

# **STEP: A Review & Recommendation**

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**The Undergraduate Student Government STEP Task Force**  
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## INTRODUCTION

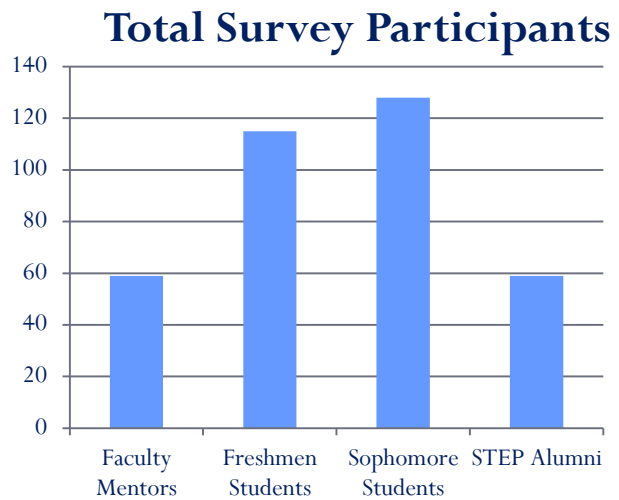
The Ohio State University sets the standard for investing in students, providing them with valuable resources and experiences to prepare them not only for future careers, but for life. While many higher education institutions offer programs to transition their freshman students, Ohio State has led the charge when it comes to second-year students by designing and sustaining the Second-Year Transformational Experience Program (STEP), a program that keep students engaged with faculty, with the campus, and with the world around them.

This program forges connections between second-years and a wide range of university faculty, provides opportunities for learning outside of the classroom, and funds student endeavors that might not otherwise be possible. In fact, the program has been so successful that STEP administrators travel the country teaching other universities how they can adapt the model for their own students. Participation in STEP is a valuable opportunity for students, and the Undergraduate Student Government (USG) truly believes in the program’s potential. The objective of this report is to describe the current state of STEP, highlight research and survey results regarding student and faculty opinions, and outline recommendations for transitioning years to ensure that students gain as much as they possibly can from participation in the program.

## THE TASK FORCE

The STEP Task Force was created in response to student concerns about how the program will transition as **the sophomore live-on requirement takes effect in Autumn Semester of 2016**. Students had voiced apprehension regarding stipend amounts, access to the program, program content, and faculty involvement. For these reasons, USG commissioned a Task Force to survey STEP enrollees, alumni, and faculty on the current state of the program. In order to collect this feedback, four separate surveys were created and distributed to both faculty and students. Below is the response breakdown.

	Total Participants
Faculty Mentors	59
Freshmen Students	115
Sophomore Students	128
STEP Alumni	59



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## STEP BACKGROUND AND REQUIREMENTS

STEP was developed by Ohio State to enhance the overall experience of second-year students. Sophomores have not yet been required to live on-campus, but those who did stay in the residence halls were eligible for STEP. In many ways, the opportunity to participate in STEP served as an incentive for students to spend a second year on campus

In addition to on-campus living, other regular requirements of the program include attending weekly meetings with a faculty mentor during the fall semester, attending a minimum of three co-curricular programs, and submit reflection papers. Typically, cohort meetings are only required during the autumn semester, as the spring semester has more of a focus on the students' proposals. The financial incentive for students to participate in STEP is a stipend of, at most, \$2000 towards “participation in study abroad, research, internships, creative/artistic endeavors, service-learning and/or leadership” ([step.osu.edu](http://step.osu.edu), accessed 1 December 2015). Students work with their faculty mentor during the year to write a proposal, including a budget, on how they hope to put this stipend to use. Upon approval, students are allowed to use the funding as they proposed in the year following their STEP participation.

## FACULTY

One of the core aspects of STEP is the opportunity for students to form relationships with faculty from a multitude of disciplines. The goal of faculty involvement in STEP is to allow faculty to nurture students into astute, self-actualized professionals. While faculty receive a \$5000 grant for their involvement, many pursue the mentorship role for the opportunity to redefine the student experience. According to the results of the STEP Faculty Survey, they are exceptionally eager to assist in the personal and professional growth of undergraduates, as accepting a faculty mentor position requires significant dedication.

*One STEP faculty member wrote in the survey that **STEP is an “opportunity to pay the support past professors have given me forward.” Helping undergraduates achieve is self-fulfilling for faculty, and it is this altruism that continues to feed into the success of the program.***

**Survey data also suggested a consensus among faculty that the program is, indeed, meeting its targets.** When directed to “Rank the success of the program in achieving the goals of: building community, increasing self-awareness, capacity to work collaboratively with others, connecting student leadership to social responsibility, inspiring change for the common good” faculty gave the program an average score of 4.16 out of 5.

Many faculty also commented on their goals as a mentor. In general, faculty are expected to help students build community, encourage students to grow personally and professionally, and develop their role as a mentor for each student to contribute to the student’s future success. In the survey, faculty noted they don’t feel pushed, but rather *supported*, in these endeavors. Their goals very often align with those of STEP, and faculty take their role as mentors seriously.

Overall, the Task Force found that faculty holding mentorship positions in STEP are dedicated mentors who want to assist participants in building a proposal for valuable use of the stipend, growing as leaders in the cohort, and finding overall success as a sophomore.

## POST-STEP: THE ALUMNI RESPONSE

Surveying STEP alumni was a priority for the Task Force, as the targeted respondents had fully completed the program and could offer a holistic perspective. A few main themes emerged from the 59 alumni survey responses.

First, the students who participated in STEP were an academically solid group. This is encouraging, as the program places an emphasis on enhancing academic outcomes. The average GPA of the program alumni surveyed was 3.45. Residency on-campus may have played a role, as on-campus living typically increases likelihood of extracurricular involvement, which correlates with academic success. Due to a self-selection bias, however, it is difficult to otherwise isolate the academic benefits of STEP.

The second theme throughout alumni feedback regarded cohort mentors. As noted above, only 29% of the STEP alumni surveyed maintained a relationship with their advisors after their second year ended. **Students rated their faculty mentor at an average of 7.74 out of 10, with 42% of STEP alumni rating their advisor as 10 out of 10.** These numbers support the previous statements that faculty, when truly invested in creating a valuable experience for their students, can have an incredible influence on the success and satisfaction of STEP participants

When asked to rate their overall experience on a scale of 1 to 10, STEP alumni gave an average rating of **7.05**. This rating leaves significant room for improvement, especially as the program will affect increasingly larger numbers of students once the second-year live-on requirement begins in Autumn 2016.

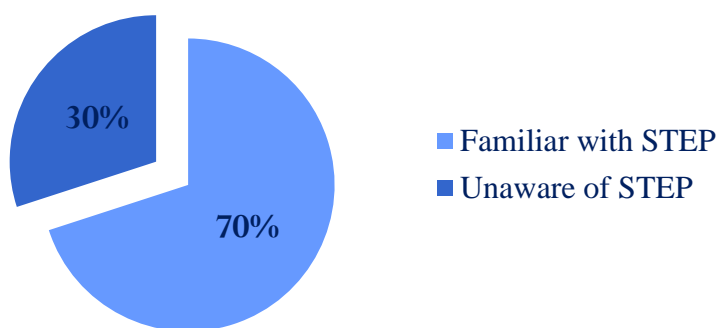
## PROGRAM DESIGN: STUDENT CONCERNS

While the faculty survey feedback proved the authenticity and dedication with which mentors accept and perform their roles, the student STEP surveys provided valuable insight regarding areas for improvement in the STEP curriculum and structure.

### *Understanding the Program*

A significant problem is that many student—specifically freshmen—do not understand the basics of STEP and how it serves students. The most commonly asked question in the survey was “What is STEP supposed to be?”

### **Freshmen Awareness of STEP**



The idea that 30% of freshmen are not familiar with STEP should be a point of concern, as all current freshmen will be required to live on-campus in Autumn 2016 and will be given the opportunity to participate in the program. Freshmen must be better informed on STEP programming before they even see their housing application.

An additional point of misunderstanding about the program emerged when sophomores currently enrolled in STEP reported uncertainty about their responsibilities under the program. While the STEP Dashboard (an online hub where students can interact with STEP requirements and information) is a helpful tool, stronger information and communication of responsibilities may increase the value of the program. Many professors currently serving as mentors explicitly stated that **STEP would benefit from making information on the program more readily available to students**. Overall, it is clear that students need to have a better understanding of STEP in order to develop interest in and ultimately benefit from the program.

In addition to a faculty push for a “more focused and defined curriculum”, a large number of students suggested “improved organization” within the program.

Four students were specifically disappointed with the friendships created within their cohorts, as they were hoping for “closer cohort relationships.” **76% of past STEP students reported feeling**



somewhat distant from their cohort. Other students suggested a solution to this issue—**building cohorts based on students’ common interests.**

A few STEP alumni were directly affected by the lack of organization, as one student did not receive funding because of financial aid conflicts and another did not receive funding due to a mix-up regarding the co-curricular requirements (the student had attended what the mentor approved as a co-curricular, but STEP had not officially endorsed the event, so his stipend was deemed inapplicable).

**Students should not be denied their stipend due to a miscommunication of the STEP requirements.** These stories should serve as a call to action for The Ohio State University to take a closer look at the internal organization of the program.

## *Program Requirements*

Beyond marketing to freshmen, the survey data suggested several policy changes that might more directly enhance the program. Currently, STEP has five requirements, three of which carry potential shortcomings, detailed below:

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1. Students must attend scheduled meetings with their STEP Faculty Member both autumn and spring semester. The primary format of these meetings is a weekly meeting in the student's "cohort", a group approximately the size of a small class. The purpose and content of these cohort meetings is largely dependent on the discretion of the faculty adviser. STEP alumni generally approved of how their advisers met this challenge, rating their adviser's quality at 7.74 out of 10.

However, that lack of structure can be problematic. While creative advisers may use this freedom to provide novel opportunities including free food, guest speakers, and leadership activities, a number of faculty mentors do not use their meeting time effectively, arriving to meetings unprepared and simply using the time as a "check-in" to see how students' weeks are going.

Prior to the survey, one of the main concerns voiced to USG was *the lack of professional development programming* within STEP. Similarly, alumni indicated that STEP could be improved by more structured programming focused on professional development. The Task Force believes that cohorts offer the best setting for instruction, as attendance at co-curricular events will depend on scheduling. Cohort meetings must be effectively utilized for the program to truly reach its objectives.

2. By the 1st of April, students must attend and submit a reflection on at least three professional development co-curricular programs. Despite a wide variety of offerings, *about half of the alumni in our survey* indicated that they were never exposed to any professional development or resume-building experiences through these three co-curricular programs. Thus, student requests for professional development went unaddressed in both cohort meetings and co-curricular events..

3. By the 1st of April, students must participate in a two-part required financial literacy program through the Student Wellness Center. This requirement includes a mandatory appointment at Scarlet and Gray Financial. A large number of STEP students reported that the session did not provide a meaningful learning experience regarding their finances. The requirement is often *viewed as burdensome*, rather than as a learning opportunity. In fact, many students left their appointment feeling more stressed about their finances than before their appointment began\*. S&G Financial is a fantastic resource, but it is more effective when coaches cater to the student's specific needs than when they conduct a general standardized appointment.

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\*<http://cssl.osu.edu/posts/documents/student-financial-help-seeking-behavior-from-theory-to-practice.pdf>, accessed 3 November 2015

## *Faculty Suggestions*

While some STEP requirements may restrict the student experience, faculty offered direct suggestions on improving the value of the student experience in their survey responses, including the following ideas:

- A. “Remove restrictions on STEP experiences”, including the mandate that all travel abroad must occur directly through Ohio State programs. This requirement limits students’ opportunities to utilize valuable external study abroad programs that may be more specifically tailored to their interests.
- B. “Implement more centralized activities”. These could include program-wide requirements for specific professional development activities, such as resume-building or interview practice.
- C. “Create a more focused and defined curriculum” for the students involved in the program.

## *Mentoring Improvements*

Lastly, survey results focused greatly on mentoring. Task Force analysis found that while STEP mentors are extremely qualified and express passion for their position, their fields of study do not always intersect with those of the students in their cohorts. This is largely by design, since the diverse dialogue fostered in a group that includes multiple majors and colleges is beneficial. There is no doubt that STEP mentors are capable of connecting their students with people and resources appropriate to the interests of the students. However, considering that one of the goals of STEP is to help students with networking and career development, **tailoring cohorts to specific fields of study could strengthen the bond between student and mentor.**

*According to the students surveyed, only 29% maintained relationships with their mentors.*

In all likelihood, this figure is higher where the mentor’s academic interests align with the student’s. Students could maintain those relationships by taking the professor’s courses, discussing research opportunities, or asking for advice.

## *The Future of STEP: Access & Affordability*

A very relevant concern of the STEP Task Force is how the second-year live-on requirement will affect the access and affordability of the STEP program. This concern is sufficiently captured in three questions.

Due to the increasing population of second-years on campus, **how does the STEP program plan to serve as many second-years as they have in the past?** A number of students do not participate in the program because they are uninterested, but STEP needs to remain accessible to all second-year students interested in participating.

If it is unfeasible for STEP to accept all who wish to participate (due to a shortage of mentors, funding, etc.), **how will it be decided who will be accepted into STEP and who will be denied?** Candidates for STEP should have fair opportunities for acceptance into the program. The application and acceptance process must be thoroughly and reviewed as the number of interested students will inevitably be increasing.

Finally, upon the original creation of STEP, all students whose proposal and budget were approved were guaranteed all \$2,000 in the stipend. Recently, this promise has been adjusted to “up to \$2,000”, meaning that a number of students participating will not receive the full stipend. **Will this stipend value ever change?** The Task Force considers the possibility of lowering the stipend to be an issue worth noting. In order for the stipend to meet its true purpose of creating a transformational experience for students, the lowering of the stipend amount may discourage students from joining the program, as they may fear having to use personal funds to meet costs of study abroad trips or other projects—and this personal spending has potential to negatively affect their financial aid qualifications. The stipend’s cap price must maintain the significance it does today in order to allow for adequate access to the transformational experiences that students wish to pursue.

## THE OFF-CAMPUS DILEMMA

In addition to producing concerns about program access and affordability, the sophomore live-on requirement presents several issues regarding off-campus living. First, the loss of revenue from sophomores who would otherwise live off-campus affects the pricing strategy for landlords. One might hypothesize that landlords will raise their prices to compensate for lost revenue. However, the landlords USG contacted were convinced that greater competition for a smaller pool of student renters would force them either lower prices or renovate units. Student Life should monitor this situation closely. With proper management, **STEP could benefit students through senior year via a friendlier off-campus housing market.**

Another concern is the possibility of “landlord predation,” whereby landlords require students to sign leases long before they can live off-campus. At Miami University, for instance, students may be asked early in their freshman year to sign leases for their junior year. This system preys on first-year students’ lack of knowledge regarding fair and safe off-campus housing, while also generating tremendous risk should their circumstances change over the following two years. When asked about marketing strategies, local landlords indicated that they anticipate putting more money into reaching students. Many were not concerned with predation, and some stated they would prefer a later leasing season to create a longer window to sign properties. Some mentioned that the only reason leases are currently signed so early is because a small number of landlords push the process forward. Again, Student Life should watch this attentively. One proactive solution would be to **educate students and parents that they do not need to sign early leases.** Another strategy follows the University of Michigan, which has attempted to make rules that would forbid students from signing leases before a certain date. To be expected, landlords in that area have attempted to find loopholes.

Also of concern are off-campus crime rates. When sophomores are required to live on campus, fewer students will rent properties in the university area, which will lead to vacancies. Vacancies, of course, beget crime. A similar situation occurred at Ohio State between 1992 and 1995, when economic recession caused particularly low enrollment. One landlord mentioned that the university received a report on how crime rates had increased due to the two year live-on policy at the time, but the university did not take action. **The university should anticipate at least a slight uptick in off-campus crime, which it could mitigate by hiring more officers and certifying them for joint jurisdiction.**

Possibly the most relevant benefit of living off-campus is that it teaches students to live on their own, a goal shared with the STEP program. **Some landlords believed that many students learn the same lessons targeted via the STEP financial literacy requirements much better through the experience of living independently off-campus.**

Student Life should monitor the effects that STEP will have on off-campus communities in order to fully understand how a second-year live-on requirement will affect *all* Ohio State students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force developed this project with the primary intent of improving STEP for future students. To that end, the Task Force recommends several solution and policy ideas that may enhance program and facilitate growth.

1. STEP coordinators and administration need to make the **expectations, goals, and requirements clear and transparent**. This is currently being fulfilled through the incorporation of STEP directives into first-year orientations and survey courses. Since the target audience for recruitment is first-year students, program leaders need to make strategic marketing decisions to ensure that students know both the benefits and the costs of participation.
2. STEP would benefit greatly from creating **relevant education and professional development** opportunities for participants. If the co-curricular programming was better aligned with colleges and extra-curriculars on-campus, the program would add more substance to the sophomore year. Likewise, the financial education should be more widely applicable.
3. **Restrictions on how students are able to spend their stipend must be lowered**. If the stipend aims to facilitate a transformational experience, then it must be as flexible and imaginative as the students who receive it. Fixed requirements on where the stipend can be spent, such as restricting study abroad options to official Ohio State programs, limit the diversity of experiences that are possible within the program. Each student transforms in a unique direction, and the stipend should facilitate that growth without reservation, maintaining significance in value and flexibility in application.
4. Cohorts and faculty should be more **strategically paired based on similar interests, career paths, and college goals** in order to forge communities that last beyond the duration of the program itself. Students will gain more, personally and professionally, from a mentor and cohort relationship if they are matched with those to whom they can relate on multiple levels. This would add a new dimension to connections made in STEP by giving students more valuable contacts for academic mentorship and advancement through the major. Smaller cohorts would even further enhance the depth and durability of student-faculty relationships.
5. Overall, **STEP as a program must be held more accountable for fulfilling its stated objectives**. While STEP currently conducts surveys and reviews from within, unbiased external analysis must be completed in order to ensure that the goals of the program are fully met. Surveyed students believe that it would be beneficial to have a Student Evaluation of Instructor (SEI) for their STEP faculty adviser. This would send feedback to the advisers on their performance, including whether they helped students to acquire desired skill sets. Evaluation should include assessments of whether students received the tools and guidance to earn the STEP stipend, enjoyed a transformational experience, and gained professional skills.

## CONCLUSION

STEP is a valuable and unique program. The Ohio State University should be proud of its constant work towards providing meaningful experience for all students. As STEP transitions into years of increased participation, administrators would benefit from molding the program in response to student feedback and instituting external reviews to make sure that it is meeting the needs of students and faculty alike.