

Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)
Working Session 1 at the CNCS Research Summit
Understanding and Measuring the Value of National Service – Session 1
Summary of Discussion

Wednesday, December 16, 2015

1–2 p.m.

Washington, DC

Moderated by Dr. Diana Epstein, Senior Research Analyst, CNCS Office of Research and Evaluation, and Carla Ganiel, Senior Program and Project Specialist, AmeriCorps State and National

INTRODUCTIONS

- Dr. Diana Epstein thanked attendees for coming to the CNCS Research Summit and to the current session. She introduced herself and Carla Ganiel as the moderators of the session.
- She then explained the goals and plans for the session.
 - CNCS wants the session to truly be a working session, so attendees will spend most of it in groups, talking about ideas.
 - The notes from this session will be circulated after the Research Summit.
 - CNCS hopes to engage attendees in a learning community after the Research Summit so that they can continue the discussions that start in this session.
- Diana referred meeting attendees to a handout in their meeting materials with an overview of this session and key questions.
- She then described the format of the session.
 - **Small-group discussions (30 to 35 minutes).** Session participants will break into small groups. Each small group will address one of the four questions on the session handout.
 - **Reporting out (20 minutes).** Each small group will identify the top three to five ideas that emerge from their discussion, with a focus on ideas that will be useful to the group at this working session and the broader community, and that can help shape the broader CNCS community's collective research agenda moving forward.
- Diana identified facilitators of each small group, and the question from the working session handout that each group would consider.
 - 1: What do we know about the impacts of national service on communities, members, and organizations, and what are the gaps in our knowledge? (Facilitator: Kate Smiles)
 - 2: How should national service be assessed for impacts and/or return on investment? What issues may need to be addressed to improve measurement of the value of national service? (Facilitator: Christopher Spera)
 - 3: How can we assess the impact of hard-to-evaluate AmeriCorps programs, such as direct service in small or rural organizations, intermediary models, disaster services, etc.? (Facilitator: Carla Ganiel)
 - 4: Given the types of programs within CNCS and the diversity of projects that use national service members, how can a common conception of national service, its value to members and communities, and its impact be communicated most effectively? What common metrics could be used to measure and aggregate the impact of national service across different types of service programs? (Facilitator: Patrick Triano)
- The small groups met and recorded key points to be reported out.

- Diana reopened the full session and asked facilitators to report out. Carla wrote down key points on pages of a flip chart.

SMALL GROUP 1: What do we know about the impacts of national service on communities, members, and organizations, and what are the gaps in our knowledge?

- **Resource limitations.**¹
 - Attaining knowledge about the impacts of national service on communities, members, and organizations may require more resources than are available.
- **More questions than answers.**
 - **Expectations from CNCS and commissions** sometimes are unclear. If the State Service Commission is asking for things, they should be giving the organization more about the question, as well as the resources to answer it.
- **Shift from member to community impact.**
 - Where before organizations were dealing with volunteer impact, now they need to determine the impact on the client and the community. Sometimes they are unsure about how to figure out client and community impact.
- **Collecting data from hard-to-reach populations.**
 - It is challenging to look at and measure consumer impact. For example, if a client with Alzheimer's disease is unable to provide information, is it acceptable to collect information from the client's children?
- **Are we measuring the right things?**
 - Reporting is tied to funding; however, organizations often measure the wrong things. It would be helpful to have more guidance regarding what to measure.
- **Do we have the right performance measures?**
 - Current performance measures do not adequately reflect impact. Performance measures may not be aligned with what organizations actually want to be measuring.
- **Organizational change is important.** How can organizations communicate the effect of this type of change?
- **What is a real result?** Organizations need to know how to capture it.
- **Measuring multiple activities versus focusing on a few.**
 - Capturing lots of different activities is difficult.
 - When a group is doing one thing, they know what to measure, but when they are doing multiple things, it can be harder to make good decisions about what to measure.
- Diana asked if people in the other small groups had thoughts to add. People in the other groups said they discussed similar issues, but they did not add specific ideas.

¹ Items in bold font within report-outs are those that Carla recorded on flip chart pages.

SMALL GROUP 2: How should national service be assessed for impacts and/or return on investment (ROI)? What issues may need to be addressed to improve measurement of the value of national service?

- This group said it had notes on its discussion, which had been enriching. It would provide its notes to CNCS after this working session.
- The group would report on the top six issues that emerged in its discussion. Three related to ROI, and three to assessment.
- **ROI**
 - **Member development.** Programs differ in how they affect members. Therefore, this should be measured differently from one program to another.
 - **A logic model or theory of change should shape measurement.** The small group discussed developing an overarching CNCS logic model or theory of change.
 - **Feedback from people served.** Diana asked if there were ideas about how to capture this information. Working session participants did not have ideas about how to do so.
- **Assessment**
 - **Measurement and intangibles.** We need to make room for both measurable things and also intangible impacts coming out of these programs.
 - **Sharing lessons across programs.** This can help with assessment. Diana asked if the small group had thoughts on how to facilitate this sharing. They did not, other than thinking it would be helpful for CNCS to facilitate communication among programs doing similar types of work. Diana noted that this was a good opportunity for her to put in a plug for the new CNCS Evidence Exchange (<http://www.nationalservice.gov/impact-our-nation/evidence-exchange>), an online collection of information housing research reports from CNCS programs.
 - **Thinking of performance as specific to the program, not “what CNCS wants.”** Programs sometimes try to fit their outcome measures to what they think CNCS wants.
- Diana opened the floor to input from the other small groups.
 - A working session participant noted that evaluation is a complex field of study in which people can be trained up to the PhD level. She pointed out the difficulty in evaluating programs effectively as a non-expert in this area.
 - Diana replied that CNCS has developed a core curriculum on evaluation. She acknowledged it does not cover everything, but she added that it does provide some important information. She invited working session participants to check it out and let her and others at CNCS know what they think of it.
 - Another working session participant said that he has found the online core curricular material on evaluation to be outstanding for people with a specific type of core CNCS program. However, he said, if you have a program that deviates from what can be measured through a randomized controlled trial (RCT), then the core curriculum is not as helpful. He suggested that, as CNCS expands materials available to practitioners, it put together more training for programs that don't fit into an RCT assessment model.

- **Disconnect between CNCS and local programs.** Another working session participant observed a disconnection between CNCS and the requirements being sent to local programs. He suggested getting CNCS staff into the field more often to address this issue.

SMALL GROUP 3: How can we assess the impact of hard-to-evaluate AmeriCorps programs, such as direct service in small or rural organizations, intermediary models, disaster services, etc.?

- The person reporting out for this small group noted that they had talked about some of the same topics as other groups, so she would focus on ideas that had not yet been covered.
- **Logic model becomes challenging when you have multiple problems, interventions, etc.**
 - They would like to follow the logic model and theory of change from problem statement to performance measures, but if doing so for every problem statement could get difficult.
 - This is especially true for multi-focus intermediaries.
- **Multi-focus intermediaries—collections of multiple interventions.** Because multi-focus intermediaries use collections of interventions, it becomes difficult to implement a single evaluation plan.
 - Diana asked whether the group had discussed whether all the interventions needed to be evaluated. The person reporting on the discussion said that they assumed they needed to evaluate them all.
 - **Community capacity outcome—a different theory of change.** However, the group's reported added, they discussed how an overarching multi-focus intermediary model and theory of change, especially in rural areas, could be useful and meaningful, as the multi-focus intermediary would be aimed at building the capacity of the community, and so figuring out how to assess the overall capacity of the community would be good to do.
 - **Quality of life?** A working session participant referred to quality of life standards used in international development that measure a host of community variables, including violence and mass transit. She noted that when the small group had been speaking of standards for a whole community, she thought of this measurement tool.
 - **Human Development Index (HDI).** Someone in the working session identified the quality of life tool that another participant had mentioned as the HDI. Another participant noted that the HDI is not very sensitive to change. It was noted that a community version of the HDI would be helpful.
- **Test your theory—is the way you think your program works the way everyone else thinks it works?**
 - Qualitative data collection might be helpful, even just to test the theory of change midstream. They could talk to beneficiaries in focus groups to ask them if the program is working and why, to help understand whether they are measuring the right things.
- **Contribution versus attribution.**
 - It is sometimes hard to determine whether something is an impact or an outcome.
- **Challenges with comparison groups.**
 - In scatter site programs or as multi-focus intermediaries, small-group participants said, they wanted to obtain comparison data, but they ran into problems because groups did not want to admit they were not doing as well as others.

SMALL GROUP 4: Given the types of programs within CNCS and the diversity of projects that use national service members, how can a common conception of national service, its value to members and communities, and its impact be communicated most effectively? What common metrics could be used to measure and aggregate the impact of national service across different types of service programs?

- **Tension: national performance measures vs. actual outcomes of programs; do national performance measures tell the right story?**
 - In concept, the presenter said, the national performance measures are great, as they make it possible to group and compare disparate grantees and programs.
 - However, she said, in their work, many in her small group had found immense pressure to fit within the measures, and they had run into questions in some cases of whether the measures really applied to them, and whether they provided value.
 - The small group also talked about the value of these measures when CNCS goes to Congress and asks for funding. They wondered whether they were helpful in this context.
- **Multiple stakeholders, multiple outcomes.**
 - **Member development, beneficiary outcomes.** Small-group participants discussed uncertainty about what metrics they were looking for, and to whom those metrics would be communicated. They were wondering if there were one performance measurement that could tell all of the groups what they needed to know, or if they needed to find different ways to speak to different people. Specifically, they were trying to determine where to focus if they do not have time to do both kinds of measurement.
- **Meta-data analysis.** This would be meta-analysis across programs.
 - A working session participant related that he has been doing analyses for national assessment for the Social Innovation Fund. It is a very flexible analysis, and similar analyses could be conducted of all of the impact evaluations coming out of CNCS. The evaluations could be grouped, coded, and quantified into impact size metrics.
- **Stories and data.** Both help create a full picture of work done in CNCS programs.
- Diana opened the floor to comments.
 - **Assumption: measurement is the best way to communicate.** A working session participant noted that it is often assumed that measurement is the best way to convey the value of national service, but that maybe that isn't correct. She referred to an earlier discussion in which Bill Basl, Director of AmeriCorps State and National, talked about telling stories to convey impact to Congress, as an accompaniment to a report.
- **Stories—why do we think Congress wants data?** Another meeting participant related that she had been coming to Washington, DC for 20 years to visit with legislators from her state, and she said they had never asked her about national performance measures. Instead, they seemed to like stories.

NEXT STEPS/FOLLOW-UP ITEMS

- Diana said that the conversation had been fantastic.
- CNCS will circulate notes on this working session and follow up with Research Summit participants about ways to continue the conversation begun in this session.

Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)
Working Session 2 at the CNCS Research Summit
Understanding and Measuring the Value of National Service – Session 2
Summary of Discussion

Wednesday, December 16, 2015

2:15–3:15 p.m.

Washington, DC

Moderated by Dr. Diana Epstein, Senior Research Analyst, CNCS Office of Research and Evaluation, and Carla Ganiel, Senior Program and Project Specialist, AmeriCorps State and National

INTRODUCTIONS

- Dr. Diana Epstein thanked attendees for coming to the Research Summit and to the current session. She introduced herself and Carla Ganiel as the moderators of the session.
- She then explained the goals, plans, and structure of the session.
 - **Small-group discussions (about 30 minutes).** Session attendees will break into small groups, each of which will discuss one of the questions on the handout for this session in the folder provided to Research Summit participants. Each small group will have a facilitator. The facilitator or someone else in the group should take notes, which at the end of the small-group discussion should cover the top five themes. It is fine for small groups to focus on gaps, but they should be gaps in CNCS’s collective research agenda.
 - **Reporting out (20 to 25 minutes).** Each small group will identify the top five themes that emerged from their discussion. The report-out should be clear, cogent, and concrete.
 - The goal of the working session is to build a learning community that includes all Research Summit attendees and to move forward with a richer conversation about the discussions begun in the working session.
- Diana announced group topics and facilitators.
 - 1: What do we know about the impacts of national service on communities, members, and organizations, and what are the gaps in our knowledge? (Facilitator: Dr. Jodi Benenson)
 - 2: How should national service be assessed for impacts and/or return on investment? What issues may need to be addressed to improve measurement of the value of national service? (Facilitator: Dr. Bob Grimm)
 - 3: How can we assess the impact of hard-to-evaluate AmeriCorps programs, such as direct service in small or rural organizations, intermediary models, disaster services, etc.? (Facilitator: Brandee Menoher)
 - 4: Given the types of programs within CNCS and the diversity of projects that use national service members, how can a common conception of national service, its value to members and communities, and its impact be communicated most effectively? What common metrics could be used to measure and aggregate the impact of national service across different types of service programs? (Facilitator: Dr. Raegan Miller)
- The small groups met, talked about their items, and recorded key points to be reported out.

- Diana reopened the full session and asked facilitators to report out. Carla wrote down key points on pages of a flip chart.

SMALL GROUP 1: What do we know about the impacts of national service on communities, members, and organizations, and what are the gaps in our knowledge?

- **What we know can inform what we do—research from one program can inform another.²**
 - The small group noted that what people in CNCS know can inform what they do.
 - One small-group participant talked about using Reading Corps work to think about a survey being developed for her organization. The group thought about a study mentioned earlier about volunteering and jobs and how that might influence what they are doing.
- **Methods: storytelling, summary data from multiple organizations.**
 - The small group talked about getting creative with methodologies, such as storytelling, and putting stories in the context of what they are doing in organizations and communities, to answer some questions they have around national service.
 - They also discussed putting together a summary of selected data. Realizing that many organizations are putting together their own analyses, as a small group they discussed how to bring these data together.
- **Who serves and why?—motivations, generational trends.**
 - One small-group participant pointed out that there is less published in scholarly journals than they would like, though all participants noted that it is helpful that CNCS and partner organizations produce great reports.
 - Small-group participants are curious about motivations—who serves? Who is serving whom? Is there an influence from previous generations, and will this be clearer as programs mature?
- **Demand for service is greater than supply of service opportunities—**
 - The small group discussed where people are applying for jobs, and where there is greater demand than supply.
- **Implications of turnover, sustainability.**
 - Where someone is working can influence if he or she has the opportunity to serve for a second year. What are the implications for the structure of the organization?
- **Effects of civic participation/national service on the economy.**
 - There are many effects of civic engagement and participation, but what are the implications of national service on the nation’s economy? This is a very macro-level question, but it could be answered at community or census tract levels.

SMALL GROUP 2: How should national service be assessed for impacts and/or return on investment? What issues may need to be addressed to improve measurement of the value of national service?

- **Senior Corps—benefits to low-income volunteers.**

² Items in bold font within report-outs are those that Carla recorded on flip chart pages.

- In Senior Corps programs, with seniors at 200 percent or less of the poverty line, is there a way to look at the benefit to the volunteer of participating in the program?
- **Collecting baseline data to measure change over time—new programs.**
 - There is a real opportunity when new programs are starting to obtain baseline data.
- **Four buckets of evaluation.** The group came up with these categories because there are so many levels of evaluation for many CNCS programs.
 - **Effects on recipients.** These are the effects CNCS programs most often try to measure.
 - **Effects on volunteer.**
 - **Effects on organization.** These include the contribution the program has made to the organization overall, not just the impact on which they are already reporting.
 - **Effects on broader community.**
- **Impact of national service participants embedded in larger programs—collective impact.**
 - The small group discussed whether it is important to isolate the impact of an AmeriCorps or Senior Corps program from where it is embedded. They also discussed the importance of bearing in mind that they are serving as part of a larger collaborative or partnership to impact a group.
 - They noted that there seem to be models already of that kind of collaborative work, such as Social Innovation Fund programs.
- **Case studies.** Case studies and how they evaluate collective impact could be helpful.
- **Connect grantees with similar evaluation goals.**
 - This can help people not work in silos, as well as fostering national conversations.
 - Diana asked whether the small group had come up with good examples of where connecting grantees with similar evaluation goals has been done effectively, or of methods or techniques for facilitating that type of connection. She explained that CNCS has thought about this as well but has struggled with finding the right forum. The small group did not have examples, methods, or techniques—just the suggestion.

SMALL GROUP 3: How can we assess the impact of hard-to-evaluate AmeriCorps programs, such as direct service in small or rural organizations, intermediary models, disaster services, etc.?

- **Evaluation requirements and budget constraints.**
 - The small group discussed the importance of right-sizing evaluation requirements based on the organizational budget, especially for small, rural nonprofits. Small-group participants do not feel that the level of rigor is appropriate for these organizations.
 - Diana asked if they were aware that organizations of less than \$500,000 have different evaluation requirements. The presenter for this small group replied that they are aware of that, but that these organizations still sometimes are really struggling even if they are smaller than the dollar threshold mentioned.
- **Standardization in data collection and analysis—economies of scale.**
 - The group asked whether CNCS can provide more tools that are standardized for implementation, such as tools for survey implementation, training and technical assistance, and access to a data management system or data submission process.

- This would help create some economies of scale so that CNCS can understand data, outcomes, and impacts at a macro level.
- **Evaluate member impacts.** The small group noted that this has gone dormant in the last decade or so, but they think it is worth considering bringing back this type of evaluation.
- **How should smaller organizations build/communicate evidence?**
 - The small group discussed allowing more colorful, flavorful, real evaluation reports to be submitted as evidence of effectiveness, with output data in performance measurement fields.
 - Diana asked for clarification, noting that there is reporting for performance measures and the evaluation report, and no requirement to report for performance measures as part of the evaluation report. Carla pointed out that programs submit separate evaluation reports.
 - A working session participant explained that changes this year mean that those who are heavily involved now in grants competition are looking at how the focus has shifted to theories of change and logic models, and so they are working on understanding how that will play out for smaller organizations that don't have the resources to do evaluation. Diana said this was really related to the evidence section. The participant agreed, but she said that these things relate to the same issue: how they measure and display impact and outcomes, and how that plays out for national direct versus small programs.

SMALL GROUP 4: Given the types of programs within CNCS and the diversity of projects that use national service members, how can a common conception of national service, its value to members and communities, and its impact be communicated most effectively? What common metrics could be used to measure and aggregate the impact of national service across different types of service programs?

- **Multi-faceted approach.**
 - **ROI, economic impact.** This approach involves focus on these factors, as well as the relationship of impact to public health or education. It also involves relating examination of outcomes and impact to the larger goals of the organization, program, and CNCS.
 - **Great stories (from evaluations).** This ensures that members will be associated with more than dollars.
 - **Member and beneficiary outcomes.** To that end the small group talked about members as recipients of services as well as the actual end recipient or client.
 - **Preventative/long-term impacts: a day without a member.** The small group discussed this strategy as similar to marketing strategies and noted the importance of being able to look at the counterfactual. This is a way to get past the complexity of explaining what they do as a unit by focusing instead on what would be lacking if they were not there.
- In summation, the reporter for this small group said they want to make sure they are getting across the heart of what they do, from the member perspective, and in terms of the services they provide.

NEXT STEPS/FOLLOW-UP ITEMS

- Diana said that the conversations had been great.
- CNCS will circulate notes on this working session and will follow up with Research Summit participants about ways to continue the conversation begun in the session.

- Diana encouraged working session participants to attend the closing panel session at the Research Summit if possible.