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Inside a Swiss Army Knife: An Assessment of AmeriCorps

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews the goals and achievements of AmeriCorps, the national service program championed by President Clinton and approved by Congress in 1993. We identify five AmeriCorps goals: satisfying unmet social needs, developing corps members, enhancing the civic ethic, reinvigorating lethargic bureaucracies, and bridging race and class. The evidence of AmeriCorps' effectiveness is not definitive. Self-reports from recipient programs, selective cost-benefit analyses, and some survey evidence indicate some positive results. More fine-grained survey and field research raise questions about AmeriCorps' overall effects. Much more research is needed before policy makers and citizens can determine AmeriCorps' productivity.

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¹This total excludes monies obligated to Learn and Serve America, National and Community Service Act administration, and the Points of Light Foundation. It includes obligations for AmeriCorps grants (\$279 million) and the National Civilian Community Corps (\$21 million). See summary chart for FY 1996 in Budget for Fiscal Year 1998, p. 1020.

One of the most ambitious and controversial programs of Bill Clinton's presidency is AmeriCorps, the national service program authorized in 1993 by the National and Community Service Trust Act (P.L. 103-82). The ambitions of AmeriCorps are modest, at least if they are measured financially—its budget for fiscal year 1996 was \$359 million, just 0.2 percent of the total federal budget.¹ The scope of its ambitions and the ideologies underpinning them have made AmeriCorps controversial, however.

In *The Bill*, a chronicle of the development and passage of national service legislation, Steven Waldman (1995) concludes: "Done properly, it [AmeriCorps] could be the public policy equivalent of a Swiss Army knife, performing numerous useful functions in one affordable package" (p. 20). Critics reach a different conclusion (Walters 1996). They see AmeriCorps as a

J-PART 9(1999):2:225-250

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

perversion of volunteerism and an extension of big government into realms previously reserved for private nonprofit organizations (Bandow 1996).

The 1993 National and Community Service Trust Act created the Corporation for National Service (CNS), an umbrella agency to house all domestic national service programs. This involved incorporating several existing national service programs (e.g., Volunteers in Service to America [VISTA] and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program [RSVP]) under the CNS umbrella. It also authorized several new programs, one of which is the AmeriCorps*State/National program, hereafter referred to as simply AmeriCorps.²

This study seeks to synthesize evaluation findings about AmeriCorps within a policy implementation context. We begin with a brief discussion of the implementation literature and its predictions about the likelihood of successful implementation of national service policy. We then describe the five goals emanating from the 1993 statute and the logic behind those goals. Richard Matland's (1995) ambiguity-conflict model provides the framework for examining the synthesis of findings about AmeriCorps' outcomes. We conclude the article with a discussion about the findings and the evaluation questions that emerge from them.

IMPLEMENTING NATIONAL SERVICE POLICY

Classical implementation models assume a top-down perspective based on the principle that representative democracy demands the primacy of the statute in determining implementation outcomes. From this perspective, if P_0 represents the National and Community Service Trust Act, and P_1 represents its realization, then the implementation problem lies in developing rational and cohesive theories about how to transform P_0 into P_1 , where P_1 is a logical extension of P_0 (Pressman and Wildavsky 1979, 179). A key to successful implementation lies in formulating the right theories about the transformation (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; Sabatier 1986).

Critiques of the classical model assert that "real world" policy implementation occurs in a multijurisdictional, multi-organizational environment characterized primarily by uncertainty (Matland 1995; Hjern and Porter 1981; Hull and Hjern 1987; Elmore 1982). From this perspective, the logic that underlies the achievement of AmeriCorps' goals in the statutory language may not (and probably does not) coincide with local standards of successful implementation. Wide variation in

²AmeriCorps*State/National members receive a minimum of \$4,725 when they complete seventeen hundred hours (or more) of full-time service. Part-time members must complete nine hundred hours of service to receive half the amount of the education award. In addition to this award, AmeriCorps*S/N members receive a small annual living allowance and health insurance as well as child care assistance for those who qualify for such support. The other AmeriCorps programs authorized under the 1993 statute are the AmeriCorps*National Civilian Community Corps and the AmeriCorps*VISTA programs. The Corporation for National Service is responsible for administering these three programs as well as the Learn and Serve America program and the National Senior Volunteer Corps program, which includes the Retired and Senior Volunteers, Foster Grandparent, and Senior Companion programs (U.S. GAO 1997b).

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

program implementation suggests wide variation in evaluation criteria, making program evaluation difficult if not impossible.

Richard Matland's (1995) ambiguity/conflict model of policy implementation offers a synthesis of the traditional top-down and bottom-up approaches (Sabatier 1986). For Matland, determination of successful implementation depends on which of four processes, which are summarized in the exhibit on page 228 of this article, characterizes a policy's implementation. The processes vary along two dimensions: policy ambiguity and policy conflict (p. 155). Policy conflict occurs when actors have incongruous views about program goals, the means to reach those goals, and/or conflicting value systems. The more incongruous the views, the more intense the conflict and the more problematic the implementation process.

Policy ambiguity occurs when goals are unclear and/or the means to achieve those goals are uncertain. Classical models of implementation predict that the greater the policy ambiguity, the greater the likelihood of implementation failure. Matland argues persuasively, however, that goal ambiguity may actually decrease policy conflict, enhancing a policy's implementation.

Matland's framework captures better than do either a top-down or bottom-up approach the complexity inherent in linking goals to outcomes. Furthermore, it demonstrates that different implementation processes yield different standards for success. As a prelude to relating Matland's framework concretely to national service, we now summarize AmeriCorps' goals and the logic underlying them.

AmeriCorps' Goals and the Logic of National Service

The statutory statement of purpose for national service programs is expansive. The political rhetoric used in the law's legitimation and the enthusiasm of supporters have generated added expectations. The eight purposes for national service programs in the preamble to the National and Community Service Trust Act (Title 42, U.S.C.A, sec.12501), together with informal expectations, translate into five primary goals for AmeriCorps. We will discuss each of these goals.

Satisfying Unmet Social Needs. AmeriCorps specializes in providing direct service. Harris Wofford, the chief executive officer of the Corporation for National Service (CNS), states that while AmeriCorps produces many derivative benefits its primary purpose is to help communities solve critical human, educational, environmental, and public safety problems (Wofford 1996). From

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

Exhibit Policy Implementation Processes

		Policy Conflict	
		Low	High
Policy Ambiguity	Low	<p><i>Administrative Implementation Process</i></p> <p>Central principle determining outcome of implementation process: adequate resources</p> <p>Classical implementation approach most appropriate for assessing relationship between goals and outcomes</p> <p>Standard for success: measurable achievement of statutory goals</p>	<p><i>Political Implementation Process</i></p> <p>Central principle determining outcome of implementation process: degree of power/coalitional strength at the macro level</p> <p>Newer classical approaches that acknowledge importance of political actors in the implementation process most appropriate for assessing relationship between goals and outcomes</p> <p>Standard for success: measurable achievement of statutory goals but interpreted within context of macro and micro political factors</p>
	High	<p><i>Experimental Implementation Process</i></p> <p>Central principle determining outcome of implementation process: contextual conditions such as level of resources and which actors are most active at the micro implementation level</p> <p>Bottom-up implementation approach most appropriate for assessing relationship between goals and outcomes</p> <p>Standard for success: learning what works and what does not work; learning also seen as a process of value in and of itself</p>	<p><i>Symbolic Implementation Process</i></p> <p>Central principle determining outcome of implementation process: degree of power/coalitional strength at the micro implementation level</p> <p>Neither top-down nor bottom-up approach is entirely appropriate for assessing relationship between goals and outcomes; some combination helpful</p> <p>Standard for success: problematic due to the high levels of policy conflict and ambiguity; focus should be on contextual factors</p>

Adapted from Exhibit 1, Matland 1995, 160.

the outset, AmeriCorps was envisioned as making a difference in each of these four programmatic areas by such service as building homes, teaching children to read, cleaning up vacant lots, and making streets safer.

Developing Corps Members. As worthy as most advocates consider the prospects of direct service, others consider it

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

secondary to AmeriCorps' role in expanding opportunities for participants. AmeriCorps' participant benefits range from growth in self-esteem and character development to the acquisition of job skills and preparation for future careers. Perhaps the most direct developmental opportunity, however, derives from the education stipend offered to AmeriCorps participants at the end of their year of service. In addition to a small stipend for their service, which averages about \$7500 a year, full-time members accrue credits of \$4725 in an educational trust that can be allocated either to tuition expenses or accumulated loans. Thus AmeriCorps members are accorded opportunities to develop through the service itself and through post-service education.

Enhancing the Civic Ethic. AmeriCorps was envisioned as a way to enhance civic commitments by providing a way for participants to contribute to the solution of public problems and to build communities. Service is viewed as the development of life-long "habits of the heart" (Bellah et al. 1985) or public service motivation (Perry and Wise 1990). It is also a way to build communities by developing the capacity of community-based organizations and fostering partnerships across governmental, business, and nonprofit sectors. Some AmeriCorps programs build communities more directly, through community development projects that focus on neighborhood revitalization and building local infrastructure (Fear et al. 1996).

Invigorating Lethargic Bureaucracies. Several administrative features of the national service initiative were intended to distinguish it from traditional bureaucracies: the corporate character of the federal administrative agency (CNS's chief executive officer reports to a board of trustees), the devolution of administrative responsibility to the states, and the competitive process for program funding. State community service commissions oversee most AmeriCorps programs by funding and administering programs delivered through local nonprofit organizations or consortia of nonprofits. Of the federal funds available for AmeriCorps programs, state commissions directly control two-thirds: one-third is allocated strictly on the basis of population and at least one-third is awarded to state commissions on a competitive basis (U.S. GAO 1997b, 3; 7).

The CNS directly administers the remaining one-third of federal funds by competitively awarding grants to national nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher learning, or multistate organizations. Thus the administrative structure is decentralized, it devolves responsibility to states and nonprofit organizations, and it is designed to manage competition for funds. AmeriCorps may also help reinvigorate bureaucracies through its infusion of

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

volunteers into mature organizations. Waldman (1995) believes that “older career employees sometimes become re-energized working side-by-side with highly motivated young people” (p. 21).

Informal Goals. In addition to the statutory goals, AmeriCorps pursues informal goals, the most visible of which is building bridges between classes and races. President Clinton pictured AmeriCorps bringing together people of different classes and races to reduce balkanization and strengthen community (Waldman 1995). Although race mixing and class mixing do not appear among AmeriCorps’ statutory goals because Clinton chose not to push for diversity language in the legislation (pp. 92-93), diversity plays a prominent role in the support programs operated by CNS and state commissions. AmeriCorps programs and members (through technical assistance contracts) have access to a variety of diversity training and consultation opportunities often subsidized by state commissions and CNS.

The Logic of National Service. Whether or not AmeriCorps’ designers consciously sought to create a cohesive logic of national service, the five goals collectively illustrate the grand assumptions that underlie national service. Personal acts of service have the potential to effect positive changes in individuals by bringing diverse groups of people together around a common task in order to solve specific societal problems. Civic participation in such tasks creates a civic consciousness (Janowitz 1983) manifest in greater individual and collective commitment to the “civic whole” (Moskos 1988, 2), what Harris Wofford calls “the new patriotism” (Gergen 1998). This commitment leads to a more active citizenry, healthier communities, and a stronger democratic polity. Devolving administrative responsibility to states and implementation of the program through local nonprofit organizations bring the process close to the ground where real differences are made.

AmeriCorps’ Goals and Implementation Processes

In its first five years, the implementation processes that surround AmeriCorps have been even more complex than Matland’s model suggests, fluctuating frequently across Matland’s four types. AmeriCorps’ implementation history suggests that two implementation processes may occur nearly simultaneously and that actors in the implementation process can strategically manipulate the levels of ambiguity and conflict to influence the type of implementation process that fits their own political interests.

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

In the early years of implementation, AmeriCorps' implementation process fell in Matland's symbolic category. The debate surrounding national service underscored differences in perceptions about the nature of volunteerism and the role of government in democratic society. At the same time, proponents of national service were successfully defusing conflict through the use of highly ambiguous goals. The Swiss Army knife nature of AmeriCorps' goals had the effect of moving the implementation process from symbolic to experimental. This movement supports Matland's assertion that high ambiguity can decrease conflict enough to assure passage of a bill despite incongruous views about the means used to achieve vague goals.

Shortly thereafter, however—and contrary to Matland's assertions about the positive effects of high ambiguity—the implementation process changed again as policy conflict flared, this time over ambiguity of means—the cost of meeting AmeriCorps' goals. In this case, proponents defused policy conflict by decreasing policy ambiguity. Proponents began to emphasize the satisfying of unmet needs as AmeriCorps' primary goal. This had the positive strategic effect of co-opting the opposition as the CNS was able to document concrete results of AmeriCorps members' activities.

The current debate over AmeriCorps' "getting things done" achievements versus its goal to develop corps members by providing them with the opportunity to go to college suggests that the implementation process once again may shift to a political or symbolic implementation process (Selingo 1998). Proponents may need to return to a high ambiguity stance by focusing once again on the merits of a Swiss Army knife approach to achieving AmeriCorps' goals.

³Our definition of AmeriCorps' goals coincides closely with two other efforts to define its goals. Bates (1996) and Van Til and Gallup (1997) identify five goals of national service. Reinvigorating lethargic bureaucracies, which we identify here based upon Waldman's analysis, is not among the five goals identified by Bates or Van Til and Gallup. Bates identifies "helping troubled youths turn their lives around" as a general goal of national service. Survey respondents in Van Til and Gallup's study, themselves participants in AmeriCorps, found this goal to be least characteristic of AmeriCorps. Their results are consistent with the view that AmeriCorps sought to avoid being labeled as a program for poor or other minorities in order to avoid potential political stigma (Waldman 1995).

Evaluation studies can play an important role in the political process as opponents and proponents manipulate levels of ambiguity by using the findings of individual studies to support their own interests. Hence evaluation studies may be an important factor influencing shifts across different types of implementation processes. We now turn to a discussion of those findings.

WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS AMERICORPS MADE?

We organize the discussion about the evidence of AmeriCorps' accomplishments around the goals we have identified: satisfying unmet social needs, developing corps members, enhancing the civic ethic, reinvigorating lethargic bureaucracies, and bridging race and class.³

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

Satisfying Unmet Social Needs

Evidence about AmeriCorps' achievements in meeting unmet social needs is largely descriptive. Since 1995, Aguirre International (1997a) has produced annual accomplishment reports for the Corporation for National Service. Their evaluations summarize AmeriCorps' accomplishments with respect to unmet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs. In addition, the United States General Accounting Office (U.S. GAO 1997b) investigated the accomplishments of twenty-four projects administered by seven diverse state community service commissions. Together, AmeriCorps participants

organized food programs that served 2,500 children; assisted with totally rehabilitating 16 vacant public housing units; operated a 7-week summer reading camp for 36 children; planted trees, removed debris, and created gardens improving 32 urban neighborhoods; and provided parenting classes to low-income families (p. 13).

Although such accomplishments are not inconsequential, the reports provide few details, for example, about the qualitative contributions of AmeriCorps. How many of the reported results are attributable to AmeriCorps members rather than to the staff of the organizations for which they worked? We also have limited information about the amount of learning that occurred for the children tutored, the intensity of youth mentoring, or the quality of after-school programs. We do have some cost-benefit analyses.

Cost-Benefit Analysis. Several studies have measured the overall cost-benefit ratio of AmeriCorps. Neuman, Kormendi, Tamura, and Gardner (1995) assessed costs and benefits in three dissimilar AmeriCorps programs: AmeriCorps for Math and Literacy in Austin, Texas, and Columbus, Ohio; Project First, a multisite project operating in Atlanta, Charlotte, and New York; and East Bay Conservation Corps (EBCC).⁴ Across the three programs, the study found a benefit range of \$1.60 to \$2.60 per dollar of federal outlay. Benefit ranges were slightly lower (\$1.50 to \$2.20) when federal outlays were aggregated with the matching funds of the grantees.

A cost-benefit analysis of two Washington State AmeriCorps projects (Wang, Owens, and Kim 1995) found the benefits of the two projects exceeded costs by a ratio of 2.4 to 1 using a 2 percent discount rate and 1.8 to 1 using a more conservative 5 percent discount rate. In one project, fifteen members (five full time and ten part time) spent about four hundred hours per week

⁴Benefits were stated in terms of individual benefits to corps members and of societal benefits such as reduced crime, lower welfare expenses, and enhanced earnings due to education attainment (Corporation for National Service 1995, 12; 21-38).

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

working for a school district in a variety of capacities ranging from reading and ESL (English as a second language) tutors, to library staff during lunch hours, to after-school enrichment coordinators, to recruiters for adult volunteers. In the second project, fourteen members (twelve full time, two part time) worked in conjunction with a city government renovating a stadium, constructing a children's playground, and creating a farmers' market.

A third cost-benefit analysis (Shumer and Cady 1997) was conducted in conjunction with an evaluation of Minnesota's AmeriCorps programs. They calculated cost-benefit ratios for three types of programs—educational enhancement, judicial system, and property/housing rehabilitation—for 1994-95 and 1995-96. Benefits were stated in terms of educational enhancement, justice system cost savings, and property/rehabilitation program initiatives (p. 84). They found cost-benefit ratios for the two-year period averaging from 1.5 for educational enhancement, to 2.5 for the judicial system, and to 2.9 for the housing rehabilitation program.

Do the uniformly positive cost-benefit ratios indicate that AmeriCorps is satisfying unmet social needs? The evidence from the programs that were the objects of analysis suggests that AmeriCorps is making a difference. At the same time, the cost-benefit analysis leaves many important questions unanswered. One involves the representativeness of the programs studied. Do the reported cost-benefit ratios extend across the more than four hundred AmeriCorps programs nationwide? The subject programs were not randomly selected, and therefore it seems likely that they are not representative and may in fact overstate the ratio of benefits to costs.

The cost-benefit ratio for AmeriCorps needs to be viewed in comparison to other programs competing for public dollars allocated to AmeriCorps. How does AmeriCorps stack up to alternatives? A long-term cost-benefit analysis of an early childhood education program comparable to Head Start suggests that such a program returned \$5.63 for every dollar invested (Haskins 1989). A recent report from the President's Council of Economic Advisors (1997) identifies a wealth of alternative social investments with high payoffs. Although little exists in the way of norms against which to measure the cost-benefit ratio for AmeriCorps, the returns from AmeriCorps do not appear to be so substantial that opportunity costs can be ignored (Bandow 1996).

Developing Corps Members

Although some opponents (and some proponents) view AmeriCorps as analogous to the Jobs Corps, the CNS has deliberately tried to steer the program away from identification with existing employment or jobs programs. In fact, most AmeriCorps programs provide little basic skills development. They do, however, provide job-like experiences for their members, many of whom are youthful, and skills training in areas such as diversity and teamwork.

Although the long-term derivative benefits of job-like experiences may prove difficult to measure, such benefits should not be underestimated. In a qualitative study of three AmeriCorps field sites, for example, Van Til and Gallup (1997) found that corps members developed a wide array of skills ranging from crisis intervention, to decision making, to time management (p. 51). Qualitative analysis of pre- and post-survey data of corps members in five AmeriCorps programs in one state (Perry and Thomson 1997) corroborates Van Til and Gallup's findings. Survey responses indicate that AmeriCorps made a positive difference in corps members' lives by increasing their personal, professional, and social skills (such as self-confidence). Many corps members also indicated an increased awareness of the needs of their communities and the efficacy of their direct service activities.

In a panel study of AmeriCorps members in one state (Perry 1997), respondents exhibited significantly higher levels of generalized expectancy for success and acceptance of diversity one year after completing their AmeriCorps experience. Furthermore, between the pretest and the one-year follow-up, three other measures—self-esteem, altruistic motivation, and instrumental motivation—increased significantly. These results suggest that long-term tracking of the effects of service is important for developing a complete picture of its consequences.

Education Award Benefit. The most direct developmental opportunity facilitated by AmeriCorps is as a byproduct of the educational awards that members earn when they complete their service. Because relatively few members have completed their service commitments and become eligible to use their education trust (members have up to seven years after their year of service to use the award), it is difficult at this stage to assess the extent to which educational opportunities have been expanded.

Statistics about percentages of corps members using their education award are problematic. In their analysis of education

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

award usage by AmeriCorps participants in fiscal year 1994-95 (U.S. GAO 1997b), GAO staff found a wide range in the proportion of members across twenty-four AmeriCorps projects (17 to 78 percent; median, 54 percent) who accessed their education award (p. 12). These findings correspond roughly with those cited by Senator Nancy Kassebaum (1996, 2) that demonstrated that as of 1996, only 40 percent of the twenty thousand AmeriCorps members nationwide had used their postservice educational awards. CNS statistics, on the other hand, indicate that by 1998, of the sixty-two thousand scholarships earned, 54 percent of corps members had used their awards (Selingo 1998). In response to a recent editorial in *USA Today* (1998), Wofford claimed that 70 percent of the first graduating class of corps members have used their award. The variation in these percentages over time illustrates that, because of the seven-year time frame, current statistics may not be the best indicator of education award usage.

Comparison of AmeriCorps statistics with findings from similar education award benefit programs provides another way to examine education award usage. In their analysis of 1986 Department of Defense data, Paul Hogan and Christine Villa found that only 47 percent of enlistees in the Army Reserves actually used their postservice benefits (Gray, Schoeni, and Kaganoff 1993, 8, n. 11). Statistics on World War II veterans indicate that about 80 percent of them used the educational benefits (*USA Today* 1998). However, as with AmeriCorps, statistics vary—not only over time, but depending on which population researchers study.

The normative issues underlying the education award benefit pose serious questions about AmeriCorps' target population. Should AmeriCorps target for participation low-income individuals unlikely to go to college without the AmeriCorps award or should it target individuals who demonstrate a greater likelihood of actually making use of the postservice benefit? In order to maximize the goal of expanding educational opportunities, the education awards should go to those who would not otherwise have the opportunity for higher education. Predicting which corps members actually will use their education awards is highly problematic, however. In a study of AmeriCorps members in three states, for example, Tschirhart (1998) found that intention to use the education award was highly dependent on age, that only 51 percent of the members rated the educational award as very important, and that 25 percent rated it as quite important.

Attrition Rates. In its report on the role of state commissions in implementing AmeriCorps (U.S. GAO 1997b), the GAO created an unintended controversy surrounding the effects of

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps on members when it reported median attrition across seven states of 39 percent. This is higher than the attrition identified in three other states (Mesch et al. 1998). Analysis of a sample of members who left AmeriCorps before completing their service demonstrates that high self-esteem, high instrumental motivation, and low education at entry to AmeriCorps were all significant predictors of leaving (Mesch et al. 1998). The results suggest that those who leave AmeriCorps come predominantly from two groups, those who are more instrumental in their orientations and sufficiently confident of their abilities to seek labor market opportunities and those who lack the work skills to perform successfully. Attrition among these two groups implies that AmeriCorps may not be perceived as beneficial by members who are either among the best or the least prepared for the job market. Still, it is important to note that Mesch et al. were unable to measure the effects of AmeriCorps on corps members while they were in the program. It may be that individuals with little education, for example, still benefited from the experience by learning particular job skills they would otherwise not have had the opportunity to learn.

Enhancing the Civic Ethic

Enhanced individual dispositions or collective commitments to democracy are not automatic outgrowths of community service. The literature about service learning (Giboney 1996), for example, depicts one-to-one service activity and political activism as two ends of a continuum. Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari (1996) argue that not all forms of service are equal. Some are more truly "public" work (i.e., service that enhances participant's performance as citizens). Other service experiences may not meet thresholds for meaningfulness or significance, thereby preventing participants from experiences that bind them to other citizens. Yet other service that is particularly intense and challenging may, perhaps reinforced by personality attributes of some participants, produce burnout or disaffection (Coles 1993). This raises questions about the transformative nature of service as envisioned by AmeriCorps' designers. To what extent does the service experience act as a vehicle for developing life-long habits of the heart?

Developing Habits of the Heart. In their evaluation of AmeriCorps' first-year impact on local communities (Aguirre International 1997a), evaluators conducted 167 interviews with community representatives at sixty AmeriCorps project sites across the country. Ninety-two percent of the interviewees indicated they saw strong evidence of a sense of civic responsibility in corps members (p. 49). Informal interviews with corps members and survey responses also indicate corps members saw

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

“contributing to the well being of their communities and the people who live in them” as the most meaningful part of their service experience (p. 49).

Other survey research suggests, however, that assessing AmeriCorps’ potential to enhance the civic ethic in corps members will require more fine-grained survey and field research. The strength of altruistic orientation varies across members within AmeriCorps, for example. Tschirhart (1998) found that the public service motivation of AmeriCorps members was highly correlated with age; older members had greater public service motivation and demonstrated greater interest in helping others.

Findings from another study (Perry and Thomson 1997) suggest further evidence for variation in public service motivation (Perry 1996) among corps members. Quantitative analysis of pre-and-post-test paired survey comparisons of corps member attitudes across three states in program year 1995-96 demonstrates a statistically significant decrease in commitment to the public interest, self-sacrifice, and overall public service motivation among corps members.

A comparison group analysis of fifty AmeriCorps members with a matched group of non-AmeriCorps community volunteers (Perry 1997) provides one way to interpret these findings. Comparison of the pretest scores of both groups indicates that AmeriCorps members brought to their service assignments significantly higher levels of public service motivation than did non-AmeriCorps volunteers. This evidence suggests that AmeriCorps’ constituency early in its implementation are individuals with an already well-developed civic ethic. If AmeriCorps members have more intense commitment to service than do other volunteers, then the kind of individual transformation sought by AmeriCorps’ designers may be unrealistic. AmeriCorps members may not be so easy to transform because they are already highly motivated to serve.

Such findings are not incompatible with findings obtained in a study of college and university students’ attitudes toward national service that was conducted shortly after passage of the National and Community Service Trust Act (Serow and Biting 1995). The study found that students who demonstrate an interest in a national service program like AmeriCorps also demonstrate a well-developed sense of civic duty and a sense of confidence about their own futures (p. 90). The study also found that what mattered more to students than commitment to any particular ideology of national service were the financial benefits, the

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

education award, and the potential for an increase in civic awareness as a result of participation in the program (p. 90).

Evidence from another quantitative study examining the purposeful nature of corps members' activities (Tschirhart et al. 1997) lends further support to the finding that national service participants have both instrumental and altruistic motivations. Individuals with stronger altruistic goals upon entry into AmeriCorps reported significantly greater achievement of instrumental outcomes than did individuals who entered AmeriCorps with weaker altruistic goals. This finding is consistent with arguments that volunteers with high altruistic/other-regarding motivations at the start of their service come to reap instrumental rewards (Pearce 1993; Phillips 1982).

Tschirhart et al. (1997) also found evidence to suggest that corps members with initially stronger goals to feel needed and important (that is, with a strong self-esteem goal) may leave AmeriCorps with a greater sense of purpose and meaning for their lives than do individuals with weaker self-esteem goals. Individuals who have strong esteem desires may engage in more self-reflection than do individuals who have weaker esteem desires. Self-reflection combined with service may bring a new understanding of community membership and role in society. Individuals who seek a better self-image may discover through service that they are part of a larger community. Through service, individuals can develop a sense of purpose and meaning (Bellah et al. 1985), gain empathy for others' problems (Wuthnow 1991; Coles 1993), and become less selfish and self-occupied (Steven and Addleman 1995).

Programs that deliberately foster reflective practices among corps members may further enhance AmeriCorps' potential to move corps members toward a deeper understanding of community membership by strengthening communication skills. In their study of the Minnesota Youth Work*AmeriCorps program, for example, Shumer and Cady (1997) found evidence of increased ability to communicate among corps members as a result of focus groups coming together on a regular basis to discuss their activities and address important issues.

It is too early to make any conclusive judgement about AmeriCorps' potential to develop a civic ethic in national service participants. The finding that corps members come to their service experience with higher levels of public service motivation does not necessarily mean that a further investment through AmeriCorps will not be productive. AmeriCorps may enable these individuals to acquire the kinds of skills that are likely to

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

make them leaders in their communities in the future. Further research needs to focus on developing an operational definition of *civic responsibility* similar to the kind of work already done on public service motivation (Perry 1996).

Enhancing the Civic Ethic Through Community Building. Developing the capacity of community-based organizations and fostering partnerships across governmental, business, and non-profit sectors in local communities represent other ways that designers envision AmeriCorps' potential to enhance the civic ethic. Aguirre International (1997a) reports that of the sixty sponsoring organizations in their site visit sample, 83 percent predated AmeriCorps. Of these organizations, 43 percent expanded or improved on existing services and 36 percent developed a new service program as a result of AmeriCorps (p. iv). Evaluators also found evidence among the sixty sponsoring organizations for the development of new alliances among like-minded organizations as a result of AmeriCorps. They report an average of ten partner organizations for every sponsoring AmeriCorps organization (p. 32).

Shumer and Cady (1997) also report positive organizational impacts as a result of Youth Work* AmeriCorps. They document an increase in the quality of service provided by participating organizations, expanded services, and increased organizational collaboration as a result of corps member activities in community organizations. Findings from a qualitative analysis of AmeriCorps' impact on local institutions in one state (Perry and Thomson 1997) provide similar but mixed results. AmeriCorps programs enhanced organizational capacity, but the increased capacity was not institutionalized. When they were asked whether their organizations could sustain the increased programming without AmeriCorps dollars, nearly all sponsoring and partner organization directors indicated it would be difficult to keep the programs going without AmeriCorps.

Field research (Perry and Thomson 1997; Van Til and Gallup 1997) suggests a relationship between visibility of AmeriCorps in local communities and its potential to enhance the civic ethic at the community-organization level. Results from a key informant phone survey conducted in January and February 1996 and a follow-up survey of the same individuals one year later (Perry and Thomson 1997) demonstrate that familiarity with local AmeriCorps programs was limited to the small circle of organizations within which corps members worked. Even after a year of AmeriCorps' presence in the community, only minimal increases occurred in levels of awareness among key informants.

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

Van Til and Gallup (1997) found that in all three communities they studied, AmeriCorps was invisible to almost every level of community leadership in all three sectors of the community—public, private, and nonprofit (p. 53). This local finding corresponds to the 1995 national Gallup poll finding that only 24 percent of the 1,027 adults aged eighteen or older said they had heard or read anything about AmeriCorps.

One of the best ways for AmeriCorps to enhance a civic ethic lies in its potential to generate volunteers. Using a sample survey of nearly 10 percent of corps members in the 1995-96 class, Aguirre International staff found that on average each corps member recruited, trained, and supervised sixteen non-AmeriCorps volunteers, generating 246 hours of non-AmeriCorps volunteer service per corps member (Wofford 1996, 73).

Numbers calculated from quarterly reports of five AmeriCorps programs over a two-year period (Perry and Thomson 1997) indicate that, together, corps members at the five AmeriCorps programs generated nearly six thousand non-AmeriCorps volunteers. It does not necessarily follow, however, that expanded organizational capacity naturally occurs as a result of an infusion of volunteers. Thomson and Perry's field research indicates that few AmeriCorps programs strategically sought to build their long-term base of volunteers. Of the five programs, only one had a deliberate strategy for generating volunteers. The remaining programs tended to be more concerned with generating volunteers around discrete service projects. One key informant interviewee referred to this kind of volunteering as "project volunteerism," or "white bread volunteerism" where "volunteers from churches, colleges, and other organizations (though well-meaning) come and go without really being in tune with the local neighborhoods in which they volunteer" (phone interview, Feb. 11, 1997). If AmeriCorps' goal is to institutionalize a service ethic through generation of volunteers in local communities, then project volunteerism may not prove successful over a long period.

Invigorating Lethargic Bureaucracies

AmeriCorps' goal of invigorating lethargic bureaucracies may prove to be the most challenging. Partners with CNS in AmeriCorps are the fifty state community service commissions. The Clinton administration originally had proposed commissions of seven to thirteen persons. The number quickly grew to twenty-five persons as seats on the commission were set aside for labor, local governments, service program representatives, youth, senior citizens, the state education agency, service learning advocates,

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

and others (Waldman 1995). Because some states had no community service commission prior to the 1993 legislation, they had to create an infrastructure from scratch (Smith and Jucovy 1995). This resulted in several unintended consequences: attention to immediate task goals resulted in a loss of coherent planning and capacity building, staff tended to make decisions based on professional rather than community interests, and three-year commitments to programs undermined the opportunity to learn from first-year experiences (Smith and Jucovy 1995).

The effort to improve quality by creating cross-state competition for nonformula funds has been unproductive. States have “gamed” this regulatory provision using a variety of tactics (Smith and Jucovy 1995). States were given the latitude to categorize programs they submitted as either formula or competitive. This led states to put their strongest programs in their competitive application. States also were given the latitude to adjust their funding priorities after the Corporation’s decisions about competitive programs, which has led states to move unfunded competitive grant applications into the formula grant, either displacing or reducing funding for other programs (Smith and Jucovy 1995).

Perhaps the single most significant impediment to administrative innovation is AmeriCorps’ reliance on categorical grants. Field research (Perry and Thomson 1997) and the literature on policy implementation suggest that the use of categorical grants may have unintended and sometimes negative impact on nonprofit organizations and relationships between funders and grantees (Break 1980; Huckins and Carnevale 1988). A potentially negative effect AmeriCorps funding can have on community building is the possible displacement of local funds from existing fiscal effort. While the initial impact may appear to be an expansion of local capacity, the displacement of local funds may, in the end, undermine the long-term community building effects of AmeriCorps programs by minimizing local philanthropic giving and community responsibility and ownership of local initiatives. As one program director lamented: “When you have federal funding as the prime source, the community tends not to own that project and see it as just another government program” (key informant interview, March 15, 1996).

Potential for Youth to Energize Career Employees. Contrary to Waldman’s (1995) assertion that highly motivated young people hold the potential to reenergize older career employees, the preponderance of anecdotal evidence indicates that the infusion of volunteers into mature organizations has not always been reconciled in constructive ways. Field reports indicate that organizations created to implement AmeriCorps are more likely

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

to conform to bureaucratic requirements than vice versa. The final report for *Environmental Problem Solving in Lansing* (Fear et al. 1996) concluded: "We all recognized that AmeriCorps was a new Federal program, but none of us fully translated this in terms of the time and attention that have to be devoted to administrative matters" (chap. 10, 1).

Perry and Thomson (1997) also found that among partner organization directors, a vast majority indicated that corps members brought with them unexpected and significant management and administrative demands. Van Til and Gallup (Cantigny Report 1997, chap. 5, 109) cite similar results. Interviews with corps members' employers (partner organizations) in three diverse communities indicate that employers recognized the trade-offs between the burdens imposed on them by the program and the benefits they received through AmeriCorps. Van Til and Gallup conclude that in the end, however, most employers agreed the benefits were "worth going through what [they had] to go through" to receive AmeriCorps funding (p. 126).

Program Costs. Program costs have been a point of contention since AmeriCorps' inception. Including the educational award benefit (depending on how costs are calculated and interpreted), per full-time equivalent (FTE) member costs have been estimated to be as high as \$31,000 (Hoekstra 1995, 3). Cost cutting measures between AmeriCorps' first and third program years, however, have resulted in a 20 percent decrease in CNS grant funds per FTE corps member with a corresponding 9 percent increase in matching funds per FTE (U.S. GAO 1997a).

Current evidence to support AmeriCorps' ability to decrease program costs by leveraging other resources from the private sector is largely anecdotal. Harris Wofford claims, for example, that in its first two years of operation, AmeriCorps raised \$41 million from the private sector (Wofford 1996, 12). GAO staff were unable to document overall trends in private contributions in their study (1997a) of AmeriCorps' reform efforts, however, because the Corporation currently has no system for identifying matching fund sources. In an examination of twenty-four AmeriCorps projects, GAO staff found a wide range in the share of project-level expenditures supported by public and private-sector sources. They report medians of 66 percent from CNS grants, 83 percent from other public-sector resources, and 17 percent from private-sector funding (1997b, 12).

Examination of oversight hearings demonstrates CNS commitment to actively seek private funding resources to offset public sector costs. The state commission administrative match is

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

now 50 percent compared to the original 33 percent. GAO staff (1997a) also acknowledge that the CNS has attempted to improve relations with the private sector by holding national summits, by providing potential corporate sponsors with portfolios of projects to spark interest, and by providing fund-raising assistance to local programs (p. 8). In its reference manual for commission and executive directors and members, CNS staff strongly urge state commissions to consider sustainability as a key commission goal by finding ways to leverage federal, state, and private-sector funds to enhance local program capacity (Aguirre International 1997b, sec. 3, 14).

Bridging Race and Class

Although race and class mixing are not formal goals of AmeriCorps, they have been designed into many AmeriCorps programs.⁵ CNS data reported in March 1995 demonstrate that corps members are a relatively diverse group of individuals in terms of age, ethnicity, education, and income level. In its first year of service, 47 percent of corps members were Caucasian, 31 percent African American, 14 percent Hispanic, and the remaining 8 percent "other." Slightly over one-half of corps members came from middle-class families (median household income of \$28,156); over one-half fell within the ages of twenty-one and twenty-nine; over 60 percent had either a high-school diploma (27 percent) or an associate's degree or some college (34 percent); and 28 percent of corps members had either a bachelor's or a graduate degree (Corporation for National Service, Office of Evaluation 1995).

Van Til and Gallup (1997), relying on reports from focus groups, found that AmeriCorps produced successful multicultural experiences. In addition to focus group results, they report that their survey question that asked whether national service "brings together people from different backgrounds" achieved better than 90 percent agreement from respondents of all genders, races, ages, and incomes (p. 13).

The evidence reported by Van Til and Gallup does not demonstrate the breadth or quality of race and income-mixing experiences. Nor does it adequately demonstrate the demands placed on program staff to build diversity into the program (Waldman 1995; Bates 1996). Changed attitudes toward diversity may occur spontaneously, but it would be naïve to expect this to be the norm. As Bates (1996) points out, AmeriCorps (unlike the military that can rely on coercion), must rely on persuasion to induce individuals of different populations to work together (p. 39).

⁵AmeriCorps programs are clearly not uniform with respect to their efforts to emphasize diversity. Van Til and Gallup (1997), for example, note that Youth-Build, a geographically dispersed program funded directly by CNS, was largely minority, both in terms of participants and clients. Homogeneous programs of this type, however, appear to be the exception rather than the rule.

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

Furthermore, some experiences are no doubt less transforming than those we have reported and may in fact reinforce race and class differences. Waldman's (1995) report of the politics surrounding the Summer of Service in 1993, a run-up to AmeriCorps, supports this cautionary note as do findings from one study of AmeriCorps' potential to change diversity attitudes (Tschirhart 1997). Tschirhart found that simply exposing individuals to members of other racial groups and persons of different ages is unlikely to result in significantly more "embracing" or "valuing" of diversity. Her findings suggest that deliberately changing the proportion of minority members to achieve a more balanced work force is unlikely, at least in the short term, to positively change diversity attitudes.

This accords with education research that suggests that merely sharing classroom space with students of different backgrounds does not result in attitude changes among students; attitude change occurs only when these same students actively collaborate on projects (Bates 1996, 39). Bates also cites a study of VISTA volunteers who reported having a more positive attitude toward persons of different racial backgrounds as a result of shared service experiences, but less positive feelings among volunteers toward class differences.

DISCUSSION

Our review of AmeriCorps' goals and the extent to which it is reaching those goals suggests that important instrumental and normative issues about AmeriCorps remain unsettled. We frame the following discussion in terms of these issues.

Instrumental Issues

Instrumental issues about national service emerge from the implementation process. It is not surprising that evaluation findings about AmeriCorps' achievements of its goals are inconclusive, given AmeriCorps' implementation history. In the five years of its existence, the AmeriCorps program has tended to move frequently across symbolic, political, and experimental implementation processes, making it difficult to set uniform performance standards. Furthermore, as Matland's model illustrates, interpreting evaluation findings about AmeriCorps' outcomes proves problematic because different implementation processes yield different ways to think about standards for success.

From a political implementation perspective, simplifying the Swiss Army knife nature of AmeriCorps by making "satisfying

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

unmet social needs” AmeriCorps’ primary goal has proven to be a successful way for proponents to demonstrate measurable achievement of the statute’s mandated goals. Policy analysts have noted the value of setting priorities when faced with potentially conflicting goals (Provan and Milward 1995; Smith 1995). Annual accomplishment reports demonstrate concrete results that even opponents of the policy are unable to dispute.

Experimental implementation, however, with its emphasis on learning as the standard for success (not measurable performance standards), suggests that a Swiss Army knife approach to achieving national service goals offers the best way to think about the achievement of national service goals over the long term. But while decentralized programs seem to fit best with experimental implementation processes, the highly politicized nature of national service policy undermines the benefits of learning through experimentation that this type of implementation process offers. The potential for learning suffers as multijurisdictional players act strategically to achieve their own goals (which may or may not coincide with national goals).

The dynamic movement across different types of implementation processes as actors manipulate policy ambiguity to their advantage has trade-offs for achieving AmeriCorps’ goals. The trade-offs inherent in experimental implementation are between experiential learning, innovation, and community ownership and lack of accountability at the macro level. Some of AmeriCorps’ problems lie in the inability of CNS staff to adequately monitor local programs and effectively assess service outcomes. This “leakage of accountability” (Milward 1996) exacerbates the problems inherent in a Swiss Army knife policy approach to national service. Yet the Swiss-Army knife nature of the program also has yielded a rich environment for experiential learning at all levels of the policy implementation process.

The trade-offs inherent in political implementation, on the other hand, are between achievement of concrete results through monitoring corps member activities and the risk of forcing local programs into an “artificially constrained form” with the likely consequence of “superficial compliance efforts from local implementers” (Matland 1995, 167). Furthermore, the monitoring required for CNS to enforce compliance to high statutory performance standards is costly, especially when it comes to AmeriCorps’ other, more ambiguous goals such as enhancing a civic ethic and developing corps members. The problem lies in determining the extent to which the benefits of accountability outweigh the costs of monitoring.

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

Normative Issues

The normative issues raised by the AmeriCorps program are at least as complex as those raised by the implementation process. In a liberal democracy, government intervention in an otherwise private domain must be adequately justified. Proponents of AmeriCorps argue that decentralized national service programs provide services that the private sector cannot provide and do so more effectively than public-sector agencies can (Moskos 1988). But as Bates (1996, 34) points out, conservatives consistently argue that private-sector volunteerism needs no help from government.

Another provocative normative issue raised by the national service debate is where national service fits into the larger questions of democratic governance and the prospects for an emerging common public philosophy. The strongest argument for a national service program like AmeriCorps may not rest in the instrumental outcomes such as “getting things done,” effectively meeting societal needs, or producing psychological benefits such as increased self-esteem or a sense of purpose among those who serve, however important these outcomes may be. The strongest argument for AmeriCorps may rest in its symbolic and sociological effects.

Service has the potential to build networks of relationships among individuals, linking them to the larger community. The value of service, like compassion, lies in its potential to set “in motion a series of relationships that spreads throughout the entire society” (Wuthnow 1991, 300). Like compassion, the value of service may rest in the *intrinsic* nature of the act itself. From an intrinsic-value perspective, service also may encourage the development of a common public philosophy that strikes a balance between liberalism’s focus on individual rights, communitarianism’s focus on community obligations, and republicanism’s (Sandel 1996) focus on civic education and the inculcation of values.

CONCLUSION

In light of the instrumental and normative faces of national service, it is appropriate to conclude with some questions. Does AmeriCorps achieve its goals or are the results claimed for it simply wishful thinking, a combination of a desired substitute for a decline in federal intervention in social problems and beliefs about the appropriateness rather than the efficacy of voluntary action? Is AmeriCorps’ value primarily symbolic, where the servers become models of a different, higher ethic of self-sacrifice

An Assessment of AmeriCorps

and commitment to community? Neither of these questions have easy answers, if answers exist at all. The merit of the questions is in the extent to which they stimulate reconsideration of program design issues and greater deliberation about the meaning of national service for democratic self-governance. Combined with additional fine-grained survey and field research on the overall individual and community effects of AmeriCorps, seeking answers to these questions can only improve the quality of the current national service debate and may enhance service outcomes.

The review of evidence of AmeriCorps' achievement of its goals suggests a confusing mixture of outcomes. Annual accomplishment surveys of member programs identify significant achievement nationally in satisfying unmet social needs. Selective cost-benefit analyses provide similarly favorable results, with benefits exceeding costs by minimums of 2 to 1. Questions about the rigor and robustness of accumulated evidence and ideological differences surrounding the efficacy of stipended service act as a counterbalance to these positive results. When the competing evidence and perspectives are weighed together, it is clear that further data is needed before an overall judgment about AmeriCorps can be made.

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