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# STEP Into Success: An Exploration of the Impact and Potential of the Second Year Torero Experiential Program

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STEP Into Success:

An Exploration of the Impact and Potential of the Second Year Torero Experiential Program

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of my study was to gather qualitative data with students and professional staff associated with the Second Year Torero Experiential Program at the University of San Diego. I wanted to identify best practices regarding supporting and developing second years and gain an understanding of the potential and impact of the program on the student experience. Recognizing a need for more intentional engagement with second-years, I conducted one on one interviews using appreciative inquiry. My findings indicated a lack of awareness around STEP, the resources available through the program, and a desire to engage with a program that connects students to opportunities beyond social programming.

Keywords: second-year experience, student engagement, student programming, student involvement, residential education programming

## **Introduction**

### **Values Statement**

Two of my core values are inclusivity and equity. Inclusivity and equity differ in that you can have an inclusive space without it being equitable to all persons and groups within that space. Equity can exist only after an acknowledgement that advantages and barriers exist and not everyone starts from the same place. We may try to provide resources to all students equally but not every student will feel comfortable seeking out those resources or connections. My desire to create equitable and inclusive community spaces for students was the driving force behind my desire to take on this action research project. My values continue to drive me to create spaces where people feel as though they belong and that they can thrive. I believe in meeting students where they are and adapting my approaches as a student affairs practitioner to make sure they are able to grow professionally and personally while achieving the goals, whatever those may be. Working with the Second Year Torero Experiential Program (STEP) through my graduate assistantship role as the STEP Coordinator, my values have intersected with my role many times while working with different students. This has led me to wonder what more could I do to help grow STEP into a program that further develops and supports second years at USD.

### **Definition of Terms**

In an effort to ensure that there is clarity when I use department and institution specific acronyms and talk about second-year students I have provided the following definitions for the most common terms that will appear in the action research document.

*USD* – University of San Diego

*STEP* – Second Year Torero Experiential Program, established in Fall 2014 the programmatic and residential arm of the second-year experience.

*Vistas* – Alcalá Vista Apartments, one of the two residence halls that exclusively houses second years

*San Buen-* San Buenaventura Apartments, second residence hall that exclusively houses second years

*Manchester* – Mixed hall of majority upper division students, houses around 100 second years

*UTAs* – University Terrace Apartments, Mixed hall of majority upper division students, houses around 30 second-years

*STEP/Up* – Residential Education’s acronym for STEP and upper division housing, commonly grouped together

*First-years* – refers to someone in their first year of college

*Second-years* – refers to someone in their second year of college and a current residential student at USD participating in STEP

*Upper division* – refers to juniors or seniors at USD

### **Positionality**

I began my graduate assistantship role working in the department of Residential Life at the University of San Diego in the Fall of 2017. When I first started my position it was called the STEP Graduate Assistant, it remained this title until September of 2018 when it was transitioned to be the STEP Coordinator. I am the first person to hold my position and because of that I have had the independence to lay a good foundation for my position to continue to grow. As STEP Coordinator, I work directly with STEP and by extension, all the second-year students at USD. The main functions of my role are to coordinate our two weekly programs, Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering as well as advise the newly created STEP Council, which is a comprehensive council made up of members from our different second year housing areas.

As the STEP Coordinator I am tasked with developing a sense of identity among the second-year students and maintaining current programs while creating and piloting new ones. I work out of the Alcala Vista Apartments and I currently report to the Acting Director of Residential Education, Sabrina Nelson. Throughout the study I had easy access to the second-year students that live in the Alcala Vistas as well as those that live in other residence halls. I also had direct access to different professional staff members who provided me with different perspectives on the roots, direction, and future of the program. The findings that are presented in this action research provide vital data that is necessary to further grow STEP by providing both Residential Education and USD with student driven next steps. My passion for cultivating equitable spaces fit in well with this research.

When I began this study, I thought that working with the program that I oversee would be an easy experience. I was only concerned with the impact that doing research could have as I further developed my role. Throughout this study I found that I had to navigate my closeness to the program and how I personally felt the program could be improved. I was cautious and took great strides to ensure that the questions that I asked were open-ended. I did not want my own bias about STEP to interfere with the integrity of my study. I openly acknowledge that I am the only one in my department whose sole task is to work with STEP and second year students at USD. This positionality is present throughout my study and while I was sure to respect the integrity of my study, I also embraced my positionality and the investment that I had in my research.

### **Need for the Study**

When developing this research, I first looked at how the first-year experience was structured. First year students live in what is called a Living Learning Community (LLC). These



LLCs group first year students together by interest. These groupings include communities centered around themes like social justice, sustainability, and civic engagement. First year students are also required to take a course that corresponds with their LLC theme and develop a project that is centered around their community that is presented at the end of their first year. I began to feel that the LLC program and the first-year experience in general was much more established and intentional than STEP.

STEP is meant to continue to build on the development that first year students received in the Living Learning Community (LLC) program as they start their second year. Through my role as the STEP Coordinator I began to notice that there did not seem to be a clear intention behind our programming. I felt that while we were providing opportunities to connect with campus partners and participate in community building events, we were not taking into account that every student has had different experiences and may not want to participate in the type of programs that we host.

Our two major weekly or biweekly programs we do are Torero Tuesday and Friday Gatherings Torero Tuesday takes place in the different STEP areas and Friday Gathering only takes place in the Alcala Vista Apartments (Vistas). Both of these events center around bringing the community together with food or snacks and connecting them to different offices and resources on campus when we invite a campus partner. Through my role helping to coordinate and run these two programs I noticed that there seemed to be a disconnect with second year students and their involvement in the programming that STEP had to offer. I observed that while these programs brought people together, they were centered around picking up your food and leaving. There was no clear evidence of any learning or development occurring. It was clear the STEP had a strong presence in the Vistas but in the other STEP areas there was little to no

engagement with the program. It was assumed by second years in the different areas that STEP was only in the Vistas, although this was untrue. I was initially concerned that second year students in other STEP areas were being unintentionally looked over and that STEP was not fully supporting their needs developmentally and communally. As my study progressed, I realized that there was also a disconnect between the Vistas residents and their understanding of what STEP even was. I informally observed that not many students in any of our STEP areas knew what the program was and that what little knowledge they had was associated with the food that we provided at our STEP events.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In an effort to address this concern I turned to the students to hear their opinion. This was done through a program I initiated called “Conversations with Carlos.” This program was held in both Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 and would eventually become the catalyst for my research question. I asked the residents that were present questions about community, their experience so far in the program, and if they had any ideas. A majority of the students expressed that they felt disconnected with other residents on their floor and the other second-year residential communities. This led me to wonder about how impactful STEP is in terms of cultivating that sense of community and a positive student experience at USD. This program helped me to gauge students’ needs and also reinforced the responsibility I have as a student affairs professional to do all that I could to help these students grow and feel connected. I looked inward and began reflecting on the impact I could have on the program and the second-year class, and how the program could look in the future. When I started this research, I wanted to discover what STEP could be and unlock the potential for the program to grow while laying the framework for my role as STEP Coordinator to grow with it.

## **Research Questions**

Through this research I wanted to know how I can further grow my role as the STEP Coordinator so that I may leave a positive impact on the program and students. I also looked at the impact STEP had on current and past second-year students as well as what first-year students needed from a second-year program at USD. I know that the mission of STEP is in the right place and that this research will identify the strengths and areas for growth so the program can move in a direction that results in a more impactful experience for second years. Throughout this research I continually asked myself the question; How can I, as the STEP Coordinator, improve my practice of creating equitable and inclusive spaces for student learning and growth? Within this inquiry there were two secondary questions; first, in what ways has STEP impacted second year students' experience of USD? and second, what can be done to better improve the program? By researching and exploring these questions I was able to identify areas of growth for myself personally and professionally, my position and STEP.

## **Literature Review**

### **Defining Sophomores**

For the purpose of my research I wanted a functioning definition for who exactly is a sophomore and how they fit into STEP. Gahagen (2006) wrote in *The Second-Year Experience: Turning Attention to the Academy's Middle Children* that there seemed to be a lack of agreement on the definition of a sophomore. They pointed out that a sophomore could be any student with the required number of credits. The thought was echoed in Kranzow (2015), who wrote that because the needs of sophomore students are so unique having a functioning definition of a sophomore is necessary in order to provide them with the resources and support, they need.

This discrepancy in the research means that a first-year student could technically be a sophomore if they took college courses in high school that counted towards their degree. Many of the studies that have been conducted around the second-year experience and needs of sophomore students are institutionally based (Gahagen 2006; Kranzow 2015; Tobolowsky, 2008). Meaning that there is a possibility that, depending on where you are conducting research, there is a different definition of a sophomore. While this seems like a minor technical problem the literature led me to consider that the best way to avoid this confusion is to clearly define a sophomore. In my research a sophomore at USD is considered any undergraduate student that is in their second year of college and lives in one of the STEP areas. I will use the term “second-year” instead of sophomore with the intention of avoiding any confusion.

### **Retention**

Retaining second year students is a current issue that is at the forefront of higher education (Ellis, 2010; Sterling, 2018; Tobolowsky, 2008). This desire to retain as many students as an institution can has led many universities to develop a second-year experience program. The current literature on the topic of student engagement mostly all agree that second-year students are in a unique position (Heier, 2012; Kahu, 2013; Sterling, 2018; Tobolowsky, 2008). Unlike first year students who require more hand holding than most students, second years want to feel independent but also have many milestones to cross during the academic year (Heier, 2012; Kahu, 2013). From declaring a major, gaining internship experience, and creating their identity they are faced with many questions and require more guidance and less hand holding.

### **Supporting Second-years**

Kranzow (2015) and Tobolowsky (2008) both identify some common themes like a need for mentorship, social engagement, and a sense of belonging that second-year students face.

These issues are similar to those that first-year students encounter (Morrow, 2012). However, while the literature is in a general consensus that there needs to be more engagement with second-years there is not one set way of implementing a successful program. Much of the literature does point out that there is a constant need for career and major development throughout the second-year experience (Bradely, 2013; Ellis, 2010; Heier, 2012; Schaller, 2005; Sterling, 2018; Tobolowsky, 2008). West (2017) points out that while there may be many struggles that occur when trying to implement a new second year experience program or even trying to enhance a current one, the benefits from these programs provide a noticeable improvement in student experience. This thought also connected with the research of Heier (2012), who conducted an evaluation of different second year experience programs and found similar themes of an increased sense of community and belongingness at the university.

### **Experience of second-year RAs**

I realized that, because of my positionality in Residential Education, I was aware of a population of second-years that was not being directly addressed in much of the literature that I came across. That population was second-year students that are also resident assistant (RAs) in their residence halls. RAs hold a unique position of authority within a residence hall, serving both as a peer but also as an authority figure (Brecheisen 2015). For this reason, I felt that this was an important population of students that was being grouped into the general population of second-years. I hypothesized that their experience being second-years and a RA was different than that of non-RAs. Brecheisen (2015) confirmed that research on the second-year RA experience was lacking as her study is the “first known quantitative national study” that investigates the second-year RA experience.

The author identified different conditions that influenced their experience like, role expectations, trainings, and work/life balance (Brecheisen 2015). Based off of data collected from sixty-eight institutions the author was able to make recommendations that included, increased training on the specific struggles that second-year RAs experience at the start of the year so those students can seek additional support, clear job expectations, and acceptable work & living conditions. There was also a need for increased support from professional staff that live and worked in the residence halls (Brecheisen, 2015).

### **Generation Z**

A new generation of college students has now begun their higher education journey. These group of young adults is commonly referred to as Generation Z. Because this new generation has just started to rise through universities there is limited work done on how to best engage with this new population and what are their distinct needs. In doing research I found that much of the information on how to engage with these students comes from or is based on Corey Seemiller's and Meghan Grace's work presented in *Generation Z Goes to College* and *Generation Z Leads*, an additional book that leans on the findings from the latter and focuses on different leadership opportunities for Gen Z. Learning how to engage with Gen Z is important because of the fact that they are now the majority of traditional aged students in undergrad and will remain so until 2032 (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Much like the Millennial generation before them, the different context that Gen Z has grown up in has influenced how they see the world around them and by extension what they want and expect from a campus experience. They engage much more over social media, are more attuned to diversity issues, and have a more entrepreneurial spirit than any generation before them (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

While the common assumption is that Generation Z may seem more disengaged than the generations before them but they are simply carefully choosing what they get involved with and generally want to learn transferrable skills that can help them in the workplace, they are wary of committing to things just for the sake of the “fun” (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Since this generation is now the majority and many are second years in college, it is important that more research is done on this rising generation and that we honor their needs and adapt our own practice to better reflect and meet those needs. The limited literature on this subject is in agreement that higher education practitioners must adapt to this new generation and must not assume that what worked for Millennials will work for Generation Z.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Literature**

While the literature is strong in regard to retention studies and campus support from different offices there are some limitations to what is currently available to the public. There are common themes that have emerged that center heavily on how a student may experience their second-year of college but there is a lack of research on different identity groups of second-years or Ras that are also second-years. There needs to be further research on how of a person of color may engage differently compared to a white student or if they are at a predominately white institution. To add to this there is no tangible research on how other marginalized identities like first gen, LGBTQ+, low income, etc... may engage differently within the systems of an institution. There is also limited research on second year experience programs that are housed within a residence hall setting. The research that is available on the subject of the second-year experience will no doubt continue to grow as more universities invest in retaining second-years and more programs are developed. More work needs to be done in order to discover industry best practices on how to support these unique groups of students.

Much of the literature on the topic of the second-year experience and helping those students succeed comes from a collection of works that is presented in *Helping Sophomores Succeed; Understanding and Improving the Second Year Experience*. This book collects the works from different contributors and is influenced by the works of Barbara Tabolowsky, Mary Hunter, and John Gardner as well as other contributors to research on the second-year experience. Throughout researching the second-year experience there was a lot of overlap between the same authors doing the same type of work. While this made it easier to identify common trends that second years experienced, there was limited data on second-year experience programs and their effectiveness. This discrepancy in the research was to me and furthered my desire to add to this area of research on second years.

Since there is very little research on residential second year experience programs. The lack of research on residential programs and my outside knowledge led me to believe that established residential programs are still a rising trend in the overall support portfolio that is offered to second year students. The literature showed great attention to the overall retention of second years and their cocurricular activities as well as advising but there is clearly a need for further investment in assessment of programs from residential life departments across different higher education institutions. In the first chapter of *Helping Sophomores Succeed; Understanding and Improving the Second Year Experience*, author Mary Schaller poses the question “What then is the experience of those students who return for the second year of college?” she writes further that as a result of an enhanced first year experience program there is the possibility of a feeling of abandonment in the second year (2010). This feeling of abandonment is demonstrated in the different aspects of the literature surrounding retention and how to support second-years.



### **Context of The Research**

After undergoing a department reorganization in early spring 2018, the department of residential life at USD was broken up into three clusters, Residential Administration, Residential Education, and Residential Facilities. STEP is housed under Residential Education, which is currently led by Sabrina Nelson, Acting Director of Residential Education. Among all the areas that house STEP students there are three Community Directors, two graduate students who work as Assistant Community Directors and one STEP Coordinator that works specifically with the program.

STEP was piloted in the Fall of 2014 and is currently in its third year. The purpose of STEP is to provide second year students with an opportunity to build community and develop both personally and professionally through weekly programming. Currently those programs are Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering. Torero Tuesday takes place every Tuesday night in the fall and bi-weekly in the spring semester. Friday Gathering takes place every Friday afternoon in the Alcala Vistas.

In the larger context of USD. STEP is the residential and programmatic arm of the second-year experience at USD and relies heavily on communication from different campus partners to connect second year students to resources they may need. The STEP Coordinator role works with these campus partners to bring them to our Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering programs. The engagement with the campus partners varies slightly depending on if they are offering an activity or simply tabling and sharing information.

### **The Institution**

Located in San Diego, California, the University of San Diego (USD) is a private non-profit, predominately white institution (PWI) that is affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.

Current numbers show that 8,905 students attend USD with 5,711 undergraduates. Of those students there are 1,044 second year students that live on campus in one of the STEP residence halls. (University of San Diego, 2018). Those second-year students live in either the Vistas, San Buen, UTAs, or Manchester. With 667 residents, more than half of the second-year population at USD lives in the Vistas.

### **Methodology**

To facilitate this research, I chose to use the appreciative inquiry model. While there were other approaches to action research that could be used, I found that appreciative inquiry was the most effective in helping me to not only evaluate and reflect on my positionality and impact within STEP but also on what the possibilities could be for the growth of the program. Appreciative inquiry is a response to the postmodern argument that social research is inherently biased based off the positioning of the researcher (Bushe, 2013). Cooperrider believes that this should not be a reason to give up the pursuit of new knowledge and ideas, but it instead frees the researcher and participants and allows them to create a wide array of creative and positive possibilities. I experienced this as I conducted my research and navigated through my positionality of my role and STEP. AI takes the “best of what is in order to imagine what could be” (Bushe 2013).

In their first article that was published in 1987 David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva argued three main points that supported their appreciative inquiry model. The first was a critique of the commonly used problem-solving approach, this approach typically dominates action research. They argued that using a problem-solving approach as a tool for social innovation was not always effective and could in fact be counterproductive. A problem-solving approach ran the risk of growing the very problem that the organization was is trying to solve. Second, they

believed that organizations and systems were realities constructed by society and that new ways of organizing were only limited by human imagination and social agreements. Their third and final point was that new ideas were the most important aspect of creating change (Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Both Cooperrider and Srivastva believed that the more traditional approaches to action research did not encourage new ideas or ways of doing things and purposed appreciative inquiry as a new method that actively fostered new and creative ideas that would lead to more innovation within an organization and society.

This approach appealed to me because it encourages the researchers and participants to look at the organization first as what it is and then as what it could be (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). There are many different ways of doing appreciative inquiry that have been developed since the first literature on the subject was released. The model that I have chosen to use is known as the 5-D model of AI. This model is a variation of the 4-D model, or AI Method, and adds in a first step that I found was lacking in the 4-D model (Bushe, 2011). This first step is referred to as “define” or an “affirmative topic”. This step is meant to identify a focus that is important to both the researcher and the different stakeholders in the organization. However, there are still some discrepancies among different AI practitioners concerning the definition of this step although it is considered to be vital to the success of the research (Bushe 2011; Barrett & Fry, 2005). Figure 1.0 shows the four different steps of the 5-D model.

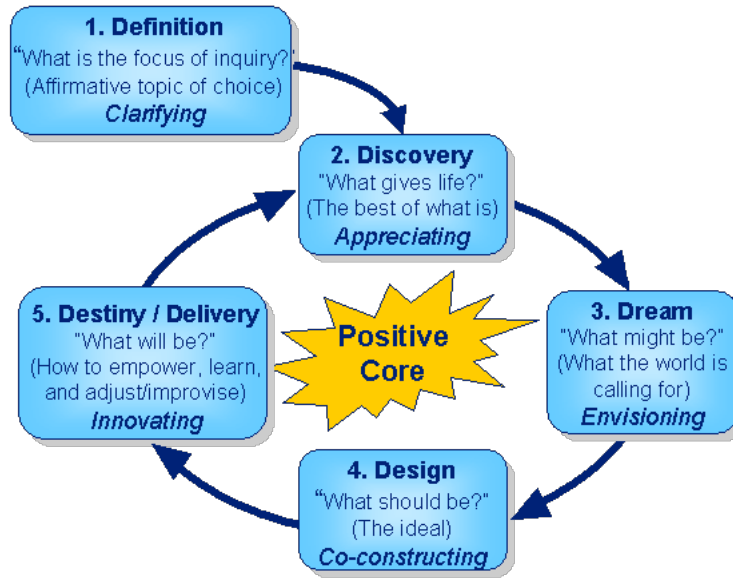


Figure 1.0 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry. Adapted from “5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.” AI Commons, The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at Champlain College,

### Data Collection

The data that I collected was qualitative in nature. I went into this research wanting to hear people’s experiences and while that limited the overall scope of my research, I also believe that it enhanced it. To collect my data, I designed questions to ask each participant. The questions varied depending on who I was interviewing. For example, I did not ask professional staff the same questions that I asked undergraduates. The questions also differed between first years, second year and upper division participants. While the questions differed, the goal was the same. I designed the questions in a way that would walk participants through the four Ds of appreciative inquiry; discovery, dream, design, and destiny. Some questions asked the participants to think of the present and challenged them to imagine the future of STEP and what it had the potential to look like. All the interviews were thirty minutes in length and took place somewhere private in offices around the University of San Diego (Appendices C,D, & E).

### Research Participants and Recruitment

Originally, I had planned to utilize different campus partners as participants however as I reflected on this, I decided to recruit only professional staff that is currently working with STEP. My reasoning for this was that I wanted the professional staff to have some sort of working knowledge of the history of the program and the current state the program is in. After reflecting I did not feel that our campus partners would have that knowledge. I also felt that I had to honor the original purpose of my study so only recruiting Residential Education professional staff made the most sense to me.

For my second and third cycles I recruited students from first years up to seniors. While I did not exclude students that I had a working relationship with from participating in my research I was glad that a majority of the students who participated in the study did not have a relationship with me. I feel that this helped keep the data from my cycles authentic and removed some of the bias that I would have in how I would interpret the data that I collected. I imagined that this bias would be on my part and my participants because of my position as STEP Coordinator and my close relationship with some of my students.

To recruit participants for this study I first sent out different emails to each of the classification of participants that I wanted to recruit (Appendix B) When recruiting students, I created a flyer (Appendix F) and included it in the STEP newsletter, which is sent out weekly to all second-year students via email. My goal was for the student voice to play a vital role in this entire research process and I relied and trusted their experiences and thoughts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to ensure that I respected the honesty and confidentiality of my participants I had each of them sign a consent form (Appendix A) before beginning any recorded interview or the research process Each participant signed the consent form and gave permission to begin

recording. I went through each section of the form and answered any questions before proceeding with the interview. To further protect the participants privacy, I have assigned each a non-gendered pseudonym by randomly drawing a name before coding the findings.

### **Overview of the Cycles**

To reach the different stakeholders that I identified as playing a role in my research and using the 5-D model of appreciative inquiry I designed three cycles. These cycles were interwoven with each other and fit well within the model of appreciative inquiry. Keeping in mind that appreciative inquiry relies heavily on the person's experience and less on charts, figures, and numbers I took a qualitative approach with my cycles. This allowed me to hear the experience of others and also reflect on my experience and impact working with STEP and second year students. The definition, or optional stage, of the 5-D model ask that a topic of inquiry be identified. For all cycles the topic of inquiry was some form of the question; What does community mean to you? This was the question that is at the core of my research with STEP. While this first question did not directly address my role with STEP there were trends that showed me how my role could fit into their definitions of community. By asking this question first I was able to see the different values that were present in each participant and how those values related or did not relate to STEP. I was also able to find similarities and differences between my own understanding of community and other definitions that my participants held. There was also a difference in the professional staff lens compared with that of the student lens. This question was adapted in some form depending on what cycle I was in. The main point of the question remained the same and centered on their experience of community within USD.

After I asked for their initial definition, I found that there were traces of that definition in each of the following questions that I asked. For each cycle I asked questions that were crafted

according to the model set forth in appreciative inquiry. The questions were formed in a way that helped participants move through the remaining 4-Ds; discovery, dream, design, destiny. I observed that this format was good at facilitating dialogue around their experience of STEP and my role within it. However, there were times that the responses went on a tangent, which is the nature of appreciative inquiry, since in AI there is an acknowledgment of each participant's distinct positionality.

### **Pre-cycle**

Before I began my cycles there were two events that I considered to be an informal pre-cycle that gave me further information on what may work for my cycles and influenced the overall direction of my research. These two events that I considered to be my pre cycle work happened in Fall 2017, Spring 2018, and Fall 2018. The events were a "Conversations with Carlos" program that occurred in Fall 2017 and Spring 2018. The last event that was my pre-cycle work was a meeting with STEP campus partners in Fall 2018. While these events were not formal parts of my data collection, they provided important information and their influence was felt throughout my three cycles.

### **Conversations with Carlos Program**

As the name suggests, this program was a conversation style event that was held in the Vistas apartments in Fall of 2017 and Spring of 2019. The overall purpose of this event was to hear students' feedback of their experience of the community and to have a conversation about how they can impact the community around them to enhance it. The first iteration of this program was more formal with predetermined questions. Participants were mostly Vistas hall council representatives. This first run of the program was successful, but it did not welcome those residents who were not involved in the community. For the second "Conversations with

Carlos” I changed the format to make it more welcoming and set up a table with pizza and a giant post it note. On the post it I asked the question, “Draw what community means to you?” I had many random students approach me and engage in good conversation over what it meant to be living in community and how we could build a stronger one. This program gave me an opportunity to see the strengths of STEP in the Vistas as well as the areas of growth.

### **STEP Campus Partner Meeting**

In Fall 2018, Sabrina Nelson, Assistant Director of Residential Education, and myself held a meeting with a majority of STEP’s campus partners. In this meeting we discussed their experience of participating in STEP’s two main programs; Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering. We wanted to hear how they felt things were going, provide a better overview of these two programs, and lay out expectations on how we envision them engaging with our residents. This meeting helped to further build a relationship with our campus partners and did help to improve how they engaged when they were present at our events. From this event I saw the need to provide a clear definition of the purpose of STEP and what we want to get out of it. The conversation that we had that day still influences the way that we work together within STEP and opened the door for further collaboration in the future.

### **Cycle One; Individual Interviews with Current STEP/UP Professional Staff**

I began the formal data collection for my action research with interviewing current residential education professional staff that work directly with STEP (Appendix E). A majority of the professional staff agreed to participate except for one individual who did not feel that they had enough experience with the program. I wanted to hear about each of their personal experience working with STEP, their definition of community, their perspective of the direction of the program, their visions of the future of STEP and my role, and how we could reach their



vision. The one on one interviews provided a great opportunity and space for the participants to honestly share their understanding of community as well as the struggles and areas of growth for the program.

When designing this cycle, I considered recruiting those individuals within Residential Education that had formerly worked with the program but moved on to different roles and areas. I decided against this because based off the fact that in order for appreciative inquiry to be effective all participating parties need to have an investment in the future of the topic. While I am sure that they are invested in the success of the program they did not directly work with the program or second year students and so I decided not to reach out to them. This was a difficult decision to make but overall, I found this this approach was much more effective for my data collection and allowed me to engage with current professionals who would be as invested in doing the work around STEP as I was.

Originally, I had also planned to recruit and interview STEP's campus partners as a part of my first cycle. This was planned before the STEP campus partner meeting. After that meeting when I began my research I reflected and decided that interviewing our campus partners was no longer necessary for the direction that my research was going. I gained insight into the campus partner experience with STEP based off the conversation that took place at the meeting and I did not feel that I would gain anything else by doing a cycle with them. I realized that I wanted to focus on the resident and Residential Education staff experience with STEP. While this action silenced a group of stakeholders from formally participating in my research, I felt comfortable with the preliminary work that was done in our campus partner meeting and wanted to focus my attention on the professional staff of Residential Education who would be able to implement any changes to the program.

Similar to all my cycles I reached out via email to my colleagues and explained what the purpose and reasoning for my research was. I was glad that I got a majority of them to agree to participate. Five out of six STEP/UP professional staff agreed to be participants. I met with them in their respective offices. At first it was strange to be interviewing them, but I worked through that and stuck to my interview questions (Appendix E). I felt an openness from each participant to be honest and transparent in their responses.

### **Cycle One Data**

There was a consensus from multiple participants that in its current form STEP is quite scattered could be summed up with a quote from Participant B, “Make it a reality beyond the Vistas”. This overarching theme showed up in different ways throughout the first cycle. Participant E commented that San Buen struggles to create their own second year culture because it is overpowered by the surrounding first year areas. Another participant commented how STEP is not present in their hall despite there being a second-year presence there. The quote and these different points stuck with me because it confirmed to me that while there has been an investment in creating a program in the Vistas, it is not equitable to the other STEP areas and that the professional staff sees that inequity. This factor would come up again in my second cycle just in a different way.

There was a common understanding among participants in this first cycle on what community is. It can be assumed that this comes from a common language that is used among higher education professionals. Interconnectedness, relationships, and cooperative living came up in multiple participants answers. Another common theme that emerged was sense of belonging and where you feel at home being your most authentic self.

Upon completion of this first cycle I gained a better understanding of the relation that most STEP/UP professional staff had with the program and it provided me with a better focus going into my second and third cycles.

### **Cycle Two; Individual Interviews with Current Second-years and Upper Division Students**

My second cycle was my first one interviewing students. I worked with current second years and upper division residents. I followed a similar format to my first cycle, asking questions that were designed to guide students through the different stages of appreciative inquiry (Appendix C). In this cycle I had fifteen students that expressed interest in participating via a google form. When I reached out to the individual students to schedule a time to meet to conduct the actual interview, I had a total of four that carried through with their participation in the study.

The lack of participation from current second-years and upper division presented a challenge. While there was initial interest in participating many did not follow through after I reached out to them. I believe that this could have been due to a lack of general knowledge around STEP, however, there is no sure way to know if this is the case. My original plan for both my second and third cycle was to do a focus group with a mind mapping activity. I decided to move away from this model because I did not want one single voice to dominate the conversation and I did not want one response to influence others in the space. I wanted the responses to remain authentic to their own experiences. While a focus group would have been useful to bounce ideas off of each other, I had to return to why I started this research, which was to learn how my role interacts and to hear their individual experiences with STEP. Because of this I chose to forego my original idea and move towards an interview model similar to what I did with my first cycle. I felt that this model was most reflective of my own values as well surrounding inclusivity and equity. Since some individuals may not feel comfortable in a group

setting, no matter how small that group is. While there are some missing pieces to my data, I believe that would have been the case no matter what format I chose to do.

While my sampling for this cycle was small, I had a good range of participants. I had one Vistas RA participate as well as a Vistas resident. Additionally, I had two residents from San Buen. While there were potential participants who showed interest from Manchester and the UTAs I ended up having no one from those areas follow through to the interview. I believe that there is also valuable data present in the lack of participants from these two areas as Manchester and the UTAs do not have an established presence from STEP, which was expressed in my first cycle by two participants.

### **Cycle Two Data**

For this cycle I asked participants five questions beginning with what community means to them. Each participant had varying degrees of responses but similar to my first cycle there were some commonalities. Safety and security were mentioned by three of the four participants and all participants mentioned how community is a friendly environment that they can be themselves in. From this initial definition of community, I then asked them when they have experience that within STEP. The only participant who was able to answer this was the one RA. The other three participants gave an answer that varied. A common theme to this follow up question was that they feel a sense of community in the hall but there wasn't that clear connection to STEP being a staple in the community. This differed from the first cycle and from the professional staff's and my own understanding of the impact of STEP and my role within it. This led me to observe that for these three participants that they found their sense of community in their involvements outside of the residence hall. Outdoor adventures and athletics were named

by Participant F and G respectively. This was not surprising to me and helped to confirm one of my theories that STEP is not where many students find community.

While there was not an understanding of the impact of STEP and a general lack of awareness of the program as a whole, summed up by a quote from Participant G; “I don’t really know the purpose of STEP”, there was an enthusiasm expressed by all four participants to make the program more reflective of their needs and the needs of the community. This was evidenced in the responses to the last three questions I asked, which fell into the dream, design, and destiny parts of appreciative inquiry. In varying forms, I asked when they have felt energized, what would interactions with STEP look like if they left you feeling energized and supported, and what are steps that we can take to make that vision a reality.

From this line of questions, I saw that the participants felt that Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering were effective in getting people out of their room but fell short of connecting students to new individuals. Participant G expressed concern over timing of Torero Tuesday but shared that they liked the option to go, even though they rarely do. Three of the four participants shared there was also a desire to do things with their friends with one participant commenting that “if people I feel comfortable with don’t go I won’t”. I found that participants F, G, and I all expressed a desire to get to know other people in different STEP areas through a field day or competition style program that brought the different residence halls together to compete.

Besides the RA participant, the other three participants showed a basic knowledge of STEP but a lack of understanding around the purpose of it. They demonstrated that they enjoyed the social aspects of Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering but that the programming was focused on socializing with friends they already had and did not give them the opportunity to make new connections or engage in developmental conversations. There was an expressed desire

by the participants to see more interactions between the different residence halls and to build up traditions that centered around their class identity. There was also an interest in incorporating the different LLC themes into the residence halls but not to carry over the same first year experience program. This would appear again in my third cycle with first year students.

Participant H left me with a quote that stuck with me throughout this cycle and that is reflective of the overall feeling from current second years; “You can reach out to them all you want but it is up to them if they want to get involved.” I believe that second years do want to get involved and this cycle showed that there is consensus on what they want to be doing, but that the programming and developmental opportunities that we are offering do not fit into their needs. It is okay that they find community elsewhere but when they are in the residence halls it is our job to provide them with developmental opportunities and connections to those around them beyond their typical circles.

There is an interest to learn more about the program and to engage with it when it fits into their interests. As a program STEP cannot please everyone and will not serve everyone’s needs but if we offer a wide variety of opportunities for them to connect and develop beyond what we currently offer it will open other students up to get involved in a way that feels most authentic to them.

### **Cycle Three; Individual Interviews with Current First-years**

My third and final cycle I decided to interview current first-year students. This was a change from my original plan. Originally, I planned to do a follow up interview with the second-year participants from my second cycle. My intention with this was to see if they had an opportunity to attend of our intersession programs and to see if there was any change to their experience. Unfortunately, the intersession programs that were planned ended up not being

carried through so this presented me with a challenge. I also began to reflect on the idea that as current first years they would be the beneficiaries of any changes that are made to STEP.

I realized that there was value in inviting their voices to be a part of the process. Especially since one of the intents of my research was to give students a voice in a program that is for them. Because of this, I made the decision to redesign my third cycle to incorporate first years. I recruited them in a similar way as I did for my other two cycles. I had a total of eight interested participants and from there I ended up with five participants who followed through to the interview. There was an additional participant that wanted to participate in an interview but due to time constraints on both our schedules they were unable to participate in time for this study to be completed.

I designed the questions for this cycle following the same format set forth by appreciative inquiry. I asked a total of four questions focusing on discovery, dream, design, and destiny. With those four questions there were two to three follow up questions that I asked as appropriate. I ended up asking three out of the five participants most of the follow up questions based off their original responses. The fourth participant, participant M and N, did not require much follow up. Crafting the questions and formatting them in this way helped me to remain focused in my data collection. I had follow up questions during the first two cycles but it did not follow the same format, so it made pulling data a bit difficult when I went to code all the information that was presented to me.

The four participants that I had represented almost all of our first-year housing areas. The only area that was not represented was Camino/Founders. I had participants from Missions A/SAP, Missions B, and Maher. I was glad to discover this since each area has a unique

personality and different resident needs. I was satisfied that my third cycle was representative of almost every first-year hall.

### **Cycle Three Data**

The first question that I asked focused on when they have felt a part of a community, I asked participants to identify this and then prompted them to reflect on what made them get involved on campus and how they can contribute to that. Through asking them this question it provided me data on their involvements as well as their own definition of community. Similar to my second cycle all participants noted that they have found their community in different spaces around campus, ranging but not limited to the United Front Multicultural Commons, Associated Students, Mulvaney Center, Hall Council, and their residence hall. Students in this cycle noted their residence hall more than in my second cycle. This can be attributed to the strong presence of the LLC program. Participants J, K, and N all mentioned the presence of the LLC and how that has been a positive experience in terms of creating relationships. However, all three also mentioned that the social aspect of the LLC and the themes they incorporate were their favorite not the academic component. This leads me to believe that it may be beneficial to integrate some themes from the LLCs into STEP's programmatic offerings.

In my second question I was curious to find out what their goals were and how being a second-year would influence achieving those goals. I had them imagine they were at the end of their second year and were reflecting back on the experiences that they had. Their goals focused on establishing connections with their current friends, discovering more things about themselves, and having a greater focus on what they are involved with. Participant M responded to that question by saying "Being a second year is less about dipping my toes in things and more about really getting grounded in what being on USD's campus means." This ties into the data



surrounding second years and generation Z wanting to be intentional about what they are getting involved in.

In my last question, the destiny phase, I asked what changes Residential Education could make to STEP in order to help them achieve their goals and visions of where they want to be at the end of their second-year. Participants J and N all expressed that they had little to no knowledge of what STEP is. Participant J stated that “I don’t know much about STEP or the second-year experience” and Participant N stated that “I just know that STEP is a program for second year students and that it is in the Vistas”. This is problematic for two reasons; the first is that these are students who are about to be second years with little to no knowledge of STEP, and second the quote from Participant N stated that it is a program that is in the Vistas. They were not aware that the program is in each second-year residence hall. This reaffirms the belief that STEP is Vistas specific. Participant N also pointed out that there is no consistent info of the STEP website through the USD Residential Life and housing page. They also noted that there was more information on the LLC program when compared to STEP. Participant N remarked that “If they are so focused on the LLC, they should pay the same attention to STEP”. I was surprised that N noticed this and voiced it. It shows that students are trying to learn about STEP but because the information is not easily accessible it created an impression on this participant that the LLC program is seen as more valuable. This can be an issue if this interpretation is shared by other members of the first-year class and deserves to be addressed. This lack of awareness of what STEP is as a program and what the goals and purpose are has been a common trend among the second and third cycle.

Programming also came up as a possibility to enhance STEP. Participant K, L and M expressed that they would like to see a diverse offering of programs perhaps connected to their

academics. Participant M also pointed out that it is necessary to be careful not to over program and that there is a balance between authenticity and forced interactions. Similar to the second cycle Participant J, K, and L mentioned doing some form of competition as a fun way to program and to build up community and awareness of STEP between all second-year areas. This was a common topic of conversation among current second ears and first years and leads me to believe that a program that incorporated some form of this would be a success if it incorporates student voice and interest as mentioned by Participant K.

Mentoring and checking in also came into play and was mentioned in some form by Participant K, M, and N. There was an emphasis on these three individuals on the authenticity of relationships, dialogue around a topic with others, informal check-ins by RAs and professional staff, and education on learning how to live in community with each other. This also speaks to what participants in all my cycles spoke about creating a diverse array of programmatic offerings to appeal to the different needs and interest of students.

### **Findings**

There were many smaller trends that I uncovered throughout my research but through analyzing the data in my cycles I identified four overarching themes that incorporated those individual themes and appeared in some form in each of my three cycles. Those themes were; community connections, developing STEP, social programming, and developmental programming. The following paragraphs will outline those themes, how they were present in the interview, and how they relate to my action research. I will also explore how each of the them impacts my role as STEP Coordinator and how I can use my positionality to analyze each theme.

### **Common Themes**

**Community Connections.** I identified this theme based off my first questions I asked as well as in some responses from participants in later questions and follow ups. All participants identified in some form their understanding of community and how to experience that at USD and, for some, within STEP or the residence hall. Their connection to the community that they hold space in whether that is as a professional staff, hall council member, athlete, or club involvement impacts each of their experiences and understanding of the place at USD.

Among the professional staff there was an understanding of the responsibility that we have as residential education staff to create these community spaces. Participant A remarked that “We are students’ home, where students live. We get a very close look at all of our sophomores. Conduct, life changes, failures etc.” Residential Education staff have a unique perspective as well living where we work and being visible to the residence hall community. Using this positionality as STEP Coordinator and keeping in mind the uniqueness of our roles will help in identifying further community needs regarding STEP and the wider experience of second years on campus.

This theme was echoed as well in my second and third cycles. It showed up in multiple participants responding that being connected to your community means people know you, smile, and are generally welcoming. Within this was a subtheme; the desire for safety. This was brought up by participants in both my second and third cycles. Participant H remarked that by seeing professional staff, STEP Council, and RAs out at STEP events helped them to feel that the community was there for them and that Torero Tuesday and STEP Council events were there for them.

With this theme there were some areas of growth for Residential Education, my role, and STEP. Other participants remarked that there was not much of a community feel within the

residence halls and among the other STEP areas. There was a lack of class identity and purpose among second year participants. While participants feel at home in the residence hall, they are a part of there is a strong desire to do more to develop STEP and engage with other second year communities. This leads into the next overarching theme of Developing STEP further.

**Developing STEP.** I had an assumption that this theme would come up as it was the inspiration for my research and for looking at how my role plays a part in the development and marketing of STEP and what is offered through the program. My role has a responsibility to listen to students and to take into account their needs and advocate to connect them with resources and provide them with knowledge so that they can learn and grow. This was brought up by Participant L, a first-year student, who stated that there “should be opportunity for students to have a voice in what happens in the program.” This theme connects directly to what I can do within my role by providing space for student input and discussion.

Along with this theme comes the need to further develop and define the program. This showed up to varying degrees throughout the cycles and was the most common trend that I identified. There was the comparison to the LLC program, the lack of awareness of STEP, and the inconsistent info on the website. This presented a need to be intentional in how we are defining STEP and the current programming offerings. More work needs to be done in order to make STEP as much of a staple in a student’s experience. My role can also work with this as I can work with students, my supervisor, and different stakeholders to update the website with accurate information and work with STEP Council to become involved in a more leadership capacity than a programmatic organization.

STEP Council is similar to hall council except that it combines all second-year housing areas into one events council. As mentioned, in my role I am the advisor for this council. They

will play a role in the further development of STEP and will also be present in the next two themes. STEP/Hall council was mentioned by participants in both my second and third cycle as being an avenue for community building, and I believe that it will play a role in the future development of STEP.

### **Programming**

The idea of programming came up in different forms throughout the cycles. I was not surprised by this and expected it to be a key piece of my action research and later recommendations. From the overall theme of programming two sub themes emerged, social programs and developmental programs.

**Social Programs.** Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering are the two hallmarks of the social programming that STEP currently offer students. It is also our only two consistent programs that we offer along with monthly STEP Council programs. The idea of social programming through these two events came up. There seemed to be the theme that if a participant in cycle two or three did not know anything about STEP they at least had a basic understanding that there was a Torero Tuesday. There was not a desire present to necessarily increase our social programming but instead couple it with different developmental opportunities. By doing this the participants believed that more individuals would feel engaged with the program. Participants in cycle two especially felt that they wanted more opportunities to meet people and to continue to build the already established relationships they they made in their first year.

**Developmental Programs.** Another aspect of this programming theme came up in the form of developmental programming. Participants in my third cycle mentioned mentorship, check-ins, dialogue, and informal interactions as key things that they were looking for that would help them achieve their goals that they set out to make in their second year. Balanced with different social

programs these developmental programs could help these students connect better to their residence hall community. This brings with it the influence from the LLC themes and the impact that those themes have had bringing the first-year participants together. As mentioned in my analysis of my third cycle participants felt that those themes helped them to connect with others that had similar values as them. It fostered dialogue and helped to learn and grow.

For the Professional Education staff, the idea of developmental programming came up in a different way. There was the acknowledgment that in its current form STEP does not offer much developmental programming. The most is the campus partner collaborations which in its current state serve as more informationals. Participant A remarked that “A sophomore in September is not the same person that they are in April” in my role I need to keep that in mind to scaffold developmental opportunities throughout the year so that it takes into account the new developmental needs of second years as they move through the year.

### **Recommendations**

From the common themes I developed a scaffolded approach to my recommendations. There are seven recommendations all together; three immediate and four long term. I attempted to take into account the possible time that each recommendation would take to implement and have sorted them accordingly under two categories; “Immediate Implementation” and “Long Term Implementation.” It is important to note that the classification does not mean that it is more or less impactful than any of the other recommendations. The classification takes into account time and the different stakeholders that would need to be present to make it happen. It is my hope that presenting them in this way will help determine which recommendations are immediate or ongoing and which are long term projects. This way when I eventually transition out of my role there is a framework to work from and adapt as the STEP Coordinator and the

program continue to develop. Each of my immediate or long term recommendations seeks to address each of the overarching themes that were present in my research; community connections, developing STEP, and programming.

### **Immediate Recommendations**

#### **Website Updates**

During my cycles the sentiment that STEP was not adequately promoted as a program was presented in different ways by a majority of participants. Based off of that as well as my own reflections and observation after the cycle was complete, I recommend that immediate work begins on updating the Housing and Residence Life section on the USD website to accurately represent STEP as a program beyond the Vistas. I am advising the following changes specifically for the “Community Living” and “Student Housing” tabs. Under the “Community Living” Section; L.I.F.T is removed from being in the same tab as STEP, STEP is given its own page similar to the Living Learning Communities tab, language on that page under STEP is changed to adequately reflect the program’s intentions, events, values, developmental offerings, and the STEP Coordinator About Me is moved from Alcalá Vistas page to this page. Under “Student Housing I am proposing to remove the tour of the Vistas from that page and change the language on where STEP is housed to include SAP, Manchester, and UTAs. Also, on that page under “Apartments available to second-year students include” I recommend removing the “Second Year Torero Experiential Program (STEP)” language from Alcalá Vistas and San Buen descriptions. On the Alcalá Vistas Apartments page under that section; remove mention of “Cookies and Convo,” and the language in the paragraph that “The Alcalá Vista Apartments is home of the Second-Year Torero Experiential Program (STEP)” replace this with a more adequate representation of STEP’s programs that happen there.

Updating the website and keeping it updated as the program grows is an important first STEP. For many students this may be their first-time hearing about the program and by misrepresenting what the program presently looks like I believe that we are misleading residents into thinking the program is still only in the Vistas which is not presently the case. It is also important when updating the website to ensure the STEP Council is present on all description of the housing options for second years. By updating the website students will have access to the information they need when trying to learn about the program. This change may lead to an increased awareness of the program and how they can get involved.

### **STEP Council Involvement**

The involvement of STEP Council is critical to the success of these recommendations. Currently the impact of STEP Council is already being felt and it was mentioned by two participants in my first cycle and one participant during my second cycle as a positive addition to the community. The members of STEP Council are currently working on a logo and a motto for the council and STEP. The motto that was developed is “One Heart, One Community.” At the time of making this recommendation a logo contest is ongoing. When the creation of this new branding from STEP Council is complete, I am proposing purchasing different items to give out to residents at events and move in like magnets, t-shirts, water bottles etc. We have seen a success with investment in the branding of the LLC program and I believe that there is a need for further branding and advertising of STEP. By giving out swag at events and students wearing or using STEP branded materials.

In the Spring of 2018 two members from STEP Council created a new program called “STEP Sunday” this program happens once a month on a Sunday and free doughnuts are passed out along with juice or coffee. This event was created as a platform for STEP Council to promote



upcoming events, receive feedback on past events, and bring more awareness to STEP Council and what they do. The first pilot of this program in the Vistas was successful and excited students who attended. I am proposing expanding this program to the other STEP areas and using it as a launchpad to get input from students, as each cohort of second years tends to have varying programmatic wants and interests. This event would also be helpful to hold in different first year areas in the Spring Semester. At the time of this research there is a discussion among STEP Council about bringing this program to the first-year areas in order to answer questions and get first years excited about transitioning into their second-year.

A collaboration with the LLC office may present an opportunity to table at the LLC showcase that takes place every year. This is a program where first years show their final class projects and brings all first years together to celebrate the end of their year. Utilizing this program as an opportunity for STEP to be present is a great opportunity for current STEP Council students to recruit first-years to join for the next year. The conversation has been started about this possibility and depending on the interpreted success of the first go I would recommend to keep trying to utilize this program to engage with first -years towards the end of their spring semester.

### **Information at Move-in and During the Year**

Currently when second-years move in at the beginning of the fall and spring there is no information provided on the programmatic and developmental offerings of the program. I recommend that for the upcoming Fall 2019 move in more a one-page quick facts sheet is provided that gives an overview of STEP, what is offered, and a way to get involved. Along with this information the STEP Coordinator's contact info should be included on there to provide students space to provide feedback on the program.

At present, information that is currently provided to students during the year about STEP includes a weekly newsletter and emails on the day of a Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering. In my first year my role created a monthly calendar that was distributed physically to all second-year areas. This year that practice was discontinued. I believe that this was a mistake on my part and that the distribution and creation of an events calendar should be brought back. Bringing this calendar back, reintegrating it into the newsletter, and distributing it to the STEP residence halls would benefit STEP and show students what programs we are offering and where they will be located. This may encourage more students to want to come to STEP sponsored events that are happening outside of their immediate residence hall.

### **Long Term Recommendations**

#### **Fireside Chat Style Program**

In my cycles there was an expressed interest from participants in having more opportunities for coming together to talk about a topic. I propose holding a Fireside chat style program once a month in either the Vistas, San Buen, Manchester, or the UTAs. The intention for this program would be to come together and ask questions about issues that they are facing as second years. The goal would be to work with campus partners who are genuinely interested in engaging with students this way to co create a fireside chat topic for the night. Possible topics could include major selection, living off campus, and study abroad. All common things that second years at USD and other institutions face. This program would be similar to the second iteration of “Conversations with Carlos” which brought residents together to talk about community in the Vistas. I also foresee this being an opportunity for campus partners to come and facilitate a conversation with second years.

Through this program, there is also the opportunity to integrate the different LLC themes by having them be topics for the night. Possible ideas include fireside chats around sustainability or different social justice issues. The integration of the LLC themes would provide a good opportunity to keep the social aspect of the program present in the second-year experience without having an academic or mandatory component. This would provide second years with autonomy in choosing if they wish to continue engaging with the LLC themes into their second year. Multiple participants in my second and third cycle expressed interest in engaging with a program like this while others expressed a desire to explore different things, like enhancing their current relationships in their second year.

Originally, thinking about a schedule for this program and my following Hall Cup recommendation and how they would fit into the already slated STEP events like Torero Tuesday and Friday Gathering presented a challenge. However, the following solution seeks to address that challenge. Presently Torero Tuesday happens once a week in the fall semester and bi weekly in the spring. I propose that Torero Tuesday is put on a bi weekly schedule year-round. Doing this provides space to include a fireside chat into one of the off weeks without adding in another programming day. I would also recommend hosting this program at 8pm instead of Torero Tuesday's 9pm. Because this would be a smaller scale program the presence of RAs would not be necessary and would be the STEP Coordinator's role to be present at this program. This honors many participants wishes to not be overprogrammed but to have a variety of programs to choose from ranging from social to developmental. There is also a cost savings benefit to doing this as Torero Tuesday, due to catering costs and the scope of the program, is the most expensive program that STEP hosts. Moving to a bi weekly schedule year-round would

save money to invest in the program elsewhere. This would potentially provide more funds for different marketing materials and STEP Council monthly programs.

### **Hall Cup**

Presently, there is no Hall Cup program. This recommendation would require redesigning the Vistas house cup program to incorporate the other Three second-year areas; SBV/SAP, Manchester, and the UTAs. Hall cup would give residents from other areas an opportunity to compete and earn points for their residence hall. It would foster healthy competition in the hall and provide a space for residents to engage in healthy habits. There are different House cup logos that presently exist for the Vistas halls or Borrego, Cuyamaca, Laguna, and Palomar. A part of this recommendation would be to keep these designs but to also design logos for the other STEP areas and use these for the Hall Cup programs.

The activities in this program would be designed with a rep from STEP Council and would be assigned to a different group of RAs with representation from each area. The area hosting the event would alternate monthly. This would help in advertising the event to each area and getting residents to come out. The activities of the event could range from door decorating contests, open mic night, or sports-based activities. I see this event taking the place of one of the Torero Tuesdays once that program is moved to a biweekly schedule. Moving to this new format and housing Hall Cup under STEP would provide opportunities for the STEP Coordinator to move beyond working with just the Vistas Ra staff and would open up the position to new collaborations that are centered around all STEP/UP areas. There would also be benefit to including upper-class residents in Manchester and the UTAs. This new format would be a challenge at first and does have the potential to not be as successful as some of my other recommendations or programs that are already in place. However, there was an expressed

interest from participants in my third and second cycle to do more programming around bringing the halls together. I believe that based off this expressed interest and if proper planning and advertising takes place that the Hall Cup program has the potential to become a great tradition that all STEP/UP residents can be a part of.

### **Integration of LLC Themes into Neighborhood Program**

Participants in my second and third cycles brought up the experience of living in a LLC community and how that was beneficial to them in finding community and engaging with people with similar interests. Presently there is a neighborhood program that is offered through Residential Life. During housing sign up participants can elect to apply to be in this program by coming together and creating a theme. Themes have included but are not limited to sustainability, outdoor adventures and social justice. Many of these potential themes already have roots in the LLC program's themes of civic engagement, social justice, sustainability, and creativity.

The framework for integrating the LLC themes into neighborhoods is already there. I am proposing that starting in Spring 2020 when signing up for a neighborhood, participants would have the option to select an LLC theme that they would want to be associated with. This would not be a requirement and the option to create their own theme would still be present during the application process. Doing this would alleviate some of the gray areas in defining what is a valid theme and what is not and would provide neighborhood participants another opportunity to choose to engage with the LLC program as a second year. There is also a benefit in being able to utilize neighborhood participants to lead a Fireside chat around their theme. In the past Residential Education has struggled to find a way to have these neighborhoods engage with the community at large and giving them the opportunity to take on facilitating a Fireside chat would

be a great educational and developmental opportunity for them and would provide the STEP Coordinator to engage with different second year students that are not Ras or STEP Council members.

### **STEP BBQ/Gathering**

The STEP BBQ was not offered in Fall 2018 after being replaced by the larger all campus BBQ. The intention was that this would be an event where the entire campus community can come together before the year ends. By removing the STEP BBQ and not replacing it with an opportunity to bring all the second-years together it took away a vital opportunity for residents to experience community among their classmates. I recommend designing a STEP Get Together to happen sometime in the fall semester and again towards the end of the spring semester. This would provide the second-year class the opportunity to come together and celebrate achievements that happen throughout both semesters. It could be an activity-based event or more of a banquet but there is value in bringing all second years together to discover who they are as a class. Work on designing this program could fall to the STEP Council with guidance from the STEP Coordinator and the Assistant Director of Residential Education.

### **Impact on USD**

I envision this action research project playing an integral role in the further development of STEP that will take place in the coming years by providing the department with data on current and former student's experience of STEP. Now it will provide USD's Residential Education with a framework for what the STEP Coordinator's role can grow into once I have moved on and what concrete steps need to be taken in order to achieve the vision laid out by the trends found in the data. I want second year students to feel as supported and valued not only in their first year but throughout their entire time at USD. Based off some of the early data,

changes have already been implemented to STEP and the STEP Coordinator role. I acknowledge that change is slow, especially in student affairs, and that there are many different stakeholders both within Residential Education and outside the department that will be involved in making any major changes to the second-year experience at USD.

### **Limitations of Research**

At the start of my research I was ambitious and wanted to connect with as many people as I could that worked within STEP. While conducting my cycles I quickly realized that while I wanted to incorporate all stakeholders, I had to be strategic about my goals and the direction that I wanted my research to go in. I was limited by three things; awareness of STEP, lack of adequate research on residential second year programs, and participants.

#### **Awareness of STEP**

When I first began my research, I had a vision of what it would look like and held assumptions of what I would discover. While some of those assumptions turned out to be proven true, as I expressed earlier, I was surprised to find that many students had no idea of what STEP was beyond our weekly programs. I assumed that they had at least a workable knowledge of the program. This presented a challenge when working with students and using appreciative inquiry. To get students to envision a program that they did not even know existed was challenging for them and made me wonder what my research could be like if students knew what STEP was. While my methodology was useful and pulled valuable data, I wonder what the data will show with future possible studies with STEP, after more awareness of the program is present.

#### **Lack of Adequate Research**

The lack of adequate research on residential second year experience programs proved to be a difficulty. I was expecting there to be a lot more information done on different program

models but there were very limited resources. Anything that was available was not applicable to the study that I was trying to conduct. If more research was present that may provide a stronger base to work from and would provide concrete data on the effectiveness of different residential programs. It would also influence how the different cycles of action research are formed and what questions are asked.

### **Participants**

While I had access to a large number of potential participants there was limited eagerness to participate from students. I am satisfied with the amount that I had and feel that I was able to pull great data from what was provided but no doubt the study would have been even stronger if there was a wider variety of participants. I also did not take into account the different identities that individuals hold and how that may impact their experience and participation at USD. There were some instances where identities did come up in my data so that would be an interesting topic for a future study. What may have limited my participants was timing and how I recruited. When planning for my cycles they seemed to fall during busy times for students either during midterms, finals, or before or after breaks. I should have paid better attention to student scheduling and planned accordingly. I recruited via email and a flyer. Upon reflection I should have recruited face to face and tabled at different events. I could have also sent out a survey and combined qualitative and quantitative data together to form a more complete picture.

### **Reflection on Limitations**

No study is ever perfect, but I remain confident in my findings and know that they provided valuable insight into personal experiences of the second-year experience at USD. It was my hope to provide a good framework for future students and to further enhance my role and I



feel that I accomplished that. More work could have been done with more time and greater access to resources.

### **Personal Reflections**

My critical friends; Timothy Duran and Meredith Méndez, my supervisor Sabrina Nelson, and action research advisor Dr. Annie Ngo helped me to develop this action research and provided me with valuable guidance throughout the experience. Conducting this action research project, I was able to grow as a new professional in my role, gain new skills, and connect with students and colleagues in ways that I would not have connected with before. When I look back on when I first started my research there were many unknowns and a lot of anxiety surrounding taking on this topic around STEP. Being new to my role and the first person to hold my position I was intimidated by using my voice to share that there were holes in our second-year experience program. This came from a general lack of knowledge on how to go about providing feedback that was driven by students and their experiences. By embarking on this action research journey, I was able to learn how to better advocate for myself and my role. I began to see my role as being an integral part of the program and the Residential Education department. Getting to this point was hard and, while I still have a way to go in my own development as a young professional, this action research project has given me the tools and a base to work from confidently.

My favorite part of this journey was being able to connect with new students and colleagues in different ways. I love to hear people's stories, experiences and aspirations. Conducting this action research gave me the opportunity to connect on each of those levels in different ways.

While I did not get as many participants as I would have like to I consider my research to be a success since I have furthered my connections with students, their connectedness to STEP

and Residential Education and have provided USD with a better understanding of the unique experience of second year students. My research was student focused and I am confident that the findings that were presented will positively impact the second-year experience and provide students with a full experience.

Because my research was driven by students and their experience in STEP it is my hope that at the end of this process the program can grow into one that is centered around a student's individual experience. I want each student to feel like their experience is valued and acknowledged in the different programming that is offered through STEP. As mentioned in my introduction my work often times aligns with my values of creating equitable spaces and I have been able to change some aspects of our current programming to better connect and invite in different students. It is my hope that this research will build on that and provide me with new ideas and strategies for better engaging with second year students.

### **Conclusion**

This action research project was close to my heart and gave professional staff and students that are associated with STEP a platform to share their thoughts, hopes, and goals for themselves and the program. While there were many things that I could not incorporate into my research due to time constraints and just my own limitations as an individual I feel confident that this research provided a good framework to build from and to enhance the program. While I hope that most of my recommendations can be implemented in some form, I am realistic in my expectation that this may not be a possibility.

I still believe that there needs to be a further investment in the second-year experience at USD and across different universities. The data that was uncovered shows that there have been great strides in getting us to a good spot in our second-year programming at USD, but more work

still needs to be done for us to ensure that we are preparing students for the challenges that they are facing. There is great opportunity to develop students within a residence hall setting and provide them with positive growth and development beyond what we are currently doing. STEP already is an impactful experience for some, but it has the potential to be an even greater experience for all our students. To get to this point it would require true collaboration and further dialogue with all stakeholders.

As more attention is devoted to enhancing the second-year experience at different institutions more research will become available to practitioners to soak in and enhance their practice. There needs to be an open exchange of knowledge among different institutions on best practices and concrete examples of successful programs that collaborate with different functional areas within the university. The work of creating an equitable second year experience program cannot be done by just one department. There needs to be an investment from the institution as a whole to build programs across different areas that aim to provide intentional support and development to second-years.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Consent Forms**

Consent form for Undergraduates

**University of San Diego  
Institutional Review Board**

**Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:  
STEP into Success; An Exploration of the Impact and Potential of the Second Year Torero  
Experiential Program

**I. Purpose of the research study**

Carlos Cortés is a graduate student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he/she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to explore the strengths, areas for growth, and personal experiences in the Second Year Torero Experiential Program

**II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:  
participate in an interview focusing on STEP and its impact on your experience as an undergraduate at USD.  
You will be audiotaped during the interview.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 30 minutes.

**III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

**Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:**

**San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339 or A counselor-on call is available to consult about after-hours psychological emergencies at all times. The counselor-on call can be reached by calling Public Safety (x2222 on any campus telephone, otherwise call 619-260-2222).**

**IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand second-year students experiences and needs at USD.

**V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and



information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

## **VI. Compensation**

**You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.**

## **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this,** and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

## **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

**1) Carlos Cortés**

**Email: ccortes@sandiego.edu**

**Phone: (808)-679-9022**

**2) Dr. Annie Ngo**

**Email: maianhngo@sandiego.edu**

**Phone: (858)-232-6217**

**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

Consent form for Res Ed/Campus partners

**University of San Diego  
Institutional Review Board**

**Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:

STEP into Success; An Exploration of the Impact and Potential of the Second Year Torero  
Experiential Program

**I. Purpose of the research study**

Carlos Cortés is a graduate student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he/she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to explore the strengths, areas for growth, and personal experiences in the Second Year Torero Experiential Program

**II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:  
participate in a private interview about STEP and its perceived impact on student's experience at USD experience.

You will be audiotaped during the interview.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 30 minutes.

**III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

**Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:**

**San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339 or A counselor-on call is available to consult about after-hours psychological emergencies at all times. The counselor-on call can be reached by calling Public Safety (x2222 on any campus telephone, otherwise call 619-260-2222).**

**IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand second-year students experiences and needs at USD.

**V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

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**Email: maianhngo@sandiego.edu**

**Phone: (858)-232-6217**

**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

**APPENDIX B**  
**Email Drafts**

## Email Draft for Current Juniors &amp; Seniors

Hello,

My name is Carlos Cortés and I am a graduate student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego in the Higher Education Leadership program. You are receiving this email because you are a former second-year student at USD who is a current Junior or Senior. I want to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting. The purpose of this research study is to explore the strengths, areas for growth, and your personal experiences surrounding the Second Year Torero Experiential Program (STEP).

If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a one on one interview about how STEP has impacted your experience as an undergraduate at USD. total participation time will take a total of 30 minutes. You will be audiotaped during the focus group.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me at [ccortes@sandiego.edu](mailto:ccortes@sandiego.edu).

Best,  
Carlos Cortés

## Email Draft for Current Second Years

Hello,

My name is Carlos Cortés and I am a graduate student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego in the Higher Education Leadership program. You are receiving this email because you are a current second year at USD. I want to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting. The purpose of this research study is to explore the strengths, areas for growth, and personal experiences surrounding the Second Year Torero Experiential Program (STEP).

If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a one on one interview about how STEP has impacted your experience as an undergraduate at USD. This focus group will be 30 minutes. Your total participation time will take a total of 30 minutes. You will be audiotaped during the interview.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me at [ccortes@sandiego.edu](mailto:ccortes@sandiego.edu).

Best,  
Carlos Cortés

## Email Draft for Residential Education Staff

Hi,

As you know I am a graduate student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego in the Higher Education Leadership program. You are receiving this email because you are part of the STEP/UP Residential Education team. I want to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting. The purpose of this research study is to explore the strengths, areas for growth, and personal experiences working with the Second Year Torero Experiential Program (STEP).

If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a one on one interview with myself to see how you perceive STEP impacting students experience on campus as well as your relationship working with STEP. Your participation in this study will be a total of thirty minutes. You will be audiotaped/videotaped during the interview.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me at [ccortes@san Diego.edu](mailto:ccortes@san Diego.edu).

Best,  
Carlos Cortés

**APPENDIX C**  
**Current Juniors, Seniors, & Second Years**  
**Focus Group Questions & Framework**

Both the second year and current seniors/juniors interview will follow the same framework and will ask similar questions. I have noted where there will be a difference.

**I will start by saying**

“Hello everyone, thanks for coming today. My name is Carlos Cortés and I am doing research on the STEP program here at USD. Today we will be doing two activities that will explore the possibilities of STEP and your experience within the program. I will be recording and taking notes during our discussion today so if you see me look down please know I am still paying attention. Let’s get started.”

**One on One Interview - 40 minutes****10 Minutes Each Question**

During this portion I will ask the participants the following questions;

1. *For Seniors/Juniors*

Think back to your second year, what are some words, phrases, and/or images that come to mind?

*For current Second-Years*

Reflecting on your experience as a second-year so far, what are some words, phrases, and/or images that come to mind?

2. *For Seniors/Juniors*

When did you feel engaged and energized during your second year, what was happening?

*For current Second-Years*

When have you felt engaged and energized so far in your second year. What is happening when you feel this way?

3. Based on what the group has just shared, if every interaction with STEP made you feel energized and engaged as it possibly could, what could you gain by participating in STEP

4. If you could build on where STEP is today, what are five different actions you think we should take?



**APPENDIX D**  
**Follow Up One on One Interview with Current Second Years**  
**Questions & Framework**

**I will open by saying**

“Hi, thanks again for meeting with me and welcome back to campus. I will be recording this interview and taking notes so if you see me writing please know I am still paying attention. This interview will not go over thirty minutes and may end before then depending on how quickly we move through the questions. You can answer what you want and not answer some, that is entirely up to you. Let’s start with the first question”

**Interview Questions**

1. Since we last met in November have you had the opportunity to participate in any of the STEP intersession activities or SYE immersion?
  - If yes, how was that experience?
  - If no, what was your reasoning for that decision?
2. You have now been a second-year for a semester and two months, what has your experience been so far?
3. How has STEP impacted that experience?
4. Have you seen a difference in how Residential Education engages in second-years since we last met?

**Close by saying**

“That is all the questions I have for you today! Thank you so much for meeting with me and talking to me about your experience. I will be sending a follow up email within the next few days to confirm the notes that I have just to make sure that it is reflective of what you were feeling. Enjoy the rest of your day”

**Amendment to Appendix D  
One on One Interview with Current First Years  
Questions & Framework**

**I will open by saying**

“Hi, thanks again for meeting with me. I will be recording this interview and taking notes so if you see me writing please know I am still paying attention. This interview will not go over one hour and may end before. You can answer what you want and not answer some, that is entirely up to you. Reminder that this is entirely voluntary and you may stop the interview and remove yourself from the study at any time. Do you have any questions for me? Okay, let’s start with the first question”

**Interview Questions**

1. *Discovery*: What do you love most about the community here at USD? What first drew you here and what has most encouraged you to stay?
  - What has inspired you to get involved on campus? What do you hope you can contribute?
  - You have now been at USD for almost a year. Inevitably there have been both high and low points. What stands out for you as a high point when you were part of a community effort here.
2. *Dream*; Imagine you are at the end of your second year reflecting back on the experiences that you had
  - What are some of those possible experiences?
  - What kind of programs are in place that are impacting that experience?
  - In your vision, what do you need to succeed?
3. *Design*; As a first year, where do you feel the most engaged within your community?
  - What stands out to you as being exceptionally promising in expanding your community as you become a second-year?
  - Where does Residential Life fit into that?
4. *Destiny*; As you move into your second year what are some changes that Residential Life could make in order to help you achieve your vision at the end of your second year?
  - What are some ways you can contribute to realizing your vision?
  - What is the first thing you need to do to make your vision happen?

**Close by saying**

“That is all the questions I have for you today! Thank you so much for meeting with me and talking to me about your experience. I will be sending a follow up email within the next few days to confirm the notes that I have just to make sure that it is reflective of what you were feeling. Enjoy the rest of your day”

**APPENDIX E**  
**One on One Interview with Residential Education staff**  
**Questions & Framework**

**I will open by saying**

“Hi, thanks again for meeting with me. I will be recording this interview and taking notes so if you see me writing please know I am still paying attention. This interview will not go over thirty minutes and may end before then depending on how quickly we move through the questions. You can answer what you want and not answer some, that is entirely up to you. Let’s start with the first question”

**Interview Questions for Residential Education Staff**

1. When you hear the word community what comes to mind?
2. What have been some key takeaways from working with the second-year population here at USD?
3. Focusing now on STEP specifically what has been your perceived impact of the program on the second-year experience at USD?
4. If every interaction a student had with STEP left them feeling engaged and energized what would the program look like?
5. What do you think are steps we can take to achieve that vision?

**Appendix F**  
**Undergraduate Recruitment Flyer for Second Years, Juniors, and Seniors**

# BE HEARD.

Looking for research participants living in the Alcala Vistas, Manchester Village, UTAs, and San Buen!

**PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY**

**PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY:  
SHARE THE EXPERIENCES OF CURRENT & FORMER SECOND-YEARS WITH THE GOAL OF ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACT OF THE SECOND YEAR TORERO EXPERIENTIAL PROGRAM.**

**FOCUS GROUPS • 1:1 INTERVIEWS**

**IF INTERESTED EMAIL:**

STEP Graduate Assistant Carlos Cortés at [ccortes@sandiego.edu](mailto:ccortes@sandiego.edu)

