DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 183 SO 029 529

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TITLE	What Service Teaches about Citizenship and Work: The Case of AmeriCorps.
PUB DATE	1996-12-11
NOTE	50p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Citizenship; *Citizenship Education; Civics; *Community Services; Public Service; School Community Relationship; *Service Learning; Volunteer Training
IDENTIFIERS	*AmeriCorps; Washington

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an exploratory investigation into some of the possible benefits of service participation. Using the national service program AmeriCorps as a case in point, the paper examines how the service experience might affect participants' citizenship development, workplace skills and career plans. Results are drawn from four focus groups, conducted in 1996, with a total of 24 AmeriCorps members, representing 17 programs in Washington state. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 60, and all had completed one to two years of service. Findings suggest that new ways to assess AmeriCorps' impact should be considered, as the current strategy which concentrates primarily on measuring effects on the recipient community may underestimate program's value. Though not a comprehensive review of members' experiences notions, the study offers a provocative picture of possibilities, which suggests that more can be -- and is being -- accomplished by the program than is currently thought. (EH)

WHAT SERVICE TEACHES ABOUT CITIZENSHIP AND WORK:

THE CASE OF AMERICORPS

By

CAROLYN COHEN

December 11, 1996

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"I'm just inspired working with people that are in AmeriCorps. They're going to go out there and keep doing things!"

"I don't think I ever really had a job or been involved in a club where I worked as a team. So this has given me the chance and the opportunity to learn to work better as a team.... So I can take the experiences and the benefits that I've gained through AmeriCorps and use them ...down the road, wherever I go."

What Service Teaches about Citizenship and Work:

The Words of AmeriCorps Members

"I think that people don't know that they can access the political process a lot — there's more to do than just vote, and people don't even feel like voting matters anyway, but there's so much more that you can do."

"I feel like if I see a problem in the community I know where to go. I feel like I have the confidence to take the initiative ... find a group that maybe can help out or maybe some other people that feel the same way, and take that initiative. Where before I would be like, yeah, there's trash in the road, well, what do you want me to do about it?"

"I'm more civically involved. I'd never attended a school board meeting, a council meeting. I'd never really gotten involved with groups, pretty much just went to my job and went home. And now tend to go to a lot more community type meetings. I also feel more of a need to help youth."

"Instead of reading an article, about say gang-related incidents or a child abuse incident, we are out there doing something about it. And you feel more empowered. Instead of just reading the article and getting mad, ... and saying, "how can they let that happen, its not right, its not fair." Through AmeriCorps you actually get the chance to explore those and see if you can change them."

"I now feel like I'm a valuable part of my community...I'm respected."

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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> *I was born and raised where I live, and I was never really involved with the community in any way, and my parents never were either. But... its like I've learned I have a voice , too, if I want one.... I've gotten involved in a lot of things I otherwise probably wouldn't have been involved in if it wasn't for AmeriCorps.*

This reflection, expressed by a middle-aged mother living in a rural community, exemplifies the type of personal transformation reported by AmeriCorps participants as a result of their service experience. These members say that serving in AmeriCorps provided them with a new sense of connectedness to their home communities.

This paper reports on an exploratory investigation into some of the possible benefits of service participation. Using the national service program AmeriCorps as a case in point, it examines how the service experience might affect participants' citizenship development, workplace skills and career plans. Results are drawn from four focus groups, conducted in 1996, with a total of 24 AmeriCorps members, representing 17 programs in Washington state. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 60, and all had completed one to two years of service.

Program evaluations to date have focused primarily on measuring the impact of AmeriCorps on local communities. This exploration sought to add new information to the discussion about the value of AmeriCorps by focusing attention on a range of possible participation effects. The findings suggest that new ways to assess AmeriCorps' impact should be considered, as the current strategy which concentrates primarily on measuring effects on the recipient community may underestimate program value. Though not a comprehensive review of members' experiences nationwide, the study offers a provocative picture of possibilities, which suggests that more can be — and is being — accomplished by the program than is currently thought to be the case.

The study investigates three questions:

- In what ways does AmeriCorps participation influence its members?
- How has participation affected members' citizenship development, workplace skills, and career plans?
- What aspects of the AmeriCorps experience produced these citizenship development, workplace skills, and career outcomes?

Major Findings

Participants perceived that the AmeriCorps experience offered them opportunities they would not have otherwise had, in particular, to contribute to their communities, learn new skills, and participate in workplace activities. This sentiment was expressed by members of all ages, regardless of their work experience, education, or socio-economic background. Findings are organized into three areas illustrating how service affected participants' citizenship development and employment preparation.

1. The experience enabled and encouraged participants to develop a set of civic competencies, strengthen connections to their communities, and engage in civic life. The most consistent civic finding, expressed by participants in each focus session, was that through the AmeriCorps experience, members acquired both action-oriented citizenship skills, and hands-on practice in using them, resulting in a sense of civic competence that encouraged them to enter the public arena and work for the common good. Reported "civic effects" included advancing:

- civic knowledge such as learning about the processes of a representative democracy;
- civic skills such as learning to consider differing perspectives and to negotiate, and
- civic disposition, meaning a willingness to engage in solving problems and improving life in one's community or country.

2. Participants report developing a set of skills that enable both an effective civic life and employability. Participants report acquiring a set of competencies which are seen by many citizenship theorists as critical to effective, active citizenship in a multicultural democracy, and are also identified by workplace policy analysts as integral to workplace preparation. They provided examples of developing the following critical skills:

- leadership and communication
- teamwork
- ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds
- resiliency and perseverance

3. Participants report that the experience allowed them opportunities they would not have otherwise had in exploring career options. Although providing members with career exploration opportunities has never explicitly been part of AmeriCorps' program intent, it is clearly an incidental member benefit. Focus group participants, regardless of their educational background or work history, reported that their service experience provided them with significant career-related outcomes. These outcomes include:

- Opportunities to explore new careers or clarify existing career goals, and
- On-the-job training that will be useful in future work experiences.

Implications

The findings clearly demonstrate the potential effect of AmeriCorps service on participants' personal, civic, and work lives. Beyond the personal effects, these findings have significant implications for administration of the AmeriCorps program in particular, and more generally for public policies relating to improving education and promoting citizenship development.

1. Expand the Parameters of AmeriCorps Assessment

Current evaluation strategies treat "member development," "community service," and "community strengthening" as independent outcomes. However, findings demonstrate that outcomes in these areas may really be quite intertwined. Specifically, AmeriCorps members who develop competencies in civic knowledge and skills, and are encouraged to engage in civic life, may well accomplish more in their communities after completing their service period, far beyond what is measured by annual program evaluations. Attention paid to developing members' knowledge and

skills may result in long term community benefits. While it is difficult to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of investment in member development, it is easy to see the potential value to a community when a member says with conviction:

> *I don't think I could ever not be involved in the community again.....I don't think I could just walk away from a problem in a community and say, "it's somebody else's problem," without trying to see what I could do to help. I just don't think I could feel, you know, that I have my own problems and my own life, and let them worry about theirs."*

These findings have important policy implications for assessing outcomes of any service program, including AmeriCorps. They suggest the potential for crafting strategies to maximize member development, and for considering how to capitalize on the public investment in members beyond their service period.

2. Validate the Educational Outcomes of Service

The focus groups revealed that for these members, the AmeriCorps experience developed new skills, knowledge, and attitudes, which are widely recognized as important educational goals in both civics and workplace preparation. Every one of the reported citizenship and employability effects have been identified as important outcomes in either recent national education standards or in current education research. The study provides examples that show how service participation enabled members to acquire or strengthen abilities identified in two benchmark-setting endeavors: The National Standards for Civics and Government, and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS).

These findings point to some potentially powerful forms of learning embedded in service experiences, even when, as in the case of AmeriCorps, the service experience is not explicitly intended to be "educational." Further exploration of these competency-based outcomes of service should be useful in designing and evaluating experiential education strategies, particularly in service-learning and school-to-work preparation, as well as other education programs such as civics and adult education.

3. Continue to Explore the Role of Public Initiatives in Engaging Americans in Civic Life

Americans clearly have a vested interest in fostering competent, engaged citizenship. When study participants discussed the personal effects of serving their country, they showed evidence of development of civic judgment, and an improved ability and inclination to address complex public problems. Public policies that promote service experiences may prove a significant strategy to encourage the type of civic-mindedness and competence needed to sustain democracy. Further efforts that explore the role of public policies in encouraging service experiences that foster development of thoughtful, engaged citizens are called for. These policies should be directed at citizens of all ages, not just those enrolled in school. They can provide opportunities for the type of transformation reported by one participant who said:

> *I feel like if I see a problem in the community I know where to go, I feel like I have the confidence to take the initiative ... find a group that maybe can help out or maybe some other people that feel the same way, and take that initiative.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This field-based study could not have taken place without the assistance of Bill Basl, Executive Director, Washington State Commission for National and Community Service, who provided information, responded to numerous queries about how AmeriCorps functions, and was instrumental in my being able to gain access to AmeriCorps members. Ellen Winiarczyk, Training Director, Washington Service Corps, went to great lengths to help me convene two of the focus groups, which provided the study with a perspective from rural and small town members. I would also like to thank all of the program directors who recruited their members for my focus groups, and in some cases arranged for meeting space.

I would like to thank the University of Washington faculty, Professors Michael S. Knapp, and Marge Plecki, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, and William Zumeta, Graduate School of Public Affairs, who offered sound advice in thinking through evaluation strategies. Diana Hess, Curriculum and Instruction, carefully reviewed my citizenship-related findings and helped me think about their policy implications. Professor Walter Parker, Curriculum and Instruction, directed me to many important sources that greatly furthered my understanding of the role of engaged citizenship in democracy.

Two of the foremost authors on the use of focus groups in applied research, Professor Richard Krueger, University of Minnesota, and Professor David Morgan, Portland State University, were kind enough to offer guidance. Professor Krueger reviewed and critiqued my initial focus questions. Professor Morgan engaged in an ongoing discussion by both telephone and email on the uses of focus groups, sent copies of relevant research, and provided direction on focus group analysis.

Dr. Changhua Wang, Nancy Henry, and Dmitri Vietze, of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, provided important information on AmeriCorps in general, as well as on members and activities in the Pacific Northwest.

WHAT SERVICE TEACHES ABOUT CITIZENSHIP AND WORK: THE CASE OF AMERICORPS

The possibilities and potential for crafting policies that engage American citizens in public life have captured the attention of policymakers, including educators. Efforts to engage citizens in the active practice of citizenship are sometimes referred to as the "civic renewal movement." This movement draws on intrinsic American values — such as a commitment to promote the general welfare, expressed in the Preamble to the Constitution, and in political documents and rhetoric throughout our history.

In the last several years, public leaders have enacted policies that strive to foster engaged citizenship by either encouraging or mandating the civic virtue of community service. Much, but not all, of this effort has taken place in educational institutions through strategies such as community service requirements. For example, service-learning, an integration of academic study, community service, and guided reflection, has become popular at the K-12 level, and is making inroads in post-secondary education as well.

At both the program and the policy levels, connections are sometimes made between educating for citizenship and for workplace preparation. This connection is evident in recent federal policy initiatives that target both youth and adult education. "Goals 2000, The Educate America Act of 1994," which codified and added to the original National Education Goals established by President Bush and the National Governors Association in 1990, includes two goals that connect the civic and workplace preparation missions of schools. These are:

- "Student Achievement and Citizenship: By the year 2000, all students will....be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy, (Goal 3)" and,

- "Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning: Every adult American will ...possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Goal 6) " (National Education Goals Panel, 1995).

Not all publicly-supported service programs are linked to an academic setting, nor do they claim education as a primary goal. AmeriCorps, a national service program established by Congress in 1993, provides citizens aged 17 and over with the opportunity to engage in one to two years of service, in exchange for living expenses and a tuition voucher. AmeriCorps is not a service-learning program. Service is not formally linked to academic study and guided reflection,

although these activities may take place at the discretion of individual AmeriCorps sites. Unlike school-linked service learning, AmeriCorps' first emphasis is on "getting things done" in the community, rather than on individual member development. Thus, AmeriCorps outcomes are primarily documented through methods such as annual accomplishment reviews and cost-benefit analyses that highlight measurable benefits to the recipient community.

However, there is evidence that in addition to "getting things done" for the community, the AmeriCorps experience may have significant effects on participants, similar to those promoted in Goals 2000. That is, that they may be achieving citizenship and workplace preparation knowledge and skills, while at the same time performing useful service to communities. While research and evaluation measures have been employed to assess participant outcomes in service-learning (Myers-Lipton, 1995; Olney, 1995; Schmiede, 1995) little attention has been paid to AmeriCorps participant outcomes. This may be because while there is general agreement that citizenship development is an integral part of public education (Parker, 1995), there is no parallel consensus that public policies and funds should be directed toward developing citizenship skills for adults.

This paper summarizes and interprets the results of an exploratory study into the possible effects of national service participation. It is intended to lay a foundation for three questions: 1) In what ways does AmeriCorps participation influence its members? 2) How has participation affected members' a) citizenship development, b) workplace skills, and c) career development? 3) What aspects of the AmeriCorps experience do members report produced civic, workplace skills, and career exploration outcomes? This study reports on effects as seen through the eyes of experienced service participants: findings are drawn from focus groups with AmeriCorps members who have completed one to two years of service.

This exploratory study is intended for a general audience interested in public policies and practices that promote citizenship development and employability skills. The findings are presented in three areas: development of civic dispositions, learning civic and workplace skills, and career exploration. Three sets of implications are drawn.

- First, as AmeriCorps is used as a case in point, some implications for the debate taking place in the public and political arenas over the value of the AmeriCorps program are addressed, and a case is made for considering new ways to assess AmeriCorps impact. This section may provide specific lessons to AmeriCorps stakeholders interested in improving and supporting the program, including policymakers, community leaders, agency directors and grant recipients.

- Second, the members in this study reported acquiring skills, knowledge, and attitudes that have been established as national standards in both citizenship and workplace preparation.

Examples of how the effects of participation converge with these national standards are provided. Implications are drawn that may prove of interest to those engaged in designing or evaluating adult education or experiential education, such as school-to-work or service-learning programs.

- Finally, some implications are drawn for those interested in policy discussion on the role of government in using service to encourage civic engagement.

PUBLIC POLICIES THAT PROMOTE SERVICE: THE CASE OF AMERICORPS [1]

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 was one of the first programs established by President Clinton in his first term of office. It established several initiatives designed to engage citizens in service experiences, including the AmeriCorps program which officially began enlisting members in September, 1994. The Act received bipartisan support, and to some extent, built on a prior Bush Administration initiative, the National and Community Service Act of 1990. The 1993 Act established the Corporation for National Service, an independent agency, which acts as an interface between the states and Congress, allocates federal funds, and exercises oversight and accountability over AmeriCorps as well as other service programs. The Corporation is governed by a bipartisan board of directors, appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. AmeriCorps funds are used to cover member costs such as living allowances, health insurance, child care, and education awards; as well as program administration expenses.

AmeriCorps grants are available on a competitive basis to public and nonprofit agencies. National organizations with programs in multiple states, for example, Habitat for Humanity, or United Way, apply directly to the Corporation and receive one-third of available funds. The remaining two-thirds are awarded through State Commissions for National and Community Service. The Commissions are nonpartisan bodies, appointed by the governors. Their responsibilities are to implement and administer AmeriCorps programs, design state strategic

1 Information for this section was taken from the following sources: Wofford, H. and Waldman, S. (1996); Larson, David Karl, (1995); Annual Reports, Washington Commission for National and Community Service and Corporation for National and Community Service, State Office, May 1996; Corporation for National Service documentation, including information from the Corporation Website; and telephone conversations with Bill Basl, executive director, Washington State Commission for Community and National Service.

plans, solicit and select programs for funding, and to provide them with training, technical assistance, and oversight.

AmeriCorps' three stated objectives are: getting things done (community service), member development, and community building. Members work to fill unmet needs identified by local communities, in one of four areas: education, human services, public safety, or the environment. On a national level, about two-thirds of the projects are directed at serving young people.

Programs are allowed great flexibility in order to best meet community needs. As a result, members may have quite different experiences from each other. Some work in teams together with fellow members, while others are assigned individually to agencies. Some spend the entire term at one site while others serve at more than one. Depending on the program, members may be able to take advantage of extensive training. Programs may choose to allocate up to 20% of the forty-hour work week for member development training activities.

While the opportunity to apply for AmeriCorps membership is open to citizens or permanent residents over the age of 17, project teams are supposed to represent the diversity of their community in terms of gender, ethnicity, education, and socio-economic background. Full-time members work at least forty hours per week. AmeriCorps members commit to serve either full or part-time for a one year period, and have the option of serving for a total of two years. Full-time is considered to be 1700 hours per year; part time service is 900 hours. In exchange for service, full-time members receive a living allowance of about $160 per week ($8,000) per year. Members who complete a full-time term of service receive an education award of $4, 725 per year. Part-time members receive half of the living allowance and education award.

There are currently about 25,000 AmeriCorps members at the national level serving in 400 programs at about 1200 sites. This study was conducted in the state of Washington, which currently has approximately 1,000 members, affiliated with 21 national direct, and 26 state commission-funded operating sites.

LEARNING ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF SERVICE PARTICIPATION

This exploratory study relies on focus groups for three reasons. First, this study was designed to discover behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes. Focus group characteristics make them ideal for such exploratory research (Morgan, 1988; Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) Qualitative methods, such as focus groups or interviews, are

especially useful for forming working hypotheses by uncovering responses to "how," "why," and "what kind of" questions. Unlike quantitative methods such as surveys, the focus group questions set discussion parameters, but don't limit participants to certain preconceived responses. The second advantage of the focus group method is that it effectively captures responses from those who do not express themselves well in writing. This was particularly important with the AmeriCorps population, some of whom either had a limited educational background, or were non-native English speakers, and were therefore much more articulate in discussion than they could have been on a written questionnaire. Third, the group interaction often results in a "snowballing effect" where one person's comments stimulate memories and ideas in the others (Hess, 1968 cited in Vaughn, et.al., 1996). The facilitator is free to follow up on these new ideas as they are raised by respondents.

Focus group methodology does have some potential weaknesses. Morgan (1996) reports that potential focus group weaknesses relate to concerns about variation in moderator conduct and the nature of group interaction. He notes three possible concerns: 1) as in survey research and individual interviews, interviewer style may affect responses; 2) group dynamics might influence responses, and 3) participants may be uncomfortable discussing certain sensitive topics.

Composing Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted, with a total of 24 participants representing 17 Washington sites.[2] Focus group researchers are advised that one to four sessions generally provide sufficient data for analysis on trends and respondent insights (Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Krueger, 1988) All focus groups were conducted in July and August, 1996, near the end of the annual AmeriCorps service period. The timing of groups ensured that all participants were completing either their first or second year of service.

Because AmeriCorps attracts members of all ages, ethnic groups, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, an attempt was made to recruit members who were diverse from each other. In general, groups were composed of members who did not know each other. Additional notes on group composition strategy can be found in the Appendix.

[2]See Appendix for list of program sites represented, further detail on participant characteristics, and the demographic survey form.

Participant Profile

It is impossible to characterize in any general terms the 24 members who participated in the four focus groups. In many ways they are people whose paths would never have otherwise crossed: a former school teacher in her mid-fifties and self-described as a lifelong volunteer, who related early experiences such as being a civilian plane spotter in the 1950's; a mid-thirties program manager who had formerly served in the military; a young idealist planning to become an "intermodal expressive arts therapist;" and a man who had been homeless and functionally illiterate sat together at one table. In another session, a retired businessman self-described as the "resident conservative," a mother of three who was in recovery from substance abuse, and a young woman who had just graduated from high school and loved operating machinery used in environmental restoration projects, shared experiences with each other. This section describes focus participants in general terms by providing some information on demographic characteristics, why members joined, and what kind of service they were doing. Participant information derives from an end of focus session survey form which all completed, and member comments made during the sessions.

All 24 participants were full-time members; 19 were women and five were men. They represented diverse backgrounds in terms of age and education, with less diversity in ethnicity. The majority were between the ages of 21-30, and had completed less than an Associate Degree education. As the focus groups were not being used to generalize to the larger population, participants were not selected on the basis of whether their characteristics matched Washington state or national data. However it may be useful to note that the ethnic, age, and education characteristics for the study group for the most part fall somewhere in the range between Washington state and national data, except that the study population had a higher percentage of members over age 30, and a higher percentage who had completed an AA or BA degree. A table with detailed demographic and comparison data can be found in the Appendix.[3]

During the course of the conversations, members talked about why they applied to become an AmeriCorps member. It is interesting to note that there was not a majority consensus on why they joined. Members (46%) most frequently said they were seeking an opportunity to engage in improving community life. This sentiment was expressed in different ways such as looking for an "opportunity to do something meaningful," or expressing a "desire to be useful." This motivation to serve was expressed both by members who related a long history of service, as well as by those who had no significant service background. The other most frequent responses were that members needed the education award in order to pay for their schooling (38%), or to get experience in a

[3]Washington state and national data are taken from the 1994-95 National Service Enrollment Forms, courtesy of Dr. Changhua Wang, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

career area (38%). Motivations relating to career exploration are further discussed in the Findings section.

Finally, although the living stipend is minimal, nearly a third (30%) of the respondents cited needing a job as a reason for joining. In fact, four of the participants indicated that they had responded to a job advertisement without fully realizing that they were applying for AmeriCorps. As one said, "I didn't know about AmeriCorps, when I got hired, I didn't know what AmeriCorps was."

While all four AmeriCorps priority areas —education, human services, public safety and the environment— are represented in this study, the majority of the programs contacted to provide focus group members were in the education or human services categories. At both the national and state levels, most AmeriCorps programs are in education or human services programs. Most of the focus participants were engaged in some sort of school-related activity such as leading youth programs, tutoring or mentoring, and literacy training. Others were engaged in environmental activities such as stream and trail restoration; in human resources such as drug and alcohol prevention programs or housing renovation; and in public safety programs such as developing neighborhood crime prevention strategies in conjunction with a community policing agency.

Learning from what Focus Group Participants Say

Several factors must be considered in analyzing findings. First, this exploratory study is composed of a small, non-random sample of AmeriCorps members. While the results provide information that simply could not be captured with quantitative measures, they are not meant to be statistically representative or generalizable. These findings are appropriately used to develop hypotheses about possible effects of service participation, and to identify promising areas for further research. Because they fully capture the complexity of participant reflections, they provide a working knowledge that will be useful for further qualitative or quantitative study. However, the data cannot be used to quantify the incidence of reported effects, connect relationships between participant responses and personal characteristics, or trace the exact causes of reported outcomes. Due to the nature of the questions and the fact that the majority of the participants were selected by program directors it is possible that participants were more likely to volunteer positive rather than negative effects.

While focus group methodology is well-suited to capture deep responses, the nature of the data make them significantly more complicated to analyze. The sessions were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Each of the four sessions was then coded and sorted three times. First, responses were charted by whether they appeared to be outcomes relating to the following:

citizenship; career exploration; civic/workplace intersection, i.e., skills that are useful in both work and civic life; or personal effects. Second, responses were recoded and further sorted by whether they represented a skill, knowledge, or attitude. In the final round of analysis, these two categories were combined and renamed, for example as "civic skills," "civic knowledge," or "civic dispositions, " and finally, relationships between these various outcomes were examined.

FINDINGS

Findings are organized into three areas that illustrate how service affected participants' citizenship development and workplace preparation. The first section, "Civic Dispositions: Citizenship Knowledge, Skills and Commitments," presents and analyzes member observations of how the AmeriCorps experience affected their disposition to engage in civic life. It identifies development of civic skills and knowledge, and exposure to an ethic of service, as specific components that contribute to a disposition to active civic engagement. Section Two, "Civic and Workplace Skills: Enabling Civic Life and Employability," takes a closer look at selected citizenship skills, specifically those that are also useful in the workplace. The third section, "Career Findings: Opportunities for Career Exploration," examines a further aspect of workplace preparation by reporting member perceptions of how AmeriCorps service affected their career plans.

Civic dispositions: Citizenship knowledge, skills, and commitments

As David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation notes, "A citizen, by definition, is someone active in the public life of community and country... citizens are more than individuals living responsible private lives" (1996, p.274). The five findings in this section demonstrate ways that service developed and engaged participants' civic skills and commitments. All participants reported civic effects. For many, AmeriCorps service had a transformative effect on

how they defined their civic lives; others simply continued to strengthen their civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes.[4]

Findings derive from responses to general questions such as, "What have you gained from your AmeriCorps experience?" and specific questions such as, "What have you learned about working to address problems in a community?"

1. Members acquired new civic knowledge.

"Informed participation.... is the foundation of democracy," writes David Boggs in Adult Civic Education (p.114). These members clearly acquired civic knowledge that strengthened their civic competence. For example, they reported learning about resources available in their communities, and how social and political systems—including the public decision-making process—work. They related gaining first-hand information about their home communities through their work in local agencies, team activities, AmeriCorps trainings, and by attending community meetings. A parent who had been a long-time volunteer in her children's schools, but who had never attended a school board meeting prior to joining AmeriCorps noted,

> After I started working in AmeriCorps, I had to go to a school board meeting to request space for an after-school program. The only building was the school. So I had to go to a school board meeting to request this use of their property. And, they didn't let us. It's a conservative district, they don't like government programs, government workers.....anyway, after seeing that I just got gradually more involved. I started getting more interested in local government.

In addition to learning the specifics of community decision-making processes, some noted an improved understanding of social and political systems. A highly-educated, mid-career woman reported:

> I learned more about the system that we live under, the political system, that it could work in a much better way than it does. And, what I've run into a lot, is that there's a lot of cynicism out there. And I think that people don't know that they can access

[4] In this study, "civic knowledge" includes familiarity with democratic values, a working knowledge of American history and the principles and processes of our representative democracy, and law-related knowledge about citizen rights and responsibilities. "Civic skills" include both intellectual skills such as being able to problem solve and consider differering perspectives; and participatory skills such as negotiating and seeking consensus, and communicating one's views to a group. These two definitions derive from a variety of sources, but primarily from the National Standards for Civics and Government, and from materials found in the research synthesis, Educating for Citizenship by Kathleen Cotton (1996). The third civic characteristic, "Attitudes" relate to what is often called civic virtue, defined by Pratte (1988) as "...forming a civic disposition, a willingness to act, in behalf of the public good..." (p.17).

the political process a lot — there's more to do than just vote, and people don't even feel like voting matters anyway, but there's so much more that you can do.

Multiple mentions were made of discovering basic information for the first time, such as what resources are available in one's community and what different agencies do. Participants also cited understanding more complex issues ranging from agency turf concerns to the budgeting process.

2. Members developed and practiced citizenship skills.

Clearly, a participatory democracy requires that its citizens apply their civic knowledge and take effective public actions beyond regularly entering the voting booth (Parker, 1996). Citizenship theorists use terms such as "strong democracy"(Barber, 1993) or "public agency" (Boyte, 1994) to describe a democratic ideal where citizens acquire the skills and dispositions necessary to directly and effectively engage in public life. AmeriCorps provided these members with action-oriented citizenship skills: hands-on practice in mobilizing different sectors of a community for the common good, seeking out and listening to differing points of view, and fostering interagency collaborations. Members related how they utilized their new-found skills; for example, by organizing urban community garden projects, pulling together various service providers to collaborate in offering a literacy program on an Indian reservation, and developing a program to bring communities together with community policing departments to resolve public concerns. In the groups, members reflected on what they learned from their attempts at community organizing, particularly how to work with a community in assessing its needs, and strategies to demonstrate respect for all community members. One young member reflected on her personal development: "I think a lot of people go into communities with high ideals and a superiority complex....[I learned that] you need to do it with them, rather than doing this God complex thing."

Members also reported learning volunteer skills. While some members had extensive volunteer experience prior to AmeriCorps, others did not. Members reported acquiring various components of volunteer skills: learning exactly what a volunteer does, how to be effective in a limited amount of time, and how to prevent "burn-out." Choosing to volunteer is also related to development of an ethic of service, and is further discussed in finding '4' below.

3. The combination of skill development and new knowledge may lead to a sense of civic competence and a disposition toward active civic engagement.

The most consistent civic finding, expressed by members in each focus session, was that the AmeriCorps experience led to a new sense of civic competence, and a disposition toward active civic engagement. Three contributing factors emerged: 1) acquisition of civic knowledge, 2) civic skill development, and 3) the application of new knowledge and skills over the service period. Transcript analysis reveals that members often linked their sense of civic competence to a synergistic blend of these three factors. In other words, members reported that attaining new civic knowledge, in combination with learning and exercising new civic skills, provided them with a sense of confidence that they "knew what they were doing" and could act effectively.

Participant reflections illustrate the resulting sense of civic competence and disposition to tackle community problems. A woman in her late twenties, living in a rural community, who had spent the year developing service-learning programs for middle schoolers, described her transformed attitude toward civic engagement:

> ...I feel like if I see a problem in the community I know where to go, I feel like I have the confidence to take the initiative ... find a group that maybe can help out or maybe some other people that feel the same way, and take that initiative. Where before I would be like, yeah, there's trash in the road, well, what do you want me to do about it?

And, in another session, an artist in her mid-thirties, with minimal prior service experience, who chose to shape her AmeriCorps work so that she could develop gang prevention programs for teen age girls spoke up:

> Instead of reading an article, about say gang-related incidents or a child abuse incident, we are out there doing something about it. And you feel more empowered. Instead of just reading the article and getting mad, ... and saying, "how can they let that happen, its not right, its not fair." Through AmeriCorps you actually get the chance to explore those and see if you can change them. See if you at least have the stomach to do it....Because a lot of it, its not nice....Without AmeriCorps its like, yeah, I should go volunteer for that youth group ...but you are just in the thinking mode— whereas AmeriCorps — it puts you there.

While members most often spoke of these factors —acquiring civic knowledge and skills, and hands-on experience in applying them — as interlinked, they also gave examples of how each factor connected independently to their disposition toward active civic engagement. For example, some members related how the skill-specific trainings — AmeriCorps requires that all members receive first aid/CPR, and conflict resolution training— gave them the confidence to jump in and act in a crisis, rather than, as one member said, "just sitting there wondering if anyone is going to

do anything." For others, knowledge of specific community decision-making processes enabled them to feel that they would know what to do to address a perceived problem.

While some AmeriCorps members are recruited to their programs from other cities or states, in this study all but one of the participants were serving in the community where they were already living. So, it is interesting to note that even long-time community members expressed a new sense of connectedness to their home communities. In one session, members labeled this new connectedness "finding a voice." In this session, conducted with members primarily from rural areas, one member described how her new experiences in engaging in public decision-making processes strengthened her civic engagement. Another member spoke up and asked her: "Do you think that that's because AmeriCorps allows you the flexibility to voice your opinions more than just being a regular volunteer?" And she replied,

> I think it's through workshops and stuff I've gone to... that I learned I could have a voice if I wanted one. That it didn't have to be someone that owned the local supermarket, or someone that, you know, was a 'higher-up' in society in the town... and that I am just as important. I have things to say, too.

This prompted a response from a third woman, a mother of three children who was in her thirties or forties:

> I was born and raised where I live and I was never really involved with the community in any way, and my parents never were either. But... its like I've learned I have a voice too if I want one. I've learned a lot of things. Personal growth has been tremendous. I've gotten involved in a lot of things I otherwise probably wouldn't have been involved in, if it wasn't for AmeriCorps.

This member went on to talk about how she had recently organized a major event, a drug abuse prevention program that engaged people from several communities, took months of planning, and was a "huge success."

4. Exposure to an ethic of service culture developed or reinforced member commitment to service.

While members were not specifically asked about the development of a personal "ethic of service," the concept of a service ethic came up in various ways throughout the discussions. Several of the members clearly came into the program with a well-developed ethic of service, a history of volunteer work, and in fact, chose this experience because they were seeking a service

opportunity. But, others said they developed a service ethic as a result of their AmeriCorps experience. A retired businessman, who held two graduate degrees said:

> My attitude toward community service is almost totally different than it was before. I always figured that I needed to apply my energies toward earning a living. And didn't really much care to work unless I got paid for it..... [But] I'm involved, and I look, and I see what needs to be done, and I try to do it. I see the need that this volunteer work is meeting and I feel very pleased to be a part of it. I'm getting a lot of personal satisfaction from that... And I don't believe I would have been able to do that without having the exposure that the AmeriCorps program offered...

Even among those who came in seeking service opportunities, there was a sense that the experience deepened their commitment. In some cases, this was attributed to the collegial encouragement of others engaged in service, and the inspiration of fellow members who were determined to overcome any barriers to their service goals. In fact, several examples of this type of support happened during the focus sessions. In each session, at least one member expressed disgust or frustration with the bureaucracies or politics at placement sites. Whenever one person expressed frustration with an institution, for example, was critical of a school bureaucracy, another participant would leap into the conversation, to offer encouragement to "hang in there" and suggestions for improving the situation.

Another component of a service ethic is willingness to volunteer. AmeriCorps is not formally considered a volunteer program because members receive a living stipend and education award. However, members did identify three connections between their service and volunteer work. First, the Corporation strongly encourages programs to engage members in recruiting community volunteers; community volunteer recruitment is documented as one of the "getting things done" measures. Those members involved in volunteer recruitment were engaged in promoting an ethic of service in their community. Second, some reported that their programs or AmeriCorps trainings required them to participate in community service projects, independent of their agency assignment. And, third, several members noted that AmeriCorps helped them learn about volunteer opportunities in their community by providing information, field trips or speakers. Due to these volunteer connections, many mentioned during the sessions that they were currently volunteering at community agencies in addition to serving in AmeriCorps. Others gave examples of the types of volunteer work they looked forward to doing in the future, indicating a potential long-term effect of AmeriCorps service.

5. Members believe that the AmeriCorps experience will have a long term impact on their civic lives.

When members talked about changes in their own civic identity and behaviors, they spoke in terms of a permanent transformation. For example, the parent and long- time school volunteer cited earlier, who had never attended a school board meeting prior to AmeriCorps responded to the question, "How are you different today than before you entered AmeriCorps?" as follows:

> I'm more civically involved. I'd never attended a school board meeting, a council meeting. I'd never really gotten involved with groups, I pretty much just went to my job and went home. And now I tend to go to a lot more community type meetings and I also feel more of a need to help youth....

Members in this study connected all of these outcomes — the acquisition of civic knowledge, development and practice of citizenship skills, exposure to an ethic of service— to a self -identity as someone permanently committed to civic involvement. As one rural woman said, "I don't think I could ever not be involved in the community again."

Civic And Workplace Skills: Enabling Civic Life And Employability

The previous section looked at a range of citizenship effects that members reported developing through their service experience. This section takes a closer look at one set of effects: their reported civic skills. It finds that the civic skills members developed are also critical to their future employability. For example, leadership skills, the ability to organize projects, work as part of a team, think critically, or feel comfortable working with diverse populations are seen by many citizenship theorists as critical to effective, active citizenship in a multicultural democracy. These very same skills have also been identified in numerous policy reports as integral to workplace preparation. Members' skill-based outcomes derived from specific program training requirements, as well as from practical experience. The Corporation requires programs to provide member training in team work and conflict resolution [5]; some program directors choose to provide additional trainings in areas such as leadership skills.

The outcomes identified in this section are primarily drawn from responses to two questions: "What did you gain from your AmeriCorps experience?" and, "How are you different

[5] These requirements, in effect at the time of the study, were modified in Fall, 1996.

today than before you entered AmeriCorps?" They are reported in four major areas: leadership skills, teamwork skills, ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds, and perseverance.

1. Practicing leadership and communication skills

Members reported that they acquired new skills in facilitating meetings, leading projects, and making public presentations. They learned these skills through on-the-job experiences, and in some cases, also received formal or informal leadership training. According to the members, some programs consciously develop leadership, as well as awareness of community needs, by requiring members to organize and lead their fellow team members in a community service project unrelated to their service. For example, one young woman who worked in an environmental program that focused on trail and stream restoration, related how she developed her leadership skills by organizing a food and clothing drive for a homeless shelter. Several of the members involved in youth work noted that teaching or directing youth groups helped them develop their leadership skills.

Members often mentioned that their public speaking experiences made them feel more confident as leaders. Some said that their supervisors encouraged them to make presentations to fellow team members, which prepared them for speaking to larger audiences. They related requirements to present information about AmeriCorps at community meetings, for example, as part of their volunteer recruitment tasks. One of the young women, self-described as "involved in gang violence for a couple of years," said:

> I was really shy when I first started AmeriCorps, and they really looked to me as a person who had a lot of strengths inside, and they would put me up on the podium and I had to do several speeches for them. Now I get up and lead groups, and I've learned to be a lot more... comfortable in front of a group..... They put a lot of trust in me. They made me give a speech in front of the governor and, like 200 other AmeriCorps people. It was pretty scary but I did it. They force you to grow, I guess.

Some members saw themselves as role models and manifested leadership by modifying their behaviors. A former "at-risk" young man, in his late teens, and currently serving as an educational assistant in a school, said:

> I live really close to the community that I taught in. I go down to the store, you know, I chew tobacco. I am buying a can of chew and I see a couple of kids that I know from the school, I'm like "oh no." You know you gotta keep on your toes about things. It's important to be a role model even like for instance, I do chew, I let kids know its bad, let them know to steer away from that. You can't tell them to steer away from that and have them watch you do it. Being so close to my

community that I work in.... Even times I see kids I don't know, I'm surprised about how generous I am with my time. If I see a kid now, its like, "Hi, how's it going?" I'll invest a little bit of time in the kid knowing that so many kids don't really get a lot of parent investment in them, that's really important. They look up to adults you know, everyone knows how much they look up to adults because we've all been kids before. Its just so important.

2. Learning to work as part of a team

Opportunities to gain team work skills appeared to be quite varied based on the characteristics of individual programs, the direction provided by individual program directors, and the nature of the service experience. Some members worked together every day as part of a team; while others were placed at their service site singly, and had little opportunity to form a team relationship with other AmeriCorps members. In some cases, members reported attending teamwork building sessions and specialized teamwork trainings, either through their individual program or at larger gatherings of multiple programs. In addition to teamwork experiences with fellow members, a few reported developing a team relationship with regular employees at their agency, or with communities they were serving. In the focus sessions, when members were asked, "How are you different today than before you entered AmeriCorps," several immediately volunteered that they had developed teamwork skills. A mid-career professional observed that prior to joining AmeriCorps, she had been the type of person who always believed that if she wanted something done, she needed to do it herself, and that she was "astonished" at how much a person could accomplish when working collaboratively with others.

A young mother, in her late twenties, placed in her first professional work experience, expressed a view similar to many who had come to understand the long-range benefits of developing teamwork skills:

> I don't think I ever really had a job or been involved in a club where I worked as a team.... So this has given me the chance and the opportunity to learn to work better as a team.... So I can take the experiences and the benefits that I've gained through AmeriCorps and use them for a job that I might do in the future.... Even as maybe in a family or just working, or dealing with friends. .... so [I'll] take all those skills that I've learned and use them...down the road, wherever I go.

While many related positive team experiences, others experienced difficulties and frustrations in working with team members, or with co-workers at their agency. However, even members from difficult team situations seemed to identify at least some of the teamwork problems as a learning experience in how to put aside differences and concentrate on the work to be done. One woman said,

> We were a diverse group in age, ethnic, and economic background. I don't think you could get much more diverse unless you moved to other parts of the world. And there were a lot of growing pains, that's what I would describe, at different points in my group process where you just feel like things got heated up and exploded and people would have to come back and talk about it later but we always made a point to do that. Well, the group made a point to do that. And I think for me, it's shown me that you can pull a group of people together and if everyone wants to work toward the same goal, that you can.

3. Experiences in working with people from diverse backgrounds

Participants were asked specifically about their experiences with diversity. In the groups it was phrased in one of two ways: "Can you describe any AmeriCorps experiences you have had in working together with people that you didn't have much in common with?" or, "Some members say that in AmeriCorps they had new opportunities to work with people from backgrounds or ethnic groups different than their own. Can any of you tell us about some of those experiences?" The focus group members themselves were from diverse age, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. In response to these questions, several referred to the diversity among their fellow program members, although they were not specifically asked about team composition.

In general, members noted a variety of diversity-related learning experiences: becoming more tolerant of the views of others, getting used to working with people of all ages, attending ethnic activities such as pow wows, forming new views toward the at-risk populations they were serving, and learning to accept personal differences among team members. They related anecdotes of struggling to work with people who had work ethics different than their own, and of overcoming gender and age stereotypes. One older man noted,

> It's been beneficial for me as an individual to be able to work with people from various age levels and different walks of life, and to be able to develop a broader understanding of attitudes and conditions..... [Because of the AmeriCorps experience] I can accept the liberal attitudes among young people, I can accept and.. understand the way people think and act ... It's good to be involved with people who are different.

Few of the members mentioned anything related to race or ethnic issues. As noted earlier, focus groups may not always be the best strategy for drawing out candid responses on socially sensitive issues (Goldman & McDonald, 1987). Even when members described their group as being completely diverse in age, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, and then said that there were a lot of growing pains in the group process, few offered concrete examples, as though they were still processing their own experiences. However, there were nods of recognition and "Yeah, I did that"

comments when a young woman from an advantaged, suburban background spoke of her experiences in trying to "improve" disadvantaged team members:

> So, finally I learned to accept my team mates at face value, and then work from there and try to find the commonalties. I mean, I'm so embarrassed by this now, but in the beginning I corrected their double negatives. You know? Okay? And I wasn't terribly bossy, you know, I thought it was a nice little reminder you shouldn't talk like that, but it was inappropriate.

4. Perseverance: Developing Resiliency

The concept of "learning to persevere" was raised by participants in response to general questions such as "Did you discover any talents or gifts that you didn't know you had?" This trait can also be defined as "resiliency" or "persistence." Members volunteered examples of how they learned to 'stick out' various personal or organizational problems facing their teams, or overcame individual personal obstacles, or just learned to recover more quickly from mistakes. A young woman who was teaching ESL and theater skills, as well as organizing other community projects in an urban area, explained:

> ...there's like this thing where you fall down and you get up, and I guess my getting up period is getting shorter because, like, I've run into the most unbelievable kinds of blocks, like with everything I've done, you know? ....I've made so many mistakes and what's amazing to me is that every time I make a mistake, like I learn from it, like more quickly. And I guess in the past I've been making mistakes and kind of just going "oh no, oh no, oh no" for like a year!....[But, I continue because] the things that I'm doing — there are people around me who need me to continue doing...

Participants gave additional specific examples that can be categorized as perseverance. A teen-age father said that he learned patience in his service experience which involved working with school children. A young, former street youth, who was working with homeless teens, said she used to "get frustrated easy," but that the service experience taught her to "keep trying and not get frustrated." This young woman, who first heard about the AmeriCorps opportunity while standing in line at a homeless shelter, said, "I am about to finish my contract, and it's been almost a year. I think the only other thing I've finished in my life was high school, and I almost didn't finish that."

Another participant perceived that for her, an ethic of resiliency was created or bolstered by the inspiration of fellow members:

> I love when I get a chance to hear other AmeriCorps members talk about their experiences and I wish they'd had more opportunities over the year to do that. But I keep hearing again, people in ... social services or the school system ... running into bureaucratic obstacles and setbacks . And what I'm overwhelmed by, is that people

don't take no for an answer and they find a way around these things or else they say, 'I'm going to set up my own system.'... I'm just inspired working with people that are in AmeriCorps. They're going to go out there and keep doing things.

Career Findings: Opportunities for Career Exploration

Because providing members with career exploration opportunities has never been part of AmeriCorps program intent, this investigation primarily explored the civic effects of service. However, career exploration is clearly an incidental member benefit. Focus group members, regardless of their educational background or work history, reported at various points in the discussions, that their service experience provided them with important career-related experiences. Some members mentioned effects on their career plans in response to questions such as, "What type of work have you done in AmeriCorps?" "When you decided to join AmeriCorps, what did you think you might get out of it?" and "Did you discover any gifts or talents you didn't know you had?" In addition to these more general questions, near the end of each session, members were asked specifically about effects of service on their career plans: "What did you learn about your own career interests?" Comments about career effects fell into two general categories. Members reported that the experience provided: 1) opportunities to explore new careers or clarify existing career goals, and 2) on-the-job training experiences that could be applied to future work. In addition, a few of the participants who lacked a strong educational background or work history referred to learning useful work habits such as regular attendance and task completion. While this section draws attention to certain examples cited by educationally disadvantaged members, it is important to note that regardless of education or career background, almost every member mentioned some kind of career effect.

1. Opportunities to focus career goals

Some participants found that service helped clarify their career goals. Their service experiences provided first-hand opportunities to advance their knowledge of the personal characteristics, skills, and educational requirements of specific occupations. They benefited from meeting and observing professionals working in their field of interest. Some members, including those who lacked a career direction prior to their service, reported that they discovered their "calling." A woman who had worked as a graphic artist found that she had a gift for teaching art to

young people, something she believed she would not have discovered except for the service experience. She now planned to further explore a teaching career. A woman in her late twenties, who worked with rural middle school youth and now plans to become a middle school teacher said:

> "I'm going back to school ... and before I started AmeriCorps, I had no idea where I was going to go, what I was going to learn, and what I wanted to be. Now I can't wait."

Others benefited by discovering what career areas they do not want to enter; some said their experiences with schools or social service systems left them still wanting to work with people, but frustrated with bureaucratic structures. Others simply learned more about themselves, and applied their new insights to a change in career decisions. A young woman, with one year of community college under her belt said:

> Before I started AmeriCorps.... I thought journalism was my true calling. While I was working with AmeriCorps, I was writing [articles for a] newspaper and soon found out that I don't want to spend my life doing that. Writing is a very lonely process....So writing will always be a part of my life, but it's not going to be the central focus.

Some members consciously joined a specific AmeriCorps program in order to further their experience and knowledge on a chosen career path. For example, some of the participants working as tutors, mentors, or literacy trainers had a prior interest in the education profession, and chose an AmeriCorps program that would provide them with the work experience and knowledge they needed to apply to graduate school or seek future employment. As a related outcome, some of the members who were interested in becoming teachers and chose service opportunities in educational institutions reported that they refined their teaching plans based on their experiences. For example, some discovered what grade level they prefer to work with, or what type of school setting they prefer.

Finally, some members described learning to apply existing professional skills to new work tasks. A case in point is a middle-aged former history teacher who was assigned to write a curriculum for a community policing training program. In some cases, the application of skills to new work settings expanded members' thinking about possible careers. For example, a former college campus security director, who was serving with a community policing unit, had not made a specific decision about her next career step, but articulated several new ideas she was exploring, all based on her service experience.

2. On-the-job training

Participants reported that they benefited from both formal and informal on-the-job training. Training opportunities depend on the individual program and the agency placement, and as a result, members reported training experiences that ranged from minimal to extensive. Members identified a variety of hands-on skills they learned on the job: using big equipment in trail clearing and other environmental projects, learning construction skills in housing rehabilitation projects, and learning new ESL teaching strategies.

Many members perceived that they would not have been able to access these experiences without AmeriCorps. For example, a couple of members assigned to a community policing unit had attended the department's special eight-hour training in problem solving; and a member serving in a literacy program, who was planning to enter literacy work as a career, was sent by her agency to a national conference. In particular, the educationally disadvantaged, formerly "at-risk" youths, believed that because of their history and lack of skills, AmeriCorps offered them a work opportunity they otherwise would not have had. As a young man who was now mentoring at-risk youth said, "I didn't think I could do what I am doing now because of where I came from." Another young man, serving as an educational assistant (EA) in a school, was in the process of applying for a paid, permanent EA position with the school district. He proudly related how his résumé reflected all of the qualifications listed in the EA job announcement, but that without the AmeriCorps experience:

> There's no way, not even one in a billion, could I have ever gotten an EA position, you know. So this gave me that opportunity to sneak my way in, you know, let me get my creativity in there, show them that I'm worthy...

A couple of the educationally disadvantaged participants had clearly become very respected in their organizations. They described a significant level of responsibilities, particularly in comparison to their formal education and workplace preparation. For example, a Mexican American divorced mother of three, who had not completed her GED, was serving at a community college and conducting community outreach to Hispanic women. One of the former street youths, who was serving at multiple agency sites, had been singled out by a social service agency to receive extensive conflict-management training, and had an informal job offer from the agency director. He had decided to serve a second year in AmeriCorps before accepting the offer. He said,

> "Other people observing.. me.. has put me in a place where not only do I feel really good about it, but as far as the future goes I think it is really good because a lot of people want me on board their ship too."

New career opportunities were not restricted to the disadvantaged members. The member who had retired from business and had two master's degrees, and had been serving at a school district, planned to use his expertise and connections to consult for the district following his service period.

INTERPRETING WHAT THE FOCUS GROUPS TELL US: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This section discusses three sets of implications for these findings. First, findings are examined to see what light they can shed on the current policy discussion over AmeriCorps. Second, national education standards are used to set a context for understanding member development of citizenship and employability skills. Finally, findings are viewed in a broader sense to see what they can contribute to a discussion on the role of public initiatives in engaging citizens in public life.

Assessing AmeriCorps

The AmeriCorps program, a campaign issue in President Clinton's first presidential race and administration, has been highly politicized and controversial. Some of this controversy is due to partisan politics, and some is due to a philosophical disagreement, particularly among public leaders, about the appropriate role for government in engaging citizens in service. Much of the current debate about the future of AmeriCorps is based however, in examining the return for value: Do AmeriCorps outcomes justify its expense? This exploration sought to add new information to the debate about the value of this program, by focusing attention on a range of possible participation effects, as much of the focus to date has been on community impacts of service projects.

AmeriCorps programs are required to provide the Corporation with program objectives and related outcome measures. Although AmeriCorps has three goals— getting things done in the

community (community service), member development [6], and community strengthening— the Corporation places its primary emphasis on evaluating community service. As a result, in order to compete for AmeriCorps awards, individual program evaluations have focused primarily on quantitative measures of community service. For example, an environmental program might provide a count of how many trees members planted, as well as the effect on land erosion and water quality in a nearby stream. An education program might report how many children received tutoring, and what effect the tutoring had on their academic test scores. These evaluations, as well as cost-benefit studies, including two conducted in the state of Washington (Wang, Owens, & Kim, 1995), have been used to demonstrate a positive return on the program investment.

However, the findings from this study, which focus on member outcomes, imply that in addition to examining community service impact, there may be some other ways to consider the "value" of AmeriCorps.[7] In looking at how participation affected the members interviewed in this study, we find signs of important outcomes, many of which have public policy implications. The focus group comments show that outcomes in the AmeriCorps' three goal areas may really be quite intertwined, and suggest that concentrating on measuring community service outcomes only in terms of "getting things done," may underestimate program value. When members develop an increased connection to their community, civic competencies, and a disposition to engage in civic life, local and national communities are strengthened. Members who have developed these attitudes and competencies may well "get more things done" in the community after completing their service period, far beyond what is measured by annual program evaluations. While it is difficult to judge the benefit of a transformed citizen in quantitative measures, it is also easy to see the potential value to a community when a member says with conviction:

> "I don't think I could ever not be involved in the community again..... I don't think I could just walk away from a problem in a community and say, "it's somebody else's problem," without trying to see what I could do to help. I just don't think I could feel, you know, that I have my own problems and my own life, and let them worry about theirs."

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[6] Member development goals appear to have been de-emphasized over the two years of AmeriCorps operation. For example, in looking at the Corporation's documentation to grant applicants, the 1994 grantee RFP states, "all programs should seek to instill a spirit of citizenship.....Programs should ...develop participants' skills in solving community problems, and... cultivate a lifelong ethic of productive, active citizenship. The 1996 "Provisions of Grant" (8/2/96) appears to be somewhat less directive. It states: The Grantee agrees to ...help Members achieve the skills and education needed for productive, active citizenship."

[7] The education is award an important member development strategy, but is not addressed in this paper, which focuses on outcomes of service. The tuition voucher is not part of the service experience as it is typically awarded at the completion of service.

AmeriCorps policymakers may find it useful to consider some additional strategies in program assessment. For example, if further research supports the finding that service connects members to their home communities in new ways, perhaps assessments could be designed to capture the specifics of how members strengthen communities over time. Also, more attention might be paid to how the public can capitalize on our investment in members beyond their service period, perhaps by further fostering their leadership skills, or providing ongoing opportunities for them to share their experience with others.

Program Improvement

While maintaining its primary emphasis on meeting identified community needs, AmeriCorps programs can be crafted to maximize member development. Some efforts in this area are in progress. For example, the Corporation has contracted with the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps to develop an "Ethic of Service Master Plan" which is available to program directors on request. Perhaps a more in-depth look at what members say they are getting out of this experience, what outcomes they value, and which experiences and trainings have made a difference for them, can be used by the Corporation, state commissions, and individual program directors in designing trainings and programs. Efforts to maximize member development could have a significant impact and at the same time be modest, inexpensive, and not detract in any way from community service endeavors. Also, an effort could be made to reach those who have a vested interest in members but a less formal connection to the program. For example, efforts could be made to raise the awareness of agency staff who supervise or work with members, and community members who benefit from AmeriCorps activities, about not only what members are accomplishing, but also the potential of the experience to develop members as citizens and workers. This might encourage these stakeholders to provide members with some special civic and work skill learning opportunities.

While the study does not look at whether the members could have accessed other programs that would have provided similar benefits, in this study members perceived that AmeriCorps provided unique opportunities that would have otherwise have been unavailable to them. Clearly, it is important for programs to keep the members focused on providing service. However, it may be useful to also help them see what they are gaining as well. Many programs already encourage member reflection through discussion or journals. It is possible that guiding these reflections toward both what they are accomplishing in the community, as well as their own civic and career growth, may positively affect morale and retention rates.

Validating the Educational Outcomes of Service

The focus groups revealed that for these members, the AmeriCorps experience developed new skills, knowledge, and attitudes, which are widely recognized as important educational goals in both civics and workplace preparation. As a matter of fact, all of their reported citizenship and employability effects have been identified as important outcomes in either recent national education standards or in current education research. This section, compares findings with two benchmark-setting endeavors: The National Standards for Civics and Government, and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). These reports represent current, broad-based national efforts to identify and define knowledge and skill outcomes in civics and workplace education, respectively. These standards are not designed to establish outcomes for national service participation, rather they are both directed primarily to an educator audience engaged in preparing youth for adulthood. However, because they each identify standards that students should master before high school graduation, they are used in this report as consensus minimum goals for adult civic and workplace competence.

The National Standards for Civics and Government were developed by the Center for Civics Education, and published in 1994. The standard development and review process, funded by the US. Department of Education and the Pew Charitable Trusts, included over 150 public hearings and discussion groups, and received comments from over 1,000 educators and community leaders. These voluntary standards identify civic content and exit goals for grades K-12. The standards extensively document "content skills" i.e., what students need to know, and an accompanying list of "participatory skills" related to civics.

In 1991, the Department of Labor released the report, What Work Requires of America's Schools. This study, commonly referred to as "SCANS." identifies skills needed to meet the demands of the 'Workplace 2000.' As in the civic skills standards process, the workplace standards are the result of a multi-tiered collaboration of a broad-based group of public leaders, in this case primarily representing education, business and industry, and organized labor. SCANS identifies eight "workplace know-how" requirements consisting of five competency areas and three foundation skill areas (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). Each of these areas is further refined for a total of 20 competencies, and 17 foundation skills. SCANS is increasingly used to set standards in curriculum development and assessment, particularly at the high school level and in post-secondary technical programs.

The knowledge and skill areas cited as participation effects by AmeriCorps members dovetail with civic and workplace competencies identified in these two standards. This does not

suggest that the AmeriCorps experience is a substitute for civics education or workplace preparation programs. For example, many of the civics standards relate to acquiring important historical and political knowledge which one would not expect an AmeriCorps member to acquire as part of the service experience. Rather, a comparison of study findings with the standards, illustrates how the service experience enabled these members to acquire or strengthen their abilities in widely accepted competencies.

The following examples, though not comprehensive, illustrate how the reported service experiences connect to these national standards.

Examples of convergence with national education standards

While the terminology and style of the two sets of standards is dissimilar, a careful reading of participant comments demonstrates how they can be translated into basic concepts found in the two standards. The following discuss two general outcome areas, first in civic dispositions, and second in civic skills that also improve employability.

First, participants' reflections provide evidence of how service strengthened their civic competence and dispositions. These effects can be compared to the concepts of "civic-mindedness" and "dispositions that facilitate thoughtful and effective participation in public affairs" (p.133) which are noted throughout the Civics Standards. Participants clearly demonstrated that they had gained new knowledge of "civic life, politics and government" (p.89). They gave examples of how their civic-minded ideas and actions derived in part from the knowledge and practical hands-on skills gained by working with organized groups, and mobilizing volunteers to address community problems. Familiarity with both the importance and role of volunteerism, and the purpose of social welfare and civic community organizations, are identified in the Civics Standards as critical components in understanding the "foundation of the American political system" (pp. 99, 102). Identified participatory skills, such as "listening to other points of view," and "open-mindedness" (p.134) were also illustrated by focus comments.

Second, every one of the reported effects which this study identified as "civic/employability skills" are found in some form in the two standards. They are expressed in terms such as "teaching others," "leading," and "understanding social systems." For example, in terms of comfort with diversity, the Civics Standards suggests that students should be able to, "Identify many forms of diversity.... (and) describe conflicts that have arisen from diversity (p.103);" while SCANS identifies as one its Interpersonal Competencies, "Works with Diversity — works well with men and women from diverse backgrounds (p. xvii)." Participant reflections

reported in the findings demonstrate that the service experience potentially provides both knowledge and skills in working with diverse populations.

Perseverance is another area identified by both sets of standards. Members gave several examples of learning "stick- to-it-iveness" despite facing multiple frustrations either with team members, or political or structural problems at their agencies. They reported learning from their mistakes, and being inspired by the perseverance of others. The Civics Standards identify this trait as a critical participatory skill: "Persistence — being willing to attempt again and again to accomplish worthwhile goals" (p. 134). As a SCANS competency, it is identified as a characteristic of responsible workplace behavior: "Responsibility —exerts a high level of effort and perseveres towards goals attainment" (p. xviii).

Teamwork is one of the most frequently cited skills required by employers. The restructuring of worksites as well as an emphasis on collaborative management styles have led to an increased demand for employees who are able to work as part of a team. This emphasis is a distinct change from the workplace of the recent past with its more hierarchical work structure. Therefore, many people have not had the opportunity to learn or practice teamwork skills as part of either formal schooling or past work experiences. In civic life, the ability to work with others toward common goals, whether it is to improve a neighborhood school, restore a wetland, or advocate for changes in public policies is key to participatory democracy.

The following example demonstrates how a further exploration might proceed in charting the convergence of standards with effects of service participation. It uses "personal skills needed for collaboration" as a broader conception of several of the civic/employability outcomes. A future study might also look at how many participants achieve competencies in the standards areas.

Personal skills needed for collaborating with others:

National Civics Standards:

"Participatory Skills.... the capacity to influence policies and decisions by working with others.... building coalitions, negotiating, compromising and seeking consensus, managing conflicts" (p.5). "Considering others points of view" (p.134).

SCANS skills:

"Interpersonal competencies... participates as member of a team, exercises leadership, negotiates, works with diversity. Basic Skills: Listening, Speaking. Personal qualities: Sociability - demonstrates understanding...adaptability...in group settings" (p.xvii).

Reported Member Outcomes

Members reported multiple related outcomes— development of leadership and communication skills, an improved ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds, and experience working as part of a team.

This initial analysis demonstrates how certain effects of service can be grounded in benchmarks set by national standards. Even though the program emphasis is on providing community service, AmeriCorps has the potential to grow good citizens and provide opportunities to develop recognized employability skills. In addition to continuing a comparison of findings with the two national standards, a further exploration might find that some aspects of the findings are an even better fit with other relevant research. For example, while civic effects certainly converge with the Civics Standards, member reflections about "finding a voice," illuminate the "strong democracy" concept identified by Benjamin Barber. Another potential area for research would be to look at the effects of member characteristics, different service experiences, and specific trainings, on the long term effects of service.

Implications for Education

These findings point to some potentially powerful forms of learning embedded in service experiences, even when, as in the case of AmeriCorps the service experience is not explicitly intended to be "educational." The types of learning that are taking place in these "non educational" programs may have implications for programs whose intent is explicitly educational, such as civics education and adult education. They may inform experiential education strategies, particularly in service-learning and school-to-work preparation. While not fully explored, areas for future investigation are outlined below.

1) Civics Education. The purpose of civics education is "to promote knowledge, skills and attitudes conducive to effective participation in civic life" (in Cotton, 1996, citing Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors, p.37). Study findings indicate potentially strong civic education outcomes from service participation. A more thorough and broader based look at results of successful service programs might inform civic education curricula and strategies.

2) Experiential Education Strategies. Service-learning strategies are designed to prepare better citizens by fostering a sense of caring for others, a concern for the welfare of one's community, and a willingness to participate in community life (Newmann & Rutter, 1983). Like other experiential education programs, service-learning proponents claim benefits additional to

citizenship preparation, including provision of workplace preparation skills and career exploration opportunities (Conrad & Hedin, 1981). Study findings add to the body of knowledge about how participating in service programs potentially provides civic and work skills. They can be used to further the existing initial endeavors (Jett, 1996) to document outcomes of school to work and service learning experiences through mechanisms such as SCANS.

3) Adult Education. Participant comments imply that further attempts to capture reflections on service experiences might provide useful lessons to adult education of all kinds. Study participants represented primarily members over age 21; with one-third over age 30. As a group, they were older than AmeriCorps members in general, providing valuable insights into this member subset. Their reflections demonstrate significant and powerful education effects from engaging in community activities and hands-on learning. They reported advancing intellectual, personal, and technical abilities. Their learning took place on an adult level, and it complemented and built on their life experiences. They were able to apply every aspect—understanding how public decisions are made, gaining personal skills such as communication and teamwork, experiencing internship-like work experiences— directly to their lives. A more directed study of these outcomes may provide educators with valuable lessons on adult education and engaged learning.

The Public Interest, Service, and Citizenship Development

Citizenship theorist Benjamin Barber defines a strong democracy as a "rich conception of citizenship" (where) ...every member of the community participates in self-governance. It entails not merely voting and overseeing representatives, but ongoing engagement in the affairs of the civic community at the local and national levels"(1989, p.355). Americans clearly have a vested interest in fostering competent and engaged citizenship. And, we are concerned about a perceived disinterest in civic life. For example, Robert Putnam's recent articles seeking to explain the decline of civic engagement, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America" and "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" (American Prospect, 1995; Journal of Democracy, 1995) have provoked a volley of responses, both in print and on service-related listservs.

Service opportunities appear to be one strategy for encouraging civic mindedness. Yet, we lack a public and a political consensus about the civic purpose of service programs. Debates abound over whether service has to do with charity or with change: Do we want participants to develop a sense of compassion and duty, or to learn to reflect critically on our social policies (Khane & Westheimer, 1996)? Even as debates continue over the nature of service, and the appropriate role of government in sponsoring service opportunities, new policies are enacted and

defended. For example, in the last year alone, 1) AmeriCorps was the one of the key points of disagreement that led to the Congressional budget stalemate and subsequent federal government shut down. The dispute continues: the September/October issue of the conservative journal, Policy Review featured a point-counterpoint between AmeriCorps defenders and detractors. 2) When some states and school districts enacted service requirements for high school graduation, those who took issue with the requirements filed lawsuits claiming service mandates constitute involuntary servitude. And, 3) new service-related policies continue to be introduced. In October, President Clinton announced a new initiative that would require universities to dedicate a significant portion of work study funds to community service, particularly tutoring programs.

In examining what study participants had to say about the personal effects of serving their country, we see evidence of development of civic judgment, and an improved ability and inclination to address complex public problems. Inarguably, a citizenry with these traits is critical to sustain democracy. As David Boggs writes, "No democratic nation can solve its problems...unless its citizens possess civic competence" (1991, p.46). Perhaps a serious look at the civic stories of those who have chosen to engage in service will prove a useful addition to the public dialogue about effective citizenship and the role of service. This study demonstrates the type of information we might gain from trying to understand and document the perceptions of service participants. Reflections on the meaning and rewards of service can inform both the larger philosophical discussion as well as specifics of program delivery. Perhaps our improved understanding will enable us to infuse these lessons into refining service, and improve citizenship development in other public arenas as well.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is a collected record of personal stories, which were analyzed to uncover the outcomes and implications that are in the public interest. While performing a year or two of service to their country and communities, these members developed knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will, it appears, enable them to enhance and strengthen their ongoing contributions. Though not a comprehensive review of members' experiences nationwide, the study offers a provocative picture of possibilities, which suggest that more can be—and is being — accomplished by the program that is currently thought to be the case. Further attempts to assess its worth would do well to explore effects over time, and to look in a more systematic way, with larger samples, at the kinds of outcomes this study demonstrates for a small number of cases.

Although almost every participant was serving in his/her home community many felt the AmeriCorps experience provided them with civic and work opportunities they would not have otherwise had. Each participant reported unique personal benefits. The street youth reported that the experience helped them turn their lives toward a healthy path; several mid-career members developed new ideas for their careers, and a couple of members will continue at their placement sites as employees. Some developed very specific workplace skills such as learning to operate heavy machinery or becoming computer literate. Yet, all of these outcomes improved participants productivity or civic competence, and thus have public implications.

Perhaps the most striking effects and potentials are in the realm of civic dispositions. These particular members were diverse in life experiences, age, ethnicity, and social backgrounds; yet each one articulated effects on their civic skills and connections. Democracy sustains itself best when citizens sustain an engagement in their civic community (Barber, 1989). In order for service to have a citizenship effect, something has to transform the individual's perception of themselves. Citizenship theorists argue that when this personal transformation takes place, citizens see themselves as people who can influence policy, and make a change in their community. These members amply demonstrated that the AmeriCorps experience has the potential to provide members with the skills, knowledge and the disposition to actively engage in civic life. Beyond that, they demonstrate a potential "transformation effect" of AmeriCorps. As one of the members, a woman in her mid-thirties who had lived in the rural community she served her whole life, said:

> I now feel like I'm a valuable part of my community. I'm respected....It feels really good to be asked for your input, your opinion, and for it to really be taken seriously. And used! I mean, sometimes my ideas have been used and I've been sought out for different things and its like wow... I'd have never imagined that 10 years ago, I'd never even thunk it, you know. I would never have envisioned myself working with our own sheriff department. It just wouldn't, you know, even occur to me. It's just like instead of looking at them as in a position of power and authority over me, I look at them just as regular people...That's pretty cool, I like it!

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INTERVIEWS

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APPENDIX

Methodology

Additional Notes on Focus Group Compostion

The two primary considerations in constructing the groups were to encourage the expression of fresh ideas by composing groups whose members had not had prior opportunities to discuss experiences with each other, and to elicit responses from members with backgrounds diverse from each other. Prior experience observing AmeriCorps discussion groups reinforced the idea that the groups should not be composed primarily of members representing only one program. When focus group members have a long established relationship, for example colleagues at a worksite, they may act like a family — with everyone maintaining distinct character roles. This is particularly true in AmeriCorps because members are often organized as teams, and in addition to a close working relationship, they may attend special events and trainings together. These established relationships can mitigate against honest reflection unhindered by self-censoring and considerations of what to say in front of fellow team members. Also, they may speak in abbreviated form about experiences they have shared with each other, but not with the facilitator.

Therefore, while all members were serving in the state of Washington, they were recruited from a variety of programs and geographic locations. While convening members from different sites posed some logistical challenges, assistance from the Washington State Commissioner for National and Community Service and local program directors, made it possible to convene groups of five-eight members, with no more than two from any one site, that seemed to provide an atmosphere conducive to honest reflection.

Efforts were made to attract a diverse population. This was accomplished by contacting sites that provided a geographical representation of rural, small town, urban and suburban areas. Also, program directors who sent two members were asked to select members who were "different from each other." Finally, some sites were selected specifically because their team members represented a certain population such as at- risk youth. In order to recruit members from rural and small town settings, focus group sessions One and Two were conducted at an end-of-the-year Member Development Institute (MDI) convened by the Washington Service Corps (WSC) whose members are placed primarily at non-urban sites throughout the state. Sessions Three and Four, were conducted in an urban and suburban setting respectively.

Focus Group Protocol

Each session was conducted in a similar format. Participants generally filtered in over a 10-15 minute period, so the facilitator chatted with them informally. When everyone was settled, the facilitator briefly described the exploratory study:

> I know that you all have had at least a year of AmeriCorps experience, and I am here to learn from you about participating in national service may have affected you. I am especially interested in how it may have affected your attitudes and your skills relating to civic life — to your participation as a citizen. I am also interested in how the experience may have affected your attitudes and skills relating to your planned future work experience.

Next, the facilitator reviewed how focus groups work, for example that the group is not expected to reach a consensus on any topic, and "ground rules" such as not interrupting or talking all at once.

In order to put everyone at ease, the first few questions were introductory; each participant was asked to state their name and program. In the first two groups they were asked to relate any prior volunteer experiences, but this question was also picked up in the post-session survey, and seemed to make members who had not been volunteers uncomfortable. So instead, in the next two sessions, members were asked "What were you doing prior to joining AmeriCorps?" The general discussion commenced with key questions about their perceptions of the effects of AmeriCorps participation, such as: "How are you different today than before you entered AmeriCorps?" and, "What have you gained from your AmeriCorps experience?"

The facilitator then followed up on members' comments by probing more specifically into experiences that seemed related to civic and workplace skills, and career exploration. Thus, questions asked were not exactly the same for each group. Probes, or additional questions were used to explore areas where civic and workplace skills intersect such as experiences in working as a team, working with diverse populations, or developing leadership skills. Some questions specifically addressed areas specific to career interests or civic development. Following are examples of some of the questions; depending on the group discussion, not all questions were asked in each session.

> What are the most important things you have learned about working to address problems or improve life in a community?

Some AmeriCorps members say that they've discovered new things about their own career interests. What experiences did you have that affected your plans for your career?

As mentioned above, questions evolved after each group. The exploratory nature of this inquiry allowed for some leeway in learning from one group to modify questions for the next. For example, after reviewing the transcripts of the first two sessions a new question was added, "Did you discover any talents or gifts you didn't know that you had?" Also, during the discussions, participants asked questions of each other. For example, in the first session one of the members described how her AmeriCorps experience led her to become more "civically involved," another member asked her: "Do you think that that's because AmeriCorps allows you the flexibility to voice your opinions more than just being a regular volunteer?" This led to an interesting discussion about "finding a voice" and the unique change agent role that AmeriCorps members can play, being neither a regular volunteer nor an employee. The wording of "finding a voice" would have been too leading for the facilitator to ask.

At the end of the session, participants were asked to complete a brief one-page personal background form.

Participant Characteristics:

Table 1 provides detail on demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Characteristics

	Focus Groups N	Focus Groups %	Wash -ington %	U.S. %
Ethnicity*				
Caucasian	19	79	59	47
African-American	3	13	8	31
Hispanic/Latino	3	13	9	13
Other	2	8	24	8
Age**				
Under 21	5	21	4	26
21-29	11	46	77	53
Over 30	8	33	19	21
Education***				
High school diploma/GED or less	5	21	48	38
Associate degress/some college	11	46	36	34
Bachelor degree or higher	8	33	16	28

n = 24. * A comparison of membership in ethnic group with state and national data is difficult because this study allowed each participantsto claim affiliation with more than one group, which is not the case in the Washington or U.S. survey. For example, the percentage of Caucasian members changes to 67%, if members who selected more than one group for themselves had selected only a nonCaucasian option. **Washington state age percentages are based on "Under 20" and "20-29" categories.*** Washington and U.S. statistics are based on education level at time of entry; this study is based on education level at time of service completion.

Table 2: Reasons for Joining AmeriCorps

	Totals
Wanted the education award	9
Seeking specific education, skills or work experience in order to further career goals.	9
Seeking community service	11
Needed a job/ Wanted Income	7

*N does not total 24. These responses where taken from transcripts and members often gave more than one reason for joining.

Prior volunteer experiences

The demographic form asked participants to "please list any previous volunteer experiences," as a way of investigating the members' ethic of service prior to joining AmeriCorps. However, their responses do not shed much light on whether the members already had a strong ethic that led them to engage in service. In some cases, members clearly listed volunteer activities they have engaged in after becoming an AmeriCorps member, and it is unclear whether they had also volunteered prior to Americorps. In other cases, the range of experiences such as "participated in community theater musical" does not necessarily show a volunteer ethic. And finally, respondents were not asked how much of a commitment their volunteer work had required, i.e. whether it was a one-shot, two-hour experience, or a long term commitment. Some members clearly stated that they had no prior volunteer experiences, either on the survey form, or as part of the focus conversation. In future studies, the question will be phrased more succinctly.

Differences among the four focus groups.

While the total focus group population provided some diversity, the groups themselves were somewhat more homogenous. This was partly by conscious design, but primarily due to the strategic decisions in recruiting and convening focus group members discussed in the methodology section. The individual group size was small, and it is not the purpose of this study to attempt any generalizations based on individual characteristics, although that could be an interesting area for exploration. For example, while one could not make any conclusion that people from rural areas are more likely to join AmeriCorps in order to receive education awards, that was true in this

exploration, and could be worth further investigation. The following comments are provided simply to give some impressions and a sense of the atmosphere for each group.

Groups One and Two were composed primarily of members from rural and small town settings, but had three urban members as well. The members of these two groups were mostly 26 or older, and had completed less education than the urban group. Members of these groups were the ones who most often responded that they had joined in order to receive the education award. Group Three was composed entirely of urban members, and five of the six participants had completed a four year college education. Every one of these members stated that they joined Americorps because they were seeking a service experience. Finally, Group Four was composed of five young people, all under age 25. Each of these young people would have been characterized prior to AmeriCorps as "at-risk" due to factors such as gang involvment or teen parenting. Three of these members had a high school education; none had completed a four year program.

Programs Represented in this Study

Goup 1. Ferry county, Yakima School District, Swan Creek AmeriCorps.

Group 2. EOC Bellevue;Yakima School district, DreamBuilders in Tacoma; BASIC, Lake Chelan AMeriCorps team; Team Hoquim.

Group 3. Just Serve, Literacy AmeriCorps, Youth Fair Chance; Youth Volunteer Corps.

Group 4: Snohomish County Youth Reconnection Project, Neutral Zone, Snohomish Team Refugee and Immigrant Forum

ADDITIONAL AMERICORPS BACKGROUND

Funding

AmeriCorps awards are available on a competitive grant basis to public and nonprofit agencies. State commissions award two thirds of the funds: one third of the funds are distributed to states on a population-based formula; and states compete for the additional third of the funds. These grants are by awarded by states to programs on a competitive basis. National organizations with programs in multiple states, such as Habitat for Humanity or United Way, apply directly to the Corporation for funding, and they in turn, award funds to their member organizations at local sites. These programs are referred to as "national directs," and receive the final third of the funds.

For the 1996-97 fiscal year, programs must match 15% of their grant in cash, and 33% of it with in-kind support.

Program Design

Individual agencies or coalitions must identify specific community needs and how members can address it, and then apply for grants which are awarded on a competitive basis. Because of the emphasis on local design, AmeriCorps provides great flexibility in program design, and it is difficult to describe programs in general terms. While not all programs fit exactly into this mold, in general, an agency may seek a grant to expand an existing initiative, or to launch a new one.

Member Benefits

Members can claim their education awards for up to seven years after completing service, and use them to pay off exisiting education loans or to pay for education at an institutue of higher education or accredited vocational training program. If a member joins AmeriCorps with an outstanding education loan, they may recieve forbearance on their loan until they have completed their service and recieved their award. In addition to these benefits, federal funding provides health care insurance for those who do not already have it, and child care benefits to low income members who have children. Programs must provide any members who are high school drop outs with the opportunity to complete their diploma or GED, and members must complete one of these programs in order to receive their education award.

AmeriCorps Members

Please check the appropriate boxes

Gender:
Male___ Female___

Age:
____ Under 21
____ 21-25
____ 26-29
____ 30-45
____ over 45

Which of the following categories best describes your ethnic origin?
____ White (non-Hispanic)
____ African American
____ Hispanic/Latino
____ Asian /Pacific Islander
____ American Indian/Alaskan Native
____ Other (specify):_____

What is the highest level of education you have completed?
____ Do not yet have high school diploma or GED
____ Completed high school diploma or GED
____ Have taken courses toward an Associate Degree
____ Completed Associate Degree
____ Have taken courses in a four-year college program
____ Completed four year college program
____ Have taken graduate-level courses
____ Completed graduate degree
____ Other, please specify_____

What career area are you planning to enter?_____

Name of your AmeriCorps program_____

What kind of work have you been doing?_____

Have you been a (check one) ___full-time or a ___part-time AmeriCorps member?

Are you from the same general area as your AmeriCorps site? ___yes ___no

Please list any previous volunteer experiences _____

_____

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Title: What ~~Get~~ Service Teaches about Citizenship and Work: The Case of AmeriCorps

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