PERCEPTIONS OF THE SUMMER 1997 SPECIAL TRANSITIONAL ENRICHMENT PROGRAM (STEP)

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Executive Summary

This study, conducted in Spring 1998, examines perceptions of UC Davis undergraduates who participated in the Summer 1997 Special Transitional Enrichment Program (STEP) offered by the Learning Skills Center. Students received a survey via e-mail and/or campus mail: 66% of those enrolled in Spring Quarter 1998 responded. Additionally, three focus group discussions were held with former participants to examine their perceptions of the program in greater depth. Highlights of this report include:

- A large majority of respondents agreed that STEP classes helped prepare them for their coursework. Mathematics and chemistry classes were rated most highly; 93% and 90% of respondents said these classes helped prepare them for subsequent coursework.

- Relatively lower proportions of respondents who attended the STEP reading and success strategies classes agreed that these courses were effective in preparing them for their courses (71% and 62%, respectively).

- At least 90% or more of the respondents agreed that STEP made them feel more comfortable on campus, helped them adjust to academic and social life, eased their transition from high school, and heightened their awareness of support services.

- Ninety-two percent of respondents indicated that they would probably or definitely take STEP again; virtually all (99%) would recommend it to new students.

- Participants in the focus groups said repeatedly that STEP gave them the tools to make a successful transition to college life. As one student stated: “STEP was like a boot camp where students received several weeks of intensive training, which helped them to develop the skills and confidence necessary to make a successful transition.”

- Most participants had few unanswered questions during Fall Quarter, a finding they attributed to the extensive resource and referral information provided during STEP. The few with questions knew where to find the appropriate resources to answer them.

- Students offered a variety of suggestions for improving STEP, including keeping the program accessible to all students in need, having more social events, and providing more information on financial assistance. However, greater emphasis on the importance of time management was the foremost suggestion.
Perceptions of the Summer 1997 Special Transitional Enrichment Program (STEP)

Introduction

In Spring 1998 the Director of the Learning Skills Center asked Student Affairs Research & Information (SARI) to study student perceptions of and satisfaction with the summer 1997 component of the Special Transitional Enrichment Program (STEP). According to the program description, STEP “helps Educational Opportunity Program and Affirmative Action students develop skills that will improve their first-year performance at the University.” The stated-program objectives are:

1) *To assist students in strengthening their learning skills and study habits in areas where improvement is needed.*

2) *To help students prepare for University-level work by providing three weeks of instruction prior to the fall quarter.*

3) *To assist students in making a good social adjustment to the Davis campus by providing living/learning experiences in the residence halls and a general orientation to campus life.*

To this end, the summer program provides classes in academic success strategies, writing, reading, mathematics, physics, and pre-chemistry, as well as counseling and advising.

Methods

SARI staff employed quantitative and qualitative research methods to ascertain the effects of STEP on participants and to gauge their satisfaction with various aspects of the program. In consultation with the Learning Skills Center, SARI staff developed a self-administered questionnaire, which was sent to 229 summer STEP participants who were still enrolled in Spring 1998.

The survey questionnaire was initially e-mailed May 7 and 8, 1998; a second e-mail was sent May 15 to non-respondents. One hundred and twenty-two participants (53%) responded. During the first week of June, the questionnaire was sent again via campus mail to the remaining non-respondents. Thirty additional participants (13%) responded. A total of 152 participants (66% of enrolled participants) responded to the survey by June 29. The questionnaire appears as Appendix A, together with numerical responses to each question. Responses to the questionnaire’s three open-ended questions are available upon request.
In addition to the survey, SARI staff scheduled three focus groups with STEP participants. The objective of these group discussions was to examine STEP within the context of the students’ subsequent experiences during their first year. The first two group sessions (May 19 and 20) were attended by participants who had volunteered to participate in a discussion as part of their response to the e-mail survey. The third discussion group (June 3) was recruited from STEP participants who had not responded to the questionnaire at the time the groups were formed. Non-respondents were included to provide a check on possible positive response bias by voluntary discussants.

Survey Results

Representativeness of Survey Respondents

Females were somewhat over-represented among the respondents to the STEP survey, comprising 62% of respondents and 58% of program participants. As illustrated by Figure 1 below, survey respondents approximated the ethnic distribution of 1997 STEP participants, with the exception of African American students who were somewhat under-represented among respondents (17% vs. 22%). These ratios are typical of other SARI surveys of the student population.

![Figure 1: Comparison of Survey Respondents to STEP Participants --by Ethnicity--](image-url)
Effectiveness of STEP Classes

The questionnaire asked participants to indicate the extent to which STEP classes “helped prepare” them for their subsequent classes. A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that each of the STEP classes they took helped prepare them. STEP mathematics and pre-chemistry classes were rated highest (93% and 90%, respectively). A relatively lower percentage of respondents agreed that the STEP reading (71%) and success strategies (62%) classes were effective in preparing them for their UC Davis classes and reading assignments. Seventy-eight percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the STEP writing class helped prepare them for writing they did as freshmen.

Figure 2

Effectiveness of STEP Classes
Level of Agreement that Class Helped Prepare
Student For UC Davis Classes & Related Activities

- Writing class (n=146): 14% Strongly Agree, 64% Agree
- Math class (n=140): 46% Strongly Agree, 47% Agree
- Chemistry class (n=82): 66% Strongly Agree, 24% Agree
- Success Strategies (n=140): 12% Strongly Agree, 50% Agree
- Reading class (n=62): 16% Strongly Agree, 55% Agree
Program Outcomes

The questionnaire also asked participants to indicate the extent to which STEP made them feel more comfortable on campus, helped them to adjust to campus academic and social life, eased their transition from high school, and heightened their awareness of available support services (Appendix A contains the exact wording of questions). As Figure 3 illustrates, 90% or more of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that STEP achieved each of these outcomes.

Figure 3
Effectiveness of STEP
Level of Agreement with Outcomes of the Program

- I am more comfortable on campus (n=152): 84% Strongly Agree, 13% Agree
- Helped me adjust to academic life (n=150): 67% Strongly Agree, 29% Agree
- Helped me adjust to social life (n=150): 55% Strongly Agree, 35% Agree
- Eased my transition from HS (n=148): 60% Strongly Agree, 32% Agree
- Made me aware of support services (n=151): 79% Strongly Agree, 20% Agree
Satisfaction with STEP

To measure overall satisfaction, the questionnaire asked participants, based on their current knowledge and experience, whether they would attend STEP again and whether they would recommend it to other new students. Ninety-two percent of respondents indicated that they would probably or definitely repeat STEP (Figure 4). Virtually all respondents (99%) agreed that they would recommend STEP to new students (Figure 5).

**Figure 4**

Satisfaction with STEP
Based On Current Knowledge, Would You Attend STEP Again?

\[ n = 145 \]

- Definitely: 69%
- Probably: 23%
- Probably Not: 7%
- Definitely Not: 1%

**Figure 5**

Satisfaction with STEP
Would you recommend STEP to other new students?

\[ n = 148 \]

- Definitely: 88%
- Probably: 11%
- Probably Not/Definitely Not: 1%
STEP Focus Group Results

SARI conducted three focus groups with participants to probe their reactions to STEP at a more complex level than that provided by the questionnaire. These discussions also provided an opportunity to explore the connection students made between the program experiences and their first year at UC Davis. Participants in the first two discussions were respondents to the survey who had indicated a willingness to expand upon their answers. The third group consisted of students who had not responded to the survey at the time the groups were formed. Despite these differences in the participants, the three group discussions did not differ in the types of responses or themes that emerged.

The following section summarizes the focus group discussions, organized by the questions asked of participants in each.

- **What questions or concerns did you have about starting your freshman year at Davis?**

  STEP students had a number of questions and concerns about starting their freshman year. The majority noted, however, that their concerns were probably no different from those of other first-time freshmen. Almost all participants had initial concerns over their academic performance and wondered whether it would meet the rigors of University standards. Most participants were also concerned about having sufficient resources to finance their education. Additionally, students had general questions about registering for classes and selecting courses. Would they register for the wrong classes or fail to get the classes they needed for graduation? Some participants found the size of classes and their new surroundings overwhelming and even intimidating. Leaving their high school peer group often added to this anxiety.

- **During your first few weeks on campus what were your major questions or concerns?**

  For the most part, students did not have a lot of questions or concerns during this point in their transition to college life. They noted repeatedly that STEP had equipped them with the tools necessary to make their transition successful. In the words of one discussant:

  
  *STEP was like a boot camp where students received several weeks of intensive training, which helped them to develop the skills and confidence necessary to make a successful transition.*

  Students who did have questions were concerned about how difficult their actual course work would be in comparison to the classes offered by STEP and whether tutoring would be available if needed. Others had difficulty reading the Class Schedule.
Where did you go, or what did you do, to get answers to your questions?

Because of the extensive resource and referral information provided by STEP, most students did not have many questions during the Fall. More importantly, those who did have questions knew where to find the appropriate resources to answer them.

Overall, how did your first quarter at Davis compare with your expectations?

Some students simply did not know what to anticipate, while others expected the first quarter to be much like STEP. Because the first quarter was exceedingly more difficult and time consuming than originally anticipated, many students wished that they had taken the STEP time management workshop more seriously.

How could you have been better prepared to start the quarter?

Because college was so different from anything participants had experienced, some students did not believe it possible for them to have been better prepared to start their freshman year. Nevertheless, most agreed that developing good study and time management skills would help a student succeed in college. Others believed that giving high school students access to actual college work and/or allowing them to sit in on college courses would give students a more accurate preview of what to expect.

How did your freshman year compare with your expectations?

Most students agreed that their first academic year had become progressively more difficult because of increases in both unit workload and difficulty of subject matter. Most students, however, also felt that they had reached a better balance toward the end of the academic year; they had successfully fine-tuned their study habits and were more adept at managing both social and academic demands.

What do you know now that you wished you knew when you started at UC Davis?

Students addressed a range of academic, social and personal issues. Most participants wished that they had better time management and study skills. One participant wished he had recognized that he was not adequately prepared academically or socially for college. Another wished he had taken a computer course in high school.

What was most valuable to you about STEP?

There was an array of responses to this question. On academic topics, most students felt that the pre-courses (and co-courses offered during the year) were very beneficial. They spoke of feeling very confident when they began the year because of these courses. One student stated that she had a realistic preview of what to expect in her actual classes due to the pre-courses.
Students also valued the on-site experience that STEP afforded. Because of their attendance at STEP, most participants reported feeling confident when they began their quarter. Unlike many of their peers, they were already familiar with campus and knew how to use the library and other resource facilities.

Discussants also emphasized the importance of forming relationships with teachers, counselors, staff and Peer Advising Counselors (PACs). Students noted that calling upon these relationships helped them tackle their freshman year successfully and provided them with a referral network. Participants also acknowledged the special relationship that exists between STEP students and the PACs. As one student stated: They know things that you can’t learn in a book. PACs informed them about instructors, dorm life, and the campus culture and norms.

There were mixed responses concerning how STEP presented the issue of campus ethnic/racial diversity. Some students believed that STEP prepared them well for the range of diversity to expect on campus, while others felt the program was too preoccupied with race. One student, who attended a very diverse high school in the Sacramento area, said that he would have felt much less comfortable in his classes (because of the absence of students of color) had he not heard the information presented in STEP. He was still shocked to see so few Latinos and African Americans, but believed his shock would have been greater without attending STEP. Other participants felt that the warnings about a lack of diversity on campus were unwarranted or provocative.

Social interactions were also a valued part of STEP. Students spoke of establishing relationships with peers and staff. They stated that knowing and networking with other students and UC Davis staff and teachers made their transition to college life easier.

**What was least valuable to you?**

Although most participants spoke highly of STEP, there were some problem areas for them. A few students felt the program was overly preoccupied with race; some even used the term racist.

Other students stated that they felt program staff were too sheltering or conservative when offering scheduling assistance. Students stated that they were advised to take a number of Mickey Mouse classes because there were regarded as easy. Others noted that they were advised to take classes that they did not need. For example, a Social Science major stated that he was advised to take three Mathematics classes that were not required for his major.

There were also complaints about the general regulations of the program. Students felt that some of the policies, such as the guidelines on visitors in the dorms and punctuality requirements, were unreasonable.
How could the campus make STEP better?

There were a variety of suggestions to improve STEP. These included keeping the program accessible to all students in need, having more social events, and including more information on financial assistance. However, providing more information on time management was the foremost suggestion: many students believed the subject required greater emphasis. Although STEP includes a time management workshop, students reported that they simply did not realize how critical time management would be to their academic success. Rather than simply receiving one workshop in the beginning of the program, some participants recommended expanding the class on time management and possibly including a former STEP student to discuss its importance.

Conclusion

The progression from high school senior to college freshman is not always smooth and, as many of the STEP participants noted, it is probably impossible to prepare any student fully for immersion into the intellectual and social life of a major research institution. Therefore, it is particularly important that potentially high-risk students, such as those admitted by exception to the University’s eligibility criteria, or those from groups historically underrepresented at the University, be given every opportunity to succeed in this process.

STEP provides students with the opportunity to take classes, participate in skills development activities, and experience life in campus residence halls prior to the start of fall quarter. Does this opportunity yield a smoother transition to college?

The perceptions of Summer 1997 participants provide one measure of how well STEP succeeded in meeting its goal of providing these students with their first “step to a successful University career.” Program participants were positive about their preparatory coursework, particularly in the areas of science and mathematics. Ratings in the areas of social adjustment to college life were uniformly high, and virtually all participants would participate in STEP again and would recommend the program to new students.
Survey Results

1. The STEP writing class helped prepare me for the writing I have done as a freshman at UC Davis. 
   \((n = 146)\)
   - Strongly agree: 14%
   - Agree: 64%
   - Disagree: 21%
   - Strongly disagree: 1%
   - Not applicable: (2)

2. The STEP math class helped prepare me for my UC Davis math classes. 
   \((n = 140)\)
   - Strongly agree: 46%
   - Agree: 47%
   - Disagree: 6%
   - Strongly disagree: 1%
   - Not applicable: (12)

3. The STEP chemistry class helped prepare me for my UC Davis chemistry classes. 
   \((n = 82)\)
   - Strongly agree: 66%
   - Agree: 24%
   - Disagree: 9%
   - Strongly disagree: 1%
   - Not applicable: (69)

4. The STEP Success Strategies class helped prepare me for my classes. 
   \((n = 140)\)
   - Strongly agree: 12%
   - Agree: 50%
   - Disagree: 31%
   - Strongly disagree: 6%
   - Not applicable: (10)

5. The STEP reading class helped prepare me for my college reading assignments. 
   \((n = 62)\)
   - Strongly agree: 16%
   - Agree: 55%
   - Disagree: 27%
   - Strongly disagree: 2%
   - Not applicable: (89)

6. I am more comfortable on campus than I would have been had I not attended STEP. 
   \((n = 152)\)
   - Strongly agree: 84%
   - Agree: 13%
   - Disagree: 2%
   - Strongly disagree: 1%
7. Participating in STEP helped me adjust to academic life at UC Davis.
   (N=150)
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

8. Participating in STEP helped me adjust to social life at UC Davis.
   (n = 150)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>3%</td>
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9. Participating in STEP eased my transition from high school to UC Davis.
   (n = 148)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

10. Participating in STEP made me aware of the support services available to me at UC Davis.
    (n = 151)
    | Response         | Percentage |
    |------------------|------------|
    | Strongly agree   | 79%        |
    | Agree            | 20%        |
    | Disagree         | 0%         |
    | Strongly disagree| <1%        |

11. How do you think your first year would have been different without STEP?
12. What would you change about STEP if you could?
13. Do you think the campus should continue to offer STEP? Why or why not?
14. Based on your current knowledge and experience, would you attend STEP again?
    (n = 145)
    | Response         | Percentage |
    |------------------|------------|
    | Definitely        | 69%        |
    | Probably          | 23%        |
    | Probably not      | 7%         |
    | Definitely not    | 1%         |

15. Based on your current knowledge and experience, would you recommend STEP to other new students?
    (n = 148)
    | Response         | Percentage |
    |------------------|------------|
    | Definitely        | 88%        |
    | Probably          | 11%        |
    | Probably not      | <1%        |
    | Definitely not    | <1%        |