



PURPOSEFUL CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES DESIGNED TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT: 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 demonstrates how emphasis on co-curricular activities can ultimately result in increased student engagement and success.

INTRODUCTION

Students' "sense of belonging" during their postsecondary careers is an important component in increasing their persistence and success. Colleges and universities that can channel student energies toward a purposeful outcome and engage them at high levels are those deemed most effective. To achieve this end, BEAMS teams considered co-curricular, or extracurricular, activities an important engagement indicator, touching on at least five of Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education": encourage contact between students and faculty, develop reciprocity and cooperation among students, encourage active learning, communicate high expectations, and respect diverse talents and ways of learning. Co-curricular activities cover a broad range of out-of-classroom, but sponsored on-campus programs and services, designed to promote leadership, life skills, and personal development for students while enhancing campus life.

The following four BEAMS institutions searched for ways to create and sustain co-curricular activities designed in collaboration with faculty, staff, students, and community members with a focus on enhanced campus engagement. They included new and expanded clubs and organizations; faculty/staff/student university-sponsored activities; orientation and orientation courses; learning communities; service-learning; and so on. Some projects began with ambitious designs covering a broad range of activities, while others focused on one or two programs. All made efforts to assess the impact of the programs, and all reported increased student engagement.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY

Alcorn State University, a state-supported Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in rural Mississippi, began its student engagement program in 2002. The university enrolls 3,100 part- and full-time undergraduate and graduate students. The president at the time was concerned about a lack of student engagement in a variety of activities, particularly in the evenings and on weekends. Student Services staff faced the usual challenge of campus participation: getting critical masses of students to venture out of the dorms after classes to attend sponsored functions. It wasn't that Alcorn didn't have co-curricular programs; the problem was drawing students to them.

Alcorn NSSE data showed that students wanted more faculty/student interaction. The Alcorn BEAMS team, led by representatives from student affairs, student health, student activities, academic affairs, and several students, decided to create more such interaction through programming around the shared values of faculty and students. They identified two sets of programs: one under the umbrella of volunteerism, integrity, and humanism, and the other on health and wellness. The Alcorn BEAMS team designed a series of activities, initiatives, and programs based on these values, hoping they would increase participation and, as a result, student engagement.

The Alcorn BEAMS team enhanced existing programs such as International Week with stepped-up advertising and larger planning committees. They took speakers and activities directly to the residence halls. They promoted health and wellness through specific activities linked with classroom exercises, so students were often required to attend as part of class. They designed talent nights for faculty, staff, and students to showcase their abilities to the campus community. They increased community service through existing clubs and organizations, including athletics. They designed short, targeted, scannable evaluation questionnaire for each activity to get a sense of its impact. The results after a year were exciting: students, faculty, and staff reported heightened awareness of life issues and enriched involvement in community service and volunteerism. Most important, respondents overwhelmingly stated that they would participate in future programming. The university has since established a Center for Student Services and Outcomes, with a former Alcorn BEAMS team member as director. The office will continue to coordinate with various campus entities to monitor student activities and student engagement.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY—MONTEREY BAY

The California State University—Monterey Bay (CSUMB), a Hispanic-Serving Institution with just under 4,000 students, set as a goal for its BEAMS project to increase first-year students' participation in co-curricular activities. The CSUMB BEAMS team identified activities that would increase opportunities for participation and enable first-year students' to make a clear connection between participation in co-curricular activities and campus engagement. In 2006, the BEAMS team surveyed first-year students and used the results, along with several newly planned programs, to establish a method and set of mechanisms for ensuring and increasing first-year students' awareness of and involvement in co-curricular activities.

Welcoming the largest freshman class in CSUMB history in September 2007, the institution began several initiatives to increase students' awareness of co-curricular activities:

- **Student Activities Alert:** This e-mail alert to students included information on co-curricular activities provided by student organizations and academic departments, listing upcoming events.
- **Publicity:** With the positive response from the *Student Activities Alert* e-mails, they created semester and monthly calendars with taglines of "Know what's going on" and "Nothing to do on campus? Read below."
- **Two New Positions:** The university allocated resources to hire a new first-year experience coordinator and a coordinator of leadership development to focus on students' first-year experience.
- **Freshman Call Center:** Using a model from the University of South Carolina, CSUMB established a new Freshman Call Center, hiring upper-division students to call every first-year student to check in and help with their transition to CSUMB.
- **Inside Track:** A coaching company, Inside Track, was hired to select 150 students at random to be coached. The institution is researching whether the coached students are more successful than those not coached.
- **Care Team:** The Care Team was created to respond proactively and reactively to issues and concerns of individual students and the larger community.
- **Participation Report:** For the first time, the university began collecting data to calculate how many participants attend events. In one semester, more than 16,000 participants went to events on and off campus.

The team has received positive feedback from faculty, staff, and students that there is a shift in thinking about co-curricular activities and what is offered on and off campus.

CLAFLIN UNIVERSITY

The student service leadership at Claflin University, a small (about 1,800 students), independent HBCU in Orangeburg, South Carolina, drew from professional experience that faculty-student interaction in and beyond the classroom as well as student engagement with institutional activities has a positive impact on student success. They assumed that those interactions could be improved and increased through programs such as orientation, coaching, mentoring, and tutoring, and by connecting course activities with active learning projects. NSSE data supported their assumptions: students cited the need for more out-of-classroom interaction with faculty and more campus activities. The Claflin BEAMS team believed that quantitative evidence could speed up the overall university commitment to improve student engagement. When competing for limited resources, they concluded, quantitative evidence was a sure way to demonstrate that an initiative was worthy of support.

It would be up to the BEAMS team to help the university community articulate what student engagement beyond the classroom looked like and to secure support for those activities. Members of the BEAMS team were carefully selected; buy-in from across the community was important. Two faculty members were chosen from each of the four schools, as well as three students from the freshman, sophomore, and junior classes. Two staff members and one administrator were also included on the team.

What did student engagement look like at Claflin? A wide range of activities became part of the concept of “student engagement for student success.” The university sponsored a series of campus-wide forums on topics of interest (even hosting former President Bill Clinton as part of campaign 2008); developed academic credit-bearing, service-learning opportunities; formally increased student representation on university committees; and executed weekly faculty-student activities.

Increased awareness of and focus on student engagement has helped garner support for other campus entities, including the office for career development, the Center for Leadership Development, the Center for Vocational Reflections, and the Freshman College. Student services assessment tools also showed students participating in larger numbers in mentoring and tutoring activities; community service activities through the American Red Cross, the Orangeburg County Council on Aging, and the National Kidney Foundation; “movie nights”; and smaller club-based organizations. Student services administrators will continue to monitor and assess student engagement to maintain the momentum gained through BEAMS.

MORRIS COLLEGE

Beginning in 2002, Morris College, a small, HBCU independent with just under 1,000 students in Sumter, South Carolina, began to implement a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) required for reaffirmation of its accreditation. The institution’s QEP, “Engaging Students More Effectively Toward the Goals of Improved Learning and Student Development,” involved 28 activities and projects. When the school joined the BEAMS initiative, Morris BEAMS team members decided to make the BEAMS project an integral part of the QEP. Team members were particularly concerned about the NSSE data indicating student perceptions that active learning did not take place outside the classroom. In addition, student complaints about the lack of computer access were growing. The Morris BEAMS team—composed of representatives from academics, student services, information systems, and institutional advancement—set its sights on two key QEP initiatives: “Service Learning and Community Service” and “Expanding Student Access to Computer Laboratories.”

Morris BEAMS team members knew something about the communities from which their students came. Though many had a tradition of volunteerism and service, they could not find time to continue that tradition since coming to college. Team members felt if the college began a formal service-learning program, with planned sites and college credit, it could tap into a student resource beneficial to students, the community, and the college. The goal was to promote students’ commitment to volunteerism while enhancing service and active learning. This was seen as a way to enhance engagement and, subsequently, student success. The Morris BEAMS team instituted the Service-Learning and Community Service Project, which began with the appointment of a part-time service-learning coordinator (SLC). The SLC recruited faculty and staff members to participate in the project and designed and implemented an orientation program.

The Service-Learning and Community Service Project has taken off. Student participation in service-learning has almost doubled and continues to increase. The local newspaper has written about the college’s program, and all indicators suggest that students are making the connection between service and active learning. BEAMS team members attribute some of the program’s success to having quantitative data early on to make the case for investing in a program coordinator.

COMMON CONCEPTS

What can we learn from these projects? When speaking of engagement and student success, it was clear in all cases that engagement for student success, and the use of co-curricular activities to contribute to that outcome, required campus-wide cooperation and coordination. In addition, each institution began to appreciate the usefulness of assessment as a way of defining needs and knowing outcomes.

Administrative involvement and support are important in program effectiveness and longevity. Most BEAMS teams included the chief academic or student affairs officer or a similar person reporting to the president of the institution. This ensured that campus leadership was kept abreast of project progress and made the subsequent case for institutionalization of project activities.

A team composed of key administrative staff, faculty, and students is important to campus buy-in and project implementation. Participation from across the institution ensured that project activities were connected to institutional objectives.

Getting key individuals to make the connection between assessment and engagement is vital to program success.

BEAMS teams often gave campus units a way to measure their effectiveness and to make the connection between assessment, institutional support, and engagement.

Defining what students mean by engagement is essential to making it part of the overall goal of student success. To design effective programs, each institution had to determine how its students defined engagement and how it could be achieved: academic engagement, extracurricular engagement, and so on.

Co-curricular activities are necessary components of student engagement. As institutions conducted focus groups and gathered additional information from students, it became clear that student life and student retention are directly connected to students' sense of belonging—engendered through activities outside as well as inside the classroom.

CONCLUSION

A student's sense of connection to a college or university community remains an essential element of engagement, retention, and success. The campus programs cited sought to design and implement purposeful co-curricular programs, initiatives, and activities engineered to engage students in active learning, provide meaningful faculty-student interaction, enhance cooperation between students, and expose students to diverse peoples and ideas.

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