

**AMERICORPS SERVICE EFFECTS ON
PARTICIPANT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

FEBRUARY 10, 2006

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
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The ultimate aim of this report is to help the Washington Commission for National and Community Service (Commission) and Washington AmeriCorps programs ensure that their services have a positive and lasting impact on AmeriCorps participants' civic engagement, an explicit aim of AmeriCorps. More pragmatically, this report aims to support Commission and program staff management by informing them on the apparent effect of AmeriCorps service on participant civic engagement attitudes and behaviors.

This report summarizes the findings from data collected from 348 AmeriCorps members (from both State and VISTA programs) who were administered a pre-service survey collected within their first month of service and a year-end survey collected in the last month of their year-one service. In order to isolate the effect of AmeriCorps, most survey items were compared to a national comparison group of 818 individuals who did not participate in AmeriCorps but were administered the same questions.

Comparing Washington pre- and post-program data with national comparison group data indicate that Washington AmeriCorps appears to increase many, but not all, measures of civic engagement among participants. These pre- and post-test data indicate that Washington AmeriCorps service increases the following in participants:

- Commitment to community service
- Community service self-efficacy
- Community-based activism
- Connection to community
- Knowledge of community problems
- Personal growth

Positive findings on AmeriCorps civic engagement outcomes are in line with research conducted in Washington, in the Northwest region, and nationally (Cohen, 1997; Jastrzab, 2004; Perry, 2004; Simon and Wang, 2002; Valente, 2004).

Pre- and post-test data, however, indicate that Washington AmeriCorps may not increase the following in participants:

- Engagement in the political process
- Importance given to service-oriented careers
- Importance given to neighborhood and civic obligations

Although some national research suggests that AmeriCorps increases participant importance given to neighborhood and civic obligations, these null outcomes are otherwise consistent with national research (Jastrzab, 2004; Perry, 2004).

Because of technical issues, findings regarding the effect of Washington AmeriCorps service on voting participation are inconclusive.

Washington AmeriCorps effectiveness at increasing civic engagement appears to be similar regardless of participant background. There were very few differences in civic engagement outcomes by participant age, gender, race, income level, amount of formal education, national service and community service background, childhood events related to service and civic involvement, reason for joining AmeriCorps, or type of service (VISTA or State).

One Washington AmeriCorps participant may have summarized this study when she stated that AmeriCorps made her “a deeper kind of patriot than the average American.” Indeed, this analysis of pre- and post-program data finds that AmeriCorps service strengthens civic engagement, regardless of participant age, ethnicity, gender and background. Although there are manifestations of civic engagement that Washington AmeriCorps service does not appear to increase, such as political involvement, this form of service does appear to boost overall civic engagement. Principally, the data indicate that Washington AmeriCorps service strengthens participant commitment to community service, community service self-efficacy, community-based activism, connection to community, knowledge of community problems, and personal growth. In the words of another participant, AmeriCorps appears to position participants to “definitely... get more involved” after their service.

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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The ultimate aim of this report is to help the Washington Commission for National and Community Service (Commission) and Washington AmeriCorps programs ensure that their services have a positive and lasting impact on AmeriCorps participants' civic engagement, an explicit aim of AmeriCorps. More pragmatically, this report aims to support Commission and program staff management by informing them on the apparent effect of AmeriCorps service on participant civic engagement attitudes and behaviors.

This report summarizes the findings from data collected from 348 AmeriCorps members who were administered a pre-service survey collected within their first month of service and a year-end survey collected in the last month of their year-one service. In order to isolate the effect of AmeriCorps, most survey items were compared to a national comparison group of 818 individuals who did not participate in AmeriCorps but were administered the same questions.

APPROACH

To best meet the needs of the Commission, the data analysis and presentation were designed to achieve the following:

- Meet or exceed industry standards of validity, where possible
- Build on the strengths of the Commission and its grantee AmeriCorps programs
- Be feasible within the organizational constraints of the Commission and its grantee AmeriCorps programs
- Be sensitive to the organizational culture of the Commission and its grantee AmeriCorps programs

DATA COLLECTION

The population to which the pre- and post-surveys were administered consisted of individuals who started their first year of AmeriCorps service in the Fall of 2004. Surveys were sent to AmeriCorps program staff who administered the pre-surveys within the first month of service and the post-surveys during the last month of the first year of service. Five hundred and thirty-five first-year AmeriCorps participants, representing over 80 percent of Washington first-year participants, were asked to complete pre- and post-service surveys. Three hundred and forty-eight, or 65 percent of those receiving surveys, completed both surveys in a way that could be matched by respondent. These 348 matched pre- and post-surveys comprise the data analyzed in this report. Survey respondent characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Gender	75% female 25% male
Race (could select more than one)	75% White 14% Hispanic 5% African American 20% Other
Age	3% under 20 81% 20 – 29 10% 30 – 49 6% 50 or over
Household income (year prior to service)	26% under \$5,000 33% between \$5,000 – \$30,000 23% between \$30,000 – \$60,000 12% between \$60,000 – \$100,000 6% over \$100,000
Type of AmeriCorps participant	80% State 20% VISTA
Highest level of educational achievement	1% no high school diploma 13% have a high school diploma 1% have a vocational/trade degree 26% have some college but no degree 7% have an associate's degree 50% have a bachelor's degree 2% have an advanced degree
Prior community/military service (could select more than one or none)	93% volunteer community service 3% military service 1% Peace Corps
Childhood events related to service and civic involvement	88% saw someone in their family help others 87% personally saw someone they admired (not a family member) helping others 68% were active in church groups, religious organizations, or community groups 40% were active in student government

Reasons for joining AmeriCorps (could select two)	56% to explore future jobs/educational interests 44% to help other people/perform community service 40% to get an educational scholarship 16% to get a job/earn money 12% to get involved in issues 9% to learn about or work with people of different ethnic/cultural groups 10% other
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The pre- and post-survey collected information on eleven civic engagement metrics developed by the Corporation for National and Community Service and Abt Associates through a thoughtful and rigorous process, based on a compelling theory of change model, that is documented in *Serving Country and Community: A Longitudinal Study of Service in AmeriCorps* and its accompanying *Appendices* (Jastrzab et al., 2004). These metrics are described in Table 2.¹

Table 2. Outcomes Measured Pre- and Post-Service

Civic Engagement Outcomes	Survey Item(s) Used as Indicators
Commitment to Community Service	<p>There was one item on the post-survey:</p> <p>How much will your AmeriCorps service affect your subsequent participation on community service (will make me much less likely to participate, will make me less likely to participate, will not have any effect on my future participation, will make me more likely to participate, will make me much more likely to participate)?</p>
Community Service Self-Efficacy	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of three items: Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I felt I made a positive contribution to the community b. I felt like part of the community c. I felt I could make a difference in the life of at least one person
Community-based Activism	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of three items: How often do you do each of the following (1 = never, 2 = not very often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, 5 = always)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Participate in events such as community meetings, celebrations, or activities in my community b. Join organizations that support issues that are important to me c. Write or e-mail newspapers or organizations to voice my views

¹ The national study from which these items are drawn (Jastrzab, 2004) included local Civic Efficacy and Grassroots Efficacy constructs as civic engagement. Yet, because the documentation available at the time of the Washington study design (Jastrzab, 2001) did not classify them as civic engagement, these metrics were not collected in this study. Similarly, after the design of this study, the national study reclassified the Importance of Service-Oriented Career as an employment construct. However, it remains as a civic engagement construct in this report.

Civic Engagement Outcomes	Survey Item(s) Used as Indicators
Connection to Community	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of five items: Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I have a strong attachment to my community b. I often discuss and think about how larger political and social issues affect my community c. I am aware of what can be done to meet the important needs in my community d. I feel I have the ability to make a difference in my community e. I try to find the time or a way to make a positive difference in my community
Knowledge of Community Problem	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of five items: On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = nothing and 5 = a great deal, how much do you feel you know about problems facing the community, such as...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The environment? b. Public health issues? c. Literacy? d. Crime? e. Lack of civic involvement?
Personal Growth through Community Service	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of five items: Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I re-examined my beliefs and attitudes about myself b. I was exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world c. I learned about the "real" world d. I did things I never thought I could do e. I changed some of my beliefs and attitudes
Engagement in the Political Process	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of three items: How often do you do each of the following (1 = never, 2 = not very often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, 5 = always)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Vote in local elections b. Try to learn as much as I can about candidates or ballot questions before voting c. Keep informed about local or national news
Importance of Service-Oriented Careers	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of three items: Please indicate whether you feel each of the following things is not important, somewhat important, or very important to you (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Working to correct social and economic inequalities b. Having a job that involves working with other people c. Working in a job where I am of direct service to people

Civic Engagement Outcomes	Survey Item(s) Used as Indicators
Neighborhood Obligations	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of five items: Do you feel each of the following is not an important obligation, a somewhat important obligation, or a very important obligation that a citizen owes to the country (1 = not an important obligation, 2 = a somewhat important obligation, 3 = a very important obligation)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reporting a crime that you may have witnessed b. Participating in neighborhood organizations c. Helping to keep the neighborhood safe d. Helping to keep the neighborhood clean and beautiful e. Helping those who are less fortunate
Civic Obligations	<p>The construct on the pre- and post-survey was made up of three items: Do you feel each of the following is not an important obligation, a somewhat important obligation, or a very important obligation that a citizen owes to the country (1 = not an important obligation, 2 = a somewhat important obligation, 3 = a very important obligation)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Serving on a jury if called b. Voting in elections c. Keeping informed about news and public issues
Voting Participation	<p>The question asked whether respondents voted in the 2000 national elections (pre-survey) and the 2004 national elections (post-survey).</p>

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis of this report focused on answering three questions:

1. Was there a statistically significant change in civic engagement measures among Washington AmeriCorps participants during the course of their first-year service?
2. Was the change or lack of change, above, different to a statistically significant degree than the change in the national comparison group suggesting that AmeriCorps service had an impact?
3. Are there differences in the civic engagement metrics by age, gender, race, income level, amount of formal education, national service and community service background, family community service background, or type of service (VISTA or State) in the civic engagement outcomes of AmeriCorps members? Although every outcome reported was tested, a failure to find any differences was not cited; only differences were stated.

In order to answer these three questions, the analysis followed these steps:

1. Testing for statistically significant changes (at the 95% confidence level) from the pre- to the post-survey on each construct using a paired-samples t-test methodology.²
2. Comparison of pre- and post-program changes in the Washington data with corresponding changes in the comparison group data using t-test methodology that identifies statistically significant differences (at the 95% confidence level). Because the national comparison data (Jastrzab, 2004) were standardized and the raw data were not available, this comparison involved duplicating the standardizing process for the Washington data before making the comparison.
3. Repeating, the first step, above, by subgroups on the following factors: gender, race, age, income level, type of AmeriCorps program (VISTA versus non-VISTA), educational achievement, prior community/military service, childhood events related to service and civic involvement, and reason for joining AmeriCorps. Only differences that were statistically significant (at the 95 percent confidence level) are presented in the report.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As with any measurement effort, there are a number of considerations and limitations to keep in mind when interpreting the findings. These are summarized below.

- Response rate. Although a 65 percent response rate is relatively high by most research standards, it certainly does not guarantee that the final sample is representative of all first-year AmeriCorps members. This is particularly true given that some AmeriCorps participants were sick or otherwise unavailable at the time the surveys were administered. Thus, although the response rate is 65 percent, fewer than 65 percent of all first-year participants are represented in the data. Therefore, these findings represent what is likely to be the case and should not be construed as definitive without corroboration.
- Imperfect comparison group. There are several challenges that result in imperfect comparisons between Washington and comparison group participants. The first is selection bias, which means that some differences in attitudes and behavior between participants and the control group might be because those who chose AmeriCorps entered with different attitudes and behaviors than those who did not choose AmeriCorps. This study was not able to replicate the methodology the

² The use of t-test methodology in the national study (Jastrzab, 2004), which provided the comparison group, dictated the use of this same methodology in this study.

national study (Jastrzab, 2004) used to obviate this bias because necessary data were unavailable.

The second challenge is that the national comparison data were not available (only published tables were) to eliminate demographics differences between this group and Washington participants. Additionally, the national comparison group data (Jastrzab, 2004) were collected in the 1999–2000 program year, while the Washington data were collected over the 2004–2005 program year. This may introduce other dissimilarities between the two groups, including the national climate around service before and after September 11th.

These challenges reduce the ability of comparison group analysis to control for all factors that are not related to AmeriCorps participation and, thus, to accurately isolate the causal effect of AmeriCorps participation. Therefore, these findings should not be construed as definitive without corroboration.

- Margin of error. Due to sampling error, all figures presented in this report have a margin of error, which varies by figure.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY SERVICE

Eighty-seven percent of Washington survey respondents reported that their AmeriCorps service increased the likelihood of future community service. Unfortunately, comparison group data on this finding are not available. Because it is not known whether increases in commitment to community service are unique to Washington state participants or would also appear among non-participants, it's not certain that AmeriCorps caused this change. Qualitative data and measures of other civic engagement outcomes, however, seem to suggest that AmeriCorps is, indeed, responsible for the increases in participant commitment to community service.

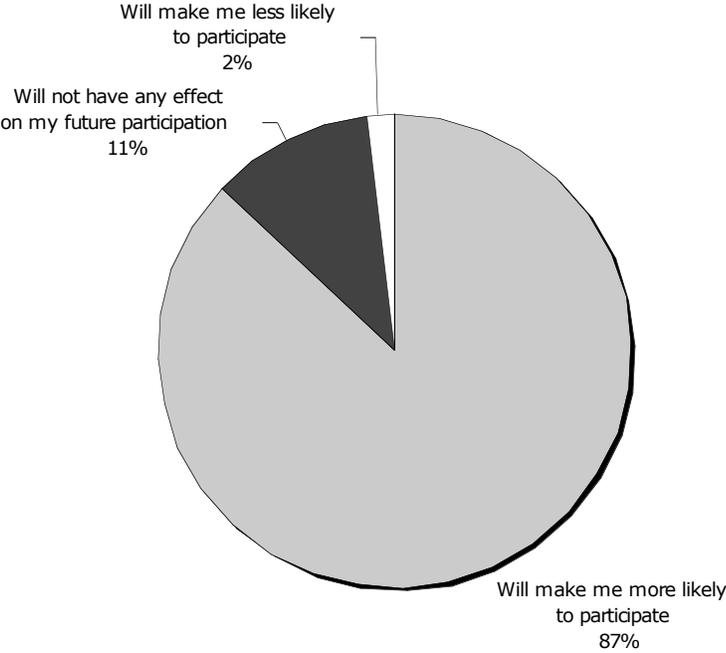
“I love community involvement even more and will continue to be involved.”

“Now I am interested in the world of volunteering and see how important and rewarding an experience it can be.”

“[I] definitely want to get more involved in my community when I go home.”

Participant responses to *“In what ways has the AmeriCorps experience changed you, if at all?”*

Figure 1. Survey Participant Self-Reported Effect of AmeriCorps Service on their Future Participation in Community Service



The commitment to community service metric was based on one retrospective post-survey item:

How much will your AmeriCorps service affect your subsequent participation on community service (will make me much less likely to participate, will make me less likely to participate, will not have any effect on my future participation, will make me more likely to participate, will make me much more likely to participate)?

COMMUNITY SERVICE SELF-EFFICACY

“When you expect success, you are willing to put in the effort to achieve it... Ultimately what makes a difference in performance is whether people put in the effort—and often the extra effort—to sustain success.”

*Rosabeth Moss Kanter
Professor, Harvard Business School*

Data from the community service self-efficacy construct indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps has a greater effect on a sense of personal effectiveness than any community service they conducted in the year prior to their AmeriCorps service.

Survey participants who conducted community service the year prior to AmeriCorps (others were not asked these questions) experienced a 0.25 increase in the personal efficacy construct on the 1–5 scale from a pre-survey average of 4.10, referring to community service conducted the year prior to AmeriCorps, to the post-survey average of 4.35 relating to the AmeriCorps service. The control group did not experience any increase indicating that the Washington AmeriCorps increase might be entirely due to the program. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) also found that the AmeriCorps experience had a statistically significant and causal effect on this construct.

“I know that I am capable of doing more than I thought I was.”

“I have increased confidence in my abilities.”

“This experience has... shown that a few volunteers can make big things happen.”

Participant responses to *“In what ways has the AmeriCorps experience changed you, if at all?”*

Increases in the personal efficacy construct were significantly more pronounced among survey respondents who, prior to their AmeriCorps service, had not conducted another type of national service (Peace Corps or military).

The personal efficacy construct was based on pre- and post-program data from three survey items:

Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

- a. I felt I made a positive contribution to the community
- b. I felt like part of the community
- c. I felt I could make a difference in the life of at least one person

Compared to their prior service, the AmeriCorps experience gave Washington survey respondents a greater sense of contributing to the community (a. above), and a stronger sense that they could make a difference in the life of at least one person (c). AmeriCorps service gave them about the same sense of being part of the community (b) as their prior service.

It should be noted that these findings are likely to understate the effect of AmeriCorps service on participants' sense of community service personal efficacy since the analysis excludes those who are most likely to see dramatic increases in this outcome: AmeriCorps participants who did *not* conduct community service the year prior to AmeriCorps.

COMMUNITY-BASED ACTIVISM

"The job of a citizen is to keep his mouth open."

*Gunter Grass
Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature*

Survey data indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps has a statistically significant effect on a participant's community-based activism. Survey participants experienced a 0.13 increase on the 1–5 scale from a pre-survey average of 2.65 to the post-survey average of 2.78 on the community-based activism construct. The control group experienced no change, indicating that Washington AmeriCorps was the likely causal effect for these changes. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) also found that AmeriCorps participants nationwide experienced a statistically significant increase in this construct and that this increase appeared to be a result of the AmeriCorps experience.

Increases in the community-based activism construct were significantly more pronounced among survey respondents who had not conducted community service prior to their AmeriCorps service.

“I am a deeper kind of patriot than the average American. It's because I walk my talk through the work I do.”

“[The AmeriCorps experience has] made me more of a leader in my community.”

Participant responses to “In what ways has the AmeriCorps experience changed you, if at all?”

The community-based activism construct was based on pre- and post-program data from three survey items:

How often do you do each of the following (1 = never, 2 = not very often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, 5 = always)?

- a. Participate in events such as community meetings, celebrations, or activities in my community
- b. Join organizations that support issues that are important to me
- c. Write or e-mail newspapers or organizations to voice my views

Washington AmeriCorps participants experienced statistically significant increases in the first two items, the frequency with which they participated in community events (a) and the frequency with which they joined organizations that support issues that were important to them (b). They did not, however, experience a statistically significant increase in the frequency with which they wrote or emailed their views to newspapers or organizations (c).

It should be noted that this construct measured a behavior that may have been part of, or at least supported by, the AmeriCorps service itself. Thus, these findings should not necessarily indicate a change of self-selected behavior post-AmeriCorps.

CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY

“Every individual, I would argue, needs to feel a connection to community, to a history, and to a human project larger than his or her own life. Without this connection, we are bereft of a concern for the future or an investment in the fate of our community. Nihilism is the result.”

*Linda Martin Alcoff
Professor, Syracuse University*

The connection to community construct data indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps has a positive effect on a sense of connection to the community. Survey participants experienced a 0.13 increase on the 1–5 scale from a pre-survey average of 3.83 to the post-survey average of 3.96. The data suggest that this increase might be entirely due to the AmeriCorps experience. Indeed, the control group did not experience any increase. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) also found that the AmeriCorps experience had a statistically significant and causal effect on this construct.

Positive findings on participant connection to community are in line with prior qualitative research in Washington that found that AmeriCorps service provided a “new sense of connectedness” to community (Cohen, 1997).

“My AmeriCorps experience has made me feel more connected with my community.”

“[The AmeriCorps experience made me] more sensitive to my community and school system.”

“I have compassion for so many communities [because of the AmeriCorps experience].”

Participant responses to *“In what ways has the AmeriCorps experience changed you, if at all?”*

The connection to community construct was based on pre- and post-program data from three survey items:

Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

- a. I have a strong attachment to my community
- b. I often discuss and think about how larger political and social issues affect my community
- c. I am aware of what can be done to meet the important needs in my community
- d. I feel I have the ability to make a difference in my community
- e. I try to find the time or a way to make a positive difference in my community

Washington AmeriCorps participants experienced statistically significant increases in two items: attachment to community (a) and awareness of what can be done to meet community needs (c). They did not, however, experience a statistically significant increase in the frequency of discussion of larger political and social issues (b), self-reported ability to make a difference in their community (d), or attempts to find time or ways to make a positive difference in their community (e).

KNOWLEDGE OF COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

*"A mind that is stretched by a new experience
can never go back to its old dimensions."*

*Oliver Wendell Holmes
Supreme Court Justice*

Survey data indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps has a statistically significant positive effect on the respondent's self-assessed understanding of community social problems, per the community problem identification construct. On this construct, survey participants experienced an increase of a third of a point on the five-point scale (0.33) from a pre-survey average of 3.23 to the post-survey average of 3.56. Increases in the community problem identification construct were particularly strong among participants with college degrees.

This apparent increase in participants' identification with community problems might be entirely due to the AmeriCorps experience because the control group did not experience any change. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) also found that the AmeriCorps experience had a statistically significant positive effect on this construct.

"I have learned a lot about how society works."

"It has made me more aware of community issues."

"I am more aware of the needs regarding elders, low-income families, homeless, and adults living with disabilities."

Participant responses to *"In what ways has the AmeriCorps experience changed you, if at all?"*

The community problem identification construct was based on pre- and post-program data from five survey items, listed below. All items, except crime (d), showed statistically significant increases.

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = nothing and 5 = a great deal, how much do you feel you know about problems facing the community, such as...

- a. The environment?
- b. Public health issues?
- c. Literacy?
- d. Crime?
- e. Lack of civic involvement?

PERSONAL GROWTH THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE

"I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor."

*Henry David Thoreau
American author, poet, and philosopher*

Data from the personal growth through community service construct indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps has a greater effect on personal growth than any community service they conducted in the year prior to their AmeriCorps service. Survey participants who conducted community service in the year prior to AmeriCorps (others were not asked these questions) experienced a statistically significant 0.22 increase on the 1–5 scale from a pre-survey average of 3.76 to the post-survey average of 3.98.

Although the control group also experienced an increase, it was lower in magnitude to a statistically significant degree, suggesting that Washington AmeriCorps probably had a causal effect. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) also found that, nationally, the AmeriCorps experience had a statistically significant and causal effect on this construct.

"It [the AmeriCorps experience] has given me the opportunity for personal growth and adjustments in completely new settings."

"My experience has increased my confidence and expanded my sense of worth."

"It [the AmeriCorps experience] has given me focus and purpose."

Participant responses to *"In what ways has the AmeriCorps experience changed you, if at all?"*

As with the personal effectiveness construct, increases in the personal growth construct were significantly more pronounced among survey respondents who, prior to their AmeriCorps service, had not conducted any type of national service (PeaceCorps, AmeriCorps, or military).

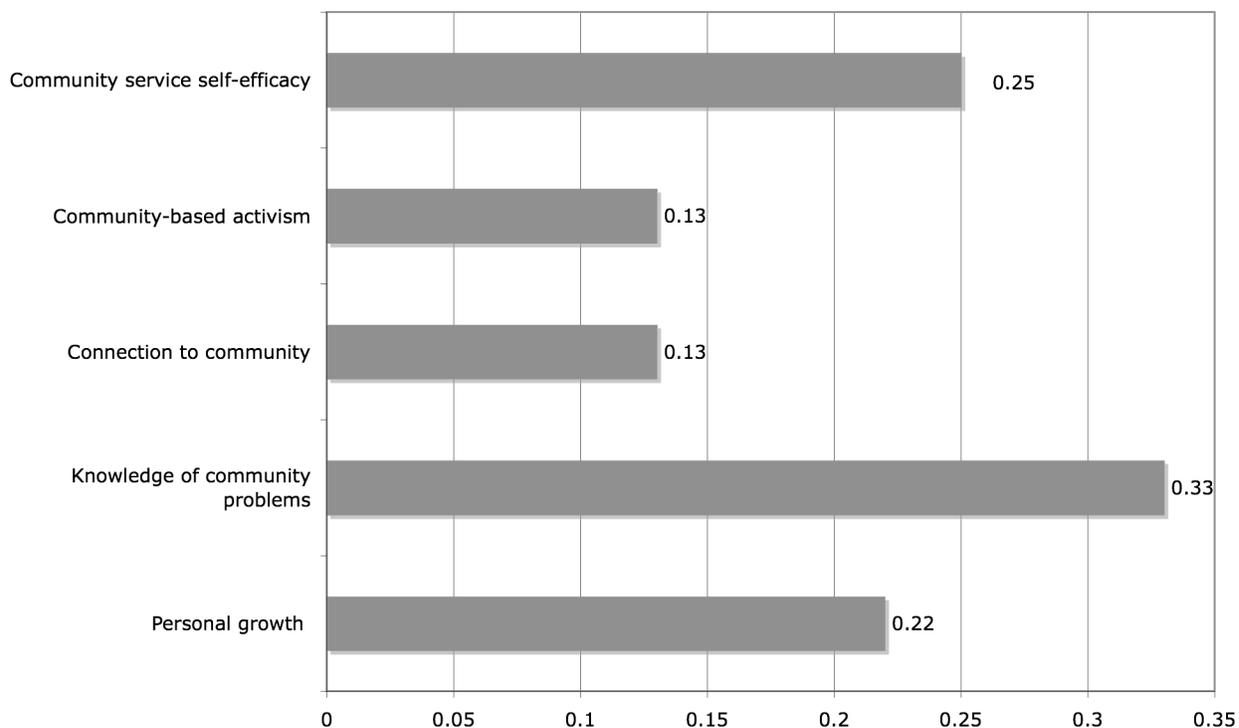
The personal growth construct was based on pre- and post-program data from five survey items:

Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

- a. I re-examined my beliefs and attitudes about myself
- b. I was exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world
- c. I learned about the "real" world
- d. I did things I never thought I could do
- e. I changed some of my beliefs and attitudes

Washington survey respondents experienced belief examination (a), things they never thought they could do (d), and belief changes (e) to a greater degree in their AmeriCorps service than in their prior year's community service. The data indicate, however, that the AmeriCorps experience was only equally effective as prior service in providing exposure to new ideas and ways of seeing the world (b) and helping participants learn about the real world (c).

Figure 2. Positive Outcomes: Construct Score Increases from the Pre- to the Post-Test Among AmeriCorps Survey Respondents (1-5 scale)



NULL OR INCONCLUSIVE OUTCOMES

ENGAGEMENT IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

“With all the daunting challenges that this country is facing at home and abroad, our democracy needs ... more engaged citizens who inform themselves of the issues and vote their informed preferences.”

*Amy Gutmann
President, University of Pennsylvania*

Survey data on the engagement in the political process construct indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps has no effect on a participant’s involvement in the political process. Participants experienced a statistically significant 0.15 increase on the 1–5 scale from a pre-survey construct average of 3.61 to the post-survey average of 3.76 on this construct. Statistically speaking, however, this is no different than that of the comparison group. Thus the data suggest that AmeriCorps participation had no effect on the political participation construct. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) also found that, nationally, the AmeriCorps experience had no causal effect on this construct.

Increases in the engagement in the political process construct were significantly more pronounced among survey respondents with a household income of under \$25,000. There is no way to determine, however, if this increase was caused by the AmeriCorps experience.

The engagement in the political process construct was based on pre- and post-program data from three survey items, only the first one of which (vote in local elections) showed a statistically significant increase:

How often do you do each of the following (1 = never, 2= not very often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, 5 = always)?

- a. Vote in local elections
- b. Try to learn as much as I can about candidates or ballot questions before voting
- c. Keep informed about local or national news

IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE-ORIENTED CAREERS

“The first duty of a human being is to assume the right functional relationship to society—more briefly, to find your real job and do it.”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

American writer, economist, lecturer, and early theorist of the feminist movement

Construct data from the survey indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps has no effect on a participant’s view of the importance of service-oriented careers. Survey participants experienced virtually no change from a pre-survey average of 2.68 on the importance of service-oriented careers construct to the post-survey average of 2.70 on a 3-point scale. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) also found that the AmeriCorps experience had no causal effect on this construct.

It should be noted that the pre-test scores were a mere 0.33 points from the highest possible value of three, indicating that those who enter AmeriCorps already have a high sense of importance of service-oriented careers. These high pre-test scores make it exceedingly difficult for the program to effect change on this construct.

The importance of service-oriented careers construct was based on pre- and post-program data from three survey items, none of which showed a statistically significant change:

Please indicate whether you feel each of the following things is not important, somewhat important, or very important to you (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important).

- a. Working to correct social and economic inequalities
- b. Having a job that involves working with other people
- c. Working in a job where I am of direct service to people

NEIGHBORHOOD AND CIVIC OBLIGATIONS

"The intangible bonds of society hold within bounds the savagery of which humans are capable, ensure order, and make possible the accomplishment of shared purpose. When the web of community unravels, fearful things happen. Children gunning down children in the school yard. The daily news offers countless grim examples."

*John Gardner
Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, and
Founder of Common Cause*

Survey data indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps does not impact participant opinion of the importance of neighborhood and civic participation, per the neighborhood obligations and civic obligations constructs.

The pre- and post-scores for each of these constructs were almost identical. The pre-score for the neighborhood obligations construct was 2.75 on a 1–5 scale and the post-score was 2.76. Similarly, the pre-score for the civic obligations construct was 2.63 on a 1–5 scale and the post-score was 2.67. There is one subgroup, participants with household incomes of over \$20,000, that did have a statistically significant increase of 0.09 on the 1–5 scale for the civic obligation construct.

The pre- and post-program survey items that made up the neighborhood obligation and civic obligation constructs, none of which increased to a statistically significant degree, were as follows:

Neighborhood Obligation Construct

Do you feel each of the following is not an important obligation, a somewhat important obligation, or a very important obligation that a citizen owes to the country (1 = not an important obligation, 2 = a somewhat important obligation, 3 = a very important obligation)?

- a. Reporting a crime that you may have witnessed
- b. Participating in neighborhood organizations
- c. Helping to keep the neighborhood safe
- d. Helping to keep the neighborhood clean and beautiful
- e. Helping those who are less fortunate

Civic Obligation Construct

Do you feel each of the following is not an important obligation, a somewhat important obligation, or a very important obligation that a citizen owes to the country (1 = not an important obligation, 2 = a somewhat important obligation, 3 = a very important obligation)?

- a. Serving on a jury if called
- b. Voting in elections
- c. Keeping informed about news and public issues

Unlike the Washington data, national data (Jastrzab, 2004) show a statistically significant positive increase from the pre- to the post-score on both neighborhood and civic obligation constructs. Furthermore, analysis of these increases relative to the comparison group indicated that national AmeriCorps service appeared responsible for much of the increase.

It's impossible to know from existing data why the Washington state and national results differ, but it's possible that it is not because of differences in programming effectiveness, but rather due to one or more of the following methodological artifacts:

- Selection bias. It is possible that the differences in results are a function of the types of individuals who choose AmeriCorps (versus comparison group individuals) and not a result of program participation. As mentioned earlier, the national analysis was conducted on data that was adjusted to eliminate this selection bias. Given available data, it was not possible to make this same adjustment for the Washington state sample. Thus, the difference between Washington state and national findings may be the result of self-selection bias.
- High pre-test scores. Another possibility is that Washington participants entered with such high pre-scores (0.25 from the highest score), thus making it mathematically very unlikely to show an upward change. Furthermore, the three-point scale used in the items of this construct aggravates this difficulty as it does not capture small upward movements.
- Different ethnicity breakdown of samples. The national data (Jastrzab, 2004) found that increases in the neighborhood obligation construct were greater among African American participants than among Hispanic or non-Hispanic White participants (comparison not available for civic obligation construct). Other research corroborates this difference (Perry and Thompson, 2004, p. 60). The Washington state participant population was only 4 percent African American and the national sample was 27 percent. Thus, this demographic difference may explain the difference in outcomes between the national and Washington state findings.³

³ Unfortunately, the number of African Americans in the Washington state data was too small to test whether there was a statistical difference

VOTING PARTICIPATION

“The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice.”

*Lyndon B. Johnson
US President*

Unfortunately, this study sheds little light on the effect of Washington AmeriCorps on national election voting participation. Although fewer survey respondents voted in national elections after they started their service (18 percent) than four years earlier (37 percent), this cannot be considered pre- and post-program data. The 2004 National elections were within a few weeks of the start of service for most members making the second measure still more of a pre-test than a post-test item. It should also be noted that the decrease in voting participation might be a function of the added complexity of voting a few months after moving to a new location—a reality for many AmeriCorps participants.

In other words, this study did not collect valid post-program data and therefore cannot say anything about changes in this item pre-service and post-service. Furthermore, because the comparison data were from different national elections than the Washington data, and national elections have such peculiarities, no appropriate comparison group data were available.

CONCLUSIONS

A comparison of Washington pre- and post-program survey data with similar data from a national comparison group (Jastrzab, 2004) indicates that Washington AmeriCorps appears to increase many, but not all, measures of civic engagement among participants. These data indicate that Washington AmeriCorps service strengthens the following in participants:

- Commitment to community service
- Community service self-efficacy
- Community-based activism
- Connection to community
- Knowledge of community problems
- Personal growth

Positive findings on AmeriCorps civic engagement outcomes are in line with research conducted in Washington, in the Northwest region, and nationally

(Cohen, 1997; Jastrzab, 2004; Perry, 2004; Simon and Wang, 2002; and Valente, 2004).

Pre- and post-test data, however, indicate that Washington AmeriCorps may not increase the following in participants:

- Engagement in the political process
- Importance given to service-oriented careers
- Importance given to neighborhood and civic obligations

Although national research suggests that AmeriCorps increases participant importance given to neighborhood and civic obligations (Jastrzab, 2004), these null outcomes are otherwise consistent with national research (Jastrzab, 2004; Perry, 2004).

Because of technical issues, findings regarding the effect of Washington AmeriCorps service on voting participation are inconclusive.

Washington AmeriCorps effectiveness at increasing civic engagement appears to be similar regardless of participant background. There were very few differences in civic engagement outcomes by participant age, gender, race, income level, amount of formal education, national service and community service background, childhood events related to service and civic involvement, or type of service (VISTA or State).

One Washington AmeriCorps participant may have summarized this study when she stated that AmeriCorps made her “a deeper kind of patriot than the average American.” Indeed, this analysis of pre- and post-program data finds that AmeriCorps service strengthens civic engagement, regardless of participant age, ethnicity, gender and background. Although there are manifestations of civic engagement that Washington AmeriCorps service does not appear to increase, such as political involvement, this form of service does appear to boost overall civic engagement. Principally, the data indicate that Washington AmeriCorps service strengthens participant commitment to community service, community service self-efficacy, community-based activism, connection to community, knowledge of community problems, and personal growth. In the words of another participant, AmeriCorps appears to position participants to “definitely... get more involved” after their service.

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ATTACHMENT: OUTCOME DATA TABLE

AMERICORPS PARTICIPANT PRE- AND POST-SURVEY OUTCOME DATA

(n=262–348)

Civic Engagement Outcomes		Pre-Score	Post-Score	Change	Statist. Signif. Change? ⁴
Civic Obligations	Construct (scores range from 1 to 5)	2.63	2.67	.04	No
	Individual items that make up the construct: Do you feel each of the following is not an important obligation, a somewhat important obligation, or a very important obligation that a citizen owes to the country (1 = not an important obligation, 2 = a somewhat important obligation, 3 = a very important obligation)?				
	a. Serving on a jury if called	2.47	2.51	.04	No
	b. Voting in elections	2.80	2.81	.01	No
	c. Keeping informed about news and public issues	2.62	2.69	.07	No
Commitment to Community Service	How much will your AmeriCorps service affect your subsequent participation on community service (will make me much less likely to participate, will make me less likely to participate, will not have any effect on my future participation, will make me more likely to participate, will make me much more likely to participate)?	NA	87% report “more” or “much more” likely	NA	NA
Community Service Self-Efficacy	Construct (scores range from 1 to 5)	4.10	4.35	.25	Yes
	Individual items that make up the construct: Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Note: Those who had not conducted community service the year prior to their AmeriCorps service were excluded from the analysis.				
	a. I felt I made a positive contribution to the community	4.09	4.41	.32	Yes
	b. I felt like part of the community	3.96	4.08	.12	No
	c. I felt I could make a difference in the life of at least one person	4.27	4.56	.29	Yes
Community-based Activism	Construct (scores range from 1 to 5)	2.65	2.78	.13	Yes
	Individual items that make up the construct: How often do you do each of the following (1 = never, 2 = not very often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, 5 = always)?				
	a. Participate in events such as community meetings, celebrations, or activities in my community	2.91	3.14	.23	Yes
	b. Join organizations that support issues that are important to me	2.99	3.09	.10	Yes
	c. Write or e-mail newspapers or organizations to voice my views	2.05	2.10	.05	No
Connection to Community	Construct (scores range from 1 to 5)	3.83	3.96	.13	Yes
	Individual items that make up the construct:				

⁴ At the 95 percent confidence level using the paired-samples t-test.

Civic Engagement Outcomes		Pre-Score	Post-Score	Change	Statist. Signif. Change?⁴
	Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).				
	a. I have a strong attachment to my community	3.68	3.88	.20	Yes
	b. I often discuss and think about how larger political and social issues affect my community	3.77	3.79	.02	No
	c. I am aware of what can be done to meet the important needs in my community	3.43	3.79	.36	Yes
	d. I feel I have the ability to make a difference in my community	4.26	4.26	.00	No
	e. I try to find the time or a way to make a positive difference in my community	4.01	4.08	.07	No
Engagement in the Political Process	Construct (scores range from 1 to 5)	3.61	3.76	.15	Yes
	Individual items that make up the construct: How often do you do each of the following (1 = never, 2 = not very often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, 5 = always)?				
	a. Vote in local elections	3.27	3.57	.30	Yes
	b. Try to learn as much as I can about candidates or ballot questions before voting	3.64	3.72	.08	No
	c. Keep informed about local or national news	3.94	3.99	.05	No
Importance of Service-Oriented Careers	Construct (scores range from 1 to 3)	2.68	2.70	.02	No
	Individual items that make up the construct: Please indicate whether you feel each of the following things is not important, somewhat important, or very important to you (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important)?				
	a. Working to correct social and economic inequalities	2.70	2.68	-.02	No
	b. Having a job that involves working with other people	2.69	2.74	.05	No
	c. Working in a job where I am of direct service to people	2.61	2.64	.03	No
Knowledge of Community Problems	Construct (scores range from 1 to 5)	3.23	3.56	.33	Yes
	Individual items that make up the construct: On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = nothing and 5 = a great deal, how much do you feel you know about problems facing the community, such as...				
	a. The environment?	3.28	3.57	.29	Yes
	b. Public health issues?	3.12	3.39	.27	Yes
	c. Literacy?	3.27	3.69	.42	Yes
	d. Crime?	3.31	3.42	.11	No
	e. Lack of civic involvement?	3.05	3.59	.54	Yes
Neighborhood Obligations	Construct (scores range from 1 to 3)	2.75	2.76	.01	No
	Individual items that make up the construct: Do you feel each of the following is not an important obligation, a somewhat important obligation, or a very important obligation that a citizen owes to the country (1 = not an important obligation, 2 = a somewhat important				

Civic Engagement Outcomes		Pre-Score	Post-Score	Change	Statist. Signif. Change?⁴
	obligation, 3 = a very important obligation)?				
	a. Reporting a crime that you may have witnessed	2.86	2.86	.00	No
	b. Participating in neighborhood organizations	2.61	2.61	.00	No
	c. Helping to keep the neighborhood safe	2.78	2.83	.05	No
	d. Helping to keep the neighborhood clean and beautiful	2.67	2.67	.00	No
	e. Helping those who are less fortunate	2.85	2.82	-.03	No
Personal Growth through Community Service	Construct (scores range from 1 to 5)	3.76	3.98	.22	Yes
	Individual items that make up the construct: Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Note: Those who had not conducted community service the year prior to their AmeriCorps service were excluded from the analysis.				
	a. I re-examined my beliefs and attitudes about myself	3.83	4.04	.21	Yes
	b. I was exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world	4.08	4.21	.13	No
	c. I learned about the "real" world	3.80	3.70	-.10	No
	d. I did things I never thought I could do	3.49	3.94	.45	Yes
	e. I changed some of my beliefs and attitudes	3.59	3.99	.40	Yes
Voting Participation	One question in the pre-survey and one in the post-survey: Did you vote in the 2000 national elections (0 = no, 1 = yes)? (pre-survey) Did you vote in the 2004 national elections (0 = no, 1 = yes)? (post-survey) Note: Those under-age or otherwise ineligible to vote were excluded from the analysis.	.37 (37% part.)	.18 (18% part.)	-.19	Yes