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Students Together Encouraging Potential (STEP) Learning Community

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Students Together Encouraging Potential (STEP) Learning Community

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Honors Project

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Table of Contents

Introduction- (Vision).....	2-3
Purpose of Community.....	3-5
Name.....	6
Target Population.....	6
Purpose & Mission.....	7-8
Universal Design.....	8-9
How BGSU would Benefit from having this Learning Community.....	9-11
Alignment with BGSU Core Values.....	12
Learning Outcomes and Goals.....	13-15
Programming Model.....	15-18
Attracting Potential Residents.....	18-19
Present Evidence of Interested Individuals.....	19-21
Funding.....	21-22
Staffing.....	22-23
Facilities	23-24
What's Next.....	24-25
Appendix.....	26-29
Resources.....	30-31

Vision

Imagine: A world in which people with and without disabilities coexist and thrive. Individuals with disabilities have made large strides in gaining rights and respect that they were denied for such a long time. People are just starting to understand the great worth and value of all individuals including people with disabilities. Yet still today, people with all kinds of disabilities face both overt and subtle discrimination and segregation on a daily basis. In particular, people with developmental disabilities are often subjected to segregation and discrimination in school, at the workplace, and in the community because society underestimates their potential and ability to learn. By recognizing the problems that people with developmental disabilities face we can make a conscious effort to create more inclusive practices. In particular, I am going to focus on the discrimination that exists in higher education because I believe universities play a critical role in initiating change in our society. Universities and colleges often serve as the starting point for many social reform movements and these initiatives enable people to progress and become more accepting of those who are different than themselves. I believe that the most effective way for people with developmental disabilities to continue to gain rights and respect is to be welcomed and included in institutions of higher learning. Inclusion would provide students with developmental disabilities the opportunity to gain more education and experience and hopefully better employment opportunities. Encouraging and promoting students with developmental disabilities to attend college sends an important message from the campus community: we think that you are important, that you should be here, and that you belong here. Ultimately, I want to build a fully inclusive residential learning community (the first one in Ohio) where people with and without disabilities can live, learn, and grow together. In this community, students with

disabilities would live with roommates that do not have disabilities and hopefully have the opportunity to experience full inclusion with a community goal of embracing genuine acceptance and love. I want to see a community based on equality and an appreciation of the strengths and gifts everyone has to share with one another.

Purpose of Community

Educator Dr. Joseph Petner once said, “The idea of belonging and membership, being part of a community, is a basic human need. It’s one of the principles of our democratic society. We all have the same needs, we want to be loved, we want to have friends, we want to feel that we are making a contribution in our families, in our communities....We learn about understanding what someone’s interests and point of view are by interacting with them. To include everyone is to open up those possibilities for learning and appreciating our humanity” (qtd. in *Everyone’s Included*). Building inclusion and fostering community can help us gain a greater understanding and appreciation for the great diversity of people and their beliefs. Every person has his/her own strengths, needs, and desires. By embracing the gifts each person has to give to the world, we can see the value of all individuals. In order to shed light on the talents each individual has to offer, people need to work, learn, and live together. Only through interacting with others different from ourselves can we break down stereotypes and barriers and help create a society in which all people feel included and valued. A strong community functions like an ideal family: everyone contributes his/her talents and ultimately each person is able to achieve his/her goals as both an individual and as a family member. This supportive community creates a nurturing environment filled with compassionate people who feel motivated and able to achieve their dreams. Building a strong network of people who love and care about you also

allows an individual to flourish and have the confidence to take risks and accomplish great feats. This concept of community is applicable to students with and without disabilities. An institution that values community believes in the connectedness of people and the importance of building meaningful relationships. Thus, universities can create a campus community that is supportive, accepting of differences, and appreciative of individual strengths and abilities. I believe that learning communities are an important way to gain this experience and appreciation for community. This helps students feel connected and welcomed in college and leads to active and engaged community members after graduation.

According to Bowling Green State University's Office of Residence Life, learning communities help students transition and succeed in college by offering unique opportunities to help students develop intellectually, socially, and psychologically. Some of these experiences include the ability to live, study, and go to class with fellow community members. Students also have the ability to engage with faculty members and professors with whom they share interests and passions. Learning communities also help provide students with community resources and supports to make the most of their educational and personal goals. Lastly, BGSU's Office of Residence Life states that learning communities help their members "live a life inspired, develop a support system, and dream big" (BGSU Office of Residence Life). As BGSU's Office of Residence Life's philosophy alludes, learning communities provide an extremely beneficial college experience for their students. They acknowledge that while academics provide one kind of learning, residential learning communities teach other important lessons that help to create well-rounded citizens who have a desire to help make the world a better place. Learning communities encourage and foster informal learning and self-discovery. Informal learning can occur in a variety of places and contexts and provides opportunities for students to learn from

both everyday situations and new experiences (such as those offered through a learning community). Consequently, students have the opportunity to examine and explore their own beliefs and perceptions of the world. New ideas, activities and experiences, and stimulating conversations can help students learn and examine not only their own beliefs and values, but to have a better understanding and acceptance of the beliefs that others hold.

In addition to personal growth, several studies have linked learning communities to higher retention rates and grade point averages because students feel connected to the university and valued by their peers. According to Martha L. A. Stassen's "Student Outcomes: The Impact of Varying Living-Learning Models," researchers Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzi conducted a systematic review of the literature on the role of residential-learning communities on student outcomes from 1967-1990. The overall results of the studies showed that "living-learning communities have a significant positive effect on a number of student outcomes, including: student gains in autonomy and independence, intellectual dispositions and orientations, and generalized personal development" (qtd. in Stassen 583). Recent reviews have also showed consistent and promising results. The Washing Center for Improving the Quality of the Undergraduate Experience reviewed 63 studies and found that "students in LCs show greater institutional commitment, greater intellectual development and opportunity to analyze and integrate ideas, greater tolerance for difference and appreciation for pluralism, and demonstrate higher persistence and academic performance as measured by college grade point average" (qtd. in Stassen 583). These encouraging studies show the importance of learning communities and their benefits to students and universities alike. Ultimately, I believe that creating new learning communities at BGSU can only improve our campus and help ensure that students not only come here but also stay through graduation.

Name

I want to create a new learning community, Students Together Encouraging Potential (STEP), for Bowling Green State University. This name emphasizes one of our core values of students working together to ensure that every resident is achieving academic, personal, and social success. The name also reflects the importance of unlocking the potential that each student possesses and can contribute to our community.

Target Population

In this learning community students with developmental disabilities and students interested in learning with and from people with disabilities will work, live, and go to school together. Both students with and without disabilities will be required to have completed high school. All students must be able to live independently or with supports such as medical equipment or assistive technology that could be provided for a student through an adult service agency. This community is designed to be small with approximately twenty-four members. Pending the results of its first years, this community could grow slightly larger in size if there was enough interest. Initially, there would be approximately six or seven students with developmental disabilities and the rest of the students would not have developmental disabilities. The reason there would be such a discrepancy in the ratio is to ensure that the students with developmental disabilities would be able to receive enough individualized support and attention to be successful throughout their college experience.

Purpose & Mission

This learning community would have two primary purposes. It would provide students with disabilities community-based instruction for experiencing community inclusion and integration. Community-based instruction means teaching students skills in a natural environment which allows them to better connect the tasks they are learning to the world outside the classroom. For example, taking students to a restaurant and having them order their own food and pay for it helps them learn how to perform a task independently in a real-life situation. According to Mary Falvey's *Community-based Curriculum: Instructional Strategies for Students with Severe Handicap*, community-based instruction is one of the most effective methods of teaching students with developmental disabilities: "Research indicates that individuals with mental retardation and/or developmental disabilities benefit from functional, hands-on instruction in meaningful life skills in the natural setting where those skills are typically used. Learning takes place across a variety of environments if our students are to generalize what they learn" (Falvey 66). Students with disabilities could have training prior to coming to college on independent living skills but would then have the opportunity to experience and practice them in an actual independent living situation. It would also provide students without disabilities first-hand experience learning from and interacting with students with disabilities. The ultimate mission for STEP is to create a community built on respect and appreciation of differences in which there is active and mutual learning. I hope that creating a model for inclusive living and learning can help the students who take part in this community become more accepting, productive, and successful members of their future communities as well as global citizens. This goal aligns well with the mission of the university: "Bowling Green State University is dedicated

to providing quality academic programs in a learning environment that promotes academic and personal excellence in students, as well as appreciation of intellectual, ethical and aesthetic values. Wisdom, sound judgment, tolerance and respect for other persons, cultures and ideas are the hallmarks of an educated person and the characteristics that the University hopes to develop in its students” (BGSU Fact Book). STEP aspires to create educated citizens who hope to make a difference in their global community by contributing and sharing their unique talents, strengths, and passions.

Universal Design

I would use a universal design (UD) model for the Students Together Encouraging Potential learning community. The concept of UD first came from the field of architecture. When creating new places, architects strive to be proactive and inclusive by creating areas that are accessible to everyone. Instead of adapting spaces after they have been built to provide access to individuals with disabilities, universal design is created to accommodate the needs of people with and without disabilities when places are initially being constructed (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer 40). For example, interior designers can create lower counters that provide access to kitchen equipment or build sinks that an individual using a wheelchair can reach. Improving accessibility can also provide advantages for individuals without disabilities (such as automatic doors.) The drive for universal design came about as a result of the movement to increase the rights of individuals with disabilities that was strongly inspired by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s (Institute for Human Centered Design). Disability rights advocates fought hard to bring people with disabilities out of institutions and into mainstream society. Legislation throughout the last few decades has been instrumental in mandating that

buildings, employment opportunities, and programs are accessible to individuals with disabilities. For example, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 specified that groups receiving federal funding must use accessible design. In 1990, with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, both public and private places were required to be handicap accessible regardless of whether they receive public funding and to have equal-opportunity hiring practices (Institute for Human Centered Design). Universal design ensures greater acceptance and accessibility for all people. It is a strong and growing movement in the disability rights community that is continually making great strides. The concept of universal design later evolved into universal design for learning which states that educators must strive to make their classroom and the content accessible for all of their students. While each student may learn something different the ultimate goal of universal design is that every student, regardless of ability, should be able to learn something important from a lesson. When designing the layout for STEP I want to make the physical location accessible but just as importantly I want to create college experiences and programs for the community members that can meet their diverse needs and abilities. I will later explain the intentional programming (pre-planned programs that have objectives and outcomes) that I will create in which all of the students in the STEP community can learn something that they can apply to their life. They do not necessarily learn the same thing but what is important is that everyone is learning and benefitting from the experience.

How BGSU would benefit from having this Learning Community

Bowling Green State University, an institution that is well-known for both its education program and learning communities, could provide students with a unique hands-on learning experience. The STEP learning community would be the first residential learning community in

Ohio to encourage students with disabilities not only to attend college and take classes but also to live on campus and become active community members. There have been a few other programs started that invited students with disabilities onto other university campuses but only through a work-program or to take classes. Students with developmental disabilities would finally be able and strongly encouraged to live on campus with their peers and gain greater independence. It would also provide students with and without disabilities an opportunity to earn meaningful degrees and certificates to help them be successful after graduation. It could also give BGSU a competitive edge in a prospective student's college selection process. What better way to learn about people with disabilities than to live with them and really see the potential that each individual has? Students who are studying education, psychology, social work, nursing, and many other career fields could gain invaluable experience interacting with individuals with disabilities. This unique program could attract students from across the state, country, and world as it provides students with a unique living and learning experience and ultimately a competitive edge in the job market. By creating STEP, the university would also be helping students with disabilities gain valuable experiences as active and productive community members. In addition, it would open up the world of higher education to students who are the least represented in institutions of higher learning. According to Meg Grigal's and Debra Hart's *Think Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities*, research has shown that students with developmental disabilities generally stop formal learning as soon as high school is over and have extremely high levels of unemployment and underemployment (xiv). Students with developmental disabilities are also the least likely of any disability category to attend post-secondary education programs: "Data reveal that 90% of adults with developmental disabilities were not employed; fewer than 15% participated in postsecondary education; and

over 700,000 people with developmental disabilities lived with parents aged 60 or over” (Grigal & Hart xi). Universities often stress the importance of diversity and how it can help students gain greater perspective and appreciation for all individuals. Ability is an often overlooked and underrepresented form of diversity in colleges. Yet it is a crucial component of diversity because people of all abilities are members of our global community and should be entitled to the same opportunities and experiences. Every person has unique talents and strengths to share with the world. Having the opportunity to attend college would enable students with disabilities the chance to share those gifts while earning a certificate or degree and consequently more competitive and meaningful jobs. The specific nature of the type of degree or certificate that students with developmental disabilities would earn would be an important issue that would need to be further discussed but is outside the scope of this proposal (which focuses on the residential component of the learning community). This program would demonstrate BGSU’s commitment to serve the entire community and the respect it holds for all individuals. STEP would also provide faculty working with the learning community an opportunity to conduct research on the effectiveness of educating and transitioning students with developmental disabilities into the post-secondary setting. This research could be used to help better prepare high school educators to teach necessary transition skills and ultimately help improve the quality of life of students with developmental disabilities. Conducting research would also add to the already strong credibility of the education program by underlining the university’s commitment to faculty research. Lastly, through the STEP community BGSU would be able to attract highly motivated, compassionate individuals who want to learn, grow, and make a difference in the world.

BGSU Core Values

The purpose and mission of the Students Together Encouraging Potential learning community aligns well with the core values of BGSU. First, the STEP community is built on a foundation of **respect for one another** and appreciation for diversity. Students with different ability levels, interests, and backgrounds would all be living, working, and learning together. Second, our students, faculty, and staff would need to **collaborate** to ensure that students are provided with the tools and resources necessary to succeed. Because everyone plays a valuable role in a community, each student would need to do his/her part to ensure personal success as well as community growth. Next, STEP would provide students with developmental disabilities a rare and invaluable opportunity: a chance for **intellectual and personal growth**. Students would be able to learn alongside their typical peers and have the opportunity to take college classes. An emphasis on education can encourage life-long learning as students explore interests and passions. Students without disabilities could also benefit from a strong community in which ideas are discussed openly and respectfully as individuals strive to understand their own values and the world around them. Fourth, the core value of **creativity and innovation** is one that would be very present in the STEP learning community from its conception through its execution. Students and faculty would have to be innovative as they discover how to meet the needs of such a diverse group of individuals. Faculty would have to devise ways to ensure that all students (and some may be more challenging than others) are able to benefit from classes, gain work experience, and live independently or with some supports. Tasks and activities may need to be modified in order to allow for full participation. Lastly, the BGSU core value of the **pursuit of excellence** aligns with the mission for STEP. The ultimate goal for this community is

to serve as a model for inclusive living and learning in pursuit of a world in which people with and without disabilities coexist and thrive.

Learning Outcomes and Goals

Next, I will identify the important learning outcomes and goals for the Students Together Encouraging Potential learning community. I believe that these outcomes reflect the overall goals that I want the members of the learning community and the larger BGSU community to achieve. One important goal is to promote disability awareness within the BGSU community. Having students with developmental disabilities on our campus provides all students with the opportunity to experience an important form of diversity that is traditionally underrepresented in higher education. While many disability initiatives focus on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, ability is also an important form of diversity. Each individual learns differently and has unique abilities and strengths. Being able to work together to capitalize on these strengths can ensure that our society most effectively utilizes each individual. Another important outcome of STEP would be that students both with and without disabilities would understand the value and concept of a community. I want students in STEP to be active, compassionate, and engaged community members. I plan to help students learn the value of community by creating programs that provide them with the opportunity to socialize and become friends. I also plan to have a required weekly seminar in which students come together to talk and reflect about their experiences, goals, and dreams. One major outcome for students with disabilities living in the STEP community would be to develop self-determination and advocacy skills. I want them to understand their own strengths and weaknesses and to know when and how to ask for help. I would like these students to try new experiences and to make sure that they speak up for themselves. STEP would encourage students to pick their own

classes, decide which groups to join, and make good life decisions. Students must be allowed to have the opportunity to make mistakes but STEP would strive to provide a safe, comfortable environment in which to learn from these mistakes. Students with disabilities would have the opportunity to learn living skills such as laundry, basic cooking, personal hygiene, and cleaning. Also students would learn work skills individualized to their own needs and interests, thus increasing their personal sense of worth and value. There are many jobs available to students on campus that students could access to gain experience and skills. Students with and without disabilities would learn how to follow a schedule and manage time. These skills can be taught and developed in the seminar class. Students would also learn problem-solving skills when they have to figure out how to navigate campus or how to use public transportation. These are skills that individuals need in order to live independently. All of the students in the learning community would learn about forming appropriate peer-relationships and how to build a support network. Through interacting with students with disabilities, students without disabilities could start to learn how and when it is appropriate to intervene and help. Students without disabilities could gain a better understanding of the strengths-based individual supports model. The individual supports model is a philosophy of working with people with developmental disabilities that emphasizes the importance of making individual choices and providing supports and resources to empower and improve their quality of life. When working together or interacting with their fellow community members, students would receive direct, explicit instruction on how to recognize and understand their own strengths and how to identify and capitalize on the strengths of others. STEP would also promote students getting involved in recreational activities to help them meet other students with similar interests and passions. This community would strive to incorporate programming that helps an individual develop physically,

emotionally, intellectually, and socially. Students in STEP would be able to take classes and explore career path options. They would have access to advising to help them understand the registration process and to pick classes that would be beneficial and of interest to them.

Ultimately, I want students to learn many valuable life skills to gain greater independence and to have a better quality of life.

Programming Model

Students Together Encouraging Potential learning community would be based on an individual supports model and would incorporate its own community development plan.

According to Will H. E. Buntinx's and Robert L. Schalock's "Models of Disability, Quality of Life, and Individualized Supports: Implications for Professional Practice in Intellectual

Disability," individualized supports incorporate several key practices: "person-centered planning, personal growth and development opportunities, community inclusion, and empowerment"

(284). STEP would utilize person-centered planning for each student with disabilities in the program. According to Cornell University's Employment and Disability Institute, "Person-

centered planning is a process-oriented approach to empowering people with disabilities. It focuses on the people and their needs by putting them in charge of defining the direction for their

lives, not on the systems that may or may not be available to serve them." Each student participating in the community would direct and create his/her own plan that includes his/her

goals for postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation. Each pupil would present his/her goals and personal strengths to all of the

members of the learning community at the beginning of the year and create individualized action plans to help him/her achieve these goals. At our weekly seminar as a community, we would

share our progress towards reaching our goals and offer suggestions and support when needed. In

addition to utilizing an individualized supports model, STEP would incorporate a programming model to meet the needs of the community as a whole. BGSU's Office of Residence Life currently implements a Community Development Plan (CDP) for each residential hall community that is specifically tailored to the needs of its residents. The CDP is a working document created by the Hall Director and carried out by the staff that is intended to be "an ongoing measure to ensure that intentional and constant attention is being given to the overall development of students and their residential experience" (BGSU Office of Residence Life). It would be very important for the Hall Director, the Director of the learning community, and the Resident Advisor(s) of the floor to work together to create programs that would meet the wide variety of needs and abilities of the residents. BGSU's CDP includes social programming as well as intentional programming in six major areas: academic, diversity, leadership, service, wellness, and BGSU Spirit. The Office of Residence Life outlines the specific learning outcomes for each domain and each hall must come up with a plan for how it will meet these objectives. Resident Advisors, residents, and Hall Directors work together to create programs that are entertaining, educational, and purposeful. Assessments would be completed to gauge residents' involvement and learning as well as their enjoyment of the program.

Programming Ideas:

Social Programs-

- Open Mic Night- Encourage residents to share their own talents such as singing, dancing, poetry, story writing, etc.
- Floor Dinner- Invite your floor to go out to dinner on campus. It's a great opportunity to catch up and find out what's going on in one another's lives

- Floor T-shirts- Create floor t-shirts and instill floor pride
- Door Decorating Contest- Have a contest to see who can create the best door decorations
- Go outside and play sports, draw with chalk, blow bubbles

Academic-

- Create a discussion group and discuss popular books and movies
- Bring in a professor to discuss a topic of interest
- Have a study café or study table
- Celebrate Pi Day and Mol Day

Diversity-

- Celebrate different “hall-idays” and learn about various cultures and traditions
- Similarities through the differences- Bring in diversity peer educators to teach students that despite our differences we all share many similarities.
- Eliminate the Hate- An open forum to speak out against hate and discrimination.
- Safe-Zone Training- An interactive training to promote LBGTQIAA (Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, Queer, Intersect, Asexual, Ally) awareness.

Leadership-

- Strengths-Quest Training- Identify an individual’s top five strengths and learn how to use them to best work with others.
- Leadership Training Sessions
- Hall Council- student government participation

Service-

- Make cards for troops
- Friday Night Lights- Help turn off lights in the academic buildings on Friday nights to save energy and money.
- Green Tailgating- Pass out recycling bags to tailgaters before the home football games and then collect the bags when they are full.

Attracting Potential Residents

In order to attract potential residents for the STEP community I would talk to students in high school who are interested in working and interacting with individuals with disabilities. I would need to talk to high school counselors and arrange an approved visit to talk to potential participants. Students who are already in college preparatory classes might be interested in this program because it would provide such a unique, hands-on learning experience. I would call the coordinator of these programs and ask to come speak to their classes. In particular, I would market and advertise to students going into education, psychology, communication disorders, social work, and any area in the medical field, although students in any major would be welcome to join. I would create a website explaining our community's values and mission statement. I would also have a booth at Preview Days, Presidents' Day, and Junior Preview Days so that potential BGSU students learn about our community. I would send letters to high school counselors and describe our community and our mission. I would host an open house in both the fall and spring to showcase our program to potential members. After STEP has been established for a few years, I would have current members visit high schools and share their college and learning community experiences. In order to attract students with developmental disabilities, I would like to partner with some of the relevant local groups, including: the Wood and Lucas County Boards of Developmental Disabilities and the Ability Center of Toledo. I have talked to

Dianne Witt who works for the Wood County Educational Service Center and who is responsible for finding placements for students as they transition from high school to adult life. She was interested and supportive of the idea for a learning community such as STEP and could potentially serve as a crucial partner for recruiting students into the program. I would gradually expand partnerships to include other geographical areas but in its earliest stages I believe that recruiting local students would be most beneficial. I would host an annual conference for Intervention Specialists and parents that focuses on post-secondary options for students with disabilities and use this as an opportunity to advertise and promote STEP. I would highly encourage and arrange admission tours for students with disabilities so that they are aware that college can be a great potential option for their future. Lastly, STEP could arrange visits for students with developmental disabilities who are currently in high school to come and stay with current community members so they could decide if this program would be a good fit for them.

Present Evidence of Interested Individuals

While ideally I would have done a formal, extensive evaluation of interest for this new learning community, I was unable to complete this goal within the time constraints of an honors project. If, however, I were to gauge interest, these are the steps I would have followed. First, I would have sent current BGSU students a survey via e-mail that explains the STEP learning community to see how many would be interested in participating. I would send this survey in the fall of 2012. I would also ask the faculty and staff of the College of Intervention Services to distribute the survey in their classes. Lastly, I would ask both the Honors Program and the College of Education and Human Development to post a link to the survey through a message on Blackboard.

The survey would appear as follows:

My name is Jessie Minard and I am a senior interested in starting a new learning community at BGSU. I would really love to hear your thoughts. Learning communities consist of a group of people living together who share a common interest or desire that helps promote academic learning, exploration of passions, and a feeling of belonging for all members. The Students Together Encouraging Potential (STEP) learning community would consist of students with and without disabilities who would live, learn, and work together. The ultimate mission for STEP is to create a community built on respect and appreciation of differences in which there is active and mutual learning. Our hope is that creating a model for inclusive living and learning can help the students who take part in this community become more accepting, productive, and successful members of their future communities as well as global citizens. If this sounds like something that could be of interest to you please fill out this survey.

What is your major or perspective major?

If you identify as a student without a developmental disability, do you have a passion for working and interacting with individuals with developmental disabilities?

If you identify as a student without a developmental disability, would you be willing to be a role model and mentor for students with developmental disabilities?

Would you be interested in gaining field experience hours for classes right on campus by working with students with developmental disabilities and helping them succeed in college?

Do you believe that everyone has strengths and the ability to learn?

Would you like to live with other people who share the same passions and interests as yourself?

Would you be interested in being part of this new learning community on campus?

What kind of benefits, programs, trips, or services would you want the learning community to provide?

How much would you be willing to pay to live in this living community?

After I submitted this survey to current BGSU students and analyzed the results I would start contacting high school guidance counselors to seek their opinion on the program. With proper permission, I would ask for potential names of any students they believe might be interested in this type of learning community experience and send them this survey. Lastly, I would like to contact Intervention Specialists from the local area schools and find out from them if they think this could be a good opportunity that would be realistic for any of their students. I would also ask these teachers to survey their students about their interest in living in such a community. I would then share the data that I had gathered about the number of current BGSU students interested and the number of perspective students with and without disabilities who would be interested in participating in the program.

Funding

I would like to collaborate with the College of Education and Human Development to make this learning community possible. I think it would be a good investment on behalf of the College of Education and Human Development to increase college recruitment and promote improved retention rates. A faculty member or an academic advisor in the College of Education and Human Development could serve as the Director for the learning community. Although this would shift some of the job responsibilities of the faculty member or advisor from formal instruction to running a learning community, this change should be viewed as a positive retention

and recruitment effort for students. If students feel connected to the university and have a good relationship with faculty such as a learning community Director, then they are more likely to be academically successful and stay. STEP learning community members would also be required to pay a small fee to participate in the community. In order to gain approval for creating a cost for the learning community I would need to talk to the Board of Trustees and explain to them how much students would be charged, what the money would be used for, and show evidence that students would be willing to pay it. Traditionally this fee is between \$200 and \$300 for current BGSU learning communities. I would need to survey the students interested in the community to find out how much they would be willing to pay. This money would be used for programming, trips, and facilities and maintenance. Some of this money would also go towards the start-up costs that the program would incur such as furniture and supplies. I would also need to calculate exactly how much money it would cost if each student participated in all of the planned programs or trips. Since each residence hall already has a programming budget, the Resident Advisor would have access to hall programming funds. These funds could help offset a lot of the programming costs if the learning community is willing to include interested non-members who live in the hall. Inviting non-community members would also help ensure that STEP members are not segregated but have the opportunity to be a part of the larger hall community. Lastly, STEP community Director and graduate assistant would work to find grants and funding for initiatives that support the inclusion and educational opportunities for students with disabilities.

Staffing

STEP would need a full-time community Director in order to be successful. This Director would be in charge of overseeing the learning community, managing the budget, and planning programs. The Director would also teach the one-credit hour seminar that all students in the

learning community would be required to take. We would also need a graduate student to assist with a lot of the administrative tasks and any other tasks deemed appropriate by the learning community Director. Another goal for STEP is to provide students who need field experience hours the opportunity to earn them through working and interacting with the students with disabilities in the learning community. Students studying education, psychology, child development, social work, communication disorders, physical and occupational therapy, and many other fields could earn required practicum hours. The Director would be responsible for coordinating these site experiences and ensuring that students are following through with their commitments. The Director or graduate assistant would also help ensure that all students have schedules and that they follow them. STEP would require one or two Resident Advisors on the floor depending on the number of residents in the community. When selecting the Resident Advisor(s) for the floor community strong preference would be given to candidates who have a passion for and interest in working with individuals with disabilities. The Resident Advisor(s) must be able to respect the dignity and self-worth of all individuals. It should be noted, that there may some additional responsibilities of working in this community such as collaboration with not only the Hall Director but also the learning community Director to create programming that meets the needs of the residents. Resident Advisor(s) would need to be creative and willing to adapt or modify programs to ensure that they are accessible to all residents. It would be critical that the Hall Director, learning community Director and assistant, and Resident Advisor(s) work together to make this community successful.

Facilities

The STEP learning community would reside on a single floor within an existing residence hall. This community would be most appropriate in a building where there are suite-

style (three to four bedrooms and a common space) rooms. Each room would house one student with a developmental disability and two to three students without a developmental disability who are all members of the community. This would allow for more support for the students with developmental disabilities while still maintaining each community member's need for personal space. The rooms would need to be accessible according to the standards set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act. The STEP learning community Director and assistant would need an office to make them accessible to students and to work on administrative tasks. STEP would need a lounge where community members could do homework, socialize, and relax. This space would also be used for the weekly seminar class and to host programs. This community space would need to be able to accommodate thirty people. Lastly, STEP would need a resource or break room to provide students a quiet place to separate themselves from others as they process challenging situations or feelings of being overwhelmed or upset. This would allow students the chance to learn how to self-monitor and have the ability to refocus their attention and calm down when they start to become upset.

Next Steps

Creating a proposal for a learning community is just the first step in the rigorous process of creating a learning community. My next course of action would be to contact the Ability Center and see if they would be interested in partnering with BGSU to create this program. I would also need to present the idea to the Dean of the College of Education and Human Development to seek his approval and permission to proceed with the process for instituting a learning community. I would also want to create an advisory board that would consist of people from different areas of expertise that would help make bigger decisions to help the community run most effectively. The purpose of this board is to bring together people from different

backgrounds and unique areas of expertise to bring perspective and skills to ensure the program's success. I would also create a survey that I would distribute to the student body via e-mail that would be sent out in the fall of 2012. I would ask the faculty and staff of the College of Intervention Services to distribute the survey to their classes. Lastly, I would ask the College of Education and Human Development to post a link to the survey through a message on Blackboard. After I have completed these steps I could initiate the official process for seeking approval from BGSU's Office of Residence Life to actually implement this learning community. This two year process is outlined in Appendix A which provides the specific details and steps that are required to create a learning community at BGSU. The last major issue I need to address is who will continue to develop this project when I graduate in 2013. I have been working with Dr. Jeanne Novak, a faculty member in the College of Intervention Services, on this project over the course of the school year and I believe that she will continue the process. She has a lot of experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities and helping these people transition into adulthood. Dr. Novak also has many university and community connections as well as relationships within the disability rights community that I hope will enable her to achieve success. I will continue to work on this project until I leave Bowling Green but I feel very confident that Dr. Novak will help see this learning community come to completion and become a thriving well-respected community.

Resources

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