

JILLIAN KINZIE  
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR  
NSSE INSTITUTE AND CENTER FOR  
POSTSECONDARY RESEARCH  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY—BLOOMINGTON

**BEAMS**  
Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students

## COLLECTING SURVEY DATA FOR ASSESSMENT: 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 provides suggestions for successful survey administration and data collection based on findings from the BEAMS project to show how assessment can be used to increase student engagement and success.

### INTRODUCTION

The need to use evidence to improve and strengthen the quality of postsecondary education has never been greater. In an era when national assessment measures and voluntary systems of accountability and transparency are being proposed in higher education, it is essential to maximize the effectiveness of all assessment efforts by using high-quality data. It is particularly important that Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) are able to demonstrate their effectiveness with evidence and ensure that their distinct mission is reflected in assessment activities.

The suggestions for assessment offered here are based on a review of the data collection approaches used by BEAMS project schools. NSSE measures the degree to which first-year students and seniors participate in effective education practices, and all of these institutions used this instrument to assess and improve student engagement and success. Lessons for a successful survey administration are drawn to help other institutions address the challenges of data collection.



## ASSESSMENT AND THE BEAMS PROJECT

Assessment in higher education is a process that involves the planned examination of information and practice related to student learning.

When done well, assessment helps colleges establish a culture of evidence wherein data about student learning informs institutional actions and decisions as well as long- and short-term planning. The quality of any assessment initiative depends on many factors, but once an institution commits to its assessment plan, one of the most important first steps is data collection.

Institutions in the BEAMS project committed to conducting two NSSE data collections in their assessment efforts. The first provided baseline information about the quality of the undergraduate experience. BEAMS team members spent time reviewing and interpreting NSSE results in combination with other information about student success on their campus, including retention and completion rates. This information informed the development of a campus action plan. The second NSSE administration offered a formative assessment of the campus initiative and provided early measures of the impact of the project on student engagement and success.

From the outset, BEAMS schools had different levels of experience using assessment tools. Some had long histories of administering locally developed placement tests and surveys to assess satisfaction, and several had experience using NSSE. Few, however, had established a culture of using evidence to inform decision-making, and even fewer had experience using standardized instruments. Most schools had limited capacity to collect data on student experiences, and few had effective mechanisms to link data to campus change efforts.

At the core of some of the most underdeveloped assessment cultures was legitimate skepticism about the validity of standardized instruments for use with minority students and the concern that assessment data would simply be used to identify and punish poor performers. NSSE's history as a useful tool for institutional improvement and survey testing with diverse populations, as well as one that rejects the use of data for ranking, lessened these concerns.

Tests with students at MSIs and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) showed that *NSSE works equally well for students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds attending different types of institutions*. This work affirms the construct validity of NSSE—that it consistently measures what it claims to measure. In addition, almost all NSSE items are generally interpreted in the same way by students from different racial and ethnic

backgrounds. Thus, *NSSE can be considered a valid, reliable indicator of the quality of the student experience for historically underserved students at MSIs and PWIs*.

Data collection was complicated at BEAMS schools, particularly those that lacked the technical capacity to administer NSSE. A lack of university-issued e-mail addresses or reliable Internet systems made online survey administration undependable at some schools, while other schools did not have complete postal addresses to conduct a paper survey administration. Schools that conducted local administrations had difficulty appointing staff to coordinate and administer the survey. Although NSSE's standard protocol is designed to ease data collection efforts, it proved challenging at some under-resourced schools.

Despite these challenges, most BEAMS schools eagerly undertook their NSSE administration. They were enthusiastic about the potential to demonstrate their good work with evidence and looked forward to the opportunity to use data to create action plans. The most successful schools planned their administration strategy, involved faculty and students throughout the NSSE administration, implemented context-specific publicity and incentives for participation, and cultivated widespread interest in the survey process and results. The design of a successful NSSE administration required attention to the following:

- Selecting a survey administration mode appropriate for the campus
- Proactively addressing the technology of survey administration
- Identifying staff to oversee the administration
- Publicizing the survey and promoting the value of the results
- Involving students and faculty in administration decisions and efforts to publicize the survey from the outset
- Cultivating a systemic, data-informed approach to studying undergraduate education by using various measures of student learning

Ultimately, a successful survey administration is characterized by a process that ensures the collection of information that is accurate, representative, meaningful, and actionable. Although high response rates are often used as a measure of a successful administration, there is no standard acceptable response rate. Rather, the most important consideration is that the data are representative of the population being assessed. Without a good representative sample, no result can be considered valid regardless of the response rate or sample size. Attention to the survey administration process is the best way to ensure representative and meaningful results.

## STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL SURVEY DATA COLLECTION

This section outlines steps that BEAMS schools took before, during, and after their NSSE administrations to ensure successful data collection. These steps are important in any campus data collection effort.

**Select an appropriate survey mode.** One of the first steps in successful data collection is the selection of the appropriate survey mode. BEAMS schools chose from among four modes for administering NSSE:

- Web-only (students receive all correspondence by e-mail and complete the Web survey)
- Web plus (students receive first contacts via e-mail, and a sample of non-respondents receive a paper survey via postal mailing)
- Paper (students receive paper survey in postal mailings)
- Local administration (institutional representatives distribute and collect surveys)

The advantage of using the two Web-based and paper administration modes is that the administration protocol is standardized and handled by NSSE. In the local administration mode, the institution is responsible for all data collection activities.

BEAMS schools that had a dependable technology infrastructure elected to use a Web-based administration. This mode requires a reliable e-mail system and good survey promotion. BEAMS institutions used their campus Web portals to publicize the survey before and during their survey administration. Several institutions created a link on their university homepage to the survey and others created an opening page with a short prompt encouraging students to complete the NSSE. New Jersey City University (New Jersey), Winston Salem State University (North Carolina), and Fayetteville State University (North Carolina) promoted their survey administration on the homepage of their Web sites, and several schools put the NSSE announcement on screen savers in computers in the library and in labs.

Paper administrations were used at BEAMS schools that had reliable campus postal mail addresses. Fewer institutions used this approach than others, but it worked well for Chicago State University (Illinois) and the smaller, more residential University of St. Thomas (Texas). These institutions used the standard NSSE reminders and postcards and additional posters in residence halls to promote the survey.

BEAMS schools that lacked the infrastructure to conduct a standard Web-based or paper administration used the local administration option. Because this option requires the institution to coordinate and administer the survey, it only worked well for schools with staff who were strategic about opportunities for data collection. Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU) in North Carolina opted for local administration because they had direct ways to administer the survey. They scheduled their NSSE administrations well in advance, and included dates in the JCSU course catalog. They administered the survey to first-year students via their Freshman Academy and to seniors at convocation events. Most important, their data collection activities were enhanced by connecting their NSSE results to their Southern Association of Colleges and Schools reaffirmation and, specifically, to their Quality Enhancement Plan, which detailed a plan to strengthen learning in the first year. JCSU staff achieved a high participation rate because they identified convenient opportunities for data collection, promoted the survey among students and faculty, and emphasized the value of the survey in their accreditation work.

**Publicize the survey.** A crucial activity in a successful survey administration is promoting the survey to its intended respondents and others. Survey publicity such as flyers and media articles as well as incentives for survey completion can communicate to the campus that the data are valuable. The promotional approaches used by BEAMS schools described here were supplementary to the standard invitations to participate in NSSE. Direct contact with students who are invited to participate in the survey must be conducted in accordance with human subjects protocol and should not cause undue influence on participation.

The most commonly implemented forms of publicity used by BEAMS schools were in-class announcements by faculty emphasizing the importance of the survey and flyers or posters in public areas, including student centers, dining halls, and residence halls. Some campuses placed announcements in the campus newspaper and in e-news listings. Institutions did the most publicity right before actual survey administration, and many actively promoted the importance of participation when the survey was in the field. Some schools asked student government, fraternities and sororities, and academic clubs to remind members about the importance of responding to an invitation to complete NSSE. In the best cases, student leaders were involved in the NSSE administration and were later involved in the interpretation and use of NSSE results.

Norfolk State University (Virginia) publicized its participation in NSSE by putting up posters and table-tents in the student center. They took advantage of NSSE's Web interface to monitor student participation. This tool provided Norfolk with information about non-responders and participation patterns. For example, they learned which forms of publicity had an impact when they saw upticks in response rates immediately after NSSE e-mail reminders were distributed and new table-tents were posted in the student center. When the interface revealed two days of non-response, they knew it was time for additional promotion. Norfolk staff members and influential student leaders then spent a day in the student center publicizing the survey to all students, giving away reminder notes attached to candy and other Norfolk State trinkets. Other institutions that used the Web interface to monitor participation saw increases in survey response when they placed posters on campus buses and ran spots about the survey on the campus radio station.

**Build a support base for assessment.** Finally, the successful collection and use of survey data depend on building a foundation of support for assessment, creating awareness and investment among all members of the campus community, and communicating clearly about how the data will be useful in efforts to improve student success. Because the BEAMS project was set up to involve a range of participants, there was a basis for such support. However, the most successful institutions expanded this foundation to promote their NSSE administration. For example, the student affairs division at St. Thomas University (Florida) made significant progress toward developing a culture that values assessment, honors student input, and supports a partnership between faculty and student affairs. The St. Thomas BEAMS team saw their NSSE administration as an opportunity to unite faculty, students,

and student affairs staff to plan ways to use the results to inform the restructuring efforts already under way in the Division of Student Affairs. They involved students, faculty, and staff in the promotion of their NSSE administration and were explicit in promotions about how the data would be used to improve the quality of the student experience. Results helped student affairs staff advocate for the L.I.F.E.L.O.N.G. Center for Leadership and Student Engagement, a home for courses, workshops, experiential learning exercises, online resources, and developmental opportunities that build on the existing strengths and talents of students.

## CONCLUSION

Knowing how to improve institutional effectiveness is nearly impossible without good information about the quality of the student experience. Surveys provide an important source of this assessment information. Yet, student participation is critical to survey success. More respondents yield better quality data. Sampling error, total completions, and response rates are crucial measures of data quality and are important for increasing confidence in the results among a wider audience.

A healthy culture for assessment develops when everyone on campus feels comfortable sharing their views with the knowledge that information will be taken seriously and will be used to improve the learning environment. The positive impact of student engagement results are multiplied when data are relevant to faculty, staff, and students. Good data collection is just the first step in equipping institutions with the information they need to improve the conditions for student success. Ultimately, the likelihood that changes in policy and practice will succeed will increase when campus partnerships form at the start of the data collection process and early decisions are made about the strategic use of data. For more information on NSSE, visit <http://nsse.iub.edu>.

### 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@IHEPCOM

### 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

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