

THE EFFECTS OF AMERICORPS ON PARTICIPANT READINESS FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS

AUGUST 31, 2007

By:

VeraWorks
10204 Amsterdam Rd.
Waynesboro, PA 17268
(717) 762-9865 www.veraworks.com

Project Director: Bea Boccalandro (bea@veraworks.com)

For:

The Washington Commission for National and Community Service
PO Box 43113
Olympia, WA 98504-3113
(360) 902-0663 www.ofm.wa.gov/servewa

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	i
Background and Methodology.....	1
Purpose.....	1
Data Collection.....	1
Data Analysis	4
Technical Considerations.....	5
Findings.....	7
Confidence in Ability to Obtain an Education Increased.....	7
Responsibility for Educational Success Increased.....	8
Basic Work Skills Increased.....	9
Responsibility for Employment Success Had Mixed Results.....	10
Conclusions.....	13
References.....	14

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE EFFECTS OF AMERICORPS ON PARTICIPANT READINESS FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS

AUGUST 31, 2007

A study conducted by VeraWorks, Inc., suggests that Washington AmeriCorps increases participant readiness for educational and employment success. As compared to a national group of non-participants, the surveyed Washington AmeriCorps participants experienced significantly higher increases in three of the four areas examined: confidence in their ability to obtain an education, responsibility for educational success and basic workplace skills. The final area, responsibility for employment success, did not increase across the full group of respondents. It did increase, however, among respondents without a four-year college degree, who made up roughly half of all respondents.

The study was based on a pre- and post-survey on educational and employment preparedness completed by 399 AmeriCorps participants between 2005 and 2006, corresponding to a 67 percent response rate. The pre- and post-survey collected information on four metrics on readiness for educational and employment success that were developed by the Corporation for National and Community Service through a contract with Abt Associates.

Although there are some variations with respect to other studies, the above overall findings are largely consistent with research conducted nationally, as well as in other states and regions. They are also consistent with Washington participant expectations of their AmeriCorps service. Sixty-four percent of survey respondents selected “explore future jobs/education interests” as one of their top two reasons for joining AmeriCorps.

Gender, ethnicity, state of residence prior to AmeriCorps, type of AmeriCorps program (AmeriCorps*VISTA or AmeriCorps*State), and previous community service do not appear to affect the degree to which readiness for educational and employment success increased. There are, however, some differences in findings by age, education level, income level and motivation behind joining AmeriCorps. The profile of the Washington AmeriCorps participant most likely to experience a boost in readiness for education and employment success appears to be a young individual who has not completed college, has a household income greater than \$20,000, and

entered AmeriCorps with the expectation that it was an investment in the future, rather than primarily a job for the present.

In summary, it appears that Washington AmeriCorps participants experience a meaningful boost in their educational and employment skills, confidence and prospects. As one survey respondent suggested, the Washington AmeriCorps experience appears to give participants “more opportunities to go places.”

**THE EFFECTS OF AMERICORPS ON
PARTICIPANT READINESS FOR EDUCATION AND
EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS**

AUGUST 31, 2007

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 ensure that their services have a positive and lasting impact on AmeriCorps participants, an explicit aim of AmeriCorps. More pragmatically, this report aims to support Commission and program staff management by informing them on the apparent effect of AmeriCorps service on participant readiness for success in education and employment. This is an expected outcome not only for the AmeriCorps program, but also for participants. Sixty-four percent of participants selected “explore future jobs/education interests” as one of their top two reasons for joining AmeriCorps.

DATA COLLECTION

This report summarizes the findings from a pre and post-survey on educational and employment preparedness data collected from 399 AmeriCorps participants. The population to which the pre- and post-surveys were administered consisted of individuals who started their first year of AmeriCorps service in the fall of 2005. Surveys were sent to AmeriCorps program staff who administered the pre-surveys within the first month of service and the post-surveys during the last month of the first year of service. Five hundred and ninety eight first-year AmeriCorps participants, representing more than 80 percent of Washington first-year participants, were asked to complete pre- and post-service surveys. Three hundred and ninety nine, or 67 percent of those receiving surveys, completed both surveys in a way that could be matched by respondent. These 399 matched pre- and post-surveys comprise the data analyzed in this report. Survey respondent characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Gender	76% female 24% male
Race (could select more than one)	86% White 8% Hispanic 2% African American 2% American Indian or Alaska Native 2% Asian 10% Other
Age	5% under 20 78% 20 – 29 12% 30 – 49 5% 50 or over
State of residence (prior to service)	70% Washington 4% California 2% Minnesota 2% Ohio 2% Oregon 2% Wisconsin 18% Other
Personal income (year prior to service)	36% under \$5,000 57% between \$5,000 – \$30,000 6% between \$30,000 – \$60,000 1% between \$60,000 – \$100,000 0% over \$100,000
Household income (year prior to service)	26% under \$5,000 33% between \$5,000 – \$30,000 23% between \$30,000 – \$60,000 9% between \$60,000 – \$100,000 9% over \$100,000
Type of AmeriCorps participant	80% AmeriCorps*State 20% AmeriCorps*VISTA
Highest level of educational achievement	1% no high school diploma 13% have a high school diploma 1% have a vocational/trade degree 26% have some college but no degree 7% have an associate’s degree 50% have a bachelor’s degree 2% have an advanced degree
Prior community/military service (could select more than one or none)	93% volunteer community service 3% military service
Reasons for joining AmeriCorps (could select two)	64% to explore future jobs/educational interests 52% to help other people/perform community service 34% to get an educational scholarship 14% to get a job/earn money 12% to get involved in issues 10% to learn about or work with people of different ethnic/cultural groups 14% other

The pre- and post-survey collected information on four metrics on readiness for educational and employment success that were developed by the Corporation for National and Community Service through a contract with Abt Associates. The development process was based on a theory of change model that is documented in *Serving Country and Community: A Longitudinal Study of Service in AmeriCorps* and its accompanying *Appendices* (Jastrzab et al., 2004). These metrics are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Outcomes Measured Pre- and Post-Service¹

Outcomes	Survey Item(s) Used as Indicators
Basic Work Skills	<p>For each skill area, indicate how much experience you have (little or none=1, a lot=3).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Solving unexpected problems or finding new and better ways to do things b. Knowing how to gather and analyze information from different sources such as people/organizations c. Listening and responding to other people's suggestions or concerns d. Stopping or decreasing conflicts between people e. Leading a team by taking charge, explaining to, and motivating co-workers f. Negotiating, compromising, and getting along with co-workers and supervisors g. Learning new ways of thinking or acting from other people h. Adapting your plans or ways of doing things in response to changing circumstances i. Managing your time when you're under pressure j. Dealing with uncomfortable or difficult working conditions
Confidence in Ability to Obtain an Education	<p>Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I have mostly bad luck when it comes to education b. I can work really hard when it comes to getting the education I need c. I have the intelligence I need to finish my education
Responsibility for Educational Success	<p>Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. If I don't finish my education, it's because I didn't have the chances others had b. To get the education I need, I have to be lucky c. When I have trouble with schoolwork, it's because the teachers don't like me d. I can't figure out what it takes to finish my education

¹ For data analysis and presentation purposes, the scales were made consistent by reversing some relative to the scale used in the surveys (e.g., values of 1 were converted to five and values of five were converted to 1).

Outcomes	Survey Item(s) Used as Indicators
Responsibility for Employment Success	<p>Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements (1 = very true 2 = mostly true 3 = neither true nor untrue, 4 = mostly untrue 5 = not at all true).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. There aren't enough jobs for me to get the kind of job I want b. I can't get people to treat me fairly when I apply for the kind of job I want c. I can't seem to try very hard to get a good job d. I don't know what it takes to get the kind of job I want e. If I can't get a good job, it's because people aren't fair to people like me

DATA ANALYSIS

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

1. Was there a statistically significant change in readiness for educational and employment success measures (constructs) among Washington AmeriCorps participants during the course of their first-year service?
2. Was the change (or lack of change) above different to a statistically significant degree than the change in the national comparison group, suggesting that Washington AmeriCorps caused the noted effect?
3. Are there differences in the readiness for educational and employment success metrics by age, gender, race, state of residence, income level, amount of formal education, national service and community service background, type of service (AmeriCorps*VISTA or AmeriCorps*State), or motivation for joining AmeriCorps? Although every outcome reported was tested for differences on each of the above, a failure to find any differences was not cited; only differences were stated.

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

1. Testing for statistically significant changes (at the 95% confidence level) from the pre- to the post-survey on each construct using a paired-samples t-test methodology.²
2. Comparison of pre- and post-program changes in the Washington data with corresponding changes in the comparison group data using t-test methodology that identifies statistically significant differences (at the 95% confidence level). Because the national comparison data (Jastrzab, 2004) were standardized and the raw data were not available, this comparison involved duplicating the standardizing process for the Washington data before making the comparison.

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

3. Comparing, using an independent samples t-test methodology, the magnitude of change in each construct by subgroups on the following factors: age, gender, race, state of residence, income level, amount of formal education, national service and community service background, type of service (AmeriCorps*VISTA or AmeriCorps*State), or motivation for joining AmeriCorps. Differences that were statistically significant (at the 95 percent confidence level) are presented.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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

- Response rate. Although a 67 percent response rate is relatively high by most research standards, it certainly does not guarantee that the final sample is representative of all first-year AmeriCorps members. This is particularly true given that some AmeriCorps participants were sick or otherwise unavailable at the time the surveys were administered. Thus, although the response rate is 67 percent, fewer than 67 percent of all first-year participants are represented in the data. Therefore, these findings represent what is likely to be the case and should not be construed as definitive without corroboration.
- Imperfect comparison group. There are several challenges that result in imperfect comparisons between Washington and comparison group participants. The first is selection bias, which means that some differences in attitudes and behavior between participants and the control group might be because those who chose AmeriCorps entered with different attitudes and behaviors than those who did not choose AmeriCorps. This study was not able to replicate the methodology the national study (Jastrzab, 2004) used to obviate this bias because necessary data were unavailable.

The second challenge is that the national comparison data were not available (only published tables were) to eliminate demographic differences between this group and Washington participants. Additionally, the national comparison group data (Jastrzab, 2004) were collected in the 1999–2000 program year, while the Washington data were collected over the 2005–2006 program year. This may introduce other dissimilarities between the two groups, including the national climate around service before and after September 11, 2001.

These challenges reduce the ability of comparison group analysis to control for all factors that are not related to AmeriCorps participation and, thus, to accurately isolate the causal effect of AmeriCorps

participation. Therefore, these findings should not be construed as definitive without corroboration.

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

FINDINGS

CONFIDENCE IN ABILITY TO OBTAIN AN EDUCATION INCREASED

“Education is the transmission of civilization.”

*Ariel and Will Durant
Writers, philosophers and historians*

Survey data indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps increases participant confidence in their ability to obtain an education. Survey participants experienced a .10 statistically significant increase on a 1–5 scale from a pre-survey average of 1.54 to the post-survey average of 1.64 on this construct. This was a greater increase than the control group experienced, indicating that Washington AmeriCorps was the likely causal effect for these changes. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) found that AmeriCorps participants nationwide did not experience a statistically significant increase in this construct.

“I’ve also gained a lot of confidence.”

“[AmeriCorps] opened my eyes to ... how education is VERY important”

“[AmeriCorps] has provided me] greater drive to complete my education.”

“[AmeriCorps] has opened me up to new possibilities within myself and shown me paths to explore educationally.”

Participant reflections on the impact of AmeriCorps

The confidence in ability to obtain an education construct was based on pre- and post-program data from three survey items:

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

- I have mostly bad luck when it comes to education (scaled reversed for analysis)
- I can work really hard when it comes to getting the education I need
- I have the intelligence I need to finish my education

Washington AmeriCorps participants experienced statistically significant increases in the items on the discipline and intelligence to get a job (b and c), but not in the item having to do with perception of luck (a).

RESPONSIBILITY FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS INCREASED

“Education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform.”

John Dewey

Survey data indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps had a statistically significant effect on taking personal responsibility for educational success. Respondents experienced a statistically significant increase of 0.08 on a 1–5 scale from a pre-survey average of 3.30 to the post-survey average of 3.38. The control group experienced a decrease, indicating that Washington AmeriCorps service was likely responsible for the increase. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004) found that the AmeriCorps experience had no statistically significant and causal effect on this construct.

“The AmeriCorps experience has made me realize I can do things on my own.”

“I have decided to go back to school and get a Master's degree in nutrition.”

Participant reflections on the impact of AmeriCorps

The responsibility for educational success construct was based on pre- and post-program data from four survey items:

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

- a. If I don't finish my education, it's because I didn't have the chance others had
- b. To get the education I need, I have to be lucky
- c. When I have trouble with schoolwork, it's because the teachers don't like me
- d. I can't figure out what it takes to finish my education

The positive change in the construct was driven by a single item: knowing what it takes to finish one's education (d) changed in the positive direction to a statistically significant degree. The items on perceived opportunity (a), luck (b) and teachers preferences (c) showed no statistically significant changes.

BASIC WORK SKILLS INCREASED

"Liberty can not be preserved without a general knowledge among the people."

John Adams

Survey data indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps increased the work skills measured in this study. Respondents experienced a statistically-significant 0.21 increase on a 1–3 scale from a pre-survey average of 2.43 to the post-survey average of 2.64. This increase was greater than the increase in the comparison group, indicating that the Washington AmeriCorps experience caused the increase.

National data (Jastrzab, 2004) also showed a statistically significant positive increase from the pre- to the post-score on basic work skills that can be attributed to AmeriCorps service.

Increases in the basic work skills construct were significantly more pronounced among respondents under the age of 25, without a four-year college degree and who did not have “get a job/earn money” as a key reason for joining AmeriCorps. The first two findings appear logical in that participants with less experience are likely to benefit more from basic workplace skills than colleagues who are already professionals. The third finding might be an indication that participants who expect to see AmeriCorps service as an investment in professional development are more likely to work to ensure they reach that goal from such service. These explanations, however, are hypothetical as the data do not provide any hints as to the reasons for these differences by participant profile.

"I'm more comfortable working as a team."

"I have gained a lot of confidence in my communication skills."

"I feel more solid in who I am and what I can do."

"I now can speak in front of a meeting."

"I have learned how to stay open minded to people with differing opinions."

"I have become a more efficient and effective person."

Participant reflections on the impact of AmeriCorps

The basic work skills construct was based on pre- and post-program data from 10 survey items, all of which experienced statistically significant increases:

For each skill area, indicate how much experience you have (little or none=1, some=2, a lot=3).

- a. Solving unexpected problems or finding new and better ways to do things
- b. Knowing how to gather and analyze information from different sources such as people/organizations
- c. Listening and responding to other people's suggestions or concerns
- d. Stopping or decreasing conflicts between people
- e. Leading a team by taking charge, explaining to, and motivating co-workers.
- f. Negotiating, compromising, and getting along with co-workers and supervisors
- g. Learning new ways of thinking or acting from other people
- h. Adapting your plans or ways of doing things in response to changing circumstances
- i. Managing your time when you're under pressure
- j. Dealing with uncomfortable or difficult working conditions

RESPONSIBILITY FOR EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS HAD MIXED RESULTS

"A man, as a general rule, owes very little to what he is born with—a man is what he makes of himself."

Alexander Graham Bell

Survey data indicate that participation in Washington AmeriCorps has no effect on respondents across the board on taking responsibility for employment success. Respondents experienced a 0.05 increase on a 1–5 scale from a pre-survey average of 3.13 to the post-survey average of 3.18, which is statistically insignificant. The control group did not experience any increase. The national study (Jastrzab, 2004), however, found that the AmeriCorps experience had a statistically significant and causal effect on this construct.

Although there was no statistically significant improvement in responsibility for employment success across all Washington respondents, there was among Washington respondents without a four-year college degree. Indeed, that those without college degrees are more likely to benefit from an increase in responsibility for employment success may explain the discrepancy between the national and Washington findings on this construct. Only 48 percent of Washington's respondents did not have four-year degrees, compared to 70 percent of respondents in the national study.

“[AmeriCorps] gave me time to find vocational clarity.”

“[AmeriCorps] has opened me up to new possibilities.”

“[AmeriCorps gave me] access to further job opportunities”

“[AmeriCorps] has given me...more experience for what I want to do in the future.”

“I am much more capable of doing better and succeeding in the work world.”

Participant reflections on the impact of AmeriCorps

The responsibility for employment success construct was based on pre- and post-program data from five survey items:

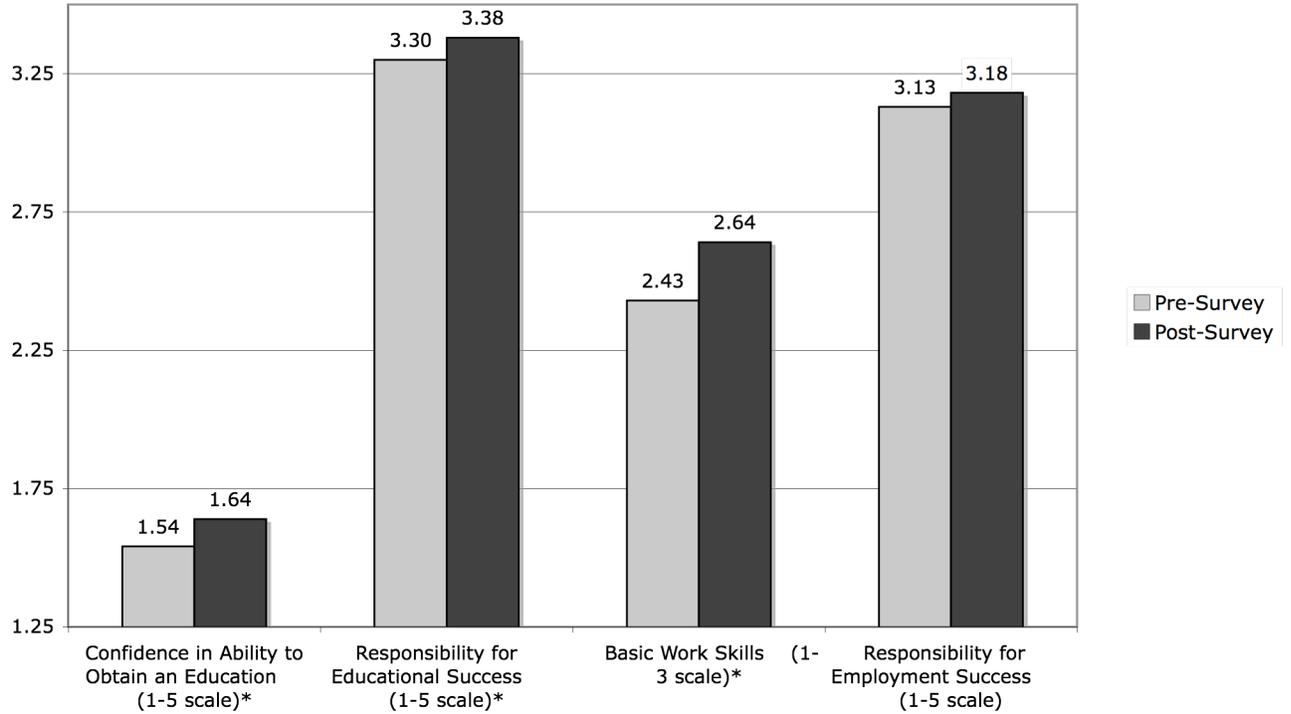
Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements (1 = very true 2 = mostly true 3 = neither true nor untrue, 4 = mostly untrue 5 = not at all true).

- a. There aren't enough jobs for me to get the kind of job I want
- b. I can't get people to treat me fairly when I apply for the kind of job I want
- c. I can't seem to try very hard to get a good job
- d. I don't know what it takes to get the kind of job I want
- e. If I can't get a good job, it's because people aren't fair to people like me

Only the item on knowledge to find a job, (d), showed statistically significant change. Despite the null finding above on the construct as a whole, it appears that the Washington AmeriCorps experience helped inform respondents on how to get a job.

In sum, the null finding in this construct does not seem to imply that participants had no employment-related gains. As discussed above, those respondents without a four-year degree experienced increases in the construct, and the full cohort of respondents experienced increases in job search knowledge. Furthermore, the ability to “explore future job/educational interests” was the most frequently selected contribution of AmeriCorps service. Comments in the open-ended questions support the contention that many participants experienced employment readiness gains.

Figure 1. Average Pre- and Post-Survey Responses by Education or Employment Readiness Construct
 (higher number = more positive response)



* Statistically significant increase (95% confidence level)

CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that Washington AmeriCorps increased participant readiness for educational and employment success. As compared to a national group of non-participants, the 399 surveyed Washington AmeriCorps participants experienced significantly higher increases in three of the four areas examined: confidence in their ability to obtain an education, responsibility for educational success and basic workplace skills. The final area, responsibility for employment success, did not increase across the full group of respondents. It did increase, however, among respondents without a four-year college degree, who made up approximately half of all respondents.

Although there are some variations with respect to other studies, these overall findings are largely consistent with research conducted nationally, as well as in other states and regions (Boccalandro, 2006; Cohen, 1997; Jastrzab, 2004; Perry, 2004; Simon and Wang, 2002; and Valente, 2004).

Gender, ethnicity, state of residence prior to AmeriCorps, type of AmeriCorps program (AmeriCorps*VISTA or AmeriCorps*State), and previous community service do not appear to affect the degree to which readiness for educational and employment success increased. There are, however, some differences in findings by age, education level, income level and motivation behind joining AmeriCorps. The profile of the Washington AmeriCorps participant most likely to experience a boost in readiness for education and employment success appears to be a young individual who has not completed college, has a household income greater than \$20,000, and entered AmeriCorps with the expectation that it was an investment in the future, rather than primarily a job for the present.

In summary, it appears that Washington AmeriCorps participants experience a meaningful boost in their educational and employment skills, confidence and prospects. As one survey respondent suggested, the Washington AmeriCorps experience appears to give participants “more opportunities to go places.”

REFERENCES

- Boccalandro, Bea. 2006. *AmeriCorps Service Effects On Participant Civic Engagement*. Waynesboro, Pennsylvania.
- Boccalandro, Bea. 2006. *The Effects of AmeriCorps Service on Participant Civic Engagement and Life Skills*. Waynesboro, Pennsylvania.
- Cohen, Carolyn. 1997. *What Service Teaches About Citizenship and Work: The Case of AmeriCorps*. Seattle, Washington.
- Jastrzab, JoAnn, Leanne Giordono, Anne Chase, Jesse Valente, Anne Hazlett, Richard LaRock, Jr. and Derrick James. 2004. *Serving Country and Community: A Study of Service in AmeriCorps. Early Findings*. Washington, D.C.: Corporation for National and Community Service.
- Jastrzab, JoAnn, Lawrence Bernstein, Lisa Liti, Sytske Braat–Campbell, Eric Stickney, Ellyn Artis and Leanne Giordono. 2001. *Serving Country and Community: A Study of Service in AmeriCorps. A Profile of AmeriCorps Members at Baseline*. Washington, D.C.: Corporation for National and Community Service.
- Perry, James and Ann Marie Thompson. 2004. *Civic Service: What Difference Does it Make?* New York, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Simon, Christopher A. “Testing for Bias in the Impact of AmeriCorps Service on Volunteer Participants: Evidence of Success in Achieving a Neutrality Program Objective” in *Public Administration Review*, Nov/Dec. 2002, Vol. 62, No. 6.
- Simon, Christopher A. and Changhua Wang. “The Impact of AmeriCorps Service on Volunteer Participants” in *Administration & Society*, Nov. 2002, Vol. 34, No. 5.
- Valente, Jesse. 2004. *An Evaluation of the Washington Service Corps’ Roadmap to Civic Engagement*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.