



STRENGTHENING WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: 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 strengthening the writing component across an institution's curriculum can ultimately result in increased student engagement and success.

INTRODUCTION

Writing across the curriculum is experiencing a renaissance as disciplines merge and create new subdivisions with distinctive forms of written communication, new fields of knowledge are created, and increasing numbers of scholarly and professional exchanges are conducted via the Web and through electronic publications. Across campuses, graduates are expected to communicate effectively in writing with a range of audiences, for varied purposes.

While first-year writing courses can introduce this expansive view of writing, students need to experience writing across the curriculum to develop their skills and their understanding of how writing works. Students need regular opportunities to experience the relationship between critical thinking and writing: writing as a process for thinking something through, and as a process for sharing thinking with others. Moreover, students who are learning conventions of written English need experiences that help them connect this learning to the process of discovery and of thinking. For students, it is critical to develop an understanding through practice that writing is not simply an abstract set of rule-governed behaviors but rather a means to clarify thinking across contexts and in a variety of formats. To ensure that students' development as writers does not stop after their first-year courses, campuses have to develop strategies to promote writing across the curriculum. A challenge lies in developing sustainable strategies—many campuses show glimmers of practices developed through previous writing-across-the-curriculum projects, projects that have become dormant. Helping students develop as writers takes time; in particular, it requires thoughtful responses from faculty-readers. The campus stories included here highlight practices aimed at supporting students' development as writers over time, across the curriculum, and through a series of iterative steps.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

INTER AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO—PONCE

The Ponce campus of the Inter American University of Puerto Rico (IAUPRP) is a liberal arts, Hispanic-Services Institution (HSI) campus offering certificates and associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees to approximately 5,400 students. The IAUPRP team used NSSE data to develop their project, which included integrating the Le@rning Support Center with the Spanish basic skills courses in the IAUPRP general education program to improve student reading and writing skills and to increase student-faculty interaction through the use of distance education technology.

The BEAMS project was designed to improve students' Spanish written communication skills by using the Spanish Virtual Lab resources of the Le@rning Support Center. The Spanish Virtual Lab, also known as Centro de Apoyo al Aprendizaje, is accredited by the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) and offers tutoring and basic skills in Spanish, English, and math, among other services. The Lab supplements the regular class by providing students with skills that are part of the writing process. Students take a pretest to identify areas in need of work, and the Lab provides them with relevant modules that can be accessed through the Web. Faculty have actively participated in the creation of the modules and are in the process of reviewing several new modules. The team has begun providing faculty development opportunities to increase the number of faculty who use the Internet in the teaching and learning process. These opportunities support the project goal of increasing the number of faculty who expect students to write and reply through e-mail.

Although the project is in the early stages of implementation, the team feels that the process of developing the work plan has been useful. The IAUPRP team intends to use the outcomes of the project as part of the general education assessment.

SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY AND A&M COLLEGE—BATON ROUGE

Southern University and A&M College—Baton Rouge (SUBR), a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), used its NSSE data and other campus data to develop a two-part approach to strengthen student writing across the curriculum. Initially, the team focused on implementing and assessing a policy change at the campus that linked taking the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE) with enrollment in English 111. Before this change in policy, which took effect in fall 2006, many students took the WPE as seniors, several years after completing the introductory composition courses. Pass rates were unacceptably low; moreover, because students put off the WPE, it served a gate-keeping function for graduating seniors, rather than as a diagnostic for students at the beginning of their college careers.

Simultaneous with implementing this policy change, the SUBR BEAMS team developed a strategy to ask faculty about the advisability of making writing across the curriculum a priority in the upcoming Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' (SACS) reaccreditation visit. With leadership from the vice chancellor's office, the team planned a series of Town Hall meetings with all SUBR Colleges and Divisions. Participants at the meeting were presented with a description of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) process and discussed NSSE data on student learning experiences. NSSE data suggested that SUBR students were writing fewer short (less than five pages) and medium length (5 to 19 pages) papers and reports than were their colleagues at comparable institutions. Other sources, including feedback from community partners in the Business and Industry Circles, corroborated the value of focusing on improving written communication skills across the curriculum. When faculty were asked whether their experiences with students were congruent with these findings, they concurred. Through this Town Hall process, cross-campus agreement on the importance of improving students' written communication skills emerged. The participatory nature of the Town Hall meetings—with the BEAMS leadership team traveling to each college and division—helped create widespread campus support for the focus on student writing. In August 2007, at the conclusion of the Town Hall meetings, SUBR faculty unanimously selected improving student learning through writing across the curriculum as the focus for the QEP.

SPELMAN COLLEGE

Spelman College is a private residential college located in Atlanta, Georgia. This HBCU liberal arts college for women serves approximately 2,000 students from across the country and several other nations. Spelman's BEAMS project focused on strengthening students' critical thinking by increasing the number of moderate-length papers they were asked to write. The team developed plans to support faculty across the curriculum in their efforts to emphasize writing as an expression of critical thinking.

During the process of implementing their BEAMS project, the team periodically reported to the faculty as a whole. To date, the team has held several campus conversations about writing in the disciplines. Attendance at writing-across-the-curriculum workshops is up. In fall 2007, the Spelman team launched an e-portfolio initiative for first-year students as part of a required First Year Experience course. Faculty members from across the curriculum who participated in an institute on portfolios volunteered to teach e-portfolio modules. The e-portfolio includes essays written for other first-year courses, in addition to an essay asking students to reflect on their first-year writing experiences and on the writing they anticipate doing in their majors. The shift from paper to an electronic portfolio is intended to make the portfolio requirement more interesting to students and more useful to the campus. Early results suggest this is the case.

Reforming general education courses is the next big task on campus, and the team anticipates that the revised learning goals and experiences for general education courses will be captured in a creative way in the e-portfolio. Various academic departments, including biology, are experimenting with ways to use e-portfolios to demonstrate learning in the major. According to the team leader, what enabled the Spelman BEAMS team to work so well together was taking the time to clarify what they each really cared about, which turned out to be students and their development. Team members also shared an idea of what a liberal arts education should look like and do.

TEXAS A&M INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

The Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) is an HSI located in Laredo, Texas. The TAMIU BEAMS project was structured to respond to information gleaned from NSSE data that neither first-year students nor seniors were getting sufficient opportunities to do short writing projects. Part of the BEAMS project focused on building on the work of faculty that already included writing in their courses. The team launched the first Scholars Alliance for Learning and Teaching (SALT) initiative in fall 2004. The initial cohort consisted of 14 faculty members who worked with students on writing in innovative ways, and represented a cross-section of academic disciplines and courses at all levels. Cohort members were invited to send students to the Writing Center and communicated closely with tutors. Faculty and students were pleased with the results. A new SALT cohort was formed in 2006, and members of the SALT cohorts have been tapped to serve on the advisory board for a newly established Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning.

Another part of the BEAMS project focused on redesigning the first-year writing program, strengthening the focus on preparing students for writing in their majors. The university writing assessment was replaced with a portfolio. In their first assignment, students write reflective essays about their prior experiences with writing. Other assignments focus on the analytical skills necessary for writing across the curriculum. One assignment invites students to write about community members, and when these interviews are conducted in Spanish, students are asked to provide translations. Students have access and can refer to an e-anthology of previous student essays. The last project in the introductory writing sequence is an essay exam based on the initial essay, so students have a chance to reflect on their views about writing.

TAMIU is also launching senior capstone writing-intensive courses, and the team hopes to bring the capstone teachers into dialogue with the first-year writing teachers about their shared commitment to helping students develop as writers and thinkers. The BEAMS project focus to create a culture of writing across the campus has become part of the QEP. Team members attribute the success of their work to strong support from administrators.

COMMON CONCEPTS

Several concepts underlie the work of these successful campus projects. Some of these common concepts are as follows:

- **Discover and articulate a shared commitment to supporting student learning.** As a Spelman team member said, taking time to discover team members' shared commitments to students gave the project focus, throughout its iterations.
- **Make a strong connection between thinking and writing, and recognize that students often begin their college careers without making this connection.** Students often begin their college careers with underdeveloped notions of what writing is, over-emphasizing the importance of surface features and discounting the importance of substance. Emphasizing the strong connection between thinking and writing acts as a useful guide for teams' approaches to professional development.
- **Link the curriculum of first-year writing courses to other courses.** It is important to design the curriculum of a first-year writing course in anticipation of the kinds of thinking and writing students will be asked to do in their majors. This provides the opportunity for students to recognize that written communication takes different forms in different contexts.
- **Provide support for faculty to work with students on writing.** Helping students develop as writers, including addressing their misconceptions about what writing is (and is not), requires faculty time. Each campus found ways to engage faculty in conversations about the importance of writing across the curriculum.
- **Secure strong administrative support for this work.** Campus teams have integrated their work on writing across the curriculum with larger campus initiatives, including reaccreditation, and they have benefited throughout these initiatives from strong administrative support.

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CONCLUSION

Strengthening writing-across-the-curriculum programs is an effective way to increase student engagement in learning as well as to improve their academic success. For students, the invitation to write in courses across the curriculum has the benefit of providing more time to practice. Although some principles about good writing can be generalized, for the most part, writing is specific to contexts and purposes. Receiving a range of invitations to write across the curriculum allows students to practice thinking about specific problems in specific ways, putting on the distinctive epistemological lenses of a disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) approach to knowledge. TAMIU's project reflects the belief that, for many students, becoming a good writer depends on finding a "home" as a thinker—one student might thrive when given the task of approaching an issue as a sociologist might, while another student will thrive when invited to approach the same issue as a biologist might approach it.

The effectiveness of writing-across-the-curriculum programs is contingent on the quality of the invitations faculty offer to students in the form of assignments and on the quality of their responses to student writing. Taking time to cultivate faculty support is critical, as SUBR's project demonstrates. The projects of both Spelman and IAUPR illustrate the value of working with technology to support students' development as writers, which requires widespread faculty support. As illustrated in these campus stories, education leaders who recognize the benefits of writing across the curriculum for student learning find needed resources to support faculty work.

