

Springforward and Step: Assessing Outcomes of a Two-Part Academic Success Initiative

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Students who struggle academically in their first year may need continued developmental support. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences and outcomes of students who participated in both SpringForward, a first-year program for students who are struggling academically, and STEP, a second-year program to support students' ongoing intellectual and social development at The Ohio State University. We also examined which factors of this two-part initiative supported student success and how this two-part initiative could be improved. Findings indicated positive outcomes for students, but individualization of programming is key. Broader implications for the field are discussed.

The focus of university retention and success measures is often on frontloaded initiatives for first-year students, stemming from an institutional focus on first-year retention and graduation rates (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2021). Fewer institutions offer similar programs for second-year students. Yet second-year students need developmental support, particularly in choosing a major, identifying one's purpose,

and developing a sense of belonging (Normyle, 2015; Sterling, 2018; Young, 2018). The second year may be the most challenging for students as their academic demands and expectations ramp up (Capik & Shupp, 2021). Nationally, there are fewer opportunities for second-year students to engage in high-impact practices designed specifically for the sophomore year, and first-year programming does not necessarily fulfill the needs of students' future years (Perez, 2020; L. A. Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018).

The Ohio State University offers many high-impact practices that support sophomore development, including the SpringForward academic success and enrichment program and the Second-Year Transformational Experience Program (STEP). SpringForward serves rising sophomores who are struggling academically to retain them into and beyond their second year and addresses students' academic and socio-emotional skills. STEP is open to all second-year students and emphasizes professional development and community-building. A student may complete the SpringForward program in the summer after their first year and then move into the STEP program for continued personal development across their second year. When viewed as a combined initiative, SpringForward and STEP provide a blend of proactive programming and just-in-time support that is essential for students who are struggling academically (Berger, 2019).

Both the SpringForward and STEP programs have been previously assessed independently (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). However, there are no assessments of the outcomes for students who participate in both programs. As many SpringForward students share marginalized identities, participating in two high-impact practices can yield even more benefits (Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the overall impact of the combined SpringForward/STEP initiative in providing students support for their academic success as they transitioned into and completed their second (sophomore) year. We sought to describe the outcomes and impacts of this two-program initiative by understanding the experiences of student participants, with the goal of assessing their significance and making future improvements.

Literature Review

We begin by situating this study in the student success literature. We first delineate who is a sophomore and provide definitions of student success. We then review the concept of high-impact practices. Finally, we summarize the literature on the second-year experience.

WHO IS A SOPHOMORE?

The term “sophomore” is colloquially used to identify students in their second year of a four-year college program. The formal definition of sophomore may vary by institution, including the number of completed credit hours, number of years in college, or more holistic measures, such as major certainty (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Young, 2018). A student who completed postsecondary credit while in high school may enter a university at sophomore rank, as might a transfer student who has been enrolled part-time and thus completed coursework over more than two years (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). Since the SpringForward program supports students who are struggling academically, some of those students will enter their second year with lower amounts of earned credit compared to their peers, which at some institutions would not lead them to be categorized as sophomores. For the purposes of this paper, a sophomore is a student who began as a traditional new first-year student (NFYS) and has completed one academic year post-high school at Ohio State, regardless of the number of earned credit hours.

STUDENT SUCCESS AND HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

SpringForward and STEP are intended to promote sophomore academic and personal success. Student success is frequently defined by quantifiable measures such as retention, persistence, and four- and six-year graduation rates (Kinzie, 2020). However, student success can also be measured in terms of critical thinking skills; cognitive, personal, and social development; development of a growth mindset; acquisition of general education and desired competencies; engagement in educationally purposeful activities; and demonstrating a commitment to learning (Braxton, 2000; Collins-Warfield, 2022; Kinzie, 2020; Kuh et al., 2007).

The normative view of student success is based on retention and graduation rates; the students who do not meet these criteria are seen as deficient or lacking (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017). Many existing theories explain student behavior and performance in terms of deficits rather than examining the factors that help them find success (Harper, 2010). An example of a deficit-based view is the tendency to attribute academic struggle to something students lack, such as preparedness for college-level learning or social capital (Sriram et al., 2012). An asset-based view identifies and emphasizes the factors contributing to a student’s success and how these can be applied to promote growth (Harper, 2010). An asset-based view shifts some of the responsibility for student success to the institution. Kinzie’s (2020) definition of success focuses on the development of talent and potential in every student, which puts the onus on the university to make a commitment to students and to create an environment that supports them appropriately.

To help all students develop their potential, Ohio State has implemented high-impact practices like SpringForward and STEP. A high-impact practice (HIP) requires “an investment of time and energy over an extended period that has unusually positive effects on student engagement in educationally purposeful behavior” (Kuh, 2010, p. vi). While HIPs vary, they typically involve outside-the-classroom learning, collaboration, feedback, and reflection (Kuh, 2008). Participation in HIPs can yield several important benefits for students: strengthened engagement; increased GPA; persistence to graduation; gains in academic skills, such as writing and critical thinking; and a greater appreciation of diversity (Kuh, 2008, 2010). In particular, students who are struggling academically can benefit from this type of engaged learning (Sriram et al., 2012).

In his seminal work, Kuh (2008) outlined several common characteristics of effective HIPs. Both SpringForward and STEP align with these characteristics. They both require students to commit effort over a sustained period, regularly interact with faculty and collaborate with other students who are different from them. Both programs have the goal of helping students remain committed to college (Kuh, 2008). What makes SpringForward and STEP unique from other HIPs on campus is their specific focus on second-year success.

THE SECOND-YEAR EXPERIENCE

The literature on sophomore-year success and retention is limited compared to the wealth of research on the first-year experience (Webb & Cotton, 2019). Therefore, in this paper, we draw upon a broad range of second-year success literature. University initiatives target first-year retention, but second to third-year losses in retention are also significant (Perez, 2020). This reflects a phenomenon known as the *sophomore slump*, which describes the slowdown of academic progress in the second year (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Milsom, 2015; Sterling, 2018; Webb & Cotton, 2019). The second year brings a growth of identity, along with changes in major and career choices (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Schaller, 2018; Young, 2018). Students encounter transitions in both their academic and social lives while grappling with finding meaning (Young, 2019). The second year is also when students begin to rely on internal decision-making rather than external (Schaller, 2018). Decisions made in the second year impact the rest of a student’s time in college, yet these students receive less institutional support, making them feel overwhelmed (Virtue, 2017; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). Sophomores need the type of environment that helps them develop their identities and purpose, make decisions about their future direction, and build supportive relationships (Perez, 2020; Schaller, 2005; Tobolowsky, 2008).

Second-year students are often surprised to find they will not receive the same support they had come to expect in their first year, leading them to move on from

the honeymoon view of college (Sterling, 2018). As Gahagan and Hunter (2006) aptly put it, sophomores are treated as “the academy’s middle children” (p. 17). Universities provide frontloaded support for new students but do not typically carry this into the second year, which impacts sophomores’ expectations, satisfaction levels, and perceptions of institutional integrity (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Sterling, 2018; Young, 2018). To promote second-year student-thriving and to positively impact attrition, institutions must know what their sophomores are experiencing (Perez, 2020). Programming must be specific to sophomore needs and can build on what was offered in the first year. However, it cannot overlap too much with first-year programs (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Young, 2018). Signature programming for sophomores with clear outcomes can boost student success and institutional commitment (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013; Young, 2018).

Successful support efforts can lead to sophomore-thriving (Schreiner, 2018). Topics addressed in signature programming include connecting with the right major, developing purposeful campus involvement, and interacting meaningfully with faculty (Schaller, 2018; Schreiner, 2018). Frequent, quality interactions with faculty significantly contribute to sophomores’ overall thriving and college success (Schreiner & Tobolowsky, 2018; Young, 2019). However, students will experience programming outcomes differently depending on their identity (Schreiner, 2018). There is limited research on how students from marginalized identities experience their sophomore year, yet it is essential to understand students’ unique cultural needs (Schreiner et al., 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). For example, in terms of thriving, certainty about one’s major is critical for White and Latinx students, while spirituality is significant for Black students, while campus involvement is significant for Asian students (Schreiner, 2018). Institutional integrity is a factor of significance for many marginalized student groups, including Students of Color, first-generation students, and students who are struggling academically (Young, 2018). There is a need for studies that explore the experiences of these students and use the results to improve practice (Young, 2018) which aligns perfectly with the research questions of our study.

The Initiatives

Before explaining our methods, we will provide important background on the SpringForward and STEP programs and the context for this study.

SPRINGFORWARD

An initiative of the Transition and Academic Growth unit of the Office of Student Academic Excellence, SpringForward is an academic intervention and enrichment program that supports rising sophomores who experienced serious academic struggle in their first year. SpringForward helps students learn effective success strategies,

boost their GPAs, and be retained beyond the first year (Jaggars, 2019). SpringForward consists of an enrichment program in the summer after the first year and ongoing programming, academic advising, and academic coaching in a student's second year and beyond. Students complete an online synchronous course, EXP 2100: Strategies for Academic and Personal Success, which addresses common issues outside of the classroom that impact academic success (e.g., choosing the right major and building a sense of community). Students receive a scholarship to enroll in two general education courses in the summer semester, giving students the opportunity to boost their GPAs. Students also participate in virtual social programming. A student is considered a "SpringForward student" if they complete the summer enrichment program. A total of 55 SpringForward students participated in the summer 2020 cohort, which is the focus of this study. Table 1 includes the demographics of this cohort.

The SpringForward staff intentionally focuses on recruiting students from populations that have been historically underrepresented and underserved by Ohio State, including first-generation students, low-income (Pell Grant-eligible) students, and Students of Color. The retention rate for each of these populations on the Columbus campus is lower than the overall NFYS retention rate on the Columbus campus (Office of Student Academic Success Analysis and Reporting, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). To support students, SpringForward relies on campus partners for referrals and wraparound support. SpringForward prevents students from slipping through the cracks at the university. The program adopts a holistic, asset-based view of student success, with the assumption that all students can learn and that the institution plays a key role in meeting students where they are with appropriate support. The learning outcomes for SpringForward are: (1) provide students with skills, tools, and resources to be successful academically; (2) help students find their place at Ohio State; and (3) advise and coach students to better understand themselves and to achieve their personal and academic goals.

STEP

Created by the Office of Student Life and the Office of Academic Affairs, STEP is a HIP that supports students' engagement, belongingness, and academic success in their second year, ultimately increasing retention (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). At Ohio State, predictors of second-year retention include "participation in campus events, living on campus, peer interaction, interaction with faculty, and institutional commitment" (OSU CSSL, 2018, p. 2).

STEP engages students in developmental activities that are adaptable to their specific interests. The learning outcomes for STEP are access, community, and self-awareness. Students build personal connections and essential professional skills. The major components of STEP include cohort meetings led by a faculty mentor, professional

Table 1***Demographics of STEP Participants (University-Wide), 2020-2021***

Demographic	Breakdown	Summer 2020 SpringForward Cohort (<i>n</i> = 55)	2020-21 STEP Participants (<i>N</i> = 2661)	Columbus Undergraduate Population (<i>N</i> = 46,984)
Race				
	American Indian/ Alaska Native	0%	0.1%	0.1%
	Asian	7.2%	10.6%	8.0%
	Black/African American	34.5%	10.6%	7.2%
	Hispanic/Latinx	10.9%	5.4%	5.1%
	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0%	0.0%	0.1%
	Non-U.S. Resident	1.8%	1.6%	6.8%
	None Given/Unknown	1.8%	3.2%	2.8%
	Two or More Races	7.3%	4.4%	4.3%
	White	36.4%	67.1%	65.6%
Sex				
	Female	58.2%	67.9%	49.6%
	Male	40%	31.9%	49.2%
	Undisclosed	1.8%	0.2%	1.2%
Honors Status				
	Honors	10.9%	24.2%	9.0%
	Scholars	45.5%	23.2%	9.6%
	Neither	43.6%	52.6%	81.4%
First-generation				
	First-generation	69%	19.5%	22.2%
	Not First-generation	31%	80.5%	77.8%

Note: language used in this table reflects the official language used by Ohio State University.

development sessions, and financial coaching, all leading to a \$2000 Fellowship for completing a *Signature Project*.

STEP cohorts consist of 16-18 students and an assigned faculty mentor. These cohorts meet weekly in the fall semester and focus on community-building, personal exploration, and preparation for writing the Signature Project proposal. Additionally, professional development co-curriculars (PDCs) are offered throughout the year and target the specific skills needed by sophomores, from managing stress to writing effective resumes. Students attend three PDCs in the fall semester. All STEP students complete a two-part financial wellness program offered through the university's financial coaching service, which provides fundamental budgeting skills needed for their Signature Project proposals and for personal success. Lastly, the culminating component of STEP is the completion of the Signature Project.

The Signature Project allows students the opportunity to explore an area of academic or personal enrichment that they would otherwise not be able to pursue. The Signature Project must fit into one of six areas: creative and artistic endeavors; education abroad; internship; leadership; service-learning and community service; or undergraduate research (OSU CSSL, 2018). Examples of Signature Projects include completing an internship, attending a study abroad program, or pursuing training in new artistic/creative skills. Students are expected to showcase their Signature Project results at the STEP Expo, held the semester following a student's project completion. Students present their transformational experiences to the larger university community. The STEP Expo is where many sophomore students gather ideas of what to propose for their own Signature Projects. Table 1 includes the demographic breakdown of STEP participants in 2020-21, which is the timeframe focus of this study (OSU CSSL, 2021).

Previous research on STEP conducted by the Center for the Study of Student Life (CSSL) revealed statistically significant impacts of participation. For the 2017-2018 STEP cohort, a statistically significant second-to-third-year retention rate was found (OSU CSSL, 2018). Additionally, for the 2017-2018 cohort, first-generation, African American, and Latinx students had significantly higher retention rates compared to their peers who did not participate in STEP (OSU CSSL, 2018). In general, participation in STEP resulted in statistically significant gains in academic, career, and leadership confidence, interpersonal skills, perceived access to resources, and a number of faculty interactions (OSU CSSL, 2018).

Participation in STEP is a primary component of the ongoing engagement afforded to SpringForward sophomores. Participation includes social, academic, and career enrichment, faculty mentoring, and engagement in residence life. SpringForward

maintains a special partnership with STEP. Our goal is to continue providing these sophomores with high-quality opportunities that will promote their involvement and success.

Methods

A qualitative research design was used to explore students' experiences with SpringForward and STEP. We asked the following research questions to understand the experiences and outcomes for students:

1. What are the experiences of students who participated in this two-part initiative?
2. What outcomes do students attribute to their participation in this two-part initiative?
3. What factors of this two-part initiative support student success?
4. What aspects of student success are not addressed in this two-part initiative?

The sample included SpringForward students from the summer 2020 cohort who were also enrolled in STEP for the 2020-2021 academic year ($n = 24$). The summer 2020 cohort was chosen as the focus of this study because of its unique context. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the summer 2020 cohort participated in a completely virtual enrichment program, which is different from all previous SpringForward cohorts. Further, the 2020-21 academic year was the first time STEP cohort meetings and programming had been offered virtually, making this population distinct from all previous years. At the time data were collected for this study (late summer 2021), the SpringForward and STEP experiences were still relatively fresh in students' memories, as opposed to previous cohorts for whom two or more years had passed since they participated in STEP.

Invitations were emailed to 24 students. Six students elected to participate in this study. Each student identified with at least one of the SpringForward target populations: first-generation, low-income, and/or Student of Color. Additionally, all six students experienced academic struggle in their first year. These students were invited to participate in a 30-minute virtual, recorded interview. These interviews explored students' experiences with both programs. Students were asked to describe their transition to Ohio State and the challenges they faced in their first year. Students were then asked to describe their motivation for joining SpringForward and STEP, their experiences in these programs, and what they felt they learned through their participation.

We used the process outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) to analyze the data. Interviews were transcribed and imported into the NVivo qualitative coding software. We read through the transcripts to gather overall impressions and look for initial emerging themes. We then used NVivo to review and code the transcripts. A priori coding was used to answer the first two research questions, using the SpringForward and STEP program goals/outcomes as a coding guide. Open coding was used for the third and fourth research questions to look for themes emerging from students' experiences. Codes were then grouped into categories and themes. Table 2 contains a sample of these.

Table 2
Sample Categories and Themes

A Priori Coding (Questions 1 and 2)		Open Coding (Questions 3 and 4)	
Access	Self-Awareness	Academic confidence	Help-seeking
Community	Skills	Accessibility	Mentorship
Resources	Tools	Changing goals	Ownership of failure
		Communication challenges	Valued relationships

Triangulation was used to improve the trustworthiness of the data (Maxwell, 2013). Data were triangulated by looking for common experiences, ideas, and concepts across all students' interviews. We also triangulated data by comparing our observations with previous publications about these two programs and with themes gathered in the literature review phase of the study.

There were several limitations to this study that should be noted. The sample size is small because we chose to focus on the summer 2020 cohort, which limited the number of students contacted for the study. Students in this cohort had similar experiences to each other, but the cohort itself was different from all previous cohorts in that much of the programming took place virtually. The mode of delivery may have shaped students' experiences as many had not previously engaged in online learning. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique context that might not be comparable to cohorts before or since.

Results

First, we explore our participants' transition to college and the experiences that led them to join SpringForward and participate in STEP. Next, we will answer research questions one and two and summarize students' experiences and outcomes. Finally, we will answer research questions three and four and explain how these programs did or did not contribute to student success.

JOINING SPRINGFORWARD AND STEP

All participants experienced challenges in their college transition, impacting their personal and academic success. These challenges resulted in dropping and/or failing one or more classes, struggling to keep pace with the amount of material to learn, and losing motivation for classes that did not interest them. They also spoke of the shock that came with earning a low GPA at the end of their first semester. Four students mentioned challenges with self-regulated learning, including time management and effective study skills. “I didn’t realize that in college, I’d actually have to work,” said Anusha. “I don’t feel like I was really set up to learn how to tackle things when they’re difficult for me.” Further, personal struggles had a major impact on some students’ academic performance, including mental health, finding a support system, balancing school with work, and navigating college as a first-generation student. Overall, the academic and personal struggles the participants encountered in their first year prompted them to seek help.

The challenges each student experienced provide important contextual information for how students became involved with SpringForward and, thence, STEP. Participants joined SpringForward because they recognized they needed to make a change. In the spring semester, the SpringForward staff sent emails to students to recruit them. Five participants remembered receiving a recruitment email. Kelsey recalled, “I just happened to receive an email in my inbox that was labeled, ‘Your first semester not go as planned? Sign up for this.’ And at that point, I had nothing to lose, so I figured I’d give it a shot.” Grady also remembered this email because it struck him as an opportunity to improve his GPA and “dig myself out of a hole.” Other students mentioned a desire to develop a sense of community as motivation for enrolling.

All SpringForward students were encouraged by staff to participate in STEP in their sophomore year. They were given the opportunity to join the dedicated STEP cohort for SpringForward students, but they could choose to participate in any cohort. Louis and Grady chose the SpringForward cohort. Deshawn, Anusha, and Aaliyah each joined a cohort related to their Scholars program, while Kelsey joined a cohort that was not affiliated with any group. Two participants described the appeal of the \$2000 Fellowship as a motivating factor for participating in STEP, whereas three others also mentioned a desire to build a stronger support network on campus. All six participants expressed some common experiences, beginning with their first-year difficulties and leading into their motivation for participating in the programs.

EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES

Our first two research questions asked, “What are the experiences of students who participated in this two-part initiative?” and “What outcomes do students attribute to their participation in this two-part initiative?” Students’ experiences with the

SpringForward program were shaped by the forced transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In late March 2020, when these participants signed up for the program, the impact and duration of the pandemic were unknown, and there was still hope the program would take place in person. However, the program was forced to shift to a 100% virtual format. Additionally, when their sophomore year began, students could choose to participate in STEP cohorts that were in-person, hybrid, or completely virtual.

The modes of instruction for both SpringForward and STEP had a substantial impact on students' experiences. Aaliyah thought the SpringForward virtual programming gave her "a slight introduction into Zoom life" and thought the class sessions gave her space to "open up to different peers who shared stories about going through similar struggles." Grady appreciated his STEP mentor's efforts at building community in the virtual environment, stating, "It's nice to just have a Zoom meeting and just talk with the people in the group. A stress-free kind of thing."

On the other hand, Deshawn felt a lack of community with SpringForward because of the virtual environment, making it difficult for him to engage with his peers during the weekly synchronous sessions. Kelsey expressed similar disappointment with her completely virtual STEP cohort. "Nobody was really willing to talk to each other unfortunately ... Sometimes when things are online, you just can't force people to talk." However, all study participants recognized it was impossible to do things in person at that time.

Participants were also trying to navigate other challenges in their lives. Anusha worked full-time during the summer while also taking classes. Anusha remembered her frustrations about a weekly planner assignment because it just pointed out how all her hours were dedicated to working. However, she also remembered the flexibility the SpringForward staff provided her: "I remembered it'd be like 8:00 [PM] and I was literally cooking dinner, stressed after a long day of work, and we would just chat." This flexibility for deadlines and accommodating her work schedule enabled her to participate and grow in the program.

The participants expressed a variety of positive outcomes from their participation in SpringForward and STEP. In particular, the SpringForward summer enrichment program helped students boost their GPAs. It also boosted their academic confidence, especially in terms of asking for help. "I've learned that if I have a question, I need to speak my mind and ask it, not just wait to read it in a book or see if it pops up somewhere else," said Grady. "And the outcome from that has been being more confident talking to professors and TAs and seeing them as people there to help." STEP provided students with the opportunity to gain basic professional skills related to

financial management and writing grant proposals. For Deshawn, this was especially useful as he plans to pursue these types of projects in his future career. “I think it was good practice and I really enjoyed that aspect of having to practice those skills,” he said. It also helped students grow their self-awareness and develop stronger goals. Each of the formal outcomes of the SpringForward and STEP programs was met by participants in this study. Tables 3 and 4 provide examples.

Table 3
SpringForward Program Goals and Outcome Examples

Outcome	Example
Provide students with skills, tools, and resources to be successful academically.	<p>“These are the things I have to do and these are the people who rely on me so... it was more of time management.” (Anusha)</p> <p>“I’ve gotten a lot of different knowledge and advice from you all, [for example] the Pomodoro Technique.” (Louis)</p> <p>“One of the biggest things that I always say when I talk about the program is how big the safety net is within it. You get your academic coach, and you have all these advisors...” (Grady)</p>
Help students find their place at Ohio State.	<p>“[I met] more people in my situation because I realized I wasn’t meeting as many folks who may have been struggling academically.” (Deshawn)</p> <p>“It gave me a space to talk about my failures in a way, because something that I found was I just wasn’t meeting people.” (Kelsey)</p>
Advise and coach students to better understand themselves and to achieve their personal and academic goals.	<p>“I saw tremendous growth having had that support. I was able to set goals and I was able to reach them academically.” (Aaliyah)</p> <p>“It helped me come into my own and do what I want to do and not what I feel like I have to do.” (Anusha)</p> <p>“It made you feel more confident in what you do because you had all these other people pushing you and saying how much they believed in you.” (Grady)</p>

Table 4
STEP Learning Outcomes and Examples

Outcome	Example
Access	<p>Referring to using the \$2000 fellowship: “I ended up getting my STNA license, which is just one STEP below being a nurse ... my goal eventually is to get a clinical job so that I can apply to med school eventually.” (Kelsey)</p> <p>“[I gained] social support from new people and then developing a relationship with an Ohio State professional.” (Louis)</p>
Community	<p>“That experience really helped me foster some friendships.” (Deshawn)</p> <p>“You’re in the same setting, and you guys are still the same type of people, but you [don’t] have to worry about some assignment or stress about this or that, you can just hang out.” (Grady)</p>
Self-awareness	<p>“STEP has helped me come to the realization that I need to figure out what I’m doing with my major and my career and everything.” (Louis)</p> <p>“It made me reflect on what I am doing what I’m doing. There was one activity we did where we were practicing the little thing about who you are. I remember writing, what do I want to gain in life? What’s my angle? What’s going to make me happy?” (Deshawn)</p>

SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

Our third and fourth research questions asked, “What factors of this two-part initiative support student success?” and “What aspects of student success are not addressed in this two-part initiative?” For context, we will revisit the needs for sophomore student success, as outlined in Table 5 (Capik & Shupp, 2021; Gahagan, 2018; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Perez, 2020; Schaller, 2005; Sterling, 2018; Webb & Cotton, 2019; Young, 2019).

Table 5***Common Needs for Sophomore Success***

Common Needs for Sophomore Success		
Academic/classroom success	Developing autonomy and identity	Psychological well-being
Building a support network	Engagement with college	Questioning and determining purpose and values
Choosing an appropriate major	Establishing goals and aspirations	Self-regulated learning
Developing adequate relationships with peers and others	Finding a sense of belonging	Support and attention from college staff

SpringForward and STEP met many of the participants' needs as they moved into and through their sophomore year. The factor that came up most frequently was the development of strong relationships with their peers and with staff. All six participants mentioned relationships they built because of their participation in these programs. "I feel like the programs were designed in a way that students could collaborate," said Aaliyah, who found this helpful for building a sense of community. Anusha, Deshawn, and Grady each met new people and made some new friends through their participation in STEP, while Kelsey particularly emphasized the peer relationships she made through SpringForward. These peer relationships strengthened students' support networks. Participants also highlighted how much they valued building staff and faculty relationships. "I felt like people on campus actually cared about me and wanted to see me succeed and were creating solutions and advice for me," said Anusha. Grady added, "I gained a really comfortable relationship with these people that are able to help me succeed." Deshawn appreciated having consistent interactions with staff, something he felt was missing from his college experience. Louis was grateful for his STEP mentor's approachability, which made him more comfortable asking for help.

While multiple areas of well-being are important for student thriving (Schreiner, 2012), psychological well-being is an important current priority. Louis spoke about the support and understanding he received during periods of psychological distress. Anusha talked about the emotional stress she experienced and how the SpringForward staff provided empathy and understanding. Students also expressed their thankfulness for the non-judgmental environment created by SpringForward. "I didn't necessarily feel any sense of judgment...It was rather, okay, 'We're resources and we're here to help you,'" said Aaliyah. Grady added, "The type of environment you're in is completely

non-judgmental at all because everyone's in the same spot." Creating this non-judgmental environment where students feel they matter is essential to developing a sense of belonging, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds (Hurtado et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2012).

Four participants mentioned gaining skills to help them become self-regulated learners. Self-regulated learning is a set of academic skills consisting of both "self-directive processes and self-beliefs that one employs to perform in an academic setting" (Antonelli et al., 2020, p. 67). Self-regulated learning strategies are an important component of programs designed to boost the classroom success of students who are struggling academically (Antonelli et al., 2020; Lee & Blankenship, 2019). Participation in SpringForward and STEP promoted students' ability to manage their time, find self-motivation, and use effective studying and planning skills and tools. Of note are the self-beliefs that students gained through their participation. Aaliyah shared that the SpringForward staff helped her understand her potential and held her accountable for doing her best. Deshawn discussed how SpringForward helped him to identify his motivation and bounce back from challenges. Grady talked about how academic coaching held him accountable for completing his work and tracking his progress, which built his academic confidence. Anusha described how she learned to be "more patient with myself and allowing myself to make mistakes." SpringForward and STEP helped students clarify their values, goals, and aspirations, which are essential for sophomore student success (see Table 5). Participation in SpringForward helped multiple participants clarify which major was the best choice for them. By using her STEP funds to complete STNA training, Kelsey developed even greater certainty that a medical-related career path was right for her. While both programs helped students set appropriate academic goals, they also helped them begin to create an identity outside of the classroom, as well. As Anusha realized, "I'm more than a student. I'm a real person with hopes and dreams and rough days."

In the interviews, participants repeatedly mentioned how peer relationships influenced their sense of belonging. Louis appreciated making connections with other students through the SpringForward virtual social events. Kelsey repeatedly spoke of building relationships with other students through her participation in both programs and how important this was to her as a commuter student. Deshawn and Aaliyah both commented on how they benefited from the connections they built with their STEP faculty mentor and fellow cohort participants. Deshawn was grateful to have some consistent relationships during the uncertainty brought on by both COVID-19 learning transitions and by entering his sophomore year.

However, there is room for improvement in the ability of the SpringForward and STEP programs to support student needs. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the

level of direction and guidance they received for their STEP project proposals. Kelsey was the only one of the six participants who completed the proposal process and her Signature Project. The students who did not complete the proposal process cited unclear communication as one of the primary factors for not finishing. “The way my STEP advisor would explain things, I felt [there were] a lot of questions rather than answers,” Louis said. He went on to describe what he saw as a disconnect between communication with faculty mentors and how mentors were explaining guidelines to students and keeping them on track. Participants expressed a desire for STEP mentors to walk them through the proposal process rather than just give them a list of deadlines.

For some participants, STEP felt transactional, like a series of hoops to jump through to gain the financial reward at the end. They expressed enthusiasm for participating at the beginning, but this waned over time. Louis commented, “as the semester progressed, it felt really repetitive, and it just felt more of like a burden on my time rather than something I was looking forward to.” Anusha expressed frustration about attending the STEP PDCs, which she felt were unnecessary hurdles that repeated content she had covered in her freshman year through her participation in Ohio State’s general first-year programming. Deshawn summarized his STEP experience this way: “At the end of the day, it felt like a task.” These responses echo what other STEP participants have said in the past, viewing the program as a series of hoops to jump through to reach the Signature Project funds rather than as an opportunity for personal and professional growth (Harris & Harrish, 2018).

Although multiple participants reported learning time management skills through SpringForward, they continued to struggle in this area in the fall semester. In some cases, students got in the way of their own success. For example, Grady acknowledged receiving multiple reminders about completing the project proposal and wishes he had asked for clarification on deadlines. He ultimately accepted some responsibility for not completing a project proposal, stating, “That was unfortunate, but I guess it just rolls down to deadlines. If you miss it, then consequence [sic].” Aaliyah acknowledged that she did not turn in her STEP proposal due to underestimating the time involved. She went on to say she accepted responsibility for how her lack of time management prevented her from successfully submitting a proposal. Some participants also commented on unrealistic perceptions of what they could personally manage while participating. Louis expressed regret about taking other summer classes in addition to participating in SpringForward because he was not prepared for the accelerated pace of the summer term. He recognized that this choice did not set him up for success.

Lastly, all participants expressed some degree of disappointment about their virtual experiences with SpringForward and/or STEP, although they acknowledged the program staff did the best they could under the given circumstances. “We missed out

obviously on a huge chunk of it not being able to be in person,” said Anusha. Kelsey also wondered if she would have had a more positive experience with her STEP cohort had it met in person instead of online. These comments speak to the broader challenge of virtual learning during COVID-19 and the implications of this for student success.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

For sophomores, issues that were addressed in the first year of college can reappear, such as academic and financial concerns or discerning one’s aspirations (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). SpringForward and STEP seek to provide ongoing support to address these. The purpose of the partnership between SpringForward and STEP is to provide an intervention that supports academic success while ensuring students who are struggling academically have access to high-impact practices that can support their development and increase the odds they will be retained beyond their sophomore year. The aim of these programs is to provide students with skills and resources to be successful (access), to help them find a sense of belonging at the university (community), and to better understand themselves and their goals (self-awareness). As demonstrated by the interview data, all participants in this study met some combination of these outcomes.

Many of the frustrations the participants shared reflected ways in which one or both programs did not fit their needs. Although there are some common needs across the sophomore year experience (as summarized in Table 5), each student brings a unique set of identities and experiences. This is important to recognize because SpringForward participants tend to represent identity groups that are marginalized within universities. Program structures and guidelines that work for majority students (i.e., White, non-first generation, not from a low-income background) might not fulfill the needs of this population. For example, Deshawn, Louis, and Grady – all first-generation students – expressed uncertainty about STEP expectations. Thus, the expectations may not have been relayed to them in a way that made sense for their experience. In future work, it will be important to consider whether programming content and materials can be easily understood by students with varying levels of college knowledge.

The results of this study suggest that transition and retention programs need to consider the variety of identities students hold and which of these identities students find to be salient. This saliency can guide the individualization of programming, which was a recurring theme in the data. For example, Anusha said of SpringForward: “I think that’s really what made the program for me, that it wasn’t like a one size fits all.” In comparison, she felt her STEP experience was inaccessible to her as a low-income Student of Color, saying, “It was just so out of reach for me that I don’t even really

know what the program was supposed to be.” Since the STEP program is a university-wide initiative that serves 2000+ students per year, it can be difficult to create a personalized student experience. STEP has previously demonstrated its ability to help students, in general, build their self-efficacy (Harris & Harrish, 2018; OSU CSSL, 2018; Pitstick, 2018). However, based on participant data in this study, there might be a need to consider those students who face unique barriers to success. Louis stated that programs at the university, including SpringForward and STEP, could do a better job of understanding students’ intersectional identities and how these impact the student experience. “They’ll do some underlying work to make it seem they are competent and knowledgeable, but then they don’t actually publicize that,” he said. He noted that while “SpringForward was meant to be specifically for the students who are struggling, who have complex different identities,” he felt STEP did not actively address this, creating a more impersonal experience. Existing research highlights the importance of intentionally designing sophomore programs that take into consideration student identities (Perez, 2020; Schaller, 2018).

Ideally, the individual STEP cohort is the place where mentors can create a tailor-made experience that meets participants’ needs. Mentoring relationships with faculty are critical for sophomore success, especially because faculty can provide academic and personal validation to help struggling sophomores believe they can attain success (Hurtado et al., 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic context is important to consider here. Prior to the pandemic, SpringForward and STEP programming had never been offered virtually. In the autumn semester of 2020, students, staff, and faculty were still figuring out effective teaching, learning, and engagement strategies for a virtual environment. Participants’ experiences were not ideal because these programs were operating in a trial-and-error phase. Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest effective mentoring of students who are struggling academically requires faculty and staff to understand students’ unique needs and adjust their presentation of the curriculum accordingly. In doing this, the university assumes a level of responsibility for meeting students where they are to advance their success (McNair et al., 2016).

It is also important to recognize the instances where participants looked to an external source for their lack of success instead of focusing on themselves. This could be explained as the difference between a victim mindset and a creator mindset (Downing, 2014), which is one of the focal points of the SpringForward curriculum. Successful sophomore programming incorporates opportunities for students to understand the consequences of their decision-making and the wisdom gained from mistakes (Schaller, 2018). The five participants who did not complete a Signature Project may have benefitted from some explicit reflection activities at that time to help process where things went wrong and how they could make improvements in the future. Transition and retention programs like SpringForward or STEP could be bolstered

by including elements of self-regulated learning, including the ability to change one's strategies when they are not working (Murillo & Worrell, 2022).

BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As part of the broader implications, this program review illustrates several points other institutions might consider when developing second-year programming. First, the students in this study valued the opportunity to build faculty relationships. Transition and retention programs can support student success by facilitating the development of these relationships (Collins-Warfield, 2022; Tygret et al., 2022). Furthermore, students indicated that a “one-size-fits-all” approach did not meet their needs; indeed, standardized programming may not support culturally diverse student populations (Phillips & Snodgrass, 2021). Transition and retention programmers are often in the difficult position of recognizing that students have different developmental needs while understanding that creating highly individualized programming is not feasible due to time, money, and staffing constraints. At an institution as large as Ohio State, it would be nearly impossible to create a highly individualized program. However, students can gain some sense of this *tailored* experience through their interactions with faculty and mentors who make an effort to understand their identities, backgrounds, and experiences (Phillips & Snodgrass, 2021; Tygret et al., 2022). This study suggests this is particularly important for students who are struggling academically. Additionally, the participants in this study discussed the difficulties of engaging in a virtual setting. The pandemic-induced shift to online learning left many higher education professionals and faculty scrambling to redesign their pedagogy. Many institutions are now considering a permanent switch to virtual activities and programs. The results of this study reinforced how essential it is to create meaningful and interactive virtual experiences (Roybal et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The SpringForward-STEP partnership met some of the most important needs of the sophomore year experience: building a support network, developing relationships with peers and others, engagement with college, and support and attention from college staff, to name a few (Perez, 2020; Schaller, 2005, 2018; Sterling, 2018; Young, 2019). While SpringForward itself is arguably a high-impact practice, students' connection with this program meant they could be channeled into another of the university's premier HIPs...STEP. As research indicates, HIPs are particularly beneficial for students with marginalized identities and for students who are struggling (Kinzie, 2012). In fact, HIPs can have a cumulative effect (Finley & McNair, 2013). The results of this study indicate that these programs are helping students meet the outcomes that are most likely to support their sophomore-year success but may benefit from a more intentional focus on intersecting student identities, which aligns with recent research

(Phillips & Snodgrass, 2021)). As more universities look to implement sophomore success programming and/or HIPs for struggling students, it will be important to keep in mind that intention and personalization are key.

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