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Central Washington University, College of the Sciences
Science Talent Expansion Program
Recruiting and Retaining the Next Generation of STEM Professionals

The Central Washington University (CWU) STEP works to increase the number of students obtaining STEM degrees, with an emphasis placed on increasing the total number of traditionally underrepresented students. The main elements of our program include (1) recruitment of students in traditionally underrepresented-serving high schools and community colleges in central Washington State; (2) merit-based financial support for STEP-participating students; (3) an interdisciplinary freshman curriculum; (4) a bridging program for sophomore and transfer students that involves research, teaching, and recruiting opportunities; and (5) a unique residence opportunity for STEP students through the STEP Living Learning Community. Enrollment for Fall 2011 includes 44 students in the freshman program, 10 students in the sophomore/junior bridging program and 22 students in the transfer bridging program. Recruiting activities continue as a collaborative effort between the STEP Recruiter and CWU Admissions staff. The emphasis we have placed on maintaining positive relationships with central Washington State high schools that traditionally serve underrepresented students has clearly been productive; our 2011/12 freshman cohort is 82% underrepresented. Underrepresented students compose 67% of our entire STEP population for this year, indicating that our emphasis on diversity has also been successful with the sophomore and transfer cohorts. Our goals of improved retention and academic performance for STEM majors at CWU are also being met. STEP students declare STEM majors to a greater extent than those students who chose not to participate in STEP (40.7% of STEP students have declared a STEM major compared to 18.5% of students in the control group). Students who have participated in CWU STEP and have declared a STEM major have higher average GPAs compared to non-STEP STEM and non-STEP non-STEM students in the control group. Undeclared-major STEP students have a higher average GPA compared to the undeclared-major non-STEP students in the control group. The design of our program is to emphasize close professional ties among STEP students, faculty, and staff. For example, the STEP Supervisor meets with STEP students 2 times per quarter, thus providing advising and academic support tailored to the individual students' needs. Our experience suggests that this approach strengthens the sense of community STEP students have, thus leading to a higher rate of retention compared to the STEM control group. Our effort to implement strategies that foster positive and sustained ties among faculty, staff, and students within the CWU STEP community is one of the most positive aspects of our program.