long-term benefits for the campus.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

The University of New Mexico (UNM) is a research institution with more than 26,000 students attending its main campus in Albuquerque. Designated as both the state's flagship institution, and an HSI, a unique pairing, UNM enrolls a large proportion of first-generation, minority, low-income, rural, and transfer students, many of whom come to the university academically under prepared and face challenges to academic success. Armed with evidence indicating that students who use academic support services on campus earn higher semester grade point averages and persist at higher rates, UNM set out to integrate those services and make them more accessible to students. To achieve this feat, UNM created the Multiple Academic Pathways for Students (MAP) project, a suite of tools designed to support and motivate students to use academic services.

MAPS was intended to create digestible formats for students so they could more easily understand the location and function of various campus offices. Students would be able to develop a cognitive map of these services, giving them a better understanding of how these offices are integrated and facilitating student interactions with them. The MAPS suite of tools consists of paper and Web-based maps that contain information that address students' navigational challenges on campus. Another goal of MAPS was to encourage a dialogue between program staff offering academic support to develop grassroots connections among the various academic support service offices.

After planning for MAPS based on NSSE and other campus-level data, the UNM BEAMS team conducted an inventory of academic support programs and secured funding for the initiative. The next steps involved training faculty, staff, and students about the project and then tracking program users and nonusers as part of the program assessment. A marketing plan to promote the project to various campus constituencies, including parents at orientation, was implemented. Now that MAPS is in place, UNM is continuing to collect data on its impact, including participating in an upcoming NSSE administration. MAPS has been further integrated into the campus infrastructure by incorporating it into a Title V grant. This strategy can provide momentum for the project's long-term success and illustrates a deeper commitment to this work within the campus community.

COMMON CONCEPTS

Each of the four institutions used common concepts in advancing their work. These campuses also followed a particular order in pursuing their projects. The primary objective of each campus was to increase engagement and retention by assisting students in navigating campus processes and experiences. The following key elements were consistent across the campuses' initiatives and contributed to their success:

- **Inform campus efforts with assessment data.** Each campus began their work by examining various data elements to determine where the problem was most acute. Using NSSE data in concert with pre-existing campus data helped to identify key issues and provided a comprehensive picture of students' experiences with the various services. By using assessment data to inform their work, the campuses maximized their efforts and honed in on the most pressing issues before them.
- **Engage in detailed planning before moving forward.** By engaging in detailed planning before moving forward, the campus teams ensured that they had empirical evidence to substantiate their claims, had buy-in from senior administrators and key faculty, and had a plan of action that would maintain the focus of their efforts. This detailed planning also served to answer the naysayers who might have attempted to counter their efforts.
- **Create seamless integration among student service offices.** A key element to each plan was to create seamless organizational, and in some instances physical, integration among student service offices. Students often express frustration about having to visit different offices across campus to attend to their needs, which could negatively affect their academic performance or influence their decision to withdraw. By attempting to curtail this bureaucratic runaround, these institutions reinforced their commitment to creating supportive campus environments.

- **Endorse cross-training faculty and staff about the breadth and scope of services.** The campuses' assessments showed that faculty and staff were unable to assist students in navigating the campus bureaucracy because many of them were unaware of services and resources available on campus, sometimes providing students with inaccurate information. Endorsing cross-training for faculty and staff makes them more knowledgeable about campus resources, and helps students in their acquisition of what is often critical and life-changing information.
- **Secure buy-in from frontline staff in each office.** As the level of customer service most often encountered by students, frontline staff play a significant role in promoting a supportive campus environment. NSSE measures the quality of student relationships with administrative offices and can provide an effective assessment of the impact of staff attitudes and knowledge on student engagement. Cross-training these individuals on various campus services can positively affect student satisfaction and the perception of the campus environment.

CONCLUSION

The four universities highlighted in this brief illustrate a growing trend on college campuses to create better integration among student support services. The goal in these efforts is to better serve student needs and to create a more supportive campus environment, thereby increasing student satisfaction, retention, and graduation rates.

Students need appropriate levels of challenge and support to get the most out of their learning experiences. While student services can provide significant support, they should not be structured in a way that students find too challenging to use. Armed with data and supported by key constituents, these BEAMS campuses began with a plan to improve their student services and collaborated with faculty, staff, and students to prompt the campus to operate in a manner that benefits students first and foremost.

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