

**AMERICORPS SERVICE AS A
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BOOST:
RESULTS FROM A REFLECTIVE SURVEY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: AMERICORPS SERVICE AS A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BOOST

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A survey conducted by VeraWorks, Inc., suggests that Washington AmeriCorps service profoundly influences participants' professional and personal direction, aspirations and commitments. The survey was completed by 332 respondents, or approximately 40 percent of Washington state AmeriCorps participants of the 2006-2007 service year.

Survey respondents described AmeriCorps as an intense experience boasting enriching relationships, compelling and intensely rewarding service work, and novel and challenging experiences. They found many program activities rewarding — from cleaning a park to being mentored by an admired community leader.

Of course, respondents also reported that the AmeriCorps experience had downsides. Chief among these were the financial hardship of living within the program's stipend, paper work and an exhausting schedule. Unfortunately, approximately three percent of respondents considered the overall experience sufficiently flawed so as to have little overall value to them.

For over 97 percent of respondents, however, the pleasures and challenges of the AmeriCorps experience came together as a positive and transformative experience. Participants reported that the AmeriCorps experience made them more skilled, confident, directed and service-oriented:

Skilled

Over three quarters of respondents reported higher levels of workplace skills due to AmeriCorps. Respondents reported that their service developed universal workplace skills such as leadership, management, teamwork and communication; as well as selected specialized skills ranging from chain sawing to teaching.

Confident

Consistent with their rise in skill levels, over a third of respondents reported that they were more certain that they had the abilities, resources and skills to achieve success in school and work.

Directed

Over a quarter of respondents expressed that the AmeriCorps experience gave them a greater sense of clarity about their future. For many, it renewed a sense of purpose and hope for what they wanted to accomplish.

Service-Oriented

Although it was typically not reported as one of most dramatic effects of AmeriCorps service, survey data indicate that the year strengthened participant commitment to serving others in over three-quarters of respondents.

The findings from this largely qualitative survey are consistent with quantitative studies completed in the last three years. Three studies commissioned by the Washington Commission for National and Community Service found that, as compared to a national comparison group, Washington AmeriCorps increases participant civic engagement and readiness for educational and employment success; and that AmeriCorps participants are more likely than other Washington workers to be employed in sectors focusing on the public good, such as government, healthcare, elementary and secondary education and nonprofit services.

The story this survey tells is an inspiring one: Participants come to AmeriCorps from all backgrounds and personal and professional highs and lows; they serve their communities with passion, do things they had never done before, develop deep relationships and encounter personal and professional challenges; and — except for a very small minority — emerge newly empowered to study, work, live and serve as their dreams demand.

AMERICORPS SERVICE AS A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BOOST: RESULTS FROM A REFLECTIVE SURVEY

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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

PURPOSE

The ultimate aim of this report is to help the Washington Commission for National and Community Service (Commission) and Washington AmeriCorps programs reach a deeper and richer understanding of the AmeriCorps service experience and how it affects participants. More pragmatically, this report aims to support Commission and program staff design and manage the AmeriCorps experience by providing an analysis of the reflections of AmeriCorps members on their service and its impact.

DATA COLLECTION

This report summarizes the findings from a survey completed by 332 AmeriCorps participants, representing approximately 40 percent of participants serving in the 2006-2007 service year. Program directors invited participants to complete the online survey near the completion of the year of service, between May and September, 2007.

The survey was designed to have respondents “tell their story” regarding the AmeriCorps experience. With the exception of demographic questions, the survey consisting entirely of open-ended or short answer reflective questions on their service such as “When you think back on your AmeriCorps experience what are the first three words that come to mind?” and “In thinking about your next job, school program or whatever other activity you do following AmeriCorps, how do you think you will ‘show up differently’ because of your AmeriCorps experience (if at all)?” The survey also included prompts around areas of particular interest, such as “Please explain how your AmeriCorps experience has affected (or not) your interest in volunteering and/or civic involvement.”

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis consisted principally of:

- Reviewing responses for every respondent and coding it according to themes (divided into several categories, depending on how the question was asked, for validity reasons)
- Analyzing the quantitative database of themes (created in step 1) to identify the most common themes
- Going back to the raw qualitative data to understand the nuances and richness of each of the common themes

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As with any research effort, there are considerations and limitations to keep in mind when interpreting the findings in this report. The main limitations are around the response rate and sample bias:

- Response rate. Although response rate of approximately 40 percent is respectable by most research standards, it certainly does not guarantee that responses are representative of the full cohort of 2006-2007 year Washington state AmeriCorps participants.
- Sample bias. The sample was clearly subjected to some types of bias, including self-selection bias (those most eager to respond might be over-represented) and attrition bias (those who did not complete the year of service were, for the most part, excluded).

Therefore, these findings represent what is likely to be the case and should not be construed as definitive without corroboration.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE AMERICORPS EXPERIENCE

Over 97 percent of survey respondents viewed their AmeriCorps experience as an overall positive experience. For example, respondents labeled the experience “amazing,” “awesome” and “one of the best years of my life.” The survey included a question designed to uncover the most positive aspects of the year: “What did you like best about your AmeriCorps experience?” This question revealed that three themes accounted for the vast majority of participant best experiences: enriching relationships, compelling and rewarding service work, and novel and challenging experiences. Over a fifth of respondents cite each as one of the items they liked best. Each is covered below.

ENRICHING RELATIONSHIPS

Over a third of participants cited a human connection of some sort as what they liked best about the AmeriCorps experience. There appear to be three ways that participants develop these enriching relationships. First, connections among fellow AmeriCorps participants and program staff were often very strong. For example, one participant shared that what he liked most about the experience was “...finally getting to know everyone on the crew. Going from complete strangers to a sort of family.” The second source of enriching relationships was community members. Many participants were touched by the children, or others, they served. For example, one respondent explained “What I liked best was working with the children. I bonded really close with them.” Finally, many cited a sense of belonging to a broader community. For example, one respondent said her “re-entry into the community” was what she liked best about the experience.

Participant responses on what they *liked best* about the AmeriCorps experience:

- *I bonded with lots of teachers and children and have some wonderful memories.*
- *I absolutely loved the homeless women that I met and worked with there. Learning their life stories and their triumphs was the best part of my AmeriCorps experience.*
- *I loved my team, and my teachers, and my kids. I had the most amazing group of people working with me, supporting me, and challenging me. I feel like I really have learned a lot, about other people, about the classroom, and about myself.*
- *My co-members were amazing.*

- *I loved working directly with students and building relationships I'll never forget.*
- *I have made many new friends, young and old.*
- *I've worked many places and many jobs in my 41 years and I can honestly say that I feel more secure, cared about and part of a team than any place I've ever been.*
- *I loved the way that our team was just that — a TEAM.*

COMPELLING AND REWARDING SERVICE

Over a quarter of respondents cited the direct service as one of the best parts of the service experience. Some participants cited the intrinsic reward from a particular activity, like “being outdoors,” “doing construction” or “teaching.” For most, however, what made the service activities great was the meaning it carried. They said, for example, that they liked “making a difference,” the “sense of satisfaction of helping others” and “having an impact.”

Participant responses on what they *liked best* about the AmeriCorps experience:

- *I liked that I was able to do something that really made a difference. I felt important and civically active.*
- *I liked being able to come home at night and feel good about the work that I had just done that day.*
- *The many service projects were challenging but as we completed each one, it ended with a sense of satisfaction in a job well done.*
- *Helping clients get resources that they needed was fulfilling.*

NOVEL AND CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES

Reading through participant reflections on their AmeriCorps service gives the impression that, for many, new challenges and great rewards were closely knit. As one respondent put it, “Each day was full of new and interesting challenges and rewards.” In other words, the sheer newness of many of the experiences made them both challenging and rewarding. Novel parts of the experience included “a new place;” “a different culture;” “different institutions;” and even an “organizational structure that I have never had.” In all, over a fifth of respondents said that experiencing something new, novel and, often, challenging is what they liked best.

Participant responses on what they *liked best* about the AmeriCorps experience:

- *Tried doing something completely different. I liked the idea of starting a new life from scratch.*
- *By overcoming challenges, I grew in so many different ways.*
- *I liked getting a different perspective.*
- *Experiencing a lot of things that I have not done before.*
- *I've really enjoyed the challenges I've come across this year. They say that people will rise to whatever is expected of them - I find that this has proven true. I came in uncertain of myself and my abilities. I am leaving with a sense of pride in what I've accomplished and how well I have managed these once-difficult tasks.*
- *It exposed me to a totally different culture and way of living. It forced me to learn a different way to interact with people. To do my service, I moved from a huge city to a small, rural community. I had multiple firsts during my time here, and was exposed to many new and different activities, most of which have been very fulfilling and enjoyable.*
- *Stepping outside of my comfort zone.*
- *I enjoyed working in an environment that was new to me.*
- *I was placed in positions that I would not have elected to be in.*

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE AMERICORPS EXPERIENCE

Almost all respondents disliked some aspects of the AmeriCorps experience. Nevertheless, only three percent of respondents considered the overall experience to be negative. For 97 percent of respondents, the positives outweighed the negatives.

The survey included a question designed to uncover the most disliked aspects of the experience: “What did you like least about your AmeriCorps experience?” This question revealed that three themes accounted for the vast majority of participant negative experiences: the financial hardship of living within the program’s stipend, administrative burdens, and an exhausting schedule. Over a fifth of respondents cite each as one of the items they liked least, as covered below.

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP OF LIVING WITHIN THE STIPEND

Perceived inadequacy of the stipend was one of the most disliked aspects of the AmeriCorps service. Over one-fifth of respondents cited it as one of the aspects of the AmeriCorps experience they liked least. It appears participants were fully informed of the stipend prior to joining AmeriCorps but were still surprised by how difficult it was to live within it. Several respondents said they had to find ways to supplement the income, including incurring credit card debt, getting a second job or living off of family.

Participant responses on what they *liked least* about the AmeriCorps experience:

- *The finances. I had a rough year financially and had to take on a second job, which took me away from my family even more.*
- *It is EXTREMELY hard to live on an AmeriCorps stipend.*
- *What I liked least was the modest income. I was able to live comfortably on the stipend but I also had the benefit of having family in the area. If I had not been so blessed with my family, I would not have been able to make ends meet on the stipend.*
- *I did not like only making 900 dollars a month. Also the health insurance sucked. It did not cover many things that are necessities like dental.*
- *Money.*
- *I will leave AmeriCorps with credit card debt because the stipend was not enough to live on. I don't think that any member joins to make money,*

but they certainly don't join to lose money.

- *Living on the stipend. \$768 a month is not enough to live on. However my position at the WorkSource took about 50 hours a week of my time and therefore it was extremely difficult to get a second job. Between housing, transportation, and gas it is impossible to live off of that amount of money no matter how much you budget.*
- *The pay.*
- *The insufficient pay.*
- *The paycheck.*
- *The degradation of getting almost no pay.*
- *I least liked the financial struggles I endured during my service.*

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

While the service itself was one of best liked aspects of the program, the administrative details associated with it were one of the least liked. Over one fifth of respondents cited “red tape,” “report writing,” “paper work” and other administrative tasks as the least favorite part of the program.

Participant responses on what they *liked least* about the AmeriCorps experience:

- *Red tape.*
- *What I liked least about my AmeriCorps experience was the paperwork.*
- *Report writing -- it wasn't tough, but sometimes it really is challenging to find the time to "reflect," and when I do, I forget to take the time to write it down.*
- *I didn't like the paperwork that well - I just don't like how boring it looks, but it's a good discipline to have, especially when there is a due date involved.*
- *The massive amount of paperwork required every week/month, a lot of it often repeating itself.*
- *I dreaded each time I had to make a report of my time.*
- *I didn't like that there was so much office work and so much time spent sitting alone at a computer This was especially traumatizing for me as I gained weight being an office worker and don't think I am as healthy as if I had a job moving around more But at least I learned what kind of job to avoid and what I really need in a work environment.*
- *All the paperwork and reports were what I disliked the most.*
- *Documentation.*
- *I didn't like all the paperwork, but I realize that it is a lot less than it has been in the past and I also realize the necessity of it in providing further service to the target group.*

- *Sometimes the paperwork can be tedious and some other AmeriCorps members didn't have as much of a work ethic as needed.*
- *I did not like all the paperwork.*
- *Paperwork.*
- *All the rules, paperwork, and obscure policies about various things.*
- *The constant stream of paperwork became a deterrent to getting my work done at host site. I understand paperwork is necessary, but as a 1/2 time member, I had the same amount of paperwork that a full time person has, thus the same amount of time I have no suggestion for improving this, but hopefully some extra benefit for the 1/2 time person would be appropriate since they get no benefits like the full time person does.*
- *I felt like with everything we did there was a pile of paperwork that we had to fill out afterwards.*
- *The thing I liked least about my AmeriCorps experience was filling out all the paperwork!*

EXHAUSTING SCHEDULE

Possibly the other side of the coin of AmeriCorps being an intense experience is that, for many, it overwhelmed other areas of life and made work-life balance elusive. Over a fifth of respondents reported that they put in long hours, were often exhausted or found that the demands of AmeriCorps crowded out family and other aspects of life.

Participant responses on what they *liked least* about the AmeriCorps experience:

- *What I liked least about my AmeriCorps experience was the exhaustion from going all the time without enough rest.*
- *AmeriCorps really does take over your life...I found it hard to ever have a weekend off.*
- *I'm still trying to find the balance between working too much and too little, so it was a very exhausting year for me as I struggled against burn out.*
- *The long weekends making up hours.*
- *The crazy hours, working all the time it seems.*
- *Exhaustion.*
- *Time spent away from family.*
- *I found it difficult to "have a life" outside of AmeriCorps for the eleven months even though I was a part-time member. I ended up working more than I had expected. The desire to help others with their special service projects weighed on my mind when I could not help; when I could help, it meant giving up scarce personal time.*

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL IMPACT

For the overwhelming majority of AmeriCorps respondents, the pleasures and challenges of AmeriCorps came together as a positive and transformative experience. As one participant said, “this year has really enabled me to grow into the person that I have always wanted to be.” Participants reported that the AmeriCorps experience made them more skilled, confident, directed and service-oriented, as covered below.

INCREASED SKILLS

Over three quarters of respondents reported higher levels of workplace skills due to AmeriCorps. Respondents reported that their service developed universal workplace skills such as leadership, management, teamwork and communication; as well as selected specialized skills ranging from chain sawing to teaching. This finding is consistent with prior Washington state and national research on AmeriCorps (Boccalandro, 2007b; Boccalandro, 2006a; Boccalandro, 2006b; Jastrzab, 2004; Perry, 2004).

Participant comments regarding skill development:

- *I have had the opportunity to learn various skills, like chainsaw work, kayaking, plant identification, and mammal handling. I also appreciate the different certifications and trainings I have received like the wild land firefighting certification and swift water rescue training.*
- *I am better equipped to handle conflicts and disagreements.*
- *I have gotten much better at professional relationships.*
- *I have far more skills in just about everything I had before and more.*
- *I am better equipped. More aware of my place in the community. My tool belt is a lot fuller than it was two years ago.*
- *I have also developed many communication and professional skills this year.*
- *I have the skills and tools to work and collaborate with others in a working environment.*

Figure 1. A high-impact experience: Selected participant quotes on the how AmeriCorps changed them

Before AmeriCorps I was...	and now I am...
○ Bound in a mindset that the only job I could ever get is in fast food and that I would never move up	○ Going to get my bachelors degree
○ Not on the right track	○ About to be in a good job with great references
○ Without a plan as to where to go next in life	○ Ready for the next step! I have set a plan in motion to get where I always imagined myself
○ Just another college graduate with very little idea what to do with my life or my degree	○ A more confident and skilled citizen with the tools to help create a successful future for myself and my community
○ Ignorant about our community	○ Aware of the many opportunities and resources
○ Depressed and working a dead-end job	○ Confident and excited for the future
○ An observer of the city	○ An active member
○ Segregated	○ Diverse in my thinking
○ Trying to figure out what my main passion was in life	○ Sure that my main passion is protecting the environment
○ Working food and customer service	○ Qualified for enjoyable positions furthering my education
○ Crippled, both [by] my disability and by my mind set	○ Accomplished, and on my way to a much better future than I had pre-disability
○ Not sure what I was going to do for a career	○ I am going to go to school for welding
○ Not sure what to do with myself	○ On the right path for achieving my goals
○ Washing dishes	○ Never washing dishes again (ever)
○ Floundering	○ Driven
○ Quiet, inexperienced, and skinnier	○ Able to voice my opinion, aware of my community roles, and heavier than when I started

INCREASED CONFIDENCE

Consistent with their rise in skill levels, over a third of respondents reported that they were more certain that they had the abilities, resources and skills to achieve success in school and work. This finding is consistent with prior Washington state research on AmeriCorps (Boccalandro, 2007b; Boccalandro, 2006b).

Participant comments regarding self confidence:

- *I don't think I would be doing what I plan to do if it weren't for my AmeriCorps experience.*
- *I am sure of where I am going now in life and where I want to end up.*
- *I will be a lot more confident.*
- *I have come to realize that I don't need to put up with ill treatment from others.*
- *I am more confident to try things.*
- *I now have... the knowledge to help make effective change wherever I go.*
- *I will be confident in my ability to get things done.*
- *[AmeriCorps] greatly improved my self esteem and made me feel like I can do anything I put my mind to.*

CLEARER DIRECTION

Over a quarter of respondents expressed that the AmeriCorps experience gave them a greater sense of clarity about their future. Many respondents reported clarity around pursuing a particular career, such as in education or environmental protection. Others reported that the experience clarified which values to be true to. For some, the service year renewed a sense of purpose and hope for what they wanted to accomplish.

Participant comments regarding direction:

- *My experience has impacted my career because now I know I want to be in a classroom teaching.*
- *This year helped me decide to actively become a caretaker of our planet.*
- *I have narrowed down my career interest and found a focus for future studies.*
- *This experience solidifies my desire to work in a non-profit organization.*
- *I know I want to go into education now, when I really wasn't certain at first.*

Figure 2. A rich experience: All survey responses to “When you think back on your AmeriCorps experience what are the first three words that come to mind?”

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GREATER COMMITMENT TO SERVICE

Although it was typically not reported as one of most dramatic effects of AmeriCorps service, survey data indicate that the year strengthened participant commitment to serving others in over three-quarters of respondents. This finding is consistent with prior Washington state and national research on AmeriCorps (Boccalandro, 2007a; Boccalandro, 2006a; Boccalandro 2006b; Jastrzab, 2004; Perry, 2004).

Participant comments regarding commitment to service:

- *I have begun to serve as a reflex. If I have free time, I'm usually helping out with whatever needs to be worked on. I am happy to branch out and work with people I have never worked with, and I immediately make friends.*
- *I feel very interested in community involvement since becoming an AmeriCorps member.*
- *I realize how important it is to serve others and in return, I will feel satisfied.*
- *I feel more compelled to use my life to help others discover their voice and help them fight for their rights.*
- *It [the AmeriCorps experience] has deepened my commitment to volunteering.*
- *It definitely upped my interest in civic engagement.*
- *I feel more empowered to combat poverty.*

CONCLUSIONS

The story this survey tells is an inspiring one: Participants come to AmeriCorps from all backgrounds and personal and professional highs and lows; they serve their communities with passion, do things they had never done before, develop deep relationships and encounter personal and professional challenges; and — except for a very small minority — emerge newly empowered to study, work, live and serve as their dreams demand. What one respondent said seems to be true for the vast majority of her colleagues: “My future will be brighter because of my involvement in AmeriCorps.”

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