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Research Objectives, Background, and Conceptual Framework

Even as the Great Recession draws to a close, some working age adults remain disconnected, neither working nor attending school. Although the unemployment rate is the lowest it has been in seven years, the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2015 has consistently reported unemployment rates among 18-to-34-year-olds to higher than those for adults overall, with even higher rates among minority populations. Millennials are pursuing advanced degrees in greater numbers than any previous generation, yet college graduates face significant job readiness issues in an increasingly competitive marketplace (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014).

In response to these challenges, many of these young adults, both connected and disconnected, have chosen AmeriCorps as the path to build their employment skills, earn an income, and get a job. According to a 2007 CNCS study, *AmeriCorps: Changing Lives, Changing America*, a majority of AmeriCorps alumni within the study period report gaining life and job skills, including leadership, teamwork, time-management, and hands-on experience within a field of interest. The study further reports that 71% of alumni were incentivized to join AmeriCorps by the prospect of earning a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award; and 41% of AmeriCorps members went on to earn a 4-year college degree within three years of entering AmeriCorps. In addition, the CNCS study, *Still Serving: Measuring the Eight-year Impact of AmeriCorps on Alumni*, shows that participation in AmeriCorps strengthens civic attitudes and behaviors, and makes members more likely to choose careers in public service.

The benefits gained from service for both the agency and the individual are themselves considerable. But it is important to determine how the skills acquisition, training, and experience gained in AmeriCorps have shaped individuals' perceptions, their job seeking, and ultimately, their career paths. Approximately 80,000 individuals are serving this year. Since its inception in 1994, the AmeriCorps program has engaged more than 1,000,000 individuals of all ages, backgrounds and abilities in providing critical, mission-driven service to the nation. This undoubtedly fills a substantial need for both individuals and organizations -- but how well? What is missing to measure AmeriCorps' impact is evidence-based data on AmeriCorps alumni potential for employment from the perspectives of organizations and individuals, and if AmeriCorps service ultimately leads to job creation at that organization.

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This study will amass primary data to answer the following research questions:

1. How does AmeriCorps' State and National Program participation contribute to the creation of job opportunities?
2. How does serving in an AmeriCorps position help individuals of different ages, education levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds, disabilities, and those who live in urban/rural areas find job opportunities?
3. How specifically does it help disconnected youth between the ages of 18-34?
4. What are AmeriCorps member perceptions and actions towards employment?
5. How do different types of AmeriCorps service (e.g., part-time, full-time) affect job opportunities?
6. What perceptions do organizations have of AmeriCorps program quality and the qualifications and skills of its members?

Research Design and Work Plan

Relevant background research.

There is a small body of qualitative and quantitative research dedicated to assessing the impact of volunteerism on employment; however, findings are mixed. Erel & Tomlinson (2005) conducted a study in the UK. They find that volunteerism, in and of itself, is not enough to help refugee women find employment. However, volunteering can enable access to resources including information, training and job networks. Paine, McKay, & Moro (2013) also find that volunteering has a significant, albeit weak, effect on work entry. The frequency of volunteering, however, does make a difference on employment outcomes. The evidence on job retention is weaker, and volunteering appears to have zero or even negative effects on wage progression. Hirst (2001) does not find evidence that voluntary participation is a significant factor in positive labor market outcomes.

A 2009 study of members of formal volunteer organizations in Italy shows that only 24% of unemployed participants attribute success in finding employment to their volunteer experience. Yet, a subsequent regression analysis shows that participation in the associations' informal activities and participation in group-work with other volunteers have a positive, significant effect on the probability

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of finding a job (Antoni, 2009). And a longitudinal study conducted by Morrow-Howell (2014) finds that volunteerism for Experience Corps older adult members creates pathways to other engagements, including work, social, and civic activities.

A 2013 study, *Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment*, is the most critical work related to the framing of this current project, finding that volunteering is associated with a 27% increase in the odds of finding employment. Volunteers without a high school diploma and volunteers living in rural areas show an even higher increase -- 51% and 55%, respectively. However, the relationship between volunteering and employment is shown to be relatively stable across gender, age, ethnicity, geographical area, and job market conditions. It should be noted, though, that a study limitation may confound the results: The study does not differentiate among individuals who volunteer from individuals who perform unpaid labor for credit, such as interns, or individuals participating in specific government-sponsored programs who are paid to perform service. These groups may be either more or less likely than strictly unpaid volunteers to secure employment through their service. In addition, this study does not differentiate when volunteering leads to employment or employment leads to volunteering. And, finally, the study does not determine why individuals are volunteering or participating in service, which could impact employment outcomes.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses testing.

This study seeks to build from previous research, addressing gaps while exploring new areas. The purpose is to determine where and how job opportunities are created, how organizations perceive AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps members, and how different types of service prepare individuals for employment.

This is an inductive study that seeks to understand what factors lead to the hiring of AmeriCorps members from both the individual and organization's perspectives. This pilot study does not seek to test a preconceived hypothesis. The primary goal of this research is to provide evidence-based qualitative data missing from CNCS research in the targeted area of Economic Opportunity to determine how employment opportunities among AmeriCorps members are created. The results may help CNCS to train members in areas or skills that lead to greater employment outcomes and to ultimately support organizations.

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Data sources and data collection method. This is a mixed methods study. Utilizing a snowball sampling method starting with CNCS contacts, this project will incorporate expert interviews with national and state staff to ensure all relevant information and national and state-level trends are captured in the areas of job creation and employment. CNCS and participating state service commission staff will also serve in an advisory role for this project, helping identify key informants and inform focus group questions. State service commission staff from Arizona and staff from America's Service Commissions (ASC) have served in an advisory role to assist with the development of this proposal.

Since the organizational perspective is critical to determining if and how job creation occurred, we will survey approximately 250 organizations that hosted AmeriCorps members from 2011-2015 to determine the hiring status of AmeriCorps members and how other jobs are affected in those organizations in the state of Arizona. Once we have a list of organizations that have hired members, we will follow up with the hired alumni staff and the Executive Director to operationalize if job creation actually occurred. Following are potential interview questions:

- 1) What is the member's position and salary? (establishes quality of job)
- 2) Is it a new position and/or program?
- 3) If it is a new program, have there been more positions added to this new program? (net gain of jobs)
- 4) Do they know of other organizations that have hired AmeriCorps members? If so, which ones?
- 5) What have been the conversations between organizations about AmeriCorps programs and its members?
- 6) What specifically affected the Executive Director's decision to hire the individual?
- 7) Was someone else replaced with this hiring (e.g. was there a net gain in jobs)?

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These brief questions will ensure that the team is capturing whether or not hiring an AmeriCorps member led to job growth for that organization.

Based on these findings, three focus groups with AmeriCorps host organizations and other organizations that have hired AmeriCorps members will be held in different regions of the state: Tucson -- a predominantly Latino region; Flagstaff -- a city with a large Navajo population; and Phoenix -- a large metropolitan area. The purpose of these groups is to understand the organizations' perspectives on employment and AmeriCorps members. Specifically, we will examine what factors lead to the decision to hire or not to hire, how AmeriCorps members are perceived, and how their experiences may vary from the general population.

In addition, we will conduct six focus groups with AmeriCorps alumni who have served from 2011-2015 in these same cities to understand their perspectives on employment, career preparation, career goals, and the job search experience (e.g., do they affiliate themselves with the site where they served or with AmeriCorps?) The purpose of these groups is to determine what types of conversations AmeriCorps alumni have with the greater business community about AmeriCorps. It should be noted that to test this study's methods, this is a one year pilot study to be held in only one state. This study will be inductive in that we will draw upon the input of advisors with CNCS and recent incoming data and questions from the Alumni Survey when shaping this study's final focus group questions.

The team will invite individuals to participate in one of these nine 90-minute focus group sessions, and each participant will receive \$75 for their time. The nine groups include two groups of AmeriCorps members/alumni ages 18-64 in each city, and one group of employers in each city. A convenience sample would be utilized. The state service commission in Arizona will send out a recruitment letter for the focus groups. Individuals who would like to participate in the groups would be asked to contact the ASU research staff.

The focus group method advances shared perspectives and identifies points of consensus as well as disagreement, among participants. These groups will help the research staff better understand individuals' and organizations' beliefs about AmeriCorps service, and how AmeriCorps service helped or does not help in securing employment. The findings will assist organizations in better supporting employment opportunities.

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Analytical methodologies.

The three primary methodologies will be a brief survey followed up by targeted interviews, key informant interviews, and focus groups. The brief organizational survey that determines employment outcomes of AmeriCorps alumni will be analyzed through Qualtrics. Depending on the sample of employers who have hired AmeriCorps alumni over the last five years, statistical tests may be run to determine if there are any predictors to successful employment outcomes. Among variables captured in the survey are the types of organization, size, location, number of AmeriCorps positions in the last five years, and number of AmeriCorps members hired. Out of the 250 AmeriCorps host organizations, a brief follow up interview will be conducted with those organizations who have hired to determine if it led to job creation and to what extent. This data will also be collected in Qualtrics and analyzed to determine AmeriCorps' statewide effect on jobs. These organizations, as well as non-AmeriCorps organizations that have hired, will also be invited to a focus group.

All nine groups will be recorded and transcribed. Detailed notes and memos will be taken from the key informant interviews. The content of these interviews and the focus groups will be coded in the software MAXQDA using open coding that represents overall content themes, ideas, and feelings that emanated from each group. MAXQDA will then help analyze the codes among groups -- how themes are interconnected, their significance, and when they are in dispute. As patterns and themes emerge across transcriptions, and relationships between categories become apparent, each one will be revisited using axial coding and memoing to build theoretical understanding. To assure inter-coder reliability, at least two researchers will code throughout this process to assure agreement of thematic findings.

Project plan.

Before the study begins, the project team will obtain IRB approval, which will be shared with all project partners and CNCS. This study will be conducted over a one-year period, October 1, 2015 through September 30, 2016. The following is a brief overview of major project activities and timeline:

Quarter 1: Expert interviews and organization survey development/administration, focus group question development

Quarters 2, 3: Survey analysis, follow up interviews with organizations, recruitment and

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administration of focus groups, and transcription

Quarter 4: Coding, final analysis and report preparation, dissemination activities

Dissemination Plan

ASU's Morrison Institute for Public Policy (MI) will utilize multiple media to better reach a wide range of audiences. It will engage with policymakers, practitioners and other influential non-researchers in a policy roundtable at which project findings will be released. The roundtable will include a brief of the report findings, as well as a panel that includes a policymaker, a state economic development representative, an organization or business representative, and an AmeriCorps member. The team will also submit the findings to an academic journal for publication, such as *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, as well as present at both academic and practitioner conferences to include the Association on Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), the Points of Light's Conference on Volunteering and Service, and the AmeriCorps State & National Grantee Symposium in September. Other regional trainings may also be included based on recommendations from the advisory committee. America's Service Commissions will also help translate the findings, identifying practices that would be of value to practitioners, and disseminating materials to practitioners.

Organizational Capability

MI has conducted substantive work on a wide variety of subjects from education reform to employment to public finance, human services, economic development and sustainability. To extend its reach, it shares findings through reports, public conferences, panels and forums regionally and statewide, often garnering national attention. Some recent MI publications that pertain to employment include: *To Learn and Earn: The Race for Good Jobs*; *Unlocking Resilience: The Key to Healthy Aging in Arizona*; *Dropped? Latino Education and Arizona's Economic Future*; *The Graduation Cliff: Improving the Post-School Outcomes of Students with Disabilities*; *On the Rise: The Role of Career and Technical Education in Arizona's Future*, and a number of fact sheets and briefs on employment issues.

MI clients have included municipalities, foundations, state government agencies, business organizations and non-profits. Services provided to its clients are customized to individual needs and, in many cases affected policy changes across a diversity of issues. The size of its grants range from

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small private foundation grants to large multi-year federal grants. MI staff work with the ASU grants department to assure all grantee responsibilities are filled or surpassed.

MI is well positioned to disseminate this study's findings to a diverse audience. Housed at Arizona State University (ASU), Morrison Institute for Public Policy bridges the gap between academic scholarship and public policy development. Driven by its mission to improve the quality of life for all, MI first identifies important issues and then conducts timely, applied analysis that informs and advises national, state, and community leaders. Its independent, nonpartisan research agenda has earned it a reputation for insightful, objective analysis that is highly readable and thought-provoking.

The following project team members have expertise that ensures project success:

***Dr. Erica McFadden, MI Senior Policy Analyst: McFadden will administer this project as the PI, assist in data analysis, and ensure project goals are met. She has led and conducted several research studies using both qualitative and quantitative methods, specifically in employment and civic engagement. She has over 20 years of experience working with non-profits in various roles. As a former non-profit executive director and now researcher, she has successfully worked with organizations to conduct needs assessments and feasibility studies as part of their strategic plans, and also has managed national service members in her own organization. Her publications and presentations have focused on social capital, community inclusion, employment, and citizen engagement. As a person with a disability, she also evaluates outcomes among people with disabilities.

***Dr. David Daugherty, MI Associate Director: Daugherty is the co-PI of this project and will assist in the design of the instruments and facilitation of the groups. He has spent more than 30 years as a research methodologist and quantitative and qualitative research specialist. Working in both the private and public sectors, he has been the primary researcher on more than 1,000 survey research projects and served as supervisor for an additional 1,500 projects. He has also moderated more than 1,000 focus group sessions. In all instances when he has served as the primary researcher he has been responsible for study design, instrument creation, data analysis, findings and conclusion, compilation of the final report and conclusions and recommendations. Much of his work has been done in understanding and characterizing mass media audiences -- the internet, TV, newspapers and magazines. He currently is the Principal Investigator of a large federal grant through the State Department of Health Services that will be renewing this year.

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***Dr. Linda Manning, MI Policy Analyst: Dr. Manning will be the primary researcher on this project. Her primary research efforts have been qualitative and in the fields of health and education. She is currently working on the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) systems evaluation project for the Arizona Department of Health Services. In this role, she collaborates with the coalition of state agencies and social service organizations working to expand the implementation of evidenced-based MIECHV programs into at-risk areas of the state with the support of grants from the HRSA Maternal and Child Health Bureau funded under a provision of the Affordable Care Act. She collects a qualitative data and quantitative data in the form of interviews, observations, and survey research for analysis.

Dr. Manning has also used her qualitative expertise to review a project called Beat the Odds, through the Center for the Future of Arizona where she conducted focus groups and semi-structured interviews, then analyzed these data extracting for themes and implications that guided a final report. Previously, Dr. Manning served as Program Manager the Shades Multicultural Mentoring program and the Instructor for Interdisciplinary Research Colloquium, both designed in part to improve retention among underrepresented graduate students at Arizona State University.

If awarded, the team will approach other partners, such as AmeriCorps Alums, for assistance. Currently, the state service commission in Arizona and ASC have offered support and will serve in advisory roles throughout this pilot project. They are:

* Bob Shogren -- Arizona Governor's Commission on Service and Volunteerism

* Kaira Esgate -- America's Service Commissions

Depending on the results of this project, states such as Nevada and Utah have also offered support.

Cost-Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy

The overall project cost for this one-year pilot project is \$98,100. This will cover staff time, travel and the research methods employed to meet project outcomes. Throughout the project, team members will seek outside in-kind support to supplement research activities.

Executive Summary

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AmeriCorps is the path some adults choose to build their employment skills, earn an income, and get a job. But, there is scant evidence-based qualitative data that illuminates how these experiences translate into employment outcomes. In addition, there is no data that provides the organizational perspective on employing AmeriCorps members. This proposed study will examine who serves and why, where job opportunities are created and how, how service affects preparation and employment among working-age adults, and how these adults are perceived by organizations. We will also gain a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between AmeriCorps State and National Programs and organizations, how these relationships may influence individual career paths, and how their experiences may vary from the general population.

To accomplish these goals, we are proposing a mixed-methods study. Since the organizational perspective is critical to determining if and how job creation occurred, we will survey approximately 250 organizations that hosted AmeriCorps members from 2011-2015 to determine the hiring status of AmeriCorps members and how other jobs are affected in those organizations in the state of Arizona both inside and outside of the placement setting. Based on these survey findings, three focus groups with organizations that have hired AmeriCorps members, which include non-AmeriCorps host sites, will be held in different regions of the state: Tucson -- a predominantly Latino region; Flagstaff -- a city with a large Navajo population; and Phoenix -- a large metropolitan area. The purpose of these groups is to understand the organizations' perspectives on employment and AmeriCorps members. Specifically, we will examine what factors lead to the decision to hire or not to hire, how AmeriCorps members are perceived, and how their perceptions of AmeriCorps members (i.e., members' skills, knowledge base, and experiences) may vary from the rest of the organizations' staff and other applicants who apply for positions within that organization.

In addition, we will conduct six focus groups with AmeriCorps alumni who have served from 2011-2015 in these same cities to understand their perspectives on employment, career preparation, career goals, and the job search experience. The goal of these alumni groups is to determine what types of conversations AmeriCorps alumni have with the greater business community about AmeriCorps and what their experiences have been with job placement. It should be noted that to test this study's methods, this is a one year pilot study to be held in only one state. This study will be inductive in that we will draw upon the input of advisors with CNCS and recent incoming data from the Alumni Survey to determine what additional questions need to be asked when shaping this study's final focus

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group questions.