

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE AMERICORPS MEMBER EXPERIENCE

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Department of Public Policy & Administration

Abstract
of
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE AMERICORPS MEMBER EXPERIENCE
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AmeriCorps has been called a political “Swiss army knife,” meeting many policy goals at once. Among these goals is to strengthen the civic engagement of those who participate in AmeriCorps programs. Building off the argument of Shirley Sagawa in her 2010 book on the national service movement, I used post-program survey data from the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study to examine how AmeriCorps member experiences influence their civic engagement outcomes. I analyzed responses from over 1300 AmeriCorps members to determine how civic engagement outcomes were influenced by the frequency that members planned their service activities, directly served beneficiaries, served in the community they lived, served with diverse members, and served beneficiaries of diverse backgrounds. I found that planning service activities had the broadest impact on perceptions of self-efficacy, connection to community, and participation in civic organizations. In my final chapter, I discuss the implications of my findings and how future research can improve upon my methods.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In his final interview with Jon Stewart as the host of *The Daily Show*, President Barack Obama emphasized the importance of getting young people involved in something bigger than themselves and provided AmeriCorps as an example of a pathway for involvement (Kalan, 2015). Since its creation under President Clinton, AmeriCorps has experienced bipartisan political support. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush called for increased AmeriCorps membership in his 2002 State of the Union Address (Wofford, 2002). Much of the support for AmeriCorps comes from its position as a political "Swiss army knife" that can address many of the country's needs at once (Waldman, 1995). While other scholars have examined AmeriCorps' impact on members, communities, and organizations (i.e. Frumkin & Miller, 2008; and Perry, Thomson, Tschirhart, Mesch, & Lee, 1999) in this thesis I will focus on the impact AmeriCorps service has on its members' civic engagement.

I will examine how specific aspects of members' experiences influence civic engagement outcomes. Shirley Sagawa (2010), one of the masterminds of the national service movement in the United States, identified three such experiences in her book *The American Way to Change*. These experiences included: (i) their degree of involvement in planning their service activities, (ii) their connection to the community they serve, and (iii) their exposure to diverse populations in their service. I am seeking to answer the question of whether these aspects of the AmeriCorps service experience do influence the civic engagement outcomes that members experience after their term of service has

concluded. I will assess this question using secondary data from the Corporation for National and Community Service on the impact of AmeriCorps service on alumni who served in the 1999-2000 program year.

The AmeriCorps Member Experience

AmeriCorps refers to three national programs administered by the federal Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS): AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps), AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), and AmeriCorps State and National. While NCCC and VISTA existed before the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 rebranded them as AmeriCorps, State and National was created with that legislation. Each of these three programs is distinct. NCCC specifically targets young people for a 10-month term of service, VISTA involves people of a variety of ages in a year of indirect service and capacity building activities with the explicit goal of ending poverty, and AmeriCorps State and National engages people in a variety of direct service activities to get things done in communities. In my thesis I will be looking specifically at the impacts of service in the AmeriCorps State and National program. “State and National” refers to the two ways that CNCS awards these AmeriCorps grants: State grants are awarded through the state service commission that oversees and monitors AmeriCorps service sites within their state lines. National grants are awarded directly to the legal applicant with service locations across multiple states and are overseen by CNCS. However, I am not concerned with this distinction in my thesis; I will use “AmeriCorps” to refer to both AmeriCorps State and National programs.

AmeriCorps members commit to a yearlong term of service, during which they receive a modest living allowance. At the end of their service, members receive a Segal Education Award that they can use to cover tuition, pay off student loans, or for other educational expenses. Since its inception, over 900,000 people have served as AmeriCorps members in 15,000 locations across the country (CNCS, 2015). These members provide direct services in the Corporation for National and Community Service's focus areas of disaster services, economic opportunity, education, environmental stewardship, healthy futures, and veterans and military families. The specific activities the members perform vary between service locations according to their particular design to meet a prevalent and severe community need.

AmeriCorps provides its members with experiences that can benefit their careers and connect them to their communities. Through their service, members can develop a wide variety of valuable skills to use in their personal and professional growth (Perry, Thomson, Tschirhart, Mesch, & Lee, 1999; Van Til & Gallup, 1997; Perry & Thomson, 1997). AmeriCorps can be a path to civil service, as alumni are more likely to choose careers in the public or nonprofit sectors and to engage in sustained volunteer work when compared to those who did not serve (Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development, 2007). Proponents of AmeriCorps also see service as a strategy to engage people in active citizenship. However, its effectiveness at influencing political engagement has been a point of contention among scholars and politicians.

While AmeriCorps has had bipartisan support in Congress and the backing of the past three presidential administrations, the original legislation establishing the program would not have passed without provisions that serve to limit its impact on members' political engagement. These limitations came in the form of AmeriCorps prohibited activities, which preclude members from engaging in political activities when they serve, including "attempting to influence legislation; engaging in partisan political activities; activities that are likely to include advocacy; and conducting a voter registration drive" (45CFR § 2520.65). Some argue that these activities would help develop vital civic skills for political participation and that their absence in AmeriCorps undermines the program's capability to build civic and political engagement among members (Frumkin & Miller, 2008).

Despite these limitations on certain political activities, Sagawa (2010) suggested that certain aspects of an AmeriCorps program's design would lead to experiences that help strengthen members' civic engagement over the long run. She identified three ways that the service experience can influence civic engagement. First, by involving participants in planning their service activities, they can have broad impacts on civic engagement. Second, serving community beneficiaries directly can help connect members to their communities. Third, serving or working with people of diverse backgrounds can influence their civic attitudes.

In this thesis, I will attempt to determine if these aspects of member experience had any impact on members' civic engagement after they completed their service. Specifically, I analyzed data collected by the Corporation for National and Community

Service for the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study conducted over eight years from 1999 through 2007. My independent variables included the frequency that members (i) were involved in planning their service activities, (ii) served in direct contact with service beneficiaries, (iii) worked in the community where they lived, (iv) worked with members from diverse backgrounds, and (v) worked with service recipients from different backgrounds than them. My dependent variables were measures of civic engagement based on the variables that CNCS used in its studies. I analyzed these variables using cross-tabulations and descriptive statistics to determine the strength of any relationships between them. My analysis supports Sagawa's assertions that the member experience has at least some impact on civic engagement outcomes.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In his 1995 State of the Union Address, President Clinton called the recently enacted AmeriCorps program “citizenship at its best.” Indeed, AmeriCorps service is inexorably connected to the ideal of citizenship, though the definition of citizenship is largely nebulous (Frumkin & Miller, 2008). Reports by the Corporation for National and Community Service and scholars have investigated the connection between AmeriCorps service and citizenship using measures of civic engagement. Most notable is the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study that provides the data for this thesis. In this chapter, I will first examine how the CNCS study measured civic engagement and consider how it fits into the literature. Next, I will review the literature to determine what effect the three aspects of the AmeriCorps service experience might have on civic engagement outcomes.

Measuring Civic Engagement in the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study

In their review of the civic engagement literature, Adler and Goggin (2005) distilled other scholars’ definitions into one, arguing that “civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future.” Scholars have operationalized civic engagement by differentiating between attitudinal and behavioral aspects of participation in civic life (Henderson, Brown, & Pancer, 2012). The Corporation for National and Community Service similarly distinguishes between the attitudes and behaviors in the variables they used to operationalize civic engagement for their 2008 study *Still Serving: Measuring the Eight-Year Impact of AmeriCorps on Alumni*. This study was the culmination of eight-years of data collection and analysis of

how AmeriCorps service impacts the outcomes alumni experienced over that period compared to those who did not participate in AmeriCorps. These longitudinal data are unique—no one else in the literature has measured the impact of AmeriCorps service over such a long period. Table 2.1 summarizes the measures of civic engagement attitudes that CNCS used for this study.

The Corporation for National and Community Service released two reports using the longitudinal data: an initial analysis in 2004 and a final report in 2008. The 2004 report on early findings of the eight-year study included an analysis of data collected shortly after AmeriCorps members completed their terms of service in the 1999-2000

Table 2.1: Civic Engagement Attitudes in CNCS Longitudinal Data

Ability to Lead a Successful Community-Based Movement: Represents the respondent's opinion about the feasibility of starting a grassroots effort to meet a range of community needs, such as starting an after-school program or organizing a park cleanup program.
Appreciation of Cultural and Ethnic Diversity: Represents the respondent's opinion about the importance and desirability of relationships between people who do not share the same cultural and/or ethnic background.
Civic Obligations: Represents the respondent's opinion about the importance of participating in various civic activities, including voting in elections and serving on a jury.
Confidence in Ability to Work with Local Government: Represents the respondent's opinion about the feasibility of working with local or state government to meet a range of community needs, such as fixing a pothole or getting an issue on a statewide ballot.
Connection to Community: Represents the respondent's opinion about the strength of his/her connection to the community, including attachment, awareness, and commitment.
Importance of Neighborhood Participation: Represents the respondent's opinion about the importance of being active in his/her neighborhood, including reporting crimes, keeping the neighborhood clean, and participating in neighborhood organizations.
Identify and Understand Problems in the Community: Represents the respondent's self-assessed understanding of social problems in his/her community, such as environment, public health, and crime.
Personal Effectiveness of Community Service: Represents the respondent's opinion about the impacts of his/her prior volunteer activities during the previous year with respect to making community contributions, developing attachments to the community, and making a difference.
Personal Growth Through Community Service: Represents the respondent's assessment of the impacts of his/her prior volunteer activities during the previous year with respect to personal growth, including exposure to new ideas, changing beliefs, and learning about the real world.
Social Trust: Represents the extent to which the respondent believes that other people can be trusted.

Source: CNCS, 2008b

program year. The 2008 final report built upon the early findings from 2004 and included analysis of the follow-up survey administered in 2007. Only four of the attitudes presented in Table 2.1 were significant in 2004 and 2008. AmeriCorps members were more likely to rate themselves higher in their ability to lead a successful community-based movement, confidence in their ability to work with local government, connection to community, and ability to identify and understand problems in the community. The magnitude of these impacts was .28, .24, and .26, indicating that they scored higher than the comparison group 28%, 24%, and 26% of the time, respectively.

These findings reflect the broader literature on civic engagement and voluntary service. Checkoway and Aldana (2013) identified leading movements and affecting change as a form of civic engagement, a definition reflected in CNCS's use of "ability to lead a successful community-based movement" as a variable. In a report for the Washington Commission for National and Community Service on the effects of AmeriCorps service on civic engagement, VeraWorks (2006) found that service had positive effects on attitudes including members' self-efficacy, connection to community, and knowledge of community problems—each of which were measured in the CNCS study. In this thesis, I analyzed the same data from the 2004 CNCS study and used similar measures of civic engagement attitudes, specifically self-efficacy, appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity, and connection to community.

In addition to considering attitudes, CNCS measured five civic engagement behaviors in its longitudinal study of AmeriCorps participation, as seen in table 2.2. Of

those five only “active in community affairs” was statistically significant in 2004 with a magnitude of 0.16, indicating that AmeriCorps members were 16% more likely to be

Table 2.2: Civic Engagement Behaviors in CNCS Longitudinal Data

Active in Community Affairs: Represents the frequency with which he/she participates in community-based activities, including attending community meetings and writing to newspapers to voice opinions.
Constructive Group Interactions: Provides the respondent’s report of the frequency with which he/she participated in group situations during which constructive interactions, such as working out conflicts and sharing ideas, occurred.
Constructive Personal Behavior in Groups: Provides the respondent’s report of the frequency with which he/she personally uses techniques for encouraging constructive group interactions, such as encouraging participation by other team members and supporting others’ right to be heard.
Volunteering Participation: Provides likelihood that respondent served as a volunteer.
Voting Participation: Represents whether respondent voted in recent elections.

Source: CNCS, 2008b

active in their community than the comparison group. The magnitude of this impact even increased to 0.19 in the 2008 final report. Simon and Wang (2002) reflect these findings in their study of the impacts of AmeriCorps service using data collected over two program years in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. They found support for their hypothesis that AmeriCorps members become more involved in their communities, determining that they more frequently joined community groups, formed community groups, or attended public meetings after completing their service. Given these findings in the literature, for my analysis I included a measure of how often members participated in civic organizations and community groups.

Finlay, Flanagan, and Wray-Lake (2011) utilized the longitudinal dataset from CNCS’s 2008 report to examine the impact of AmeriCorps service on voting. They argue that AmeriCorps service has little to no effect on people’s voting or political mobilization. Using latent transition analysis, Finlay, Flanagan, and Wray-Lake divided respondents into groups of inactive, voting involved, and highly committed. They found

that while serving in AmeriCorps might make the involved more committed, it has no effect on moving those who are inactive in politics into the involved category. This study supports the concerns expressed by Frumkin & Miller (2008) discussed in the previous chapter regarding the political engagement outcomes of AmeriCorps service. Even CNCS (2008) found little to support AmeriCorps' impact on voting behavior, with a magnitude of impact less than .01 immediately after service and a small negative impact in 2007. Despite the unlikelihood that AmeriCorps service influences voting behavior, I included voting as a dependent variable in my analysis to confirm whether member experience has any impact on it.

Involvement in Planning Service Activities

Sagawa (2010) asserted that involving participants in planning their service activities could influence civic engagement outcomes. The idea that planning one's service activities will increase civic engagement has a strong theoretical basis in youth development programs, particularly service learning. Service learning programs give students the opportunity to perform community service and simultaneously learn the skills, knowledge, and values to be productive and engaged members of society. AmeriCorps programs can integrate service learning into their design to develop civic skills in its members, including empathy, respect, and responsibility (Sagawa, 2010). Kirlin (2002) identified involving volunteers in planning their own service activities as key to the development of these civic skills, and Sagawa (2010) identified this practice and reflecting on service experiences as "core components of a high-quality service-learning program."

In their seminal book on civic voluntarism in America *Voice and Equality*, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady defined civic skills as “competency in English, vocabulary, writing letters, going to meetings, taking part in decision making, planning or chairing a meeting, and giving a presentation or speech” (as cited in Kirlin, 2003). Patrick (2000) categorized civic skills as cognitive and participatory, with cognitive skills involving critical thinking and analytical skills, while participatory skills are concerned with actions. The 2008 CNCS study measured members’ perceptions of their civic skills by asking about how confident they were in their ability to work with local government and organize community activities. The study found that those who served in AmeriCorps saw a 25% increase in their perceived ability to work with local government and to lead a successfully community-based movement, with significance at the .01 level, compared to those who did not serve (CNCS, 2008).

AmeriCorps mobilizes community resources to meet a specific problem or need. Giving members the opportunity to plan and organize the specifics of their service can help them develop and practice the civic skills needed to be active and engaged citizens. Morgan and Streb (2001) exemplify this in their study on the impact of service learning projects. Their study used robust regression of pre- and post-survey data from 210 participants in a variety of high school service learning projects to look at the prevalence of “opportunities for student ownership, leadership, and voice.” In their analysis, Morgan and Streb found that the extent to which participants’ felt they had a voice in their service drives the benefit they experience. Participants that felt they had “real responsibilities, challenging tasks, helped to plan the project, and made important decisions” saw the

greatest impact on their perception of self-efficacy, civic engagement, and group attitudes (2001). This study provides an empirical basis to support the assertion that AmeriCorps members who are involved in planning their service activities will see higher levels of civic engagement after their service—an assertion that my thesis will further test.

Proximity & Connection to the Community

Sagawa (2010) identified increased connections with the community as an impact of service programs, suggesting that national service makes participants more likely to continue volunteering and be more connected to their community. Enhancing members' connection to their community is a goal of AmeriCorps and national service; indeed, an assessment criteria for the current AmeriCorps grant competition is that members will be recruited “from the geographic or demographic communities in which the programs operate” (CNCS, 2015). Jacobsen and Linkow (2010) defined community engagement as participation in civic life through volunteering, making charitable contributions, and abiding by the law. Similarly, Zaff et al (2010) suggest that a social connection to the community plays an important role in making an active and engaged citizen.

AmeriCorps service can provide an avenue to involve members more in their communities. Simon and Wang (2002) conducted an analysis of pre- and post-service survey data over two program years for four states to test four hypotheses, including one to determine if participation in AmeriCorps would “lead to an increase in community involvement.” They operationalized community involvement using three variables: joining a community group, forming a community group, and attending a public meeting. Their analysis concluded that people who serve in AmeriCorps “are significantly more

involved in communities at completion of their service commitment.” These findings are consistent with those of the 2008 CNCS study, which found that AmeriCorps alumni were 24% more connected to their communities than those who did not engage in AmeriCorps service.

Henderson, Brown, and Pancer (2012) provide some empirical support for the longer-term effects of service on community involvement and civic engagement. They examined the impact of mandatory volunteer service performed by high schoolers in Ontario. Using a multivariate binary regression analysis of survey data from 1,250 freshmen at Wilfrid Laurier University, they found that students who had positive experiences in sustained volunteer service in high school were “more socially engaged...in religious and cultural activities or university social groups” (2012). Their findings indicate that the community engagement outcomes are not limited to the community where that service took place and that the impacts of service are not necessarily limited to the local context.

While the literature supports the assertion that AmeriCorps service can lead to greater community engagement among members, it does not give any indication of the difference that being in direct contact with service recipients has on civic engagement outcomes. A comparison of the differences in civic engagement outcomes between AmeriCorps State and National and AmeriCorps VISTA gives some indication of the role proximity to the community might have in the impact on members. In addition to the longitudinal AmeriCorps study, CNCS released another study in 2008 examining the impact of service in AmeriCorps VISTA. In comparing the two effects by their relation to

comparison groups, CNCS found that AmeriCorps VISTA had “no differences between [members] and their counterparts in the comparison group” (CNCS, 2008a) while AmeriCorps State and National had higher scores on connection to community than the comparison group (CNCS, 2008b). This distinction is of particular interest in my thesis because of the implications it has on connection to the community served. If members are directly interacting with the community in their AmeriCorps service, they are likely to exhibit greater levels of connection to their community and be more civically engaged in the future.

Exposure to Diversity

Sagawa (2010) posited that national service would make participants more civically engaged by connecting people of diverse backgrounds. She echoed the sentiment of Robert Putnam that diversity can have detrimental effects on social cohesion in the short term, but public policies can help bridge the divide between groups in the long term. Putnam argued that, in the face of growing diversity and multiculturalism due to immigration, people tend to “hunker down [and] withdraw from collective life,” distrusting the people in their communities regardless of race or ethnicity, and lose faith in their ability to affect change (2007). Sagawa argued for national service as an intervention that can bridge this divide and increase people’s connectedness to their communities (2010). As the country becomes more diverse, AmeriCorps service can expose members to people with backgrounds different from their own, giving them the opportunity to connect with them and not hunker down.

AmeriCorps programs can connect people of all races, genders, social classes, and ages to help bridge the social divides between these populations. In their assessment of the goals and achievements of AmeriCorps, Perry, Thomson, Tschirhart, Mesch, and Lee (1999) found that programs were more successful at bridging ethnic and cultural divides when AmeriCorps members, program staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries were in frequent contact with each other. Hampton and Duncan (2011) also found that merely being part of a diverse group was not enough to affect peoples' attitudes; program leadership must actively foster experiences to build relationships that bridge the divisions in race, social class, and gender. These findings align with those of the 2008 CNCS study, which did not show a significant difference between AmeriCorps and the comparison group in their appreciation of cultural and ethnic diversity either immediately after their service or in the long term, indicating that service by itself is insufficient.

In their study "Visions of National Service," Frumkin and Miller interviewed 48 leaders in national service policy and practice, many of whom asserted that national service participants who serve with those "one might otherwise feel alienated from" could build civic engagement and "cultivate a deep commitment to one's fellow citizens and to the country as a whole" (2008). Education literature also supports the positive impacts of diversity. For example, using a hierarchical linear modeling meta-analysis of a sample of studies on college diversity experiences, Bowman (2011) found that "college diversity experiences are related to increased civic engagement" including attitudes and behaviors. Ultimately, the literature is not unanimous on the expected effects of diversity on civic engagement outcomes. I will attempt to shed some light on this subject to see

how members' exposure to diverse populations in the course of their service influences civic engagement outcomes.

Filling the Gaps in the Literature

In this thesis, I will explore the relationship between three aspects of AmeriCorps members' experience—their involvement in planning service activities, their connection and proximity to the community, and their exposure to diverse populations—and the civic engagement outcomes that members receive. The literature supports the assertion that AmeriCorps members who are involved in planning their service activities will experience greater civic engagement outcomes. Similarly, the AmeriCorps members that interact directly with the beneficiaries of their service can expect greater connectedness to their community. Finally, the literature supports the conclusion that AmeriCorps members who serve diverse populations or on diverse teams will experience greater civic engagement outcomes after their term of service has concluded. While the literature supports these assertions, no one has yet looked specifically at how these aspects of the AmeriCorps member experience influences their civic engagement outcomes. I will fill that gap in the literature in this thesis and provide a springboard for further research down the line.

CHAPTER 3: DATA & METHODOLOGY

I used data from the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study to assess my research question: how does the AmeriCorps member experience influence civic engagement outcomes associated with national service? These data were collected by Abt Associates, Inc., on behalf of the Corporation for National and Community Service to assess the long-term impact of AmeriCorps service on members. My analysis focused on data collected as part of the Post-Program Survey and examined how civic engagement outcomes of AmeriCorps service are influenced in the short-term by specific aspects of the member experience, including their involvement in planning their service activities, their connection and proximity to the community they serve, and their exposure to diversity. In this chapter, I will describe the dataset, independent and dependent variables, and methodology I used in my analysis.

The AmeriCorps Longitudinal Survey Dataset

The AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study collected survey data from approximately 1,700 AmeriCorps members who served in one of 108 AmeriCorps State and National programs from across the United States. The data were collected in three phases over eight years. First, from 1999 through 2000 baseline data were collected from program participants. Second, Post-Program Survey data were collected beginning one to two months after members completed their service, with a supplemental survey completed approximately two years after members completed their service. Finally, a Follow-Up Survey was administered in 2007 to gather data on attitudes and behaviors since completing AmeriCorps service. This study also included participants of AmeriCorps

NCCC and a comparison group, but since I am concerned primarily with AmeriCorps State and National, those other groups are not included in my analysis.

The AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study is a public use dataset received with permission from the Corporation for National and Community Service. For this thesis I used the IBM SPSS Statistics software package to analyze Post-Program Survey data for over 1,300 AmeriCorps State and National program participants from 1999-2000. While this dataset included over 400 variables, I focused on only 24 specific variables of interest for analysis. There are five specific questions that comprise the independent variables of how involved AmeriCorps members were in planning their service activities, how close they were to the community they served, and their exposure to diverse populations in their service. The dependent variables measure civic engagement using responses to eighteen questions from the survey, organized into three categories of civic attitudes, connection to community, and involvement in civic life. These variables are discussed in detail below.

Independent Variables: Member Experience

The independent variables I used in my thesis connect to specific AmeriCorps member experiences associated with the three ways Sagawa (2010) identified service can influence civic engagement. Table 3.1 summarizes these variables.

Table 3.1: Independent Variables

Involvement in Planning Service Activities: Measures how often AmeriCorps members are involved in planning their service activities.
Working with Community: Measures how often AmeriCorps members serve in direct contact with service beneficiaries and in the community where they live.
Exposure to Diversity: Measures how often AmeriCorps members work with members and service recipients from diverse backgrounds.

The first is a straightforward measure of how often members were involved in planning their service activities. Experiences that influence how close AmeriCorps members are to the community in their service is measured using variables of how often members served in direct contact with service beneficiaries and how often they worked in the community where they live. Exposure to diversity is measured using variables of how often members work with other members from diverse backgrounds and how often they work with service recipients from different backgrounds than themselves.

I measured the independent variables using five questions from the Post-Program Survey in the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study. For each question, respondents indicated how often they did certain things in their AmeriCorps service using an ordinal scale where 1 = never, 2 = not very often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, and 5 = always. Involvement in planning service activities was measured using one variable asking members how often they were involved in planning their service activities. Working with community and exposure to diversity each were measured using responses to two questions. For working with community, members were asked how often they served in direct contact with service beneficiaries and how often they served in the communities where they lived. Exposure to diversity was measured using how often members worked with other members of diverse backgrounds and how often they worked with service beneficiaries of different backgrounds than their own. I chose these variables specifically because they were the only questions in the dataset that fit into the framework of member experiences that Sagawa (2010) identified that could influence civic engagement outcomes. I analyzed the relationship between each of the individual questions that

comprise the three independent variables and the dependent variables of civic engagement described next.

Dependent Variables: Civic Engagement

The dependent variables in my thesis are informed by the civic engagement literature reviewed in the previous chapter and include composite variables based on those used by CNCS in its studies. I have grouped these variables into three categories: civic attitudes, connection to community, and involvement in civic life. These categories are summarized in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2: Dependent Variables

Civic Attitudes: Measures AmeriCorps members' appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity and their perceptions of self-efficacy.
Connection to Community: Measures AmeriCorps members' attachment to their community, their awareness of its problems, and their commitment to its betterment.
Involvement in Civic Life: Measures AmeriCorps members' participation in civic organizations and voting in recent elections.

Civic attitudes include two composite variables measuring appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity and perceptions of self-efficacy. Connection to community involves one composite variable measuring one's attachment to his or her community, awareness of its problems, and commitment to its betterment. Involvement in civic life includes variables measuring participation in civic organizations and voting.

The civic attitudes and connection to community categories of variables each include composite variables comprised of indices calculated using the mean response to questions in each category. The mean for each response was rounded down to the nearest whole number, so a mean of 1 through 1.99 was recoded as "1" and so on for each index. I did this specifically to preserve the upper limit of the range of responses by having it

consist of the highest scores for all individual variables in the index. The specific variables that comprise each category of dependent variable, including the indices for each composite variable, are described below.

Civic Attitudes

I used two composite variables to measure civic attitudes: appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity and perceptions of self-efficacy. I measured appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity using a composite variable comprised of the mean response to four questions about diversity. Due to limits in the dataset, I only examined racial, cultural, ethnic, or language diversity; there were no variables that measured diversity in politics, gender, or other demographics. Each of the variables in this composite measured how much respondents agreed with the following statements: (i) if people from different backgrounds took the time to understand each other, there wouldn't be so many social problems; (ii) some of my friends are of different backgrounds than me, racism affects everyone; (iii) and I feel comfortable belonging to groups where people are different from me. The responses to these questions were coded on an ordinal scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

The other variable I used in this category involved a composite variable to measure perceptions of self-efficacy in working with local governments and communities. The variable included responses to questions that asked how hard it would be to accomplish six specific activities. I looked specifically at how difficult respondents felt it would be to (i) get the local government to fix a pothole in the street, (ii) get the

local government to build an addition to the community center, (iii) organize an event to benefit a charity or religious organization, (iv) get an issue on the ballot for a statewide election, (v) start an after-school program for children whose parents work, and (vi) organize an annual program for the local park. Responses fell on an ordinal scale of 1 = would not be able to get done, 2 = might be able to get done, and 3 = would be able to get done.

Connection to Community

I used one composite variable to measure AmeriCorps members' connection to their community. Respondents indicated how much they agreed with five statements relating to their attachment, connectedness, and commitment to their community. Specifically, respondents indicated their agreement as to whether (i) they felt that they had a strong attachment to their community, (ii) they often thought about how larger political and social issues affected their communities, (iii) they were aware of what could be done to meet the important needs in their communities, (iv) they felt they had the ability to make a difference in their communities, and (v) they tried to find the time or a way to make a positive difference in their communities. Their responses were measured using an ordinal scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

Involvement in Civic Life

The final category of variables, involvement in civic life, did not include composite variables; instead, I used three separate variables to measure participation in civic organizations and voting. Respondents self-reported past activities for each of the

variables in this category. For participation in civic organizations, respondents were asked to indicate in a single response how often they participated in events such as community meetings, celebrations, or activities, using an ordinal scale where 1 = never, 2 = not very often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, and 5 = always. To measure voting activities, respondents indicated yes or no if they voted in the 2000 primary presidential election or if they voted in state and/or local elections in the past year. There was no measure for voting in the most recent presidential election in the post-program survey.

Methodology

While a multivariate quantitative analysis is the most rigorous approach to assess my research question, limitations in the data make such an analysis problematic. Specifically, the sampling methodology taken for the study and the descriptive variables that were not part of the dataset limit the appropriateness of such analysis. The sampling methodology for this data was not random; the data were collected from members in programs that chose to participate. The strength of the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Survey came from the data collected from a comparison group that had shown interest in AmeriCorps but did not enroll. Since my independent variables are only applicable to AmeriCorps members, I could not take advantage of this strength. Instead, I used the data collected from this convenience sample which limits its generalizability. In addition to this challenge, the public-use dataset I used was removed of all identifiers to protect respondents' confidentiality. As such, I did not have access to possible control variables that would be used in a multivariate quantitative analysis. Due to these limitations, I chose to use a less rigorous but more appropriate analysis using descriptive statistics.

Descriptive statistics are the next-best analytical approach that are both appropriate for the dataset and my research question. Specifically, I conducted a straightforward comparison using descriptive statistics including cross tabulations with gamma and chi-square tests to determine the magnitude and statistical significance of impacts. This analysis compared the independent variables individually with each composite dependent variable, presenting the direction of the relationships and their statistical significance.

While this methodology is appropriate, there was potential for weakness in my analysis—particularly in the possibility of omitted variable bias. In addition to the absence of control variables mentioned above, the data in my thesis do not include all of the possible variables that could influence civic engagement. While I have endeavored to construct variables for civic engagement that are comprehensive and accurate, they are limited by the data available. This is also true for my measures of member experience, as even if other aspects could influence civic engagement, my dataset does not include such measures. Due to these weaknesses and limitations, my findings must be considered preliminary and in need of rigorous analysis to substantiate.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS & RESULTS

In my analysis I first ran bivariate correlations for each individual variable, followed by cross-tabulations that included calculations of Goodman & Kruskal's Gamma and Chi-Square statistics for relationships between each independent and dependent variable. My analysis of bivariate correlations produced coefficients and p-values that indicated the magnitude and statistical significance of correlations between variables. Similarly, my analysis using cross-tabulations included the descriptive statistics of Goodman & Kruskal's Gamma, which showed the direction and magnitude of associations between two variables, and Pearson's Chi-Square, the statistical significance of which indicated the generalizability of the relationship in the sample to that of the population.

The dependent variables I used to measure civic engagement included four composite variables and three individual variables to measure civic skills, connection to community, and involvement in civic life. Due to the limited number of cases on the lower end of each measure, I recoded the responses to combine the bottom two categories. Depending on the question, these included combining responses of "never" with "not very often" and "strongly disagree" with "disagree." The responses for each dependent variable are skewed toward positive responses; my analysis used cross-tabulations to examine where those with specific member experiences fall on the distribution and speak to the magnitude and significance of those relationships. In this chapter, I will present the results of my analysis by first discussing key bivariate

correlations and then highlighting the observed impacts of the independent variables on measures of civic engagement.

Bivariate Correlations

I ran a bivariate correlation analysis to determine if any of the responses to the individual questions that comprise my independent and dependent variables were correlated to a high enough degree that would compromise my analysis. There were no variable pairs that were correlated at a rate greater than .534. There were, however, groups of variables that were correlated in the .3 to .4 range. These groupings corresponded to the measures included in the composite variables, which makes sense given that the questions in each composite variable are ostensibly measuring different aspects of the same thing. There is the possibility of acquiescence bias in responses to some of these variables; given the kinds of questions being asked, it may be obvious that there are “right” answers for what members should be doing. For example, asking members if they agree with positive statements about diversity could lead people to choose positive responses due to how they are presented. However, these variables were not correlated highly enough for this to be an issue.

Impact of Involvement in Planning Service Activities

The frequency that members were involved in planning their service activities had significant relationships with at least one dependent variable in each category. The most significant of these impacts in terms of magnitude were with members' perceptions of self-efficacy, their connection to their community, and their participation in civic organizations. These findings align with expectations based on the literature that those

members who were more involved in planning their service activities would have opportunities to develop their civic skillset to engage in civic life.

Involvement in planning service activities was positively associated with both measures of civic attitudes but most specifically on perceptions of self-efficacy. The results are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Perceptions of Self-Efficacy by Involvement in Planning Service Activities

		How often AmeriCorps members got involved in planning their service activities				Totals
		Never, Not Very Often	Sometimes	Very Often	Always	
AmeriCorps members perceived ability to accomplish civic activities	Would not be able to get done	13.5% 22	8.5% 30	4.7% 21	4.3% 18	6.6% 91
	Might be able to get done	81.6% 133	85% 300	86.1% 384	81.6% 345	83.9% 1162
	Would be able to get done	4.9% 8	6.5% 23	9.2% 41	14.2% 60	9.5% 132
	Totals	100% 163	100% 353	100% 446	100% 423	100% 1385
Gamma = .301*						
Chi-Square = 37.076 with 6 degrees of freedom*						
* = statistically significant at the .0001 level						

This relationship had a Gamma value of .301, indicating that an increase in how often members planned their service activities was associated with about a 30% increase in their perceptions of their ability to work with the local government and their communities to accomplish civic activities. This relationship was significant at the .0001 level and had Chi-Square values that were also statistically significant at the .0001 level, indicating that the relationship viewed in the sample was, with 99.99% confidence, representative of the AmeriCorps member population.

Members' connection to community was the most impacted when they were involved in planning their service activities. On the next page, Table 4.2 shows the cross-

tabulation of the relationship between planning service activities and connection to community. The Gamma coefficient of .311 was statistically significant at the .0001

Table 4.2: Connection to Community by Planning Service Activities

		How often AmeriCorps members got involved in planning their service activities				Totals
		Never, Not Very Often	Sometimes	Very Often	Always	
AmeriCorps members' level of agreement with statements about the strength of their attachment, awareness, and commitment to their community	Never, Not Very Often	11% 18	2.3% 8	1.6% 7	1.2% 5	2.7% 38
	Sometimes	28.2% 46	34% 120	19.7% 88	18.4% 78	24% 332
	Very Often	54% 88	57.5% 203	63.9% 285	57.7% 244	59.2% 820
	Always	6.7% 11	6.2% 22	14.8% 66	22.7% 96	14.1% 195
	Totals	100% 163	100% 353	100% 446	100% 423	100% 1385
Gamma = .311*						
Chi-Square = 118.854 with 9 degrees of freedom*						
* = statistically significant at the .0001 level						

level, indicating that members who are more often involved in planning their service activities are 31% more likely to have greater connection to their communities 99.99% of the time. The Chi-Square value for this relationship was also statistically significant at the .0001 level, indicating that the sample is representative of the population.

AmeriCorps members who were more involved in planning their service activities were also more likely to participate in civic organizations. On the next page, Table 4.3 presents the cross-tabulation of planning service activities and participation in civic organizations, which had the strongest relationship in this category. This relationship had a Gamma of .271, indicating that participation in civic organizations increased by 27% as frequency of involvement in planning service activities increased. The Gamma

coefficient and the Chi-Square value were both statistically significant at the .0001 level, indicating that the relationship in the sample is present in the population as well.

Table 4.3: Participation in Civic Organizations by Planning Service Activities

		How often AmeriCorps members got involved in planning their service activities				Totals
		Never, Not Very Often	Sometimes	Very Often	Always	
How often AmeriCorps members participate in events for civic organizations	Never, Not Very Often	35.6%	28.9%	19.1%	13.5%	21.8%
	Very Often	58	102	85	57	302
	Sometimes	41.7%	48.4%	47.2%	42.6%	45.4%
	Very Often	68	171	210	180	629
	Always	19%	15.9%	27.6%	31.7%	24.9%
	31	56	123	134	344	
	3.7%	6.8%	6.1%	12.3%	7.9%	
	6	24	27	52	109	
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
	163	353	445	423	1354	

Gamma = .271*
 Chi-Square = 79.044 with 9 degrees of freedom*
 * = statistically significant at the .0001 level

These findings were supported by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, as members who were more involved in planning their service activities experienced greater civic engagement outcomes across all dependent variable categories including self-efficacy, connection to community, and participation in civic organizations.

Impact of Working with Community

I tested the effects of the two variables that comprise working with community separately, looking at both how direct contact with service beneficiaries and working in the community where one lives influences each civic engagement dependent variable. Direct contact with service beneficiaries did not have a very strong relationship with any of the civic engagement variables. However, members who served in the communities where they lived experienced greater connection to their communities and were more likely to participate in civic organizations.

While serving in direct contact with service beneficiaries had no statistically significant impact, members that serve more often in the communities where they live showed an increase in their connection to their communities, as seen in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Connection to Community by Serving in Community of Residence

		How often AmeriCorps members worked in the community where they live				Totals
		Never, Not Very Often	Sometimes	Very Often	Always	
How much AmeriCorps members agree with statements about their community	Strongly Disagree, Disagree	7% 24	1.5% 4	1.7% 6	1% 4	2.7% 38
	Sometimes	34.6% 119	27% 74	18.7% 65	17.5% 73	23.9% 331
	Very Often	48% 165	59.9% 164	62.5% 217	65.3% 273	59.2% 819
	Always	10.5% 36	11.7% 32	17% 59	16.3% 68	14.1% 195
	Totals	100% 344	100% 274	100% 347	100% 418	100% 1383

Gamma = .251*
Chi-Square = 77.350 with 9 degrees of freedom*
* = statistically significant at the .0001 level

This relationship had a Gamma value of .251, indicating that when members work in the communities where they live there is a 25% increase in their connection to the community. This relationship and the Chi-Square value were statistically significant at the .0001 level, indicating that the relationship in the sample is also present in the population it is drawn from.

Members working in the communities where they live also saw an increase in their participation in civic organizations. This relationship, presented on the next page in Table 4.5, shows a Gamma value of .243, indicating that members who serve more often in the communities where they live are 24% more likely to participate in local civic organizations outside of their service. The Chi-Square value was statistically significant, indicating that the relationship seen in the sample was also present in the population.

Table 4.5: Participation in Civic Organizations by Serving in Community of Residence

		How often AmeriCorps members worked in the community where they live				Totals
		Never, Not Very Often	Sometimes	Very Often	Always	
How often AmeriCorps members participate in events for civic organizations	Never, Not Very Often	33.4%	20.8%	16.5%	17.5%	21.9%
	Very Often	115	57	57	73	302
	Sometimes	46.2%	51.8%	44.8%	40.9%	45.4%
	Very Often	159	142	155	171	627
	Always	16.6%	20.8%	31.5%	28.9%	24.9%
	Very Often	57	57	109	121	344
	Always	3.8%	6.6%	7.2%	12.7%	7.9%
	Always	13	18	25	53	109
	Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
		344	274	346	418	1382

Gamma = .243*
 Chi-Square = 74.509 with 9 degrees of freedom*
 * = statistically significant at the .0001 level

These findings generally supported the expected relationships based on my review of the literature in Chapter 2, specifically concerning connection to community and participation in civic organizations.

Impact of Exposure to Diversity

The frequency that members worked with service beneficiaries or other members that are of different backgrounds than their own had significant positive impacts on their appreciation for diversity. On the following page, Table 4.6 shows the relationship between members' appreciation for cultural and ethnic diversity and the frequency that they worked with other members who were of different background than them. This relationship had a statistically significant Gamma value of .315 for the relationship between how often members worked with members of diverse backgrounds and their appreciation for diversity.

Table 4.6: Appreciation for Diversity by Worked with Diverse Members

		How often AmeriCorps members worked with members of diverse backgrounds				Totals
		Never, Not Very Often	Sometimes	Very Often	Always	
How strongly AmeriCorps members agree with positive statements about diversity	Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither	20.5% 25	18.8% 40	8.2% 33	6.6% 43	10.2% 141
	Agree	63.9% 78	63.7% 135	61.3% 246	55% 356	59% 815
	Strongly Agree	15.6% 19	17.5% 37	30.4% 122	38.3% 248	30.8% 426
	Totals	100% 122	100% 212	100% 401	100% 647	100% 1382
Gamma = .315*						
Chi-Square = 81.400 with 9 degrees of freedom*						
* = statistically significant at the .0001 level						

Table 4.7 depicts the same relationship but with how often members served with beneficiaries of different backgrounds than them. The Gamma value of .249 for this relationship was also statistically significant at the .0001 level. The Chi-Square values for both relationships were statistically significant, indicating they were present in the

Table 4.7: Appreciation for Diversity by Worked with Diverse Beneficiaries

		How often AmeriCorps members worked with beneficiaries of diverse backgrounds				Totals
		Never, Not Very Often	Sometimes	Very Often	Always	
How strongly AmeriCorps members agree with positive statements about diversity	Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither	19.2% 24	14% 38	8.1% 37	7.7% 41	10.1% 140
	Agree	67.2% 84	62% 168	60.9% 279	54% 285	59% 816
	Strongly Agree	13.6% 17	24% 65	31% 142	38.3% 202	30.8% 426
	Totals	100% 125	100% 271	100% 458	100% 528	100% 1382
Gamma = .249*						
Chi-Square = 51.172 with 9 degrees of freedom*						
* = statistically significant at the .0001 level						

population. These findings support the literature that AmeriCorps service provides an avenue to bridge social divides, at least between ethnicities and cultures.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Throughout this thesis, I have focused on the impact that AmeriCorps has on its members' future civic engagement by looking specifically at members' experiences. I structured my analysis on Shirley Sagawa's (2010) argument that the experiences that have the greatest impact on civic engagement are those that involve members in planning their service activities, connect them to their communities, and expose them to diversity. My analysis supported her claims, but it is clear that more research is needed to determine which experiences AmeriCorps programs should be replicating to maximize impact. While the results of my analysis were largely expected based on my review of the literature, there were a few anomalous findings that warrant further research.

I will begin this chapter by reviewing my key findings related to the question of whether the AmeriCorps member experience influences civic engagement. I will then turn to a discussion of how future research can improve upon my methods. My hope would be that such research would lead to still better understanding of how specific experiences in AmeriCorps service impacts civic engagement.

Does the AmeriCorps Member Experience Influence Civic Engagement?

My analysis supported Sagawa's (2010) assertion that specific aspects of the AmeriCorps experience lead to greater civic engagement outcomes among participants. Members who were more frequently involved in planning their service activities saw the broadest impacts on their civic engagement. The impacts of members working in the communities where they live and their exposure to diverse members and beneficiaries were largely as expected based on my review of the literature in Chapter 2. Similarly,

member experiences had the expected minor impact on voting activities. Ultimately, my findings did not stray far from what was expected, but they nonetheless have implications for AmeriCorps programming in the future, specifically regarding program design and member recruitment practices.

In my analysis, it was clear that the frequency in which members are involved in planning their service activities broadly influenced their civic engagement after service. My findings align with those of Kirlin (2002), Sagawa (2010), and Verba et al (as cited in Kirlin, 2003), supporting the argument that involvement in planning one's service activities will aid in the development of skills for sustained civic engagement. Indeed, in my analysis the members who were more often involved in planning their service activities saw a 30% increase in their perceptions of self-efficacy. Since one of the goals of AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National and Community Service is to promote active and engaged citizenship through service, it seems that these responsibilities should be part of the baseline member experience. In this regard, it is a good sign that 90% of respondents reported at least sometimes being involved in planning their service activities. Further research could determine more definitively if members are being substantially involved in planning their service activities and what impact this has on their future civic engagement.

The frequency that members served in direct contact with service beneficiaries had an interesting relationship with the dependent variables, particularly because this measure had only minor, statistically insignificant impacts on nearly all measures of civic engagement. Appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity was the only dependent

variables that had a statistically significant relationship with this independent variable, and that was relatively weak with a Gamma value of .143. This slight relationship makes sense, however, as members who frequently interact with service beneficiaries are likely interacting with people of diverse backgrounds, and such interactions would conceivably influence their attitudes in this regard. However, further research is needed to ascertain the nature of this relationship.

Members who served in the communities where they lived were more connected to their communities and participated in civic organizations more often. This finding could indicate that AmeriCorps service helps build that connection between members and their community, but it could just as easily indicate that people who are already highly connected to their communities are more likely to engage in AmeriCorps service there. Given the methodology used in my analysis and in collecting the original data, it is impossible to ascertain causality. A longitudinal analysis of data collected before members begin and after members complete their service is essential to answer this question.

The impact that exposure to diversity had on members' appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity was not surprising. It makes sense that members who are more frequently exposed to a diverse population of service beneficiaries or other members of different backgrounds would have a greater appreciation for that diversity. Overall, my findings support the idea that AmeriCorps bridges social divides and gives people from diverse populations the opportunity to engage with one another.

By contrast, my analysis suggested that my independent variables had little impact on AmeriCorps members' propensity to vote. However, my study suggests we should not dismiss this possible relationship entirely, as there was some evidence of an impact on voting in the 2000. Members that were more frequently involved in planning their service activities were 14.7% more likely to have voted in the 2000 presidential primary and 12.7% more likely to have voted in the most recent state or local election. These findings are contrary to my expectations, and it is difficult to say with any level of certainty why this relationship exists, or be confident it is not a chance occurrence. There is room for future research to explore how experiences in AmeriCorps service impact political engagement down the line, as my data was very limited on this front.

Ultimately, my analysis shows that AmeriCorps member experiences do affect their level of civic engagement once they have completed their service. However, as I have stated before these findings are preliminary and will require much more rigorous analysis before relationships can be definitively determined. My hope is for this thesis to spur interest in understanding how the service experiences of AmeriCorps members can influence civic engagement outcomes. Future research can build on my analysis and the data collected by the Corporation for National and Community Service to better answer these questions and guide national service policy.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can improve on the analysis I have presented in this thesis. The impact of my analysis was limited at the outset by the dataset I used. Scholars, the Corporation for National and Community Service, or other parties who are interested in

the impact that AmeriCorps service has on its members will need to collect data that is specific in its focus and measures the experiences of members more objectively than the data I used. Data collected specifically to answer questions similar to those posed in this thesis will allow for greater freedom in analytical methodology.

The AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study provides a long-term comparison of the outcomes of service for those who served in AmeriCorps and a similar sample population of those who did not serve. My analysis looked specifically at data from the Post-Program Survey that only pertained to those who served in AmeriCorps. The data collected in the survey was primarily self-reported attitudes or behaviors, which inevitably makes the measures subjective. It is possible to use methods that are more objective. For example, the organizations overseeing member placement sites can objectively say how frequently members were involved in planning their service activities; that would be less subjective than simply asking members how often they planned their service activities. Other studies will need to use more objective measures of members' experiences in addition to asking them about their attitudes and behaviors.

The data collected in the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study was intentionally broad; there were over four hundred variables covering details of the member's service, civic engagement, education, and career. If it were not for this broad focus, I would not have been able to conduct my analysis for this thesis. However, this breadth of questioning could potentially compromise the accuracy and validity of responses on a single topic. Future research into the impact of specific experiences in AmeriCorps service should endeavor to focus data collection efforts on the nuances of how members experience their

service. Data that are more focused will allow for greater flexibility in the analytical methods researchers can use to assess the impacts of specific experiences. I measured variations in member experience as well as I could within the confines of the dataset; researchers in the future need not replicate the limitations of my analysis for themselves.

My efforts in this thesis represent first steps in understanding how AmeriCorps service influences members' civic engagement. While my findings are promising, much work remains in order to understand the nuances of the AmeriCorps member experience and how they influence civic engagement. As President Obama spoke of expanding AmeriCorps as a way to get young people involved, it is important that policy analysts understand its performance toward this end and inform the conversations that will make this program more effective. Future research will provide the empirical basis that informs how AmeriCorps programs are designed to most effectively involve Americans in active and engaged citizenship.

What Does This Mean For AmeriCorps?

The findings of my analysis have implications for AmeriCorps programming, specifically regarding their design and in how programs recruit members for service. Involving members in planning their service activities had the most consistent positive influence on civic engagement outcomes; programs should take the next step with this and engage members and stakeholders in a collaborative process to meet community needs. In addition, programs can adjust their recruitment efforts to focus on finding diverse candidates from the target beneficiary communities. These implications and the findings of my thesis support existing practices for delivering AmeriCorps programs.

Programs can foster collaboration by involving members and community stakeholders in planning the activities that members will perform to meet the community's needs. Given that the vast majority of members already plan their service activities at least sometimes, my findings suggest that programs should focus their design on strengthening partnerships with community stakeholders. Such partnerships would allow programs to more effectively meet the needs of the communities served while simultaneously giving members the experiences and skills to make them more civically engaged. The ways that programs can involve members and community stakeholders in the planning process will vary based on the community's needs. At the very least, involving members in planning their service activities can have a significant positive impact on their confidence in getting things done in their communities and their connection to those communities.

My findings also have implications for programs' member recruitment practices, specifically regarding from where they recruit members. When members serve in the communities where they live, they are more connected and engaged. At the same time, members see civic engagement outcomes when they serve with beneficiaries and other members of diverse backgrounds. These findings indicate that programs should recruit members from the communities targeted for service while specifically looking for diverse candidates. These practices are already widely accepted among AmeriCorps programs across the country; my findings further confirm the appropriateness of such practices to connect members to their communities and expose them to diversity.

As delegated in the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, state service commissions have the authority to impose requirements on the AmeriCorps State programs in their state according to policies they adopt. State commissions have used this power to adopt promising practices in the areas I have identified. For example, in the request for applications for the 2016 program year, California's state commission urged applying programs to involve community stakeholders in the planning and implementation processes, and they required applicants to speak to the ways they will recruit members from the communities they serve (CaliforniaVolunteers, 2015). Such policies are a step in the right direction to codify practices for AmeriCorps that will maximize its impact on civic engagement outcomes for participants in the program; further research could explore the policies other state commissions have adopted for their programs, as that was not my purpose in this thesis.

While my findings support the impacts of AmeriCorps service, it does so using data that are over a decade old. CNCS has not released any similar full-scale evaluations of AmeriCorps since the final report of the AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study in 2008. Individual AmeriCorps programs that are funded at least three years are required to conduct an evaluation of their effectiveness, and many of these evaluations are presented on CNCS' Evidence Exchange on their website. However, these only show the effectiveness of each program's individual design to meet a specific need; there is a need for analysts to evaluate AmeriCorps as a whole. As national politics get more divisive, CNCS must be able to show the effectiveness of AmeriCorps in meeting its goals if the program is to be sustained at a national level. Independent studies like mine that use more

recent data will be vital to the longevity of AmeriCorps, both in securing support in Congress and in showing CNCS how the program can be improved to maximize its impact.

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