

**AmeriCorp State and National Symposium 2016**  
**September 21-23, 2016, Alexandria, VA**  
**Luncheon Plenary**  
**Thursday, 9/22 12:30pm – 2:00pm**  
**Transcription**

**BILL BASL:** Well, good afternoon. It's great to see everyone here, and we're going to start our lunch program. Feel free to have that second glass of iced tea or the coffee or your dessert. We're going to start in about 5 seconds. So to kick us off this afternoon, I'm going to introduce someone that really needs no introduction to most of you. You all probably should or know or should know Mary Bruce. She's the Co-Director of AmeriCorps Alums, and has been a faithful supporter of looking at ways that after this experience, after this AmeriCorps experience, what goes next. So this is a big opportunity for us to have a real strong conversation and discussion with Mary, Jessica, and Tyler who are going to come up and share their experiences, and also how those experiences helped them and assisted them in their careers that they are in right now. So without further ado, Mary Bruce!

**MARY BRUCE:** Is the cake good? I didn't get mine yet. Who had carrot? Yeah, that's the one I was eyeing for sure. Oh, I'm up on the big screen. You could take a photo and send it to my mom. She would love that. I'm Mary Bruce. I'm the Co-Executive Director of AmeriCorps Alums, and actually if we could get the slides up, that would be great. I served in AmeriCorps in 1999, unbelievably, and the coolest thing that happened is that AmeriCorps changed my life, and it has informed every step along the way. I just asked my lovely panelists, "What's the theme of our panel? What are we talking about?" And they both offered the same thing, which is "AmeriCorps and Beyond!" – Like Buzz Lightyear, and I think that's really the conversation that we're hoping to have today. So, if the clicker works... Oh my gosh! You can take that one and send it to my mom, too. She likes that one. My dad probably would as well.

So I wanted to tell a little bit about my story, and then hear about Jessica's and Tyler's story, and then talk about some of our thoughts about what is the role of AmeriCorps Alums, who the heck are our alumni, what are we doing in this great city and nation and world. So the picture on the top right actually is my mom. She was raised in a very conservative house. She is the first woman in her family not to marry somebody from the Czech Republic, she's Czech, and she told her dad before she married my dad that she wanted to do the Peace Corp, and her dad was very conservative and said, "No, no, no, no. You cannot do the Peace Corps, you get married," and I was raised hearing that story.

And then my sister, who's on the bottom left there, she also wanted to do the Peace Corps. She went to American University here in D.C., which is why now I'm here many years later. She also wanted to do the Peace Corps, but when she finished her undergrad, she had such a tremendous debt burden, she signed up, filled out the forms, and they said, "Yeah, you can join the Peace Corps but you have to keep paying your student loans." She was like, "Well, that can't work." So she didn't do the Peace Corps.

Then it was my turn to go to college, I was a senior in high school and I got into some schools and was excited to go to college, and then I got my financial aid forms back. My parents had recently gotten divorced and nobody, you know, the paperwork didn't get filed and nobody turned in the FAFSA, so I got zero financial aid. So I had to make a choice, am I going to go to college, which is what I always thought I was going to do, so I was fortunate to be raised in a community where that was a priority, was I going to go to college and take on a tremendous debt burden or do something else? Luckily, my sister's best friend Erica had done VISTA, AmeriCorps VISTA, and she said, "Well, there's this AmeriCorps thing that nobody's heard of yet. You could do that instead."

So I was a senior in high school, didn't listen to the guidance counselors in my school, as lovely as they were, and said, "You know what, I'm going to join AmeriCorps and move to D.C.," and I served there for a year in D.C. public schools, and it totally changed – it rocked my world. It rocked my world, and every step of the way since then has been informed by that experience. I still live across the street from the school where I served, still volunteer at the youth center where I served, at the Latin American Youth Center there, and what's amazing in my story is I was then with the Ed Award able to go to undergrad, get other scholarships for service and leadership that I learned in AmeriCorps, and was able to graduate debt-free and join the Peace Corps. So that's me there on the left where – cool. Thanks, guys!

Yeah, I served in Morocco for 2 years, also doing youth development work. I made my mom and my sister pretty proud. I don't know – it was hard. I'm glad I did. I don't know I'd do it again but I'm glad I did it. Any other return Peace Corps volunteers in crowd? Yeah! Are you with me? Who wants to serve in Peace Corps again? Yes, okay, I'm like a half-hand, some half-hands. Any AmeriCorps alums in the crowd? Yeah, you're my people! Anyone who's hired an AmeriCorps alum? Have you hired an alum? Have you dated an AmeriCorps alum? All right, all right. Have you married one? Okay. Ameri-babies? Anybody? Yeah, okay. Love it, love it.

So I think one of the things that I've learned through my through my service story is that AmeriCorps perks up in all these amazing ways, and that if it weren't for my mother's story and my sister's story and Erica's story in service in AmeriCorps, I wouldn't have known that was an option for me, and all these doors wouldn't have opened for me since, that is the people you work with and serve with, and yes, date and marry, that change your lives, and those relationships, those stories is what is opening doors for other people. And that's really the mission and the vision of AmeriCorps Alums. We represent the nearly 1 million – holler, million! Ha, that's crazy! The nearly 1 million people who have served in AmeriCorps since its founding, including most people in this room I think, and our mission, we are guided by the AmeriCorps pledge, the line, "My year of serve and beyond" – and beyond! See, you're right!

So that's our focus, and our new strategic direction is really about supporting and equipping each other to get things done and continue in service, and that Alums does that in a lot of ways. There we are, so "Supporting and equipping each other to get things done so that all people can thrive in strong communities." If you work at an AmeriCorps program with core members, can I see, raise your hand? If you work at Commission? Okay, cool, yeah, awesome, and everybody who didn't raise your hand, you are also doing valuable work. We can talk more.

And so we wanted to figure out, you know, what is the role of AmeriCorps Alums and alumni work for those who are currently serving with core members and who work at State Commissions in forming AmeriCorps programs. So we ran a study with 400 core members, divided them by regions, so they couldn't talk to each other, and tried to see what happens if we intentionally connected core members to the alumni network, currently-serving members to AmeriCorps Alums, our resources, our jobs fairs, our career fairs, our stories, our blogs, our social media, stuff like that, what would happen? And it was awesome. We found statistically significant results around the core members connected to alums wanting to serve a second year, feeling more connected, knowing they were part of a national network, wanting to be more involved in policy issues, on measure after measure, really good stuff, to pretty simply communications and blogs, check on our newsletter, be a part of community.

And then what we're hearing from some of our State Commission partners – and I'm proud to be partnering with California, Wisconsin, Nevada, and Florida, shout-out, I see you all – really amazing work happening intentionally in those four states around building these connections. And Amy Porter in Wisconsin shared that her core members didn't know they were part of this big, million-strong national service community, and these free resources are available to them.

So really in thinking about your core members and the work that you do with your programs, this top-line message, “Life after AmeriCorps starts today,” not something that needs to come at the very end of the core year but can really happen throughout. Help them start thinking about what's next, whether it's Peace Corps or the cool stories that these guys have, that sort of intentional partnership and cueing up, that the things that you're learning and doing every day are going to help you get a job, go to grad school, go back to college, get a job – I'll say that one again because it's top of mind – and that you can start thinking about that early in your year of service. And what's cool, top-line message, everything Alum does is free and is available to your core members and programs, but they don't have to wait to finish to start using our stuff. They can start using them right away.

Really important thing, your core members and alums aren't automatically enrolled in AmeriCorps Alums, even if they check that box, so it's up to you all to help your members and your program directors that they can come use our free resources, and again, lots of stuff online, [americorpsalums.org](http://americorpsalums.org), but our mission is to support and equip, and we do that through lots of professional development opportunities, online, on the ground, and stuff like that. So, cool? Better than the carrot cake? No. But still, free is good, but the carrot cake was free.

So our alums are amazing and all across the country, and we have two of them here today. So I want to turn it over first to Jessica and then to Tyler to talk a little bit about their stories. Where did you serve, what did you do, and how does that related to the cool stuff you're doing today? Jessica's really fun.

**JESSICA GRAHAM:** That's amazing, I haven't said anything yet. So good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for indulging me. I'm the daughter of a minister and a history teacher, so when we hear “good afternoon,” we want to hear something back. I also just want to say congratulations and huge kudos to the recipients of today's awards. It's symbolic, it represents

what all of us have done, and so just congratulations to all of the people who are going to be honored here today.

I did my service years with Citizen Schools. Oh, there's a Citizen School, oh my goodness! Well, come find me after. I was an AmeriCorps Teaching Fellow from 2005 to 2007. I spent all of my days in Boston public schools, working around academic enrichment activities, connecting Cisco employees to volunteerism, really getting the community into the schools. And so for those of you not familiar, that was time was getting citizens into schools. I said yes to AmeriCorps because I was really interested in finding out how to change the community that I was from, and so it was a very personal commitment for me. It was not an intellectual commitment, it was a very kind of personal, "I want to do something with my life," and I know I'm preaching to all of you as the choir here in that you've made the same commitment, and you're coaching and hiring people that have made the same commitment.

The thing I'll share that was really impactful to what I'm doing now – I currently am the Community Relations Manager at Cisco Systems. It's a technology company based in San Jose, California. We have over 70,000 employees, and I'm responsible for the Employee Engagement programs, which means volunteers. And people always ask me, like, "How did you get this job?" – And the first thing I say is "AmeriCorps, baby!" I learned how to work hard, I learned how to be inspirational, I learned how to never take no for an answer, I learned how to motivate people around me, I learned how to wait – right? We're working on issues that are problematic for a very complicated reason, so sometimes you have to wait a little bit and take a step back and take some strategy. Some I learned how to do that, and I use those skills now in my current role. It's a joy and a pleasure to be able to tell people that I'm an AmeriCorps alum, so I'm happy to be here and to meet here with all of you.

**MARY BRUCE:** Tyler.

**TYLER WRIGHT:** Hello. Welcome, or thank you for having me, all of that good stuff. I got like 5 different channels I can go through but I'll pick one here or [PH] around but yes.

**MARY BRUCE:** The picture he's about to show is really good, guys. That one's a picture of Tyler with a marine.

**TYLER WRIGHT:** Ah! Thanks, Frank. I'm not going to lock eyes with you, either. All right, so yeah, this is this fellow here, Senior Manager of Military Initiatives with Points of Light. I'm really delighted to be out here, and just for me seeing all the hands go up, I think that's very indicative of the power that's in the room here today, specifically as it relates to, you know, I think we can all go back to that moment where we raised our right hand and we recited the Oath, and sustaining that into today. I think we all have a story to tell, and I would love to learn from each and every one of you what that story looks like.

For me – yeah, slides. It all started in the military. A lot has changed since, as you can see, but yeah, 2008, I raised the right hand. I was a Hospital Corpsman for 5 years. It was an awesome time in my life. That's me and my little one. That's my Ameri-baby, right? Yeah, so for me, I was working at Walter Reed, and it was that time to move on with my life, as a number of us do, and

I'm looking around and I'm seeing that the DoD does a great job of preparing folks for successive levels of being in the military, making rank in other words, but there was a lot more to be done to assist veterans as they transition out, get into academia, and really take advantage of that post-9/11 GI bill. It's a real life-changer for military and their families, and I wanted to find a way to continue that message, and fortunately I ran across the America Legion Auxiliary.

Many props to you, you've really changed my life, American Legion Auxiliary Call to Service Corps, and served at Student Veterans of America where I was really fulfilling my dream, to assist other veterans and help them along the way, and we receive those testimonials that, "Hey, you have changed my life. I've now got a degree in Computer Sciences and I've got a really good job, I'm doing what I love." So for me in my path – there you are, Frank, now I'm pointing you out. Good, sir.

Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with National Service. I realized how very transformative it was for me, and I felt that it was the perfect – it was the perfect solution for many veterans. Not all but many that want to continue to serve in whatever way, this is a way to then apply those innate skills that they've acquired in the military domestically. So I've moved on since from Student Veterans of America, had a great run with them, and it was all good things. Now I'm with Points of Life, trying to share that message with veterans and their families, and again, I'm really honored to be here with such outstanding folks such as yourselves.

**MARY BRUCE:** Thanks, Tyler. Thanks, Jess. What I'm hearing are these cool and circuitous paths of service, and how you're sometimes in and out a little bit, and that it is still a path and you're still heading on this path of making the world a better place. So in thinking about it, there are so many brilliant – I would say everyone in this room is brilliant. There's so much expertise in this room, and every day you all are doing amazing work that's changing lives. So we're humbly up here – because we've got the mikes and the comfortable chairs – we're humbly up here, but I'm wondering if you have thoughts or reflections on, in thinking of your own path to leadership and the young folks who are serving each day, we know the demographics of our country are changing. We're going to be a majority-minority, which is a complicated term, a majority-minority country soon. AmeriCorps Alums, the data that we see at AmeriCorps Alums, about 45% of participants in our programs – our career fairs, our webinars, and things like that – are people of color, so African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans are using our resources and really coming out, and we see that. You saw some of the faces of our alumni on a slide before, a really diverse and amazing group. So as we're thinking about the young folks who are coming into service and our country's demographics, any thoughts on leadership and what that means for those individuals and what it might mean for the sector?

**TYLER WRIGHT:** Yes, so...

**MARY BRUCE:** Easy question, this is softball, Tyler.

**TYLER WRIGHT:** I could sing a song. No, so for me, really, I found this in the military as well, and I see a lot of parallels between the military and AmeriCorps, and how it really brings folks from all across the world, all walks of life. You're talking folks from other countries, you're talking just all of that in this great melting pot of innovation, and I see the same thing with

AmeriCorps, and I think that one of the strengths of AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Alums is that these folks continue on with their respective organizations or they carry that message into another organization, so now you've really built a cadre of folks that get it. They're coming for all the right reasons, ideally. There is a cause, that cause that they are drawn to, they also happen to share that with folks regardless of any differences, and that's the inherent power of National Service, I feel. I hope I answered that question, but yeah, I saw that in the military, see it in AmeriCorps, and I think Bill had mentioned this yesterday that in doing so, you've got real change-makers. You've got public servants that are able to respond to the folks that we serve all across the board.

**JESSICA GRAHAM:** Yes to everything he said. I would also add that I think that AmeriCorps as a network, we have a unique capacity to have courageous conversations, right, and so when you talk about leadership, when you talk about change management, when you talk about things like race and social injustices, things that are happening even in today's news, like this is not a comfortable conversation but I think the benefit of being in AmeriCorps is that we are all literally signing up to have uncomfortable conversations, right, and that's the train the trainer model for the nation. We are the train the trainer models for the nation. So I think there's a huge capacity there that, yes, it's tapped, we're all here, but it could even more further leveraged through the AmeriCorps Alumni network.

When I think about my own experience in AmeriCorps Alum, I was not recruited to AmeriCorps. I found AmeriCorps, it did not find me, and I went and I signed up for my service years, and I met all my other amazingly service-oriented people, and I was the outlier. All of them had gotten recruited from their schools, and I was like, "Well, dang, no one came to my historically black college to recruit me." I would have been signed up way before this. So I think that that's something that we should also think about when we're talking about leadership.

And then the last point when we talk about leadership is the importance of sending signals of leadership. What kind of signal does it send when you have female leaders, or when you women of color who are leaders, or when you have someone in a very visible position who represents the direction that you're hoping to go in? That is far more impactful than any diversity statement you could ever put out there. Just that one hire can be so incredibly important, because people are going to send that link around like, "Oh my god, looks who's the director, girl! We going over there!" I'm speaking from personal experience but it is – you cannot discredit the power of the personal.

**MARY BRUCE:** Tyler, I saw you nodding. Is there anything you'd add there from your experience with veterans, and then Jess, I'm going to ask you from the corporate sector, so thinking from the different sectors that are involved with this work?

**TYLER WRIGHT:** Yeah, we see veterans getting into work in every such industry. Habitat for Humanity, heard them earlier today, major props to you. You've got a Vietnam veteran there that has a very strong interest in addressing homelessness, that was his cause, and that's what we're finding with our program, Frontline Families, is that we've got veterans and civilians alike working as AmeriCorps members – serving as AmeriCorps members, excuse me, big blunder. But yes, wrong crowd to say that to, yes.

But yeah, so they're addressing multiple causes in their communities, and far so often with veterans services organizations, the narrative is always one on how do we serve veterans. Our approach here and with others such Mission Continues and Team Rubicon is we ought to take notice that veterans bring a lot of skills, and really our way of serving them is by allowing them to continue to serve in our communities. That's where I see that happening.

**MARY BRUCE:** Jess, any corporate sector reflections? When we prepped all the questions, they didn't know I was going to ask the sector question so pop quiz. Any reflections coming from your position?

**JESSICA GRAHAM:** Corporations, I mean it's bad to say, but they are made up of people, aside from the policy issues around like what we do with our money, I think there are people there who could be hugely beneficial to all of our missions. So if any of you are thinking like, "Should I have a corporate outreach strategy, or should I not? Does it matter?" I would say, "Yes, you should, and I think it does matter." And people, a lot of times they don't have access to the information. You have people that are kind of global citizens, they're living in your community but they don't even know who they're living with, and so the onus is upon all of us to do some education around "This is the neighborhood you live in, and this is the two or three things that you could do that would actually make a huge difference." So I've been able to have a lot of response from the Cisco community by doing some education, by introducing different organizations who subject matter experts on various topics that are relevant to local communities.

The other thing I would say, which this took me like a year to get over it, but logistics sometimes trumps mission. I saw and have continued to see a trend where people are like, "I want to do something like good," and you're like, "Oh, okay, is it education? Is it women's rights? Is it civil liberties? Like what's your thing?" They're like, "I don't know, can it be on Monday at 4 o'clock?" And I'm sitting there like, okay, so you really don't have any passion point at all, like right? We're all passion people! It sounds like you just really don't... But I have been able to flip those people because after they come on Monday at 4:00 and they do what I tell them to do, now they're like, "Well, you know actually, I'm interested in this topic and I'd like to learn more." So that's the door opener.

**MARY BRUCE:** Cool, cool, so thinking of door openers, I want to think a little bit about the future. So we're in D.C. I don't know if you guys have heard anything in the news lately about what's happening with the election. You might have gotten something in your mail. So there's both, I think, a lot of opportunity on the horizon, and I think maybe for some of us some fear or anxiety about what the future holds both for National Service but also for the country, but AmeriCorps Alums, there are a million of us. So if you think about that group, potentially that voting bloc, what is your "what if"? Like what if we... fill in the blank? Like what is the "what if" of AmeriCorps Alums?

**JESSICA GRAHAM:** I have so many! I think the one that stuck out to me is learning about connecting more with each other. I mean, these forums are so wonderful because we can be here and talk to each other, but this is like a premium, highly vetted and select group of people, so I

think that there's a lot of power there and that we should be networking with each other more. That could be something like LinkedIn, which I know we have in AmeriCorps Alums LinkedIn. I'm on it, you guys should all be on it. But things that create a space for us to use each other as supporters of each other's work, I think that's important.

I'd love to do more around voter registration, and I'd love to see AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps Alums specifically, be more active in that, and that's me talking to myself just in front of you guys. I don't know exactly what to do and I'm not an expert at that, but I think it's just a catalytic game-changer that affects all of our issue, and puts the power in the people's hands as it was designed to do.

**TYLER WRIGHT:** Yeah, I completely agree with you, Jess, specifically as it relates to networking, and I think a lot of us can attest to the fact that the folks that we serve with at the pre-service orientation in VISTA, we've kept contact with. There it is, VISTA, Volunteers In Service To America, yes sir, yes ma'am. Very good stuff. But yeah, for me those folks that I served with I have maintained with into the future, and we've collaborated on and off and just tend to cross paths. A lot of that's happening organically, but I think there is definitely an opportunity to amplify that and make it something where we're all better integrated.

And the other thing, too, is my "what if" is what if we find a world in which an AmeriCorps Alum occupies every private sector company and nonprofit organization, and what kind of power will drive future outcomes for those respective organizations as a result.

**MARY BRUCE:** Awesome, awesome. So I heard really powerful stories from both of you around your paths from service to amazing impact with veterans and companies and volunteers all across the country, and some provocative questions around like "what if," what are the difficult conversations that we could be having and should be having, and what are some of the opportunities if alums continue to take up leadership. So I can't quite see Barbara but I think – okay, totally blinded up here. So thank you to Jessica and Tyler, thank you to everyone here for your expertise and your work, thank you to the award winners, it's an honor to share the room with you, and I just want to invite everyone to think about that "and beyond" of AmeriCorps, and what's possible together to do this.

So I'm going to be super cheesy, and I told Jessica I'd do it so we're going to do it. You know Buzz Lightyear? What does he say, "Infinity and beyond"? We're going to go, "AmeriCorps – and beyond!" Are you ready? What? We can, do you want to selfie it? I don't have any room on my phone. My data is full but I invite anyone – okay, Tyler's going to, we're going to selfie it. We're going to go 1-2-3, "AmeriCorps – and beyond!" And Tyler is going to selfie it. This is incredible, guys. Ready? 1-2-3, "AmeriCorps – and beyond!" He got it, he got it. Excellent.

**BILL BASL:** So thanks again to Jessica, Tyler, and Mary for that wonderful conversation. Thank you again. And so now we're going to transition into our awards presentation, so we're going to take a one-minute transition break. That means you stay where you are. You can stand up but you can't leave the room. So we have to move some chairs and we'll be back with you in one minute. Thank you.

