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A Description and Rationale for the Skills Through Experience Program (STEP)

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Executive Summary

The Skills Through Experience Program (STEP) began in the summer of 2014. This document provides background information, a description of the pilot program, the rationale and the future plans for the program.

Background Information

The idea that all SU undergraduates need hands-on experience to develop a set of foundational skills necessary for career success and effective citizenship is the core of the Skills Through Experience Program (STEP). The Program intends to meet this need by providing undergraduates with opportunities within and outside the classroom to practices these skills. All of the Program's coursework and supporting material were developed by more than fifty students and alumni under my coordination over the past ten years.

My decision to create a program for all undergraduates grew out of the concern throughout higher education that most college graduates lack the skills for both careers and citizenship and the success of the Policy Studies Major in preparing undergraduates with the necessary skills. I decided it is not enough to serve our majors and that we needed a program to supplement the education of all majors in all colleges.

Key dates in the evolution of STEP since 2000 include:

- **2003** - Publication of my book, *10 Things Employers Want You Learn in College* (revised in 2012).
- **2010** - Student project to create a "hybrid high school" which led to the Skills Win Database, supported by the Syracuse Campus-Community Entrepreneurship Initiative funded by a grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation of Kansas City, MO.
- **2012** - Erin McElroy, a 1992 Policy Studies and MPA alum, award-winning film maker and long term employee of IBM rebranded and helped develop the Skills Win Database, also creating an accompanying mobile app.
- **2013** - Development of the Citizenship and Civic Engagement Major, which relies heavily on experiential learning.
- **2014** - Encouragement by several high level Syracuse University administrators.
- **2014** - Two experienced based courses (URP 470: Experience Credit and PAF 410: Practicum in Public Policy: SU Policies) began to be offered.
- **2015** - The publication of the 2015 SU Mission Statement which serves as a rationale for STEP.
- **2016** - The Public Affairs Program begins an undergraduate staffing program to place and pay selected students.

Skills

The organizational framework of STEP is the 38 skills first presented in *10 Things Employers Want You to Learn in College (2003)*. The list is based on 45 years of working with undergraduates and informed by a variety of studies that cite similar skills. Formal and informal reviews and suggestions by employers were also taken into consideration. A poster displaying all 38 skills, organized into ten skill sets, is provided at the end of this document. The Skills Win Database (http://database.skillswin.com/) provides web-based materials on those 38 skills.

The 38 skills are grouped into the following 10 Skill Sets:

1. Taking Responsibility
2. Developing Physical Skills
3. Communicating Verbally
4. Communicating in Writing
5. Working Directly with People
6. Influencing People
7. Gathering Information
8. Using Quantitative Tools
9. Asking and Answering the Right Questions
10. Solving Problems

Experience

Work experience paired with adequate reflection and feedback are necessary for skill development. STEP provides credit for the work experience enhanced by online assignments, workplace supervision, coaching and evaluation by Practitioner Experts as well as the STEP undergraduate staff.

The Pilot Program

The Pilot Program has two components: experienced-based coursework for credit and a staffing program where students are paid by the Public Affairs Program for on- and off-campus internships.

Experience-Based Coursework

In 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, two types of courses have been offered.

1. **URP 270 (1 credit) and URP 470 (3 credits): Experience Credit:** Offered through the College of Arts and Sciences under the Undergraduate Research Program (URP) in collaboration with Associate Dean Kandice Salomone, College of Arts and Sciences. Students can sign up for a skills internship with me as their faculty advisor. A skills internship is one in which the reflective work for the internship is related to the 10 Skill Sets, rather than a specific scholarly field. Students complete a series of online assignments connected to the required 45 internship hours per credit.

2. **PAF 410 (3 credits): Practicum in Public Policy: SU Policies:** Sections of this course are offered through the Public Affairs Program and administered by Practitioner Experts who are staff members and supervisors in different units on campus. Students who are employed in supervisory positions or are completing extensive training required by the organization can sign up for the course. Students will practice and self-assess their skills through online assignments. The following sections of PAF 410 were offered in 2014-2016:

   1. Residence Life Policy Implementation
   2. Implementation and Evaluation: Shaw Center
   3. Literacy in Urban Education (offered under a different PAF 410 title)
   4. Recreation Service Policy
   5. Public Safety Policy Implementation
   6. Student Centers and Programs Services
   7. Food Services

Syllabi for both courses are available on the STEP website (http://skillswin.com/).

Preliminary results from both courses are encouraging, but the samples are not large enough to draw more than tentative conclusions. The number of students and credit hours for 2014-2015 through the summer was 249 credits to 85 students, and for 2015-2016 through the summer was 251 credit hours to 87 students. Student evaluations have been positive for the most part, with pointed suggestions on how to improve the experience.

The goal for the pilot project in 2016-2017 is to at least double the number of students taking the two courses mentioned above, offer more sections of PAF 410 and identify other existing coursework that meet the STEP criteria. Courses across the university that are open to all undergraduates and include a significant portion of skill development through hands-on experience will be identified and recommended on the STEP website.

The Staffing Program

Since the summer of 2015, several students have been hired to work on- and off-campus through limited funds available to the Public Affairs Program from outside donors. The two criteria for these placements are that (1) the job will enhance existing skills of the students and (2) the staff and organizations receiving the funds are likely to provide an experience that will develop skills. Students will report to the Director periodically on activities completed. The Director will be responsible for selecting students who have demonstrated a satisfactory level of competence for most of the skill sets and are ready to develop some specific skills like Excel, management, or advanced writing.

Rationale

This section briefly discusses the need and potential effectiveness of the experience-based coursework and staffing programs.

STEP is Built on the Successes of the Public Affairs Program

The antecedents to the Skills Through Experience Program began in 1978 with the formation of the Policy Studies major, which was designed to provide students with the desire and competencies to do good and do well. The major's tagline is "undergraduates building professional skills through community service and research." Through several community-based courses and the required 35 service hours for the major students have the opportunity to develop skills through persistent practice with informed reflection and coaching by faculty and practitioner experts. Most experts recognize this form of apprenticeship learning as the most effective. It is the same model of instruction used by the physical sciences where laboratory and lectures are intertwined to provide evidence to support theories. In effect, the workplace is the laboratory for developing the 10 Skill Sets.

Students in the program have been some of the strongest leaders on campus, won many awards on- and off-campus, and have been successful in business, government and the non-profit sector. Compiled over the past 30+ years, alumni of the program cite skills and internships as the key to their career success and their work to improve society. Existing testimonials of alumni are available on the Public Affairs website (http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/Testimonials.asp).

While project-based and experiential coursework is increasing in higher education, it has not reached the level required to help students develop the full range of foundational skills needed for success. STEP will allow students whose coursework is heavy on scholarly content and critical thinking to develop the "soft skills" and basic computer skills necessary for career success and effective citizenship. First, it allows students to substitute experiential courses for Arts and Sciences elective courses that students don't see as essential to their education. Second, it "buys" time in students' busy schedules where they have to work to pay their bills. STEP helps students earn academic credit for jobs that they might need, and otherwise are unable to take because of coursework, to cover the cost of the university. This benefit is especially important for low income students.

STEP Supports the SU Mission

Below is the Syracuse University Mission Statement in boldface as published on the Fast Forward website (http://fastforward.syr.edu/strategic-plan/vision-and-mission-statements/), along with justifications of how STEP enhances the SU Mission.
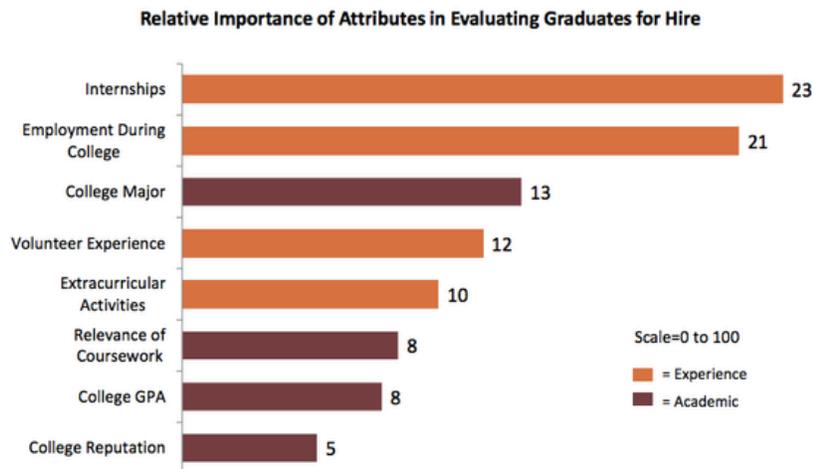
2015 Syracuse University Mission Statement:
As a university with the capacity to attract and engage the best scholars from around the world, yet small enough to support a personalized and academically rigorous student experience, Syracuse University faculty and staff support student success by:

- **Encouraging global study, experiential learning, interdisciplinary scholarship, creativity, and entrepreneurial endeavors**: The major measurable goal in this statement is the increase in the number of credit hours using experiential learning. The coursework and staffing program encourage the increase of experiential learning in all colleges.

- **Balancing professional studies with an intensive liberal arts education:** STEP courses connect the liberal arts to professional roles and earn upper level Arts and Sciences credit.

- **Fostering a richly diverse and inclusive community of learning and opportunity**: STEP helps a financially diverse population by enabling students to receive credit for their jobs on- or off-campus while informing skills growth for career and citizenship preparation.

- **Promoting a culture of innovation and discovery**: PAF 410: Practicum in Public Policy: SU Policies brings the voices of the students who are a source of innovation into the decision-making process of administrators in a constructive way. As part of the coursework, students submit a policy memo with suggestions on how to ameliorate one problem they encountered working for their organization.

- **Supporting faculty, staff, and student collaboration in creative activity and research that address emerging opportunities and societal needs**: Many STEP course credits will incentivize problem-solving both within and outside the University.

- **Maintaining pride in our location and history as a place of access, engagement, innovation, and impact:** STEP activities will help students feel they are a part of the University by bringing them closer together to their SU staff supervisors and providing an outlet to help solve the problems they see.

STEP Enhances Career Education & Citizenship

It is universally agreed that careers and citizenship are the two most important goals of undergraduate education. My students have compiled and continue to compile an annotated bibliography of more than 100 entries that emphasize the importance of skills for career success. Below are the results of one of the studies included in the aforementioned skills bibliography. This widely quoted study summarized in *The Atlantic* shows that four of the five most important attributes in employers' hiring decisions are based on some kind of experience: internships, employment during college, volunteer experience, and extra-curricular activities.

Relative Importance of Attributes in Evaluating Graduates for Hire

Attribute	Value
Internships	23
Employment During College	21
College Major	13
Volunteer Experience	12
Extracurricular Activities	10
Relevance of Coursework	8
College GPA	8
College Reputation	5

Scale=0 to 100
■ = Experience
■ = Academic

Source: http://m.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/08/the-thing-employers-look-for-when-hiring-recent-graduates/378693/

The skills necessary for career success are the same basic skills necessary for effective citizenship. It is necessary for good citizens to possess the skills needed to gather information, make informed judgements and establish and maintain professional work relations with others. Without a set of intellectual perspectives and soft skills, it can be difficult for citizens to make rational decisions as voters, community members and policy influencers.

Moreover, experiential learning is inherently democratic. Rather than learning just from what they are told by faculty, the media and scholarly publications, students are learning to inform themselves through reflective experience. Democracy requires that individuals are free to think for themselves and to relate their own experiences to the bigger picture.

Future Plans for STEP

In this pilot stage, the home of the program is the Public Affairs Program with a strong, working relationship with the College of Arts and Sciences, Career Services, the Shaw Center for Public and Community Services, Student Employment, and several units in Student Activities. Its strength is that it integrates Academic Affairs and Students Affairs to create a seamless educational experience. The Public Affairs Program can continue to build the program with its own resources, as long as student enrollment and demand grows in a limited way.

For 2016-2017, the plan is to develop a website for students, expand the number of units offering PAF 410: Practicum in Public Policy, and to increase enrollment in our two courses from 100 to 200. In addition, we plan to identify and publicize courses offered throughout the University open to all undergraduates that develop skills through hands-on activities

If STEP becomes a signature program for the University and supports the range of activities listed above, new resources and perhaps a new location would be needed for clarity. This is especially true if the University chooses to highlight the Skills Through Experience Program as a "signature" program for recruiting purposes. Given the increasing pressure to prepare students for careers and citizenship from a variety of sources and the competitive advantage schools that offer co-op and extensive internship programs have, STEP could be a powerful branding device that would challenge schools with similar programs.

Currently, about 20 percent of my work as Director and Professor of the Public Affairs Program goes to STEP. Alumni and parental donations, as well as the $12,000 I received for overload in work 2015-2016, support the program and will continue to support the program. Many others also contribute to sustain the development of STEP as a pilot program, but budgeted funds will be needed for an Associate Director and eventually for a full time Director if STEP succeeds in improving career and citizenship competencies for all Syracuse University undergraduates.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

SKILLS**WIN**

10 Skill Sets for Success in Career and Citizenship

*To improve your skills and get more information
please email skillsexperienceproject@gmail.com
or visit database.skillswin.com*

Skill Set 1: Taking Responsibility
1 - Motivate Yourself
2 - Be Ethical
3 - Manage Your Time
4 - Manage Your Money

Skill Set 2: Developing Physical Skills
5 - Stay Well
6 - Look Good
7 - Type Well
8 - Write Legibly

Skill Set 3: Communicating Verbally
9 - Converse One-on-One
10 - Present to Groups
11 - Use Visual Displays

Skill Set 4: Communicating in Writing
12 - Write Well
13 - Edit and Proof
14 - Use Word Processing Tools
15 - Master Online Communication

Skill Set 5: Working Directly with People
16 - Build Good Relationships
17 - Work in Teams
18 - Teach Others

Skill Set 6: Influencing People
19 - Manage Effectively
20 - Sell Successfully
21 - Politick Wisely
22 - Lead Effectively

Skill Set 7: Gathering Information
23 - Search the Web
24 - Use Library Holdings
25 - Use Commercial Databases
26 - Conduct Interviews
27 - Use Surveys
28 - Keep and Use Records

Skill Set 8: Using Quantitative Tools
29 - Use Numbers
30 - Use Graphs and Tables
31 - Use Spreadsheet Programs

Skill Set 9: Asking and Answering the Right Questions
32 - Detect Nonsense
33 - Pay Attention to Detail
34 - Apply Knowledge
35 - Evaluate Actions and Policies

Skill Set 10: Solving Problems
36 - Identify Problems
37 - Develop Solutions
38 - Launch Solutions

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