

# Student Teaching Excellence Committee (STEC) Annual Report

Faculty of Environment, University of Waterloo  
STEC Executive Committee

2017

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## Organization Background

The Student Teaching Excellence Committee was formed in the fall of 2012 to enhance the teaching and learning experience of Faculty of Environment students at the University of Waterloo through the development of teaching and learning initiatives. Over the years this has been accomplished through numerous tools. Initially, a town hall meeting was organized to discern the needs of the student body. In the following years, we have organized and implemented: workshops, panel discussions, spotlights on student learning, assistant in student selection for funding from the Teaching Learning Committee (TLC), and a mentorship initiative. In order to best serve the needs of the student body, we have refocused our energy on two main initiatives: bi-annual panel discussions, and the Graduate Student Mentorship Program.

## 1. Current and Ongoing Initiatives

### a. Panel Discussions

#### Program Context

The discussion panels arose from an inaugural panel held by STEC in March, 2016. The panel addressed a topic of unique interest to Environment graduate students - how budding scholars might leverage social media to develop their visibility and identity as researchers. The panel was deliberately planned to include faculty members from each Environment department, as well as a multidisciplinary post-doctoral fellow with a unique perspective on using social media for job-seeking. The success of this panel was the impetus for developing similar panels throughout the 2016-2017 school year. We have tailored our panels to issues that both the executive committee feel are important as well as suggestions provided by the Faculty of Environment student body.

#### Panels Breakdown

##### *i. Winter 2016—Social Media (The Importance of Social Media in Academia: Building Your Brand)*

This panel addressed the important and various methods of using social media as a graduate student and early academic. The panel brought together faculty from two different Environment departments, a staff member, and a post-doctoral fellow to discuss how they have used social media to develop and their careers and forge scholarly networks, and share best practices they have found useful in navigating social media platforms. This event was live-tweeted, receiving an overwhelmingly positive response with approximately 60 (fill in the number) in attendance, included students and faculty alike.

### *ii. Fall 2016—Scholarships (Grad Student Panel: Tips for Writing Effective Scholarship Applications)*

Held in early September, 2016, this panel brought together three graduate students who from the departments of Planning, Geography and Environmental Management, and Environment and Resource Sustainability who had successfully obtained SSHRC, NSERC, Vanier and other scholarships. Panelists shared their personal experiences and recommendations for putting together a successful application. In particular, panelists spoke to the unique circumstances of conducting research in the Faculty of Environment doing work which frequently integrated realms of both social and natural science. While the attendance for this panel was low due to other events happening simultaneously, it received enough positive feedback both from attendees as well as those unable to attend that the panel will be repeated at a more accessible time in the Fall of 2017.

### *iii. Winter 2017— Research Methods (Research Methods in the Environment: No Alternative Facts Allowed)*

This panel, held in March 2017, was comprised of four faculty members from each of the Schools/departments within the Faculty of Environment to discuss specific approaches for developing research methods, and why they choose particular methods to use. The goals of this panel were threefold: first, to provide students with a snapshot of how to craft research methods to a specific line of inquiry; second, to show the different programs or techniques for managing and analyzing data, such as R or NVivo; and to give students a sense of different types of research happening in departments that were not their own. This panel was likewise very well-received, with approximately 40 people in attendance, and requests were received that it be repeated in upcoming terms. STEC hopes to accommodate this request, and expand upon it by implementing research knowledge exchange opportunities more fully into the upcoming year's mentorship program.

## **b. Faculty of Environment Graduate Student Mentorship Program**

### **Program Context**

The Graduate Student Mentorship Program is tailored from lessons learned from the Association of Graduate Planners in the School of Planning informal PhD mentorship program launched in winter of 2015. STEC expanded the program to be Faculty-wide for all graduate students beginning in July 2016 to encourage leadership development, cross-disciplinary learning and growth, as well as foster an integrated Faculty graduate student experience.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this initiative include:

- Addressing threats for academic success, including feelings of confusion, isolation, and stress have been noted by many incoming graduate students
- Developing skill-building and academic support networks through peer relationships
- Supporting incoming graduate students as they transition to a new academic environment

- Offering existing graduate students an additional support relationship that enriches their academic experience

### Outcomes

Our ongoing objective for this initiative is to encourage three main outcomes. First, we hope to facilitate an increased level of student-led guidance and interaction; second, we hope to provide opportunity for student collaboration across departments within the Faculty of Environment; and third, we strive to encourage networking across disciplines to help develop stronger social and scholarly ties across the Faculty.

### Program Details & Results

#### *i. Implementation*

We took a great deal of effort to ensure this initiative was supported by the entire Faculty of Environment by attending graduate coordinator meetings, initiating meetings with Dean Jean Audrey, maintaining communication with student organizations, and attending town hall meetings put on for various reasons throughout the faculty. We further coordinated with supporting departments outside the Faculty, such as the Student Success Office, to provide as streamlined and supportive a program as possible for our incoming mentors and mentees. We liaised with graduate coordinators and faculty to ensure communication relating to this initiative was distributed efficiently and effectively to incoming and current students.

The development of an online survey for mentors and mentees enabled us to pair students according to: research interests, desired outcomes of the pairs (i.e. was a student more interested in knowing the campus, groups on campus, faculty, or grant applications), and personal preferences (gender, location, life-situations). Using the online survey coupled with individualized verification on a case-by-case basis ensured that pairs were matched as appropriately as possible, giving consideration to research interests as well as personal preferences to the greatest extent possible.

Training was then required for all incoming mentors and offered by the Student Success Office in July-August 2016. A specialized fall event was held at the Grad House to welcome incoming pairs, provide an overview of the program, and offer mentorship participants the opportunity to socialize and ask questions about the program. It also allowed participants to meet other pairs, and ideally initiate networking for future relationships..

#### *ii. Achievements*

- Included 44 students in a one-year commitment
- Hosted two social networking events
- Trained all mentors in best practices for mentorship

#### *iii. Evaluation*

Participant evaluations were obtained in the form of a mid-term brainstorming event, held in November 2016, as well as a end-of-year online survey distributed in May 2017.

Recommendations that emerged from the mid-term brainstorming session, which involved approximately 20 attendees, included the following:

- a. expressed interest in research networking events, such as special interest round-tables for mentorship participants and research “speed-dating”
- b. enhanced information support for mentorship participants, including website links to certain resources, and a “mentorship toolkit” containing recommendations on engaging with mentors/mentees, dealing with difficult issues such as mental health, and questions for mentors and mentees to ask in order to make their interactions more productive
- c. continued support around mentorship meeting logistics, such as special events and encouragement for meeting venue options

The end-of-year survey yielded less feedback on the whole, but highlighted some useful points.

## 2. Continued Steps for STEC

In response to the suggestions generated at both the mid-term discussion event and end-of-term survey, STEC has created the following plan for the upcoming year.

### May-June 2017

- Review survey results and modify the program as needed
- Revise previous mentorship and recruitment material
- Recruit mentors via department graduate administrators (use past lessons learned)

### July-August 2017

- Hold mentor training session and orientation
- Recruit mentees from incoming graduate cohort
- Pair incoming students with mentors

### September-December 2017

- Hold one networking events with speakers/training sessions on the mentorship relationship, early September
- Hold additional training session for mentors unable to attend the summer session