



AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes

Summary Report Executive Summary

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Executive Summary and Key Findings

Do national service experiences encourage AmeriCorps members to stay civically engaged and pursue service-oriented careers? This question is central to this report, which examines survey results for former members of the AmeriCorps State and National (ASN) program, the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) program, and the AmeriCorps VISTA program.

The purpose of this study was to understand and document long-term outcomes for AmeriCorps alumni, particularly in four outcome areas: development of career-oriented soft skills, career pathways, sense of community, and civic engagement. By comparing results for cohorts of AmeriCorps alumni who completed their service in 2012, 2009, and 2004 (two, five, and 10 years before the survey project began), the study also identified outcomes at different life stages.

The study addressed the following three research questions:

- In what ways does participating in a national service program influence members' a) development of career-oriented soft skills, b) career pathways, c) sense of community, and d) civic engagement?
- In what ways, if any, do member outcomes vary by the six Serve America Act focus areas (disaster services, economic opportunity, education, environmental stewardship, healthy futures, and veterans and military families), and by the particular type of service programs (ASN, NCCC, VISTA) and program experiences?
- In what ways, if any, do member outcomes vary by life stage?

Research Methods

An online survey was fielded using the Dillman (2000) approach,¹ which involved sending alumni a pre-survey announcement, an email invitation, and a series of phased reminders delivered by email, phone, and mail. Alumni who did not respond online were offered the option to complete the survey by telephone or mail back a paper survey. The survey drew largely on the exit survey AmeriCorps administers to all members at the completion of their service, and was modified and pilot tested prior to widespread administration. The questionnaire items asked about demographics, life stage information, AmeriCorps service experience, development of career-oriented soft skills, career pathways, sense of community, civic engagement, AmeriCorps branding, service focus area, and willingness to participate in a follow-up survey.

The sampling frame consisted of all eligible alumni in the AmeriCorps Data Warehouse, an administrative data system that contains records of all members who enrolled for a term of service. Eligible alumni were full-time, half-time, and reduced half-time former AmeriCorps members from ASN, NCCC, and VISTA, whose most recent service experience ended in 2012, 2009, or 2004. Analysis of the data showed that there were 85,777 alumni who met the survey's eligibility criteria. JBS drew separate equal probability samples from each sampling stratum. Ultimately, 7,199 sample members were contacted, from which 1,468 alumni provided usable survey results, for an overall response rate of 20 percent. Response rates varied by sampling stratum, program, and alumni year.

Nonresponse bias analysis was conducted to determine if nonresponse was random or biased due to

¹ Dillman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and Internet surveys: The tailored design method* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

systematic differences in characteristics between respondents and non-respondents.² Among the variables examined, the relative bias was as low as three percent of the sample mean for age and 2009 alumni but was 23 percent for VISTA alumni and 2012 alumni, 24 percent for alumni who used their education award and 27 percent for ASN alumni. Two steps were taken to adjust for nonresponse: 1) nonresponse weights were applied to each sampling cohort to correct for nonresponse bias across programs and years, 2) regression analyses were used for assessing outcomes, which held constant the effect of demographic and service characteristics.

Research Question One: Influence of National Service on Key Outcomes

Research Question 1 asks, “*In what ways does participating in a national service program influence members’ a) development of career-oriented soft skills, b) career pathways, c) sense of community, and d) civic engagement?*”

Table 1: Key Outcome Definitions and Measures

Outcome	Measures
<i>Career-oriented Soft Skills:</i> The wide range of skills and abilities needed to succeed in the workplace. Essential personal attributes needed for success in almost every job.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Competency scale ($\alpha = .85$ pre and $.83$ post) • Self-efficacy scale. ($\alpha = .90$) • Career-specific Skills (self) scale ($\alpha = .89$)³ • Career-relevant Skills (others) scale ($\alpha = .96$)
<i>Career Pathways:</i> The extent to which AmeriCorps members maintain a service orientation in their choice of careers, and whether serving with AmeriCorps helped to define and shape an individual’s professional goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career Pathways scale ($\alpha = .90$) • Item asking how service fit into the alumnus’ career pathway • Two items asking what the alumnus had done in the six months immediately following AmeriCorps, and whether the alumnus obtained a job directly related to AmeriCorps service in the six months after his/her service ended • Item asking about the alumnus’ current career activities
<i>Sense of Community:</i> The formation and maintenance of strong bonds with communities and investment in the community’s welfare.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Item related to trust in community members. • Three items asking about confidence in corporations, the media, and public schools • Sense of Community scale ($\alpha = .80$)
<i>Civic Engagement:</i> Attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors consistent with active involvement in civic and community life, such as participating in community organizations or voting in national and local elections.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic Participation in the last 12-months scale ($\alpha = .68$) • Political and Community Engagement in the last 12 months scale ($\alpha = .71$) • AmeriCorps Effect on Civic Participation scale ($\alpha = .90$) • Civic Self-efficacy scale ($\alpha = .91$) • Voting Behavior index with items on registration and voting • Item measuring boycotting behavior

Career-oriented Soft Skills: AmeriCorps alumni report having high levels of career-oriented soft skills including cultural competency, self-efficacy, and career-specific skills for interacting with others and for self-management. In each skill area, alumni reported that their skills had increased from before AmeriCorps service or that AmeriCorps service had helped build these skills.

- Nine out of ten alumni agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed exploring differences with others and interacting with different people, respected others’ values, and were confident

² Researchers used a relative nonresponse bias measure that is derived by dividing a measure of the effect of the response rate on the difference in respondent and non-respondent means by the mean of the entire sample. Assessing Nonresponse Bias in the Consumer Expenditure Interview Survey King SL, B Chopova, J Edgar, J M Gonzalez, DE McGrath, and L Tan. Paper Presented at the Joint Statistical Meetings 2009 accessed at <http://www.bls.gov/osmr/pdf/st090220.pdf>

³ The career-specific skills scale consists of two factors, one pertaining to managing self and another pertaining to interacting with others.

interacting with diverse people. Alumni showed gains in all these areas compared to before service, with the largest gains in confidence interacting with diverse people.

- Nine out of ten alumni agreed or strongly agreed that they could solve difficult problems, persist when opposed, accomplish goals, handle unexpected events and unforeseen situations, remain calm, cope with difficulties, and identify multiple solutions. Alumni rated their current skills as higher than at pre-service, with the greatest gains being in their abilities to deal with unexpected events and unforeseen situations.
- Most alumni rated themselves as having good or excellent career-specific skills, including written and oral communication, teamwork, collaboration with diverse individuals, professional conduct, independence, planning, time management, prioritization, conflict management, adaptability, persistence, and goal orientation. On average, 85 percent of alumni reported good or excellent skills in interacting with others and 95 percent reported good or excellent skills in self-management. On average, alumni said that AmeriCorps helped somewhat or a great deal in building their skills in interacting with others (85 percent) and in self-management (95 percent).

Career Pathways: While there was some diversity in career pathways, most alumni were students prior to AmeriCorps (63 percent), and of those who were engaged in education six months prior to AmeriCorps, analysis shows that 44 percent were working in the government or nonprofit sector six months after AmeriCorps and 56 percent are working in the government or nonprofit sector now.

Other alumni attended school after AmeriCorps, furthering their education goals. At the time of the survey, more than half of alumni reported working in the nonprofit (33 percent) or government sector (25 percent). Following service, approximately one quarter of participants (27 percent) obtained a job directly connected to the organization or agency in which they served. Fifteen percent are currently in a position related to their service. A majority of alumni (80 percent) indicated their service experience was worthwhile in furthering their careers. Most alumni responded that AmeriCorps service either aligned with their existing career path or directed them towards a service-related field, with 34 percent indicating that their career path turned in the direction of service-related work following AmeriCorps. After service, 43 percent of alumni stayed in their community of service.

Sense of Community: Overall, alumni reported having a strong sense of community, with an average of 82 percent of alumni agreeing that they felt a strong personal attachment to their community, were aware of community needs, felt an obligation to contribute to their community, planned or were actively involved in community issues, and voted in elections. Alumni reported a stronger sense of community at the time of the survey compared to before service, with an average of 22 percent more alumni having agreed or strongly agreed they were involved in the community. The strongest gains were in alumni who agreed or strongly agreed that they are aware of the important needs in their community and that they have a personal attachment to their community. Two thirds of alumni reported that they can trust most or all of the people in their neighborhood. At the same time, less than half of alumni reported some or a great deal of confidence in corporations (40 percent), or the media (42 percent), while a large majority (83 percent) reported some or a great deal of confidence in public schools.

Civic Engagement: AmeriCorps alumni reported high levels of civic engagement and civic self-efficacy and indicated that their AmeriCorps experience influenced their civic engagement. Almost 80 percent of alumni indicated that they definitely or probably had civic self-efficacy, defined as the ability to deal with community problems by taking a range of actions that include creating a plan to address an issue, getting others involved, organizing and running a meeting, identifying individuals or groups who could help, or contacting an elected official. More than half of alumni noted that their service experience had made them more likely to engage in civic activities such as volunteering for or donating money to a cause they cared

about. Almost all alumni (94 percent) are registered to vote and 89 percent reported voting in the last presidential election.

Research Question Two: Variation in Key Outcomes by Focus Areas, Programs, and Experience

Research Question 2 asks, *“In what ways, if any, do member outcomes vary by the six Serve America Act focus areas (disaster services, economic opportunity, education, environmental stewardship, healthy futures, and veterans and military families), and by the particular type of service programs (ASN, NCCC, VISTA) and program experiences?”*

Overall, there were no strong patterns between outcomes and service area focus or service program. Generally, in each outcome area, small numbers of service focus areas or program cohorts were significantly associated with a few outcomes. Similarly, no set of focus areas or service program cohorts was significantly related to all of the outcome areas or to all of the outcomes within an outcome area.

Service experience variables were more often significantly related to outcomes. To measure the effect of program experience on outcomes, the survey asked alumni about several aspects of their service experience: how many terms they had served, in which programs they served, whether their final service term was full-time, whether they had completed it, and whether they had used their education award. Alumni also responded to questions about satisfaction with their AmeriCorps experience, as well as questions asking them to rate several aspects of their service experience, which were used to derive a positive service experience scale and a negative service experience scale. The most consistent association was between a positive service experience and more positive outcomes in all outcome areas. Other measures of service experience were significantly related to several outcomes, but there were no consistent patterns across outcome areas or measures within an outcome area.

Career-oriented soft skills were strongly related to having a positive service experience. Alumni that reported having a more positive service experience had significantly higher levels of each of the career-oriented soft skills, including cultural competency, post-AmeriCorps self-efficacy, and career-specific skills, both for managing self and for interacting with others. A positive service experience also increased alumni’s likelihood of attributing the gains in their career-specific skills to AmeriCorps, as did alumni’s greater satisfaction with their service experience.

A positive service experience and greater overall satisfaction with AmeriCorps were also significantly related to higher career pathways scale scores. Additional variables influencing career pathways included having multiple terms of service, having a job with an organization related to service both six months after service and at the time of the survey, and completing the last term of service, which was associated with greater frequency of alumni listing AmeriCorps on their resume and with currently having a job with an organization associated with the alumni’s service.

As with career-oriented soft skills and career pathways, the most consistent predictor of sense of community and civic participation outcomes was having a positive service experience. A more positive service experience was significantly related to increased sense of community post-AmeriCorps, trust in neighbors, trust in corporations, trust in the media, attributing changes in civic engagement to AmeriCorps service, increased discussion and thinking on civic issues, and increased likelihood of boycotting a service or product.

Research Question Three: Variation in Key Outcomes by Life Stage

Research Question 3 asks, *“In what ways, if any, do member outcomes vary by life stage?”* The answer to this research question focuses on alumni’s personal characteristics obtained from survey questions about

demographics, life stages, and the skills and abilities that alumni brought to their AmeriCorps service.

In general, demographics, life stage, and pre-service skills had little effect on most alumni outcomes. Demographics had little effect on career-oriented soft skills, sense of community, and civic engagement. Alumni with less than a four-year degree were more likely to encourage civic engagement among others. With regard to career pathways, alumni who had less than a four-year degree at the time of the survey were more likely to be currently unemployed and less likely to be currently working at a public service job. They were also less likely to be serving in a position at or directly connected to the agency that sponsored the AmeriCorps program in which they served. Alumni's life stage did have an effect on self-efficacy, with those who were unemployed, working in the public sector, at a nonprofit, or at a government agency, prior to service reporting higher post-service self-efficacy. Alumni's ratings of their self-efficacy also decreased with age. Alumni employed in the private sector prior to service were more likely to be employed in the private sector post-service. Alumni who were older, in school before AmeriCorps, or parents or caregivers at the time of service were more likely to be currently engaged in service. Alumni's post-service sense of community and civic engagement was largely independent of alumni's life stage. As expected, alumni's pre-service skills were significantly associated with their corresponding post-service levels. Career pathways outcomes were independent of pre-service skills. Higher pre-service sense of community predicted higher civic engagement, and higher pre-service cultural competency and self-efficacy predicted higher career-specific skills.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, respondents indicated that there were substantial benefits to participation in AmeriCorps programs, including AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps NCCC, and AmeriCorps VISTA. Across all alumni, a vast majority stated that they felt they made a contribution to the community (92 percent), gained an understanding of the community they served (93 percent), and were exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world (87 percent). Due to participation in AmeriCorps, a majority of respondents stated that they were more likely to volunteer and to participate in community organizations. In terms of the impact of service on alumni's careers, respondents reported that participation in AmeriCorps helped them figure out the next steps of their career and increased their ability to work with others and to respond to unexpected challenges. In open-ended responses, AmeriCorps participants stated that their experience helped them to define their values, made them more likely to pursue a career in service, and had a positive impact on their life even after their term of service ended. Positive outcomes, on the whole, were largely consistent across AmeriCorps participants and independent of their service programs, focus areas, or personal characteristics. The key consistent driver of successful outcomes in developing career-oriented soft skills, having a career pathway that led to work in the government or nonprofit sector, and maintaining a sense of community and civic engagement after AmeriCorps was a positive service experience. There were also some differences in outcomes related to other service experience factors, but no strong patterns.

The association between satisfaction and positive service experience with successful later outcomes provides support for the usefulness of measures of satisfaction and service experience quality in post-service surveys. Support for an association between satisfaction immediately following service and later satisfaction and positive outcomes would be strengthened by a longitudinal study following a cohort of AmeriCorps members. Support for survey findings may also be substantially strengthened by an impact evaluation using a benchmarking or comparison group that matched alumni on key characteristics.