



## The STEP Forward Framework

### What is the STEP Forward framework?

As undergraduate educators, we have a responsibility to ensure that our students are well prepared for life after university - whether their focus is on embarking on a career or starting a business, pursuing further graduate or professional schooling, or engaging in community service, travel, or other personal-growth activities. Rather than limiting our approach to this challenge to traditional professional development, the Faculty of Arts & Science is engaging with the issue through a wider lens.

The STEP Forward framework is a major new initiative that will imbue new and existing activities across the Faculty with an added level of forward-looking reflection and integration of academic, personal, and professional development for our students. The central aim of STEP Forward is to develop our students' capacity to connect their academic learning to their personal values, aspirations, and practical planning, through active reflection on what they have learned. Bringing together activities that develop these skills under a unifying framework will enable the Faculty to showcase our many concerted efforts to prepare our students to be productive contributors to society. Moreover, this coordinated framework will highlight for students that these activities are an important and integrated aspect of their Arts & Science education, providing a progression of skill development as they enter, transition through, and exit the Faculty.

### How do academic units participate in STEP Forward?

STEP Forward will include new and existing activities that help our students develop, understand, and put into action their short- and long-term academic and personal goals. The focus is on activities that deepen the connections between students' disciplinary knowledge and skills to their personal and professional development. FAS is calling on academic units to participate in this initiative with FAS-sponsored resources and support.

The STEP Forward framework includes a three-component rubric. To be incorporated into STEP Forward, an activity is expected to show how it helps students:

- **Connect** knowledge and understanding across academic, personal, and professional spheres.
- **Reflect** on learning experiences, interests, and goals within and between each sphere.
- **Project** goals onto short- and long-term plans that integrate personal values with academic knowledge and professional skills.

By integrating these three cornerstone actions, each STEP Forward activity will contribute to the learning outcomes of the framework as a whole: students will develop greater insight into their strengths, weaknesses, interests, and skills; understand how their university education has prepared them for constructive involvement in society; and improve their ability to plan and

make decisions for the short- and long-term. See the "How is *Connect-Reflect-Project* embedded in each STEP Forward activity?" section below for more details on each part of the rubric.

The Faculty encourages academic units to participate in STEP Forward in three ways:

- 1) Your unit can apply to join one of the pre-existing STEP Forward programs.
- 2) Your unit can request Faculty support to implement an activity listed on the STEP application website.
- 3) Your unit can propose a new or enhanced activity that satisfies the STEP Forward *Connect-Reflect-Project* rubric.

For more information, see the *STEP Forward Call for Participation* document.

### **What are some examples of STEP Forward activities?**

The Faculty of Arts and Science has identified four targeted areas for STEP Forward engagement; examples of activities from each of these areas are included below. Some of these activities are centrally organized (by FAS and other partners), so that academic units and instructors can participate in these without having to undertake their design and administration. These activities are indicated by ‘\*’ in the descriptions below. In addition, the Faculty will support units to enhance or enlarge their own existing activities that fit the STEP Forward framework, or to create new approaches to addressing the STEP Forward goals. The examples listed here are not intended to limit what qualifies as an existing or new STEP Forward activity.

#### 1. Course and Curricular Enhancements:

- Activities in Faculty-sponsored first-year programs (199s, Big Ideas Courses, and FLCs) that require students to reflect on the purpose, goals and future of their university education\*
- Research skill development and research career-focused activities for 299/399 courses\*
- Activities connecting ICMs and Summer Abroad activities with academic and career goals\*
- TA training and other support for expanded service learning opportunities\*
- Career exploration and planning activities embedded in POST requirements or other courses
- Increased opportunities for service learning and other experiential learning that involve reflection and future-oriented planning
- Exploring post-graduate education in 4<sup>th</sup>-year and capstone courses

#### 2. Orientation and Re-orientation:

- Goal setting and reflection activities in College orientations
- Re-orientation activities connecting one stage of academic study with the next, including:
  - welcoming students to programs,
  - preparing students for upper-year study, and
  - helping students transition to life beyond university in their final year

#### 3. Alumni, Career, and Community Connections:

- Backpack 2 Briefcase, connecting students in a program to its alumni\*

- Explore It, integrating career exploration, reflection, and peer-to-peer discussion into courses\*
  - Professional development workshops to support Work Study students\*
  - Alumni and community mentorship programs
4. Online Engagement and Support:
- STEP Forward website, introducing the program to students, providing learning resources, and describing the range of available activities\*
  - Integration of NGSIS and other IT tools with career, further education, and skill development information for students and advisors\*
  - Use of social media to support, connect and integrate STEP Forward goals with student community and activities

### **What are the STEP Forward “STEPS”?**

STEP Forward activities are staged to apply 1) as students enter university, 2) as they choose their POST, 3) as they advance through their POST, and 4) as they prepare to graduate. The purpose of this staged framework is to help students explicitly structure their curricular and co-curricular activities according to a unifying conceptual framework that highlights the progression that students experience during their studies.<sup>1</sup> At each stage, students will become more involved and proactive, and ultimately more responsible for their own development. We identify the STEP Forward stages or "STEPS" as follows:

1. *STEP into Arts & Science:* This stage aims to introduce students to reflective thinking about their academic aims, personal values, and post-graduate goals as they enter university, and (as one concrete goal) will prepare and support them in the choice of programs. Students will become familiar with the new opportunities available to them through STEP Forward activities and will be introduced to the ***Connect-Reflect-Project*** rubric that underscores the entire STEP Forward framework.
2. *STEP into Programs of Study:* The next stage focuses on students’ academic focus and introduction to their program learning communities, and builds on students’ skills in having navigated the transition to university. Activities expand on the general themes introduced in the first stage, and begin to make more explicit why it is important to connect the three spheres of academic, personal, and professional knowledge and skills.
3. *STEP into Action:* As students continue in their programs, they will further integrate personal development with actualization of academic and professional skills. Activities will directly relate to their programs and will be supported by existing sources of student advising. This step can also foster student thinking about innovative, self-directed work pathways, and enhanced engagement with community and workplace learning opportunities.
4. *STEP into the Future:* The final year of study will require a more detailed and developed focus on planning for life beyond the university. Reflective activities earlier in the fall

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from STEP components embedded as requirements in courses or programs, student participation in STEP Forward activities is voluntary.

can prepare students for writing graduate and professional school applications and for mock interviews, but can also support students in taking a self-directed and proactive approach to more general decision-making around their future.

### **How will students understand the links between different STEP Forward “STEPS” and activities?**

It will be apparent that many different types of activities, across all stages of the degree, can help to prepare students in a holistic way for effective planning and decision-making at the intersections of their academic knowledge and their personal goals. To provide a consistent backbone for STEP Forward activities – one that is recognizable by students as providing a set of progressively developing skills within the framework – each activity is expected to explicitly describe for students how it addresses the *Connect-Reflect-Project* rubric.

This rubric will be highlighted to students through the STEP Forward website and other communications, which will explain the overall framework and the ways in which STEP Forward is intended to enhance their Arts & Science education. Information about each component activity will indicate to students its position in the framework, and the ways in which the activity supports, in whole or in part, the overall goals of STEP Forward.

### **How is “*Connect-Reflect-Project*” embedded in each STEP Forward activity?**

In order to help students monitor their progress in developing the understanding and skills associated with the STEP Forward framework, each activity will articulate the ways in which it asks students to connect, reflect, and project, as described in detail below:

***Connect:*** STEP Forward activities support the exploration and integration of three spheres of knowledge: 1) the academic knowledge and lifelong learning skills that are the foundation of a traditional university curriculum; 2) the personal knowledge and skills that help students make meaning of their life and opportunities; and, 3) the professional skills and community and workplace engagement that position students as contributing members of society. To make the intersections within and between these areas of knowledge and growth more explicit, STEP Forward activities will often involve a partnership among multiple participants:

- *Faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate student groups* connect academic knowledge to students’ lives through teaching, mentorship, and participation in a community of learners.
- *Advising, Student Life, and Alumni Relations experts* help students to develop and apply skills that complement their academic knowledge.
- *Businesses, community organizations, and alumni* help students to actively think about, plan for, and explore opportunities outside the university.

***Reflect:*** STEP Forward activities emphasize self-reflection and the application of critical thinking skills to the student’s own goals and aspirations. These reflective activities may take the form of: free-form or prompted written pieces that encourage students to consider their goals and expectations for various learning activities; peer-to-peer discussion on learning experiences that both broaden and deepen the outcomes for individual students; guided activities that engage students in planning for the future, within a framework that highlights insight into their values

and interests; etc. The Faculty will provide expertise on such reflective approaches to help faculty and TAs effectively engage students in such activities.

**Project:** The goal of the *Connect* and *Reflect* actions is to bring students to a position where they are able to plan for the future in a way that builds on their academic knowledge, fits their personal value system, and exploits and expands their professional skills. In addition, planning and decision-making must be seen as an iterative process that further contributes to student development in all three of these areas. STEP Forward activities will gradually develop goal-setting and adaptive-planning abilities, shifting over time from a focus, e.g., on how to prepare for one's first midterm, to selecting a program, to preparing job and grad school applications.

### **What is the Faculty of Arts & Science doing to support the roll-out of STEP Forward?**

The Faculty has put out a call for participation that encourages academic units and instructors to contribute to STEP Forward as fits their unit goals and disciplinary context. The Faculty is expanding its resources to ensure that units or individuals interested in engaging in, initiating, enhancing, or enlarging STEP Forward activities have a robust set of supports available to them. Among the supports provided will be:

1. **Coordination:** Overall coordination, monitoring, and evaluating of the targeted projects and unit-level activities
2. **Teaching support and faculty development:** Expertise on reflective writing, connecting academic knowledge to more outward and/or future-oriented thinking, TA training
3. **Alumni connections:** Support for collaboration between alumni relations and STEP activities
4. **Student activities:** Expertise on and support for the development of student engagement activities
5. **Communication:** Development of materials for students, faculty, staff and other communities about the goals, structure, and outcomes of STEP Forward and its component activities

### **How will STEP Forward transform the Faculty of Arts & Science?**

STEP Forward represents a new focus in undergraduate education in the Faculty of Arts & Science. The initiative aims to more deeply integrate academic studies with an understanding of how students will use the knowledge and skills they develop in university to engage productively in society throughout their lives. The full rollout of STEP Forward will ensure that every Arts & Science student will have the opportunity throughout their degree to complete a range of reflective activities that will help them identify goals and develop a plan to realize them. Students who engage in STEP Forward will graduate with a clear sense of the connections between their arts and science education and potential future pathways. Equipped with skills supporting connection, reflection, and the ability to project future plans, these students will be empowered as lifelong learners, community leaders, and engaged members of society.