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AmeriCorps in the Field

Implementation of the National and Community Service Trust Act in Nine Study States

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CONTENTS

TABLES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of Public/Private Ventures' 30-month study of the implementation of AmeriCorps, the signature program of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. Supported by The Ford Foundation, the study's central emphasis was to examine the role of states in implementing the new AmeriCorps program, a role the 1993 legislation expanded markedly from the 1990 legislation it replaced.

To gain that understanding, the study addressed three questions: What role did states—and in particular the newly mandated state Commissions—play in implementing AmeriCorps? What kinds of service resulted from their efforts and from their interactions with the federal-level Corporation for National Service? What lessons for policy and legislation does the experience suggest?

We developed answers to those questions as a result of documenting the experience of nine study states: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Washington and West Virginia.

We visited each of these states four times, interviewing governor's staff, state Commission staff, state Commissioners, and staff from other state agencies. We also examined a random sample of 20 AmeriCorps programs within our nine states, documenting their institutional structure, their participants, the kinds of service they offered and the ways they sought to implement service. In addition, we attended conferences and other formal sessions sponsored by the Corporation for National Service, and interviewed Corporation staff as well as other policy experts knowledgeable about service.

Our findings and conclusions address three main topics: the role of states; the federal-state relationship; and programs and participants.

THE FEDERAL-STATE PARTNERSHIP

The 1993 legislation measurably strengthened the role of states, mandating the establishment of Commissions and specifying a range of duties for them. At the same time, it established a new Corporation for National Service, which was to launch the new AmeriCorps program, provide it with a national identity, and coordinate other federally funded service programs.

The Corporation's role was consistently energetic, and focused on state-level activities and decisions, and on individual AmeriCorps programs. This strong and activist role was critical to AmeriCorps' success in meeting the goals and timetables established in the legislation and by the Corporation itself.

The Corporation set the objectives, articulating with considerable detail its desired outcomes, and, most of all, it devised and oversaw a challenging implementation timetable. The latter, especially during the first year, left states, and particularly the newly appointed Commissioners, with little opportunity to go through the often lengthy and inefficient processes that typify consensus-building and decision-making in new organizations.

The Corporation also took an active role in the selection, and often the refinement, of individual programs, and at times in issues pertaining to the staffing of Commissions. Its energetic prosecution of all these tasks was carried out by staff who were highly intelligent and extremely dedicated—but also typically young and frequently criticized by the states for their inexperience. In their determination to make AmeriCorps succeed, they were often impatient with or ignorant of the difficulties state officials faced in building a "state-owned" set of policies and programs, and too inexperienced to provide timely assistance and guidance to states. There also was high turnover in Corporation program officer assignments, so that few states in our study group established relationships with Corporation staff that had much continuity.

The end effect of the Corporation's actions was to limit the state role, and in some respects to slow the capacity and motivation of states to widen that role. State staff were hard-pressed to respond to the stream of requirements imposed on them by the legislation and the Corporation. State Commissions had a potentially important say in the selection of candidate programs, but came to recognize that the Corporation had, and would exercise, final say. Commissions had substantial but not sole or final say in even the disposition of their own formula funds.

The Corporation's activism did result in stress and often confusion at the state level. Yet that activism, the rapid implementation timetable, and the Corporation's emphasis on quality spurred progress and results that a more passive role—one that viewed the states as laboratories for experimentation, with control over their pace and decisions—would not have produced. The Corporation raised the stakes for states. It chose not to establish and enforce minimum acceptable standards for programs, but instead to set expectations high and to push states in their selections to meet them. It prodded states to look more closely at their program choices and make those choices with an eye toward quality and tangible outcomes. We concluded that the overall quality of service programs in AmeriCorps would have been lower absent the steady pressure the Corporation applied.

THE ROLE OF STATES

The legislation was meant to ensure a strong role for states, and that role was further amplified in regulations and other guidelines promulgated by the Corporation for National Service. However, we conclude that the role states played in shaping service policy fell short of the broad expectations set for it. States were to establish Commissions that would be active foci of civic commitment to service, would shape an agenda of service, would select programs to receive federal funding, would support and monitor programs, and would augment the resources and political capital dedicated to service activities. Commissioners to be appointed in each state were envisioned as central to this process.

In fact, however, the Commissioners had only limited inclination or capacity to assume such roles. Usually screened if not selected by governors' staffs, Commissioners often had only limited knowledge or experience with service issues and programs. Volunteers themselves, they were heavily challenged by an extraordinarily fast-paced start-up. While there were individual

Commissioners who got deeply involved, most deferred to the Commission's professional staff. It was the staff who interpreted rules, set agendas, narrowed and presented choices for decision-making by Commissioners, developed state service plans—and thus, in fact, did most of the service policymaking in states.

By the second year, Commissioners in our nine study states had, for the most part, settled into roles that were in many ways useful, but more characteristic of those in a typical staff-driven organization than the governance role envisioned in the legislation. They ratified choices presented to them by staff; they helped advocate on behalf of service programs; they sometimes served as buffers between Commission staff and potentially distorting or inappropriate political influences; they sometimes visited individual programs; and they occasionally made efforts to identify sources of additional funding.

Given the ambitious implementation goals and the fast pace of the timetables established by the legislation and the Corporation, the relative inexperience of the Commissioners, the fact that they are volunteers, and the relatively small sums of money for which they have responsibility, this level of staff-driven activity and decision-making is not surprising—nor does it necessarily imply anything negative about the quality of decisions or service programming. However, it does mean that the vision of an active, volunteer citizen body shaping, overseeing and promoting a service ethic throughout the state—a role provided for in the legislation and consistently espoused by the Corporation—did not occur. National and community service from the start was less a citizen-led movement than a funded federal program driven by a paid professional staff.

Thus, what differentiated states in their behavior and performance around service, we conclude, was the quality and energy of their staffs, and the maturity and quality of service activities that had existed prior to the beginning of AmeriCorps. The executive directors, in particular, were pivotal in setting the pace, the direction and the standards for AmeriCorps programs in states. In those states where strong leadership in that position combined with a strong preexisting "infrastructure"—i.e., a mix of knowledgeable organizations, individuals and programs—AmeriCorps, and service in general, seemed to flourish.

Was this staff-driven governance and decision-making inevitable? To some extent it was, since this is the most efficient way to accomplish specific objectives on a fast timetable, as the legislation in good part required. But this result was also shaped by the role the Corporation for National Service and its staff played, and by the political controversy surrounding national service.

AMERICORPS PROGRAMS AND PARTICIPANTS

We examined a randomly selected group of 20 AmeriCorps programs in the nine study states for their consistency with the goals and regulations of AmeriCorps; their relationship to their parent organizations; their specific aims and operations; their recruitment practices; the way and degree to which they sought to incorporate some notion of "service" that would differentiate them from a typical human service or work experience program; and any indications about their success.

The programs we studied were highly consistent with AmeriCorps aims. They were for the most part well-conceived and capably managed; AmeriCorps participants performed work of clear value, addressing identified needs in their communities. Overall, the participants were diverse in terms of gender and ethnic origin. There was no evidence in the programs we examined of politically questionable activity.

The programs of course varied in quality and in the degree to which, in our view, they constituted "service" programs. We determined that about a fourth of the programs in our sample were of superior quality in terms of their success in espousing and putting into practice a well-defined concept of service. At the other end of the scale, in about a fourth of the programs, participants were performing useful work to be sure, but work that was largely indistinguishable from that in traditional work experience programs. The remainder fell somewhere in the middle, combining elements of well-conceived service activities with typical work experience.

Besides the programs themselves, we reviewed the characteristics of AmeriCorps participants in the 20 programs, in the nine study states and nationally, using data furnished by the programs and by the Corporation itself. Although these data provide no more than a broad descriptive picture, they do suggest that participants nationally and within the study states were broadly diverse in terms of gender and race (though typically young, as might be expected); that they tended to be well-educated (23% are college graduates, while another 41% have at least some college education) though more than a third were high school graduates or less; and that they represented a cross-section of income levels. AmeriCorps was able to attract reasonable numbers of minorities and people of low income.

We also concluded that an important aspect of AmeriCorps programs was that they permitted local organizations to address needs and problems in ways that, typically, categorical programs do not permit or make difficult to carry out. AmeriCorps participant "slots" were thus a flexible resource that human service organizations and other agencies could utilize to provide different services, or provide services to different populations, than they otherwise would have been able to. Creative organizations in our study sample made good use of this opportunity.

PUBLIC POLICY AND NATIONAL SERVICE

The success of AmeriCorps during its first two years, in the quality of programs, diversity of participants and speed of implementation—all meeting requirements set forth in the legislation—is, in our view, closely related to the Corporation's decision to control implementation, rather than to accord to states the broad role and discretion envisioned in the legislation.

This is not to say that states, on their own, would not have ultimately achieved the same levels of quality and diversity—it is just quite unlikely that those levels would have been reached so rapidly. Nor is it clear what other effects on long-term state level "buy-in" and the development of commitment and support for service resulted from the early, strong federal leadership and activism. We cannot tell what would have happened otherwise.

The strong federal oversight also resulted from the continuing political debate in the U.S. about the desirability of community and national service as embodied in AmeriCorps. That debate helped to shape the Corporation's energetic role in ensuring that AmeriCorps programs of high quality were quickly implemented—even if that role limited the discretion and decision-making the legislation intended states to have. Had the timetables and goals of the legislation not been met, or if serious questions about program quality arose, it would have substantially strengthened the case of AmeriCorps' critics and endangered the program. The Corporation thus acted in response both to its legislative mandates and to political concerns, concerns that arise from deeper, enduring issues implicit in the concept of national service.

Two in particular are central. The first concerns the full-time, stipended participant. Most observers agree that such "slots" capture an essential facet of the service ideal: the individual (usually young) who wishes to make a full-time commitment, at some personal sacrifice, to serving and meeting some real need—but who needs basic living support in order to do so. Funding such slots creates the framework for a cadre of individuals whose contributions and effort measurably transcend intermittent volunteering or low-paid, part-time work in a human service setting. If those "slots" are publicly funded, it demonstrates support for an ideal of service, a commitment on the part of government, and, if those "slots" are federally funded, this approaches the idea of "national service."

However, regardless of its service connotations, the full-time, publicly funded slot is inevitably a form of work experience, invariably raising questions about whether the work is genuinely needed, whether it displaces "true" volunteers with paid volunteers, or whether the participants might be drawn into partisan activity. The full-time, stipended slot is irreducibly costly, and the cost issues can be readily exacerbated—as they were in AmeriCorps—by setting the stipend near the minimum wage, providing health benefits, and offering tuition benefits for a completed tour of duty.

The AmeriCorps history demonstrates the amount of disagreement that support for full-time, stipended participants engenders, how divisive the issue can become, and how difficult it is to resolve either in terms of service or in terms of the work itself. To be sure, the disputatious nature of the debate was partly caused by broader partisanship. But in the end, the inherent nature of public financing of full-time, stipended service work invites strong disagreement.

The second key divisive issue implicit in "national service" is the level of government that funds and manages it. In the case of AmeriCorps, the federal role in both arenas was strong and visible. States functioned capably enough as implementers, but state Commissioners, who were intended to provide leadership and direction for service, took little part in the governance of AmeriCorps or other service programs. Broader expectations for "the state role" were largely unrealized.

In a time when "big government" is publicly disavowed by leaders of both major parties, and across the political spectrum, the lack of balance between federal and state levels is bound to remain a divisive issue for AmeriCorps. There will be competing demands on the federal level: on the one hand, to take steps to ensure high-quality implementation; on the other, to "devolve" responsibility and keep to a limited role. States, and particularly Commissioners, will continue to face the challenge of moving beyond reactive compliance roles and assuming real leadership responsibilities for their service efforts, a process that is lengthy and idiosyncratic, and that states must have the autonomy and time to accomplish on their own.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A majority of Americans continue to believe that providing service is both a fundamental aspect of good citizenship and an effective way to accomplish work that meets critical community needs. AmeriCorps' early success in providing productive and high-quality opportunities for service, and establishing a framework for implementation, seems useful to build on and improve. In that spirit, and based on the data and findings of this study, we make the following recommendations, directed to three distinct audiences: the Corporation, the states and the Congress.

Recommendations to the Corporation for National Service

We recommend that the Corporation redefine the responsibilities for service between the federal and state levels of government, by taking the following three steps:

1. Substantially increase the responsibilities of state Commissions for all Corporation-funded programs. Under the current arrangement, Commissions have only limited say in many of the federally funded service programs that operate within their states. In particular, the previous ACTION programs (VISTA and Senior Corps) are primarily managed by the federal government. Shifting those responsibilities downward would add to the scale of the state effort. This would, of course, require more coordination within the Corporation's organizational structure—particularly, again, regarding AmeriCorps and the ACTION programs. We also think that the quality standards that thus far have been applied with good effect to AmeriCorps would strengthen the VISTA and senior programs as well.

2. Limit its own role in program selection and refinement. The Corporation's greatest strength has been in articulating the importance of quality standards and pressing states to use high standards in selecting and supporting programs. The Corporation has been less successful in allowing states full responsibility for their program selections. Through the practice of reexamining state program selections and pressing for refinements even after approving choices, the Corporation has undercut states' own responsibilities. A more appropriate role, we suggest, is for the Corporation to be vigorous and insistent on the quality issue, explicit and timely regarding issues of compliance standards and monitoring, and relatively hands-off on actual selection and negotiation regarding individual programs.

3. Establish and maintain clear and realistic expectations for state Commissioners. Commissioners now are being encouraged to assume broad leadership roles, yet in our study states their activities were generally more limited: representing some of the appropriate constituencies (service organizations, public agencies, volunteer organizations, etc.), ratifying program choices presented by their staffs, and serving as advocates for service. This represents a scale of commitment most Commissioners are willing to fulfill, and

one that, well carried out, could be an important base for further strengthening their role over time.

Besides these balancing steps, we also recommend a continued push toward cost-sharing, not just to ease the federal support burden over time, but also to formalize and augment the state commitment to service. Rather than asking states to provide any funds for stipends, we would suggest an arrangement where states must provide needed administrative support funds for all stipended service participants as a condition for receiving federal service funding. Variations might include forward funding commitments (of two to three years) on the part of states, state commitments to pay for specific program elements, and strong provisions requiring that a fraction of needed funding come from the private and/or philanthropic sector.

Recommendations to the States

While the Corporation should continue its efforts to rebalance responsibilities, we also recommend that states take greater initiative in leadership responsibility for service programs. Although the Corporation will continue to play a visible role in the federal-state partnership and will in many ways influence state actions, there are clear opportunities for a stronger state role that should be acted on.

States can take independent steps to strengthen representation and membership on Commissions; begin connecting and integrating service and volunteer programs more completely; establish fundraising and cost-sharing goals and carry them out; and monitor and assess their own programs more extensively. In addition, states can empower their Commissions in more far-reaching ways. Several states, for instance, have considered incorporating their Commissions as separate nonprofit organizations with expanded service and voluntarism agendas.

Taking the initiative through such actions as these will, at times, create tensions and disagreement over the nature of the federal-state role. On balance, though, that process will probably lead to strengthened and improved contributions at both levels. Our judgment is that the federal role can be usefully modified to promote leadership on the part of states, but that leadership will happen only if states move energetically to make the most of those opportunities.

Recommendations to the Congress

We urge Congress, in considering reauthorization or new legislation regarding national service, to continue the active federal role. In particular, we do not believe that a pure block-granting approach is necessary or appropriate. The federal role in setting priority areas for service, seeking to establish and maintain quality standards, highlighting promising or effective service programs, assuring compliance with fiscal and other standards, and providing funding directly to pilot or demonstration efforts and to programs whose scope may be national or regional, are all important functions. With regard to AmeriCorps, these roles were largely successful and can be faulted only for having limited the development of state autonomy. That is a balance issue that can, we think, be successfully addressed if it is carefully provided for in new legislation.

One specific change we recommend concerns formula and competitive funding arrangements. The intent of the 1993 legislation was to recognize state autonomy by establishing a distinct state formula funding stream; in practice, the distinction was lost, and formula and competitive funds were treated somewhat interchangeably, thus limiting state autonomy. A change that would increase the fraction of AmeriCorps' funding directly under the control of states, and permit greater flexibility in decisions about competitive funding, would encourage a stronger state role.

Finally, on a broader scale, the early history of the implementation of AmeriCorps is representative of the difficulties and challenges involved in developing a truly decentralized operation and the need to develop legislative priorities and timetables accordingly. The 1993 legislation created a significant conflict between institutional goals (development of state leadership through establishment of strong Commissions) and performance goals (rapid implementation of high-quality programs). That conflict was resolved at a cost to the first goal.

New legislative initiatives need to reflect the reality that devolution is not automatic and that development of state capacity and leadership in a relatively young field, such as service, will take time and may slow the achievement of performance objectives. For any reauthorized or new legislation, we recommend that there be adequate provision of both time and resources for the careful and complete development of governance and leadership mechanisms at the state level. The federal partner—in this case, the Corporation for National Service—should be directed to promote that development, and not be compelled—as in many ways it was—to choose between that aim and the achievement of the legislation's programmatic objectives and implementation timetable.

I. INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings and conclusions from a 30-month study of the implementation of AmeriCorps, the signature component of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. The report draws on extensive fieldwork conducted in nine of the 48 states that adopted the program in 1994.

The study of AmeriCorps was undertaken by Public/Private Ventures, with the sponsorship of The Ford Foundation, to assess the effectiveness of the 1993 Act in creating or expanding national service activities in the United States, with particular focus on the role states play in that process. That legislation had strengthened the modest state role that had been established by prior legislation in 1990.

P/PV's earlier study, *Launching AmeriCorps*, concentrated on the start-up phase of the new AmeriCorps initiative, particularly recording how states had to respond swiftly and intensively to a demanding implementation schedule, the changes from prior administrative arrangements, the role assumed by the new Corporation for National Service, and the degree to which the Corporation and states had succeeded in getting new AmeriCorps programs under way. This report draws on that study, as well as on our additional fieldwork, to provide a focused picture of AmeriCorps implementation in the nine study states, and the significance of that process for the larger topic of national service.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The key questions addressed in the study are:

- Have the states played the role envisioned for them? How important a contribution have they made to the development of service, and in what ways?
- What programs have resulted from this process, which organizations have sponsored the programs, who has participated, and what needs have been addressed?
- How coherent and effective has the federal-state relationship proven to be?

It is important to note that this study is <u>not</u> an evaluation of AmeriCorps. We do not present precise measures of the effectiveness of the overall federal-state framework created to implement AmeriCorps, measure the impact of AmeriCorps programs, nor provide evidence of whether these programs, or service in general, are cost-beneficial.

The study's major point of view is that of the states, and how they coped with the start-up and implementation of the new AmeriCorps program. However, even this focus would have been overly broad without further refinement. Prior to AmeriCorps, there were already a range of service programs that states funded or operated, as well as ACTION programs (including VISTA and three senior programs) that were operated within states, which in many cases involved preexisting and idiosyncratic issues that would not help us illuminate the key questions posed above.

Thus, rather than dealing with the full range of service programs, we concentrated on the implementation of state-funded AmeriCorps programs. We did so because these programs (the formula-funded and competitively funded state programs) embodied two key features of the new legislation: programs for which the states were to have principle responsibility, and programs that embodied the 1993 legislation's emphasis on stipended service, mostly but not exclusively involving young people in a variety of human service and environmental settings. In so doing, we did not entirely ignore other components of the 1993 legislation or other aspects of service and voluntarism. Where they pertain to the central subject we are seeking to elucidate, we have documented the connection, and sought to explain the importance of the connection.

For example, we spent time learning how the AmeriCorps National Direct programs and the K-12 Learn-and-Serve programs were planned and funded. Similarly, we sought to understand how the former ACTION programs (which were administered state-by-state, but through a federal agency) were incorporated into the new AmeriCorps arrangements. While our work did not produce exhaustive information about these issues, the report does discuss how they affect the role of the service Commissions in the states on which we focus.

The main methodology we employed in the research is qualitative. It draws primarily on five sources of information:

- Fieldwork in nine study states, which took place during their implementation of AmeriCorps, from formation of Commissions to conducting outreach and proposal selection, through start-up of programs. Each state was visited four times by two-person research teams, who interviewed Commission directors, other key staff, Commissioners, AmeriCorps members[1] and other individuals in each state who are involved in service in general and with AmeriCorps in particular.

- Interviews with staff of the Corporation for National Service, Congressional staff, and other national figures with knowledge of the legislation and of AmeriCorps.

- A review of documents, regulations, proposals and other written materials that form part of the record of AmeriCorps. These include federal documents issued by the Corporation, as well as such state and local documents as public notices, Commission minutes, RFPs, state plans, program descriptions and applications.

- An examination of 20 programs, randomly selected from within our study states, that permitted us to look more closely at the organization, management and nature of participation in state-run AmeriCorps programs.

[1] This is the term used by the Corporation for participants in AmeriCorps programs; in our study, we use "AmeriCorps members" and "participants" interchangeably.

- National and, where available, state data regarding AmeriCorps programs and participants.

Based on our analysis of these sources of information, we developed our findings and conclusions.

Our key sources of information were nine states that we selected for the study on the basis of information developed through review of earlier state plans and applications; a survey of state activity we conducted in Fall 1993; consultation with Corporation staff and staff of other organizations that had contact with or knowledge of states; and discussions with state officials themselves.

Our primary criterion for selecting states was their clear intention of responding with energy and seriousness to the mandate of the new legislation. In addition, we identified a group of states that reflected a range of sophistication about service when we selected them: on the one hand, states that had only limited prior service involvement; on the other, states that had supported numerous service programs or had responded energetically to the earlier 1990 National and Community Service Act.

The nine states chosen for the study are California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Washington and West Virginia.

BACKGROUND: THE 1993 LEGISLATION

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, which considerably modified legislation that had been passed in 1990, was designed to reflect the newly installed Clinton Administration's emphasis on service, especially by young people. A prominent feature of the legislation was the connection between service opportunities and postprogram education benefits, linking the willingness to serve with chances to further one's education.

The Act includes a number of key features:

- <u>The establishment of a Corporation for National Service</u>. The Act consolidated funding streams that had been established under the 1990 National and Community Service Act, and merged the Commission for National and Community Service (the small federal entity that had been formed under the 1990 legislation) and ACTION (which ran VISTA, a long-standing, stipended volunteer program, and a collection of senior service volunteer programs) into a new Corporation for National Service.

- <u>A prominent state role</u>. Moving beyond the largely unstructured approach permitted in the 1990 Act, the 1993 legislation charged each state with developing an apparatus to promote wider participation in service planning and program decisions. Each governor was charged with creating a state Commission that was to shape and oversee the state's service initiative. The Commission would be bipartisan and inclusive, and represent a range of viewpoints about service programs and participants. Most important, the legislation provided funding to support states as they established and operated their Commissions.

- A rearrangement of funding. The former ACTION programs were now funded through the new Corporation, as were service-learning and service programs at the K-12 and higher education levels, federal support for the latter having been formalized in the 1990 Act. In addition, the new AmeriCorps initiative was funded through separate allotments for National Direct programs (national organizations and federal agencies that could be funded directly by the Corporation), the state programs (for which distinct formulas and competitive allotments were set up), and a variety of small demonstration streams (special governors' grants, grants for special programs for the disabled, etc.).

- Stipends for participants. The Act provided a minimum living allowance of $7,662 per year for full-time AmeriCorps participants, while the maximum allowable stipend was set at $15,324. (These figures were to be adjusted annually to reflect changes in the cost of living.) In no case would the Corporation provide more than 85 percent of the minimum cost ($6,513 in Year One). All programs had to provide some matching funds to pay the stipend.

- Funding for education awards. The 1993 Act was envisioned from the start as both an education-financing and service initiative. Education awards of $4,725 were made available to individuals who served in an AmeriCorps program full time for a year (1,700 hours of service) or part time for the equivalent of a full-time year. These awards were to be provided separately through the National Service Trust Fund.

- An emphasis on "getting things done." The legislation identified the four broad areas that AmeriCorps projects were to address—education, human needs, public safety and the environment—and charged the Corporation with further defining priorities within those areas.

The legislation authorized AmeriCorps for three years and left to the new Corporation the task of developing regulations for the Act and deciding on the timetable for its implementation.

POLITICS AND IMPLEMENTATION

The new AmeriCorps program enjoyed no honeymoon period. It had sparked an unexpectedly partisan debate in Congress and passed in Summer 1993 with narrow bipartisan support.[2] Rather than in an environment of tolerance, the new program started off with lingering and vocally expressed concerns about the very idea of federal support for service, about the institution of a new federal entity to administer it, and about the potential costs of the new program.

[2] The final vote in the House was 275 to 152, with 248 Democrats, 26 Republicans and 1 independent supporting the measure. In the Senate, the vote was 57 to 40, with 51 Democrats and 6 Republicans voting in favor.

Early on (in late 1993), staff of the newly formed Corporation for National Service adopted goals for program start-up and numbers of enrolled participants geared to establishing a record of success that would not only ultimately justify reauthorization of AmeriCorps but also provide support for Congressional appropriation decisions in the program's second year. Reaching these goals meant that regulation-writing and review, grant-making and program start-up had to take place on the most optimistic timetable, with minimal slippage. As a result, states throughout 1994 were rushed to get their AmeriCorps administrative structures in place and to complete the required tasks for accessing AmeriCorps funding. They had little opportunity to actively develop statewide service strategies.

The Corporation also chose to be an exceptionally active partner in the implementation of AmeriCorps. While it recognized and supported the role of states in planning and carrying out their responsibilities, the Corporation had its own vision of service. It wanted to advance AmeriCorps as a "national" program—one that would meet high standards that the Corporation put considerable effort into developing and promulgating. The Corporation pressed states to incorporate these quality standards and, in so doing, created a complicated environment for implementation, in which new issues arose and often were resolved in evolutionary fashion, making it difficult for states to keep to the ambitious timetable that the Corporation itself had established.

These two basic decisions—the Corporation's stringent implementation timetable and its "strong partner" role—resulted during 1994, the first year of implementation, in the states being somewhat reactive, as they responded to the demands of the timetable and the Corporation's insistence on close review of state-approved programs prior to their being funded. The role of state Commissioners, envisioned as a pivotal part of the state service apparatus, was most adversely affected. For the most part, their role was limited and passive.

It was Commissions' professional staff that set the state agendas, interpreted the technical requirements of the new law, and saw to the complexities of getting a new program off the ground in foreshortened time. In that pressured environment, states responded quite capably; within a year, despite the aura of confusion and disorganization that surrounds any start-up effort, they had selected programs and had some under way.

The early results in Washington seemed to justify the Corporation's strategy. Second-year (FY 1995) appropriation levels for the new AmeriCorps initiative actually exceeded the targeted amounts. But the November 1994 elections, in which Republicans won control of both houses of Congress, swiftly and negatively changed the ground rules. Within months, the House had voted to cut almost three-fourths of AmeriCorps funding—which would have essentially ended the program—and preliminary budgets for FY 1996 proposed to "zero out" (i.e., defund) AmeriCorps altogether. A compromise funding level took months to reach: during this period, a series of temporary spending bills, Presidential vetoes and short-term shutdowns of the federal government combined to heighten uncertainties about the future of AmeriCorps and keep federal and state staffs from making commitments of funding to individual programs.

Throughout this period, the Corporation, besides its normal administrative and implementation tasks, endured two virtually complete shutdowns while still working to keep funds flowing to the states, and underwent a change in executive leadership (the departure of Eli Segal, who was replaced by former Pennsylvania Senator Harris Wofford, long a service proponent). Eventually, a legislative compromise was reached in February 1996, five months after the fiscal year had begun.

To an unusual degree, then, large political disputes (in which, it should be noted, the AmeriCorps program itself had a mostly symbolic part to play) continually affected implementation in the field.[3] State Commissions, staff and Commissioners alike, rushed through a hectic first year by a politically accelerated timetable, watched with concern as AmeriCorps faced a succession of threats, and found themselves reacting to short-term emergencies and the prospect that funding for the programs they had devoted time and effort to identifying and selecting might be curtailed or eliminated altogether. The ability of these Commissions to advance the cause of service was, as we discuss in the pages that follow, clearly affected. And during this period, governors' offices in the study states were in some cases reluctant to expend resources, financial or political, on behalf of a program so obviously fixed in partisan cross-hairs.

How the process unfolded, the roles played by states, Commissions and the Corporation, and the programs that were produced as a result, are the subject of the remainder of this report. Chapter II describes how states managed in an environment that went from haste to uncertainty. Chapter III discusses AmeriCorps programs and participants, and Chapter IV examines the dynamics between the states and the Corporation. Chapter V presents our conclusions and recommendations.

[3] The AmeriCorps effort was characterized by critics as a typical failed "Great Society" program, and on that account found its way onto the list of programs slated for elimination. The fact that the President had made clear his support for the program also made it a useful bargaining chip for Republicans in both the House and Senate.

II. PROMISE AND PRAGMATISM: THE ROLE OF STATES

A pivotal feature of the 1993 service legislation is its emphasis on states as the principal institutional mechanism for implementing AmeriCorps. In this chapter, we assess their response and their successes.

WHY STATES

The linked decisions to administer service programs at the state level and to establish Commissions for that purpose in good part reflected the experience of the 1990 National and Community Service Act. That legislation had relied on agencies at the state level to serve as administrative units, but had left open the question of which state agencies. State responses varied. In some, state education agencies (SEAs) became the designated "lead agency" for all funding; in others, SEAs handled service-learning funds, and other agencies (state departments of environmental resources, governor's voluntarism offices, state service corps) handled lead agency roles for other funding, which frequently included making choices about the allocation of funds to programs.

These were highly ad hoc arrangements, which relied on agency staff who frequently had other duties[4] and thus neither viewed service programs as their first priority nor had strong familiarity with or interest in them. Such a response was in fact reasonable from the state vantage-point: the funds involved were small and seemed to warrant no more than a minimal response.

The framers of the 1993 legislation believed that strengthening the state role was essential. President Clinton, a vocal supporter of service, was himself a former governor with a strong commitment to the value of state direction and management of federally funded programs. In addition, it was felt that making states major actors would help blunt criticism of excessive federal involvement.

The 1993 Act sought to correct what were seen as deficiencies in the 1990 arrangement. While state specification of a lead agency was technically possible, the legislation called for (and regulations and staff at the Corporation for National Service strongly encouraged) each governor to create a state Commission, consisting of between 15 and 25 voting members, that would be bipartisan and inclusive, and represent a range of viewpoints about service programs and participants. The Commission was required to include certain categories of people: for example, someone with experience working with at-risk youth; someone experienced with volunteers who are senior citizens; the head of the state education agency; a representative of organized labor; and a person between the ages of 16 and 25 who is, or has been, a service participant or supervisor. In addition, each Commission would have full-time staff.

[4] A third of states surveyed in 1992 had a half-time equivalent or less dedicated to service program administration.

The state Commission was expected, in the words of the Corporation, "to steer but not row" the state's service initiative. It was to develop a three-year state service plan; provide technical assistance to local organizations in planning programs and applying for funds; administer a competitive process to select local programs to include in the state grant application; write the application to the Corporation; administer the grants; develop strategies for recruiting and placing participants; and coordinate its own efforts with the state education agency that applied for service-learning funding and with federally operated service programs, such as VISTA. Significantly, the legislation provided for funding to support states as they established and operated their Commissions.

Among our study states, the early response to the legislation was fairly uniform. An informal group, consisting of individuals (mostly staff of state agencies) began meeting late in 1993 and into early 1994 to decipher the new requirements, decide how they would be met, how to organize Commissions, how the efforts would be staffed, and who would take responsibility for taking needed first steps.[5] These early efforts were usually enthusiastic, and drew on state-level professionals and others within states who had a genuine interest in making the new AmeriCorps program succeed.

THE FIRST YEAR

The timetable for AmeriCorps implementation in the first year gave states few chances to achieve the broader goals for their Commissions that had been urged upon them. Program selection and start-up became almost exclusive concerns, and the formation of Commissions became either a rushed process or one that was overshadowed by efforts to meet the stringent deadlines the Corporation established.

Commissions were formed at variable rates. A few of our study states named Commissioners early in the process, but in one state, the first full Commission meeting did not take place until most programs had already been selected. In many of the study states, nomination and selection of Commissioners (a process that involved the governor's office in all cases) continued throughout Spring 1994.

As a result, in all our study states, professional staff assumed decisive control over the first-year program agendas, setting timetables and tasks for Commissioners and themselves. The role of Commissioners was variable though always limited. A few engaged actively in the program review progress, interviewing prospective grant recipient organizations and rating proposals. For the most part, though, their role consisted in ratifying the rankings and choices presented to them by staff and approving state plans that for the most part been framed and written with only limited involvement on their part.

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[5] The most immediate need was to apply to the Corporation for administrative funds, which required a statement of intent, usually produced by the governor's office. These grant funds in turn would support staff and administrative expenses for forming new Commissions and beginning the process of needs assessment, plan development and program selection.

The first year's experience was viewed largely as an anomaly, the byproduct of an implementation timetable that had permitted little organizational development and planning, and that had made Commissioners mostly inactive observers. Within our study states, both staff and Commissioners recognized the problem. By the end of 1994, most had begun holding retreats or Commission meetings in which their larger roles were to be shaped.[6] Their expectations seemed to be that with the first-year pressures in the past and programs in the field, more orderly development of roles and functions would take place.

Yet as states moved through into AmeriCorps' second year and beyond, they faced a turbulent political landscape at the federal level, marked by uncertainty about funding availability and a continuous (though less volatile than in the first year) recalibration of Corporation expectations. These states also responded to their unique internal challenges. The promise of service had to come to terms with pragmatism as the broader vision of AmeriCorps and the state Commissions was tempered by realities both external and internal.

THE UNCERTAIN SECOND YEAR

At the level of the states and their Commissions, Year Two activity reflected a shift from idealism to pragmatism as vision gave way to reality. States were confronted with the twin challenges of addressing the needs of local programs while responding to complex federal regulations. This occurred in an atmosphere that had swung from the Year One intensity bordering on chaos, to one of indecision as uncertainty about the availability of funds prevailed.

The chilling effect of Congressional wrangling over the federal budget was felt, to some degree, across all of the study states. Public and private funding needed to match federal AmeriCorps grants, and to build long-term support for service programs, grew less certain. The early negative press accounts of the national service budget debates prompted local funders to delay, decrease or eliminate their support entirely. In addition, some potential applicants chose not to apply for funding in Year Two simply because they believed it not worthwhile to invest the time to complete the proposal when there was no way of knowing whether the funds would be available.

Changes in the political climate in several of the states, including (late in 1994) the election of new governors and shifts from Democratic to Republican majorities in state legislatures, affected Commission operations. In one state, for example, the election of a Republican governor—a vocal critic of President Clinton—made for indifference to national service in the governor's office and delays in Commission appointments. The potential for greater disruption in that state was mitigated by the presence of a powerful Democratic state legislator who served on the Commission.

In a second state, the election of a Republican governor resulted in swift across-the-board firings of the Commission staff and the relocation of the Commission from the state's Office of

[6] The Corporation held a conference late in 1994 devoted exclusively to helping Commissioners think through and define their roles.

Volunteerism, located near the Governor's Office, to the state's Budget Office. The move reflected a decline in political support for service by the Governor's Office—the spatial distance suggests a philosophical distance absent just a year before—and suggested a shift in perspective about the nature of the Commission's roles and responsibilities.[7]

Six of the nine study states have also replaced their executive directors since Year One.[8] (The states where the changes occurred were, with one exception, states that had more recently begun to involve themselves significantly in service programming.) The reasons for the departures are varied: three of the executive directors moved on to pursue other professional opportunities, one was fired by the Commissioners, one was an acting executive director who was replaced, and one was ousted by a new governor. One characteristic, however, is shared by all six of their successors: extensive prior service experience did not appear to be a key qualification. In most cases, in fact, they had had no significant service experience prior to AmeriCorps. One of the new executive directors was a former Commission member, but she had originally been appointed to the Commission for largely political reasons, not because of a background in service. In the remaining five cases, service experience or philosophy was not a major factor in the selection process. Rather, other professional skills, such as nonprofit management and fiscal administration, took precedence. This fact again reflected the pragmatic state response to the changing context—the scarce funds and uncertain future—within which national service exists.

MANAGING AMERICORPS

Beginning in their second year, the study states were able to stabilize their staffing patterns through direct hires, staff shared with other departments and provided as part of the in-kind match,[9] and the services provided by young interns. Staff size is generally small, but directors

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[7] The Commission recovered quickly from the firings and the move. It continued to function and rebuilt its former strength as the new executive director, much experienced with state bureaucracy and politics, gradually hired new staff.

It is worth noting that Commissions in three other states also moved their offices. While these moves were not politically motivated, they did have some interesting side effects. In one state, the Commission's relocation from the Governor's Office to a state agency across town had a negative affect on communication between Commission staff and the separate staff (the Corporation state office, formerly ACTION) that was responsible for Senior Corps and VISTA programs. Their offices had previously been located along the same hallway; the move impeded informal communication. In a second state, the Commission's move brought it into closer physical proximity with the Corporation state office and contributed to a close working relationship between the two offices. In the third state, the Commission moved to the state capital in response to a personal request from the executive director, not for political reasons.

[8] This percentage (66.7%) seems higher than the national rate. Frank Slobig, in his *Report to the Corporation on National Service on the Privatization of State Commissions*, noted that there had been a 40 percent turnover among Commission executive directors nationwide since AmeriCorps' inception. Slobig's paper was issued in February 1996; our findings are as of May 1996.

[9] AmeriCorps administrative funds must be supplemented by non-federal resources, in increasing levels, each year. Frequently, this match involved "in-kind" resources—notably space and staff furnished to assist in program management.

for the most part indicated that their staffing levels were adequate.[10] Most frequently, staff in our study states combined field and administrative functions: an individual staff person would have responsibility for overseeing some programs, and be responsible for an administrative area (for example, financial administration or MIS).

The states are responsible for monitoring their respective AmeriCorps programs, providing quality control and technical assistance where necessary, and collecting data specified by the Corporation. In fact, the dual pressures—responding to program needs and to the Corporation's requirements for programs—inform much of the states' operations on any given day. As one executive director noted, state Commissions tend to see themselves as a "buffer" between the Corporation and the programs. Commissions believe that they know better than the Corporation what the programs need. Thus, Commissions see part of their role as a point of contact and a clearinghouse: they receive and interpret information from the Corporation for the programs. Programs, in turn, seem satisfied with this arrangement. Of the 20 state AmeriCorps programs interviewed for this study (see Chapter III), few reported regular contact with the Corporation or with a Corporation program officer. Only one program director expressed a desire to be able to bypass the state and communicate directly with the Corporation.

Commissions in the nine study states had uneven levels of monitoring their local AmeriCorps programs. Some states have the staff capacity to assign individuals to oversee specific programs. Others rely on the executive director to track program activity. At a minimum, though, all of our study states capably handled the tasks of providing adequate oversight and support to programs; and several of the Commissions succeeded in establishing strong connections between the state staff and local programs, with regular and frequent monitoring that permitted a clear sense of individual program strengths and problems.

Both states and the programs themselves receive funds to conduct technical assistance activities. All of the study states held some statewide trainings and hosted statewide service days. But for the most part, states leave it to individual programs, which are more conversant with their own training needs, to determine who will conduct training around what issues.

One potential state responsibility—to begin connecting the disparate streams of service that include Learn-and-Serve, National Direct AmeriCorps programs,[11] AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps Seniors—was largely unaddressed. A common reason for this, we found, was structural. Even though funding for all these programs comes from the Corporation, the admin-

[10] In one state, the executive director felt he needed a larger staff, but the state had placed a limit on staff size due to funding constraints. In another state, the Corporation pressed strongly to have the executive director hire additional staff to increase the Commission's capacity to monitor programs, but the Commission declined to follow the recommendation.

[11] National Direct AmeriCorps programs are sponsored by national organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity, or federal agencies. These programs typically operate in a number of states, usually with a relatively small number of AmeriCorps members at each site. The sponsors apply directly to the Corporation for their grants, not through the state Commissions. Beginning this year, federal agencies are no longer permitted to apply for the National Direct funds. Learn-and-Serve are school- and college-based service programs.

istrative structure is fragmented—an issue we discuss in greater detail in Chapter IV. Individual states made efforts to connect to specific programs (service-learning and AmeriCorps VISTA), but in no state was any sustained effort undertaken to draw them all together.[12]

THE ROLE OF COMMISSIONERS

As described both in the legislation and in the Corporation's regulations and other communications with the states (for example, its 1994 *State Commission Member Handbook*), the original vision of Commissioners and their role was broad, ambitious and optimistic. Commissioners were described as being the representatives within states who would advocate for service programs, shape the states' agenda of service, monitor programs, and build capacity and commitment for service over the long haul.

In reality, however, the role of the Commissioners in our nine study states was limited, very much resembling that of many nonprofit board members. In none of the study states did Commissioners assume strategic leadership roles. Instead they served as ambassadors for service, and as ratifiers of key decisions that were initiated and made by staff. Indeed, the turnover of staff leadership in the study states did not appear to have an effect on the level of involvement by Commissioners.

Commissions tended to be smaller during Year Two, as individuals stepped down and governors deferred decision-making with regard to replacements. The Corporation mandate that called for a Commission membership representing specific groups and interests was increasingly disregarded. Commissions worried less about these requirements and instead adjusted their bylaws to change quorum requirements so the smaller bodies could conduct business. As numbers have dwindled, so has representation. Representation by youth, which was emphasized in the original regulations and described in P/PV's Year One report as "uneven," has now been virtually eliminated in two of the nine study states, where the young people previously on Commissions left to attend college or to pursue other professional opportunities.[13] Representation by organized labor, never a strong feature of the Commissions, has likewise declined.

Commissioners, selected for who they were and what they represented, not necessarily for what they knew about service or what skills they could bring to the work of the Commission, have for the most part contributed little to the day-to-day service effort in the study states. In gener-

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[12] Commissions are making initial efforts to draw together service programs in their states. For example, in an effort to enhance collaborative trainings and other service activities, one Commission executive director has organized the state into six regions, each with three coordinators—a Commission staff member, a Learn-and-Serve representative and a representative from VISTA or Senior Corps—who are responsible for developing regional trainings. In addition, a number of Commissions use their newsletters as a vehicle for introducing communication among the streams of service. At least one Commission sends its newsletter to schools across the state in order to have a connection with Learn-and-Serve programs. A second state recently expanded its newsletter to include information on all of the streams of service, not just state AmeriCorps programs.

[13] It should be noted that several other states have amplified their youth voice with the addition of youth activity councils. Most of these councils' activities consist of youth reaching out to other youth.

al, they are neither equipped nor inclined to play more than ceremonial roles: as ambassadors to different regions of their respective states or as representatives at meetings. These Year Two findings are consistent with those during Year One: Commissioners had little influence on setting direction, shaping strategy or generating support for service across the state.

While staff have indicated that they would like Commissioners to become more involved in such activities as program monitoring and fundraising, this shift in roles and responsibilities has, for the most part, not taken place. While all study states note that there are at least a handful of dedicated individuals among the membership of their respective Commissions, Commissioners are more often overextended or indifferent. Although states have hosted retreats, provided training, and created and assigned Commissioners to committees in an attempt to encourage their increased engagement, little has changed since Year One.

Despite this apparent lack of involvement, one area in which Commissioners have tended to be active is program selection. During the first year, under terrific time constraints, the study states set up more or less elaborate processes to solicit and review applications and select programs for funding consideration by the Corporation. When appraising applications, states and their Commissioners considered a range of variables, including geographic diversity, adherence to the state plan and attention to state priorities. The money was there and the Commissioners were relatively active participants.

Circumstances during Year Two dictated quite a different response on the part of states and thus their Commissioners. Funding uncertainties constrained the program selection process and dampened morale. Some states opted to mitigate risk by recommending only the re-funding of Year One programs. Others adjusted their application requirements, indicating to potential grantees the limitations in funding availability as signalled by Washington. These more conservative approaches, by their very nature, tended to reduce Commissioner engagement because, among other things, fewer applications were submitted for review. Therefore, the endeavor that Commissioners were most likely to participate in was curtailed due to funding uncertainty, further underscoring their relatively minor role.

Apart from participating in program selection and playing the role of "ambassador," Commissioners in some states were occasionally involved in activities that appear to reflect more closely the kinds of things that staff and the Corporation theoretically saw as the Commissioners' role. Fundraising, for example, has become a particularly vital activity because of the political and fiscal context within which the state Commissions find themselves. The Commissioners appear likely candidates for the task, given the "board-like" nature of their functioning. Commissioners in one study state are reportedly engaged in fundraising activities, and in two other states, Commissioners have political connections that have been fruitful. Still, staff and especially executive directors are more likely to be responsible for this task.

In addition, in two states, the Commissioners have been involved in hiring (and in one case, firing) Commission staff. In one of the states, key Commissioners were highly instrumental in the decision to replace the executive director. In a second state, Commissioners helped create staff job descriptions and conducted interviews. In at least one additional state, the Commissioners on the administrative committee recommend candidates to the governor to fill empty Commission slots.

In some cases, executive directors are beginning to identify the roles Commissioners can and cannot fill and are successfully having Commissioners appointed who can meet specific needs, as opposed to primarily meeting the Corporation's requirements. In one state, an RSVP member was appointed because of that organization's strong standing with state and national elected officials. In another state, the heads of two major local philanthropies were named as Commissioners.

THE RECORD AND THE FUTURE

Both the 1993 legislation and the Corporation's regulations identify a series of roles and tasks for state Commissions and imply in their language that the Commissioners <u>are</u> the Commissions—in other words, that it is the Commissioners who would fulfill those roles. In fact, for the most part, the Commissions' professional staff have performed those functions. To reflect that not surprising reality, we have, throughout this report, distinguished between Commissioners and Commission staff.

It was primarily the Commission staff whose contributions made the critical difference in AmeriCorps' rapid, and relatively controversy-free, implementation. The original role articulated for Commissioners—a federally mandated, indigenously selected, unpaid voluntary board that was to assume strong leadership in an area that is difficult to define—is, in retrospect, unrealistic. In fact, the Commissioners' role differs little from that of the members of a large number of similar state-level entities whose formation is usually political and whose functions are ceremonial or political—but rarely substantive.

Year One and Year Two each posed unique challenges for the states, from start-up with its attendant intensity and high hopes, to maintenance within a precarious funding environment. The near future seems no more certain. As states seek ways to support and maintain their most successful programs, AmeriCorps approaches a critical review and reauthorization debate. It remains a question whether service, as it was legislated in the 1993 Act, will survive intact. But it is clear that the states have successfully withstood a challenging, uncertain, and at times chaotic period, and have proven themselves capable agents for launching and managing a complex, federally driven program.

III. PROGRAMS AND PARTICIPANTS

The goal of all the activity at the state and federal level was, of course, the design and implementation of AmeriCorps programs to provide services that address otherwise unmet needs in communities across the country. The pace of that activity, as well as provisions of the legislation and the Corporation's interpretation of them, affected what those programs would look like, who their participants would be, and the kinds of services they would perform.

Because of uncertainty about funding during the period when states were soliciting proposals and preparing their applications for AmeriCorps' second year—and because, ultimately, there was only a very small increase in the amount of funding available—the programs that were funded through the harried Year One process are, to a large extent, the AmeriCorps programs that are currently operating. Potential applicants that did not learn about AmeriCorps during Year One, or were not yet prepared to apply, had only minimal chances of receiving funding during Year Two. Those second-year funds, for the most part, were committed to Year One programs, which had priority for refunding if they had been operating satisfactorily. Some Year One programs made adjustments in internal structure, project definition and recruitment strategies, and states were able to add a few programs—but for the most part, the outcome of the Year One application process defined AmeriCorps in Year Two.

This chapter looks at the Year One application process and at key aspects of a sample of the resulting programs, including their origins, their recruitment aims and the ways they have structured themselves in order to deliver service.

THE YEAR-ONE APPLICATION PROCESS

During Year One of AmeriCorps, the state RFP process was shaped to a large extent by the compressed timeline. During the late winter and spring of 1994—almost simultaneously with the appointment of Commission staff and Commissioners—states promoted the availability of AmeriCorps funds, held public forums, issued their formal RFPs, reviewed grant proposals from AmeriCorps program applicants, wrote the "state plans" required by the Corporation and prepared their state application.

Considering the extremely compressed time frame, most states reached a fairly extensive audience, using existing mailing lists and public media. States' reports of the number of individuals and organizations to which they sent information ranged from 500 to 12,000. Many states also filed information at local libraries. Though states were fairly satisfied with the breadth of outreach given the stiff time constraints, most felt that they failed to reach some sectors that should be involved in AmeriCorps. They planned to invite those sectors into the process during Year Two.

The number of proposals received in response to the states' RFPs ranged widely—from 140 in one of our study states to 14 in another. The variation reflected more than simple differences in population. Some Commissions made a conscious effort to manage expectations in the field by making it clear to potential applicants that the 1993 Act had not resulted in a landslide of federal funding. One Commission, for example, announced on the first page of its RFP that the funding would support only three or four programs with a total of fewer than 80 full-time AmeriCorps members.

Other states—including those with little service experience and/or those that were predominantly rural—received fewer proposals because agencies lacked the experience and capacity to respond to a complex RFP within such a short time. One of the study states, whose applicants consisted primarily of urban programs, felt that the number of proposals it received from rural areas was limited because, while rural networks of volunteer and church-based programs were in place, staff of those programs could not see themselves within the fairly sophisticated framework constructed by the Corporation.

The requirement that programs have at least 20 participants also limited the number of applicants, particularly, again, in states with large rural areas. Since a sparsely populated area would have little need for 20 participants working at one site, they would have to develop collaborative programs that placed participants in groups of two or three in sites around the area, something that required a degree of sophistication, coordination and organization that the programs did not yet possess.

The Funding Formula

Along with the constraints created by the short timeline, the funding formula for AmeriCorps complicated states' efforts. Under the 1993 legislation, the program funds—totaling approximately $150 million[14]—are divided into three categories. One-third of the funds (formula funds) were to be awarded to states based on population; at least one-third (state competitive funds) were to be awarded to states on a competitive basis; and the remainder (national direct competitive funds) were to be awarded on a competitive basis to public or nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education and federal agencies. Programs that were seeking state formula or competitive funding applied to their state Commissions, which conducted the review process and prepared the state application. However, organizations seeking National Direct competitive funds applied directly to the Corporation. States' efforts to accommodate this funding mechanism played a large role in determining the strategies they used to construct their applications to the Corporation.

Each state was allotted a specific amount of formula money, and the cost of programs in the state formula application could not exceed that figure. To prepare their formula application, states had to focus on the number of participant slots rather than the number of programs: the Corporation presented the allotment in terms of available slots, a number they arrived at by dividing each state's formula allocation by the anticipated average federal share of the cost of an AmeriCorps position ($13,800). The number of full-time slots, in turn, equalled the number of education awards the state was eligible to receive for its formula programs.

[14] The $150 million did not include education awards, which were to be provided separately through the National Service Trust Fund.

In addition, in order to keep the review process manageable for competitive funds and to try to ensure that states submitted only the highest quality programs for that funding, the Corporation limited the number of programs a state could include in its competitive application. Each state was allowed to enter at least three programs, along with an additional program for each full percentage point of the national population that state contained. Thus, since New York had 7 percent of the population, it could submit 10 (3 plus 7) competitive proposals. (See Table 1.)

State applications were due at the Corporation on June 22, 1994. In mid-summer, the Corporation would announce the winners of competitive grants. Commissions would then have five days to adjust their applications by shifting unfunded competitive programs into the formula package, if they desired.

How States Responded

The formula-competitive split and the opportunity to shift programs between the two packages led states into a variety of strategies for structuring their applications. Few states used what could be described as a single approach for making their decisions about which programs to put in the competitive portion and which to include in the formula portion. However, the strategies of the nine states we studied can be categorized this way:

1. **Rankings**—All state Commissions used a numerical review process for ranking proposals that were submitted by local organizations. In most cases, their criteria closely paralleled the criteria that the Corporation said would be used at the national level. These included, for example, program impact, infrastructure, capacity and sustainability. Commissions then used the rankings to decide which of the proposals would be included in their state AmeriCorps application. In some cases, they also used the rankings to make decisions about which of the accepted programs would go into the competitive portion of the application. Of the nine states studied, five placed the proposals with the highest rankings in their competitive application.

2. **Program size**—Five of the study states placed programs in the competitive application because they were too large for the formula portion. They would have used too high a percentage of available slots, or they required more slots than the state was allocated.

3. **Geographical diversity**—Two of the study states placed at least some proposals in the formula application because they wanted to ensure having AmeriCorps programs in a range of locations around the state.

Several other factors also entered into the decisions. In at least three of the nine states, political pressures from the governor's office led to the inclusion of programs that had otherwise ranked

Table 1

MAXIMUM SIZE OF 1994 STATE AMERICORPS APPLICATIONS

State	Program Funds Available Through Formula Allocation	Education Awards Available to Formula-Funded Programs	Maximum Number of Programs That Could Be Included in Competitive Application
California	$6,188,252	448	15
New York	3,607,947	261	10
Florida	2,712,156	197	8
North Carolina	1,376,996	100	6
Washington	1,041,917	76	5
Maryland	984,418	71	5
Colorado	707,036	51	4
Connecticut	649,736	47	4
West Virginia	360,854	26	4

Source: Corporation for National Service. "Corporation Grant Programs and Support and Investment Activities; Final Rule." *Federal Register*, March 23, 1994.

too low to become part of the state application.[15] In addition, in six of the states, there were tensions between including new programs and those programs—youth service and conservation corps—that had been funded under the 1990 legislation. On the one hand, Commissions wanted the national service initiative to reach new constituencies and to build the state's service base. On the other hand, the mandate to "get things done" and fund high-quality programs drove states to select programs that had demonstrated existing capacity. This tension was further complicated by the question of fulfilling funding commitments made under the 1990 Act. Ultimately, three of the six states chose not to include the 1990-funded youth corps programs in their packages. One of the states that did include a youth corps application made that decision only after much internal struggle. The other two states felt more positively about including the previously funded programs.

Once the Corporation made its decisions about funding of competitive programs, seven of the study states shifted at least some of their unfunded competitive applicants to the formula package. Three of those states moved <u>all</u> of their unfunded competitive programs into their formula package, displacing or reducing the size of formula programs to accommodate the switches. Four other states shifted at least one of their unfunded competitive programs into the formula package.

States reported two reasons for making these shifts. One was what a Commission director described as "fairness." In that state, several of the rejected competitive programs had earlier been moved from the formula to the competitive package to strengthen that package, and it seemed only fair to move them back. In addition, two Commissions reported that the Corporation's decision to reject particular competitive applicants had disrupted the geographical balance of AmeriCorps programs in the state. Some rejected competitive programs were moved into the formula package to restore that balance, while formula programs were bumped that would have been operating in parts of the state served by competitive programs that were funded.

THE PROGRAMS

The following section looks at a sample of AmeriCorps programs, drawing on interviews with directors of 20 randomly selected state programs, observations of those programs during site visits and data from the Corporation.[16] As shown in Table 2, the sample includes five California programs; three each in Washington and New York; two each in Florida, North Carolina

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[15] In one state, for example, the governor wrote a letter to each Commissioner the day before the meeting at which final selections would be made, asking them to fund two desired projects.

[16] The sample was randomly selected from the full roster of state formula and competitive AmeriCorps programs in the nine study states. Thus, National Direct programs were not included, nor were programs from other streams of service, such as K-12 Learn-and-Serve. The initial draw of 20 programs yielded a list on which two states were overrepresented and one state was not represented at all. To correct this, we randomly eliminated three programs from the overrepresented states and picked substitutes until all the states were represented. While this method does not ensure that the sample is statistically representative of AmeriCorps programs as a whole, it eliminates any subjectivity in program selection and provides a reasonable cross-section of the programs.

Table 2

AMERICORPS PROGRAMS IN STUDY SAMPLE

PROGRAM	MEMBERS 1995-96	FIRST AMERICORPS GRANT
Child Abuse Prevention Council, California	22	1995
Partners in School Innovation, California	14	1994
Central Valley for Children, California	31	1995
Barrio Housing Corporation, Building, California	41	1994
California Conservation Corps, Backcountry, Calif.	68	1994
The Neutral Zone, Washington	24	1994
Public Awareness Commitment of Kitsap, Wash.	43	1994
Snohomish YMCA, Washington	25	1995*
Rochester AmeriCorps, New York	89	1994
Poughkeepsie AmeriCorps, New York	28	1995
Project Safe and Sound, New York	79	1994
HomeCorps, Maryland	24	1994
Volunteer Maryland!, Maryland	40	1994
ACCESS, North Carolina	25	1995*
Warren Service Corps, North Carolina	32	1994
AmeriCorps Orange, Florida	18	1995
Domestic Violence Legal Aid Project, Florida	21	1995
CitySERVE!, Connecticut	20	1995*
Metro-Denver Gang Prevention, Colorado	21	1994
Family Resource Centers, West Virgina	22	1994

NOTE: An additional 14 members are funded through a separate AmeriCorps grant that is administered by a different fiscal agent.

* These programs each received a planning grant in 1994.

and Maryland; and one program in each of the remaining states—Colorado, Connecticut and West Virginia.

Both nationwide and in our sample, AmeriCorps programs displayed significant variation in size, structure, specific service activities and type of participants recruited. The 1993 legislation, with its broad definition of service, had laid the groundwork for this kind of range, and the Corporation's decision to make program quality its first priority—and thus to interpret regulations rather than mechanically apply them—further allowed for extensive variation in program design and operation. In fact, a key goal of the legislation was to generate programming and service activities that grew from the particular strengths and addressed the particular needs of individual communities. The range of services, the varying structure of programs and the diversity of participants suggest that this goal was met.

The legislation had identified four broad areas of need that programs could address: education, the environment, human services and public safety. In fact, as Table 3 illustrates, the majority of programs in our sample addressed more than one of these areas.

Table 3

NEED AREAS ADDRESSED BY SAMPLE PROGRAMS

Need Area(s)	Education	Environment	Human Services	Public Safety	Education/ Human Services	Education/ Public Safety	All
Number of Programs Addressing Need Area(s)	3	1	3	2	3	7	1

More specifically, the programs in our sample addressed a wide range of particular needs. For example, the programs' activities included mentoring and tutoring children who are at risk of school failure; organizing tenant groups and neighborhood watches; educating migrant workers about health and social services; supporting school reform measures; restoring hiking trails; working with business owners to make shopping areas safer and, thus, more viable; and helping the homeless into shelters and treatment groups.

The Origins of Programs

The Corporation and the states encouraged three types of programs to apply for AmeriCorps funding: existing service programs, new initiatives, and collaborations of new and/or existing service programs that were working together for the first time.

The 20 programs in our sample included both entirely new initiatives and add-ons or augmentations of already existing programs. They were sponsored by a range of entities, including school districts, small community-based organizations, national nonprofits and local government agencies.

Agencies had many reasons for designing programs and applying for AmeriCorps funds. In some cases, organizations in their ongoing work had previously identified additional services they felt would be important to provide, and the availability of AmeriCorps funds created the opportunity to put those services into place. For example, AmeriCorps funding enabled Maryland's Action for the Homeless, an advocacy organization, to create a direct service component—HomeCorps—that included outreach to homeless people to connect them with social services and temporary housing, and efforts to move people from temporary housing facilities into permanent housing.

The Domestic Violence Legal Aid Project, an AmeriCorps program in Florida, presents a similar case. Its lead agency, the Legal Aid Society of Broward County, dealt frequently with domestic violence cases and wanted to add a program providing legal assistance and referrals to victims of domestic violence. AmeriCorps funds made this possible, although the initial vision was expanded to include domestic violence education in area elementary and high schools.

In other instances, AmeriCorps programs augmented services that an agency had been previously providing. For example, one agency that ran a traditional youth conservation and service corps used AmeriCorps funding to start an additional corps program with a somewhat different focus and a slightly different group of participants. While the traditional corps program focuses on job training and corpsmember development, the AmeriCorps program focuses on service. Participants are somewhat older than the traditional youth corps participants, and they all have at least a high school degree or GED.

Still other programs are completely new ideas whose genesis lay in the availability of AmeriCorps funds. One such example is CitySERVE!, which operates out of the Meriden, Connecticut, City Manager's Office and places AmeriCorps members at agencies around the city to offer direct services to those agencies' clients.

A number of the programs in our sample were developed through collaborations among agencies. (In fact, two of the study states required that each AmeriCorps applicant be a collaboration.) These collaborations—which were formed within the same neighborhood or across cities and counties—ranged in size from two or three partners to one collaboration of more than 50 organizations.

While a strong collaboration—where the partners have previous working relationships and complementary missions and strengths—can obviously enhance a program and expand the services offered to clients and communities in need, collaborations are also risky. In some cases, the rush for AmeriCorps funding meant that agencies with little prior contact attempted to weld together a proposal. Not surprisingly, this, at times, resulted in a weak collaboration that at least initially hampered the delivery of timely and effective services.

One of the states that required collaborations foresaw the potential negative consequences and tried to forestall them by structuring its review process to test the strength of the proposed collaborations. Applicants for AmeriCorps funding were required to bring representatives from all entities in the collaboration to a panel interview, where interviewers paid careful attention to the strength of the collaboration by noting, for example, whether the collaborators were presenting a consistent image of their goals and respective responsibilities.[17]

Given the range of origins of AmeriCorps programs, one potentially important issue concerns the degree to which AmeriCorps funds were used as substitutes either for other sources of federal support or for other state, local or nonpublic funds that might previously have been employed in support of a given activity or the provision of a given level of services. This issue is always difficult to quantify or assess with certainty, particularly in the human services field, where demand for services almost always exceeds their actual provision, and individual programs are routinely faced with the task of trying to draw together available resources.

While we did not try in our examination of programs to produce conclusive measurements, we did assess our program sample in terms of three broad characteristics in order to make a rough determination of whether substitution occurred around AmeriCorps funding, and if so, whether it was widespread. We assessed: (1) whether AmeriCorps funds were supporting the provision of activities not previously provided by an agency or supporting expansion of existing services; (2) whether the services being supported by AmeriCorps could readily be paid for by other funding sources; and (3) whether there were indications that the AmeriCorps-funded services had been previously supported by other sources.

Applying these criteria, we found that almost all AmeriCorps program support appeared to go to activities that would not otherwise have occurred, or would not have occurred at the level they did without the existence of AmeriCorps funds. Among the strongest programs were those that addressed emerging needs in innovative, service-related ways, for which alternative funding sources would have been difficult, if not impossible, to identify. More common were program efforts that significantly expanded the level and type of services an organization provided, an expansion that would have been unlikely to occur were it not for AmeriCorps funding. In fact, of our 20 sample programs, only one existed prior to AmeriCorps, and that program received only education awards, not AmeriCorps operating funds.

Recruitment Strategies

For the most part, the programs in our sample identified the kinds of AmeriCorps members they wanted—in terms of age, education, ethnic background, and/or work and life experience—and targeted their recruitment efforts to attract those corpsmembers.

[17] Despite this upfront effort, some of the collaborations still proved to be unsound, and state staff had to invest time with the programs to clarify misunderstandings among partners when possible, and recommend sloughing off uncooperative partners when necessary. This staking and pruning did have a good effect: most collaborations seemed stronger in the second year.

Some programs, because of the nature of the services they were providing, recruited participants who had at least some college education and/or significant service and work experience. This was true, for example, for Volunteer Maryland!, which places AmeriCorps members at individual sites around the state to develop and implement programs that will draw volunteers into the sites' ongoing work. Programs that sought more experienced members sometimes found that the limited stipend ($7,662) was an obstacle to recruitment. Volunteer Maryland! dealt with this challenge by providing a larger ($11,000) stipend, raising the additional money by requiring that each site pay a portion of its AmeriCorps members' stipends.

A number of programs wanted to attract participants who were members of the communities the programs would be serving, believing that they could most effectively provide the services in this scenario. Thus, HomeCorps recruited formerly homeless people, who would have the experience most necessary for performing outreach services to the homeless. Project Safe and Sound, in New York City, recruited African-American and Hispanic participants because they reflected the racial and ethnic composition of the neighborhoods where the projects were located.

Other programs intentionally tried to attract a diverse group of participants. CitySERVE!, for example, wanted its participants to reflect the racial composition of the city of Meriden, but did not want age or educational diversity. It recruited participants between the ages of 17 and 25 who were high school graduates but did not plan to attend college or were delaying enrollment.

The question of whether AmeriCorps members would serve full time or part time also influenced recruitment strategies. The Corporation discouraged programs from having primarily part-time members, which would lessen the service impact of the programs and diminish the visibility of AmeriCorps. Some programs, however, were able to overcome the Corporation's resistance. The Barrio Housing Corporation in California, for example, recruited members who were attending college and, thus, could not make a full-time commitment to service. Ninety-three percent of its members are part time. ACCESS, a program that both serves and recruits from immigrant communities in North Carolina, found that the low-income population it had targeted could not afford to commit full time and live off the modest stipend, but preferred to serve part time and earn compensating income elsewhere. Sixty percent of its members are part time. Still, as Table 4 indicates, fewer than 30 percent of AmeriCorps members nationwide—and an even smaller percentage in our sample—serve part time.

<u>Diversity</u>

The Corporation strongly encouraged programs to recruit a diverse group of AmeriCorps members. This push did influence the design of some programs, which developed a range of service activities that could be delivered by a diverse group of participants. Still, AmeriCorps is more diverse in the aggregate than it is within individual programs. As the previous section suggests, program directors' primary recruitment concern was identifying the kinds of participants who could best perform the service. In some cases, that worked against the probability of having a widely diverse group of participants. In other cases, programs lack diversity simply because the available pool of participants was not particularly diverse.

Table 4

FULL- AND PART-TIME STATUS OF AMERICORPS MEMBERS

SERVICE YEAR STATUS	NATIONAL POOL	NINE STUDY STATES	20 SAMPLE PROGRAMS
Full-time ACMs	72%	74%	86%
Part-Time ACMs	28%	26%	14%

Source: Corporation for National Service, 1995

As part of our study, we examined participant patterns at three levels: nationally, within the study states, and in the 20 randomly selected programs. The AmeriCorps members, across each of these levels, are diverse in gender, age, race and education. (See Tables 5 to 8.)

Gender. Both nationally and within our sample, female AmeriCorps members outnumber males by approximately three to two. This ratio generally reflects the mix of the applicant pool rather than a deliberate decision to recruit more women. Few programs expressed dissatisfaction with the gender ratio.

Age. With its modest living allowance and tie-in to education benefits, it is not surprising that AmeriCorps attracted a relatively young population of members. Both nationally and in our sample, their median age (halfway between the top and bottom) is 22. At the same time, some AmeriCorps programs also attracted—and/or deliberately recruited—a significant number of older participants, as is reflected in the higher mean age of 25.6 nationally. Among our sample programs, the mean age was 28. To a large extent, this is a result of the recruitment strategies of programs such as HomeCorps, which targeted an older population (in this case, formerly homeless people) who had close connections with the population they would be serving and experience with the services they would be helping to deliver.[18]

Racial/Ethnic Distribution. In the aggregate, AmeriCorps programs attracted an ethnically and racially diverse population, though, overall whites are somewhat underrepresented (42%) relative to the general population, and African-Americans are overrepresented (30%). While this distribution occurs not so much within individual programs as across them, nearly all of our sample programs did have at least some racial/ethnic diversity among their members.

Education. AmeriCorpsmembers range widely in educational background. About 36 percent have a high school diploma, G.E.D. or less. Another 41 percent have at least some college

[18] Several of the programs in our sample had participants who were in their 60s. However, this appears to be a function of who applied rather than a result of a deliberate recruitment strategy.

Table 5

GENDER OF AMERICORPS MEMBERS

	NATIONAL POOL	NINE STUDY STATES	20 SAMPLE PROGRAMS
Male	37%	41%	34%
Female	63%	59%	66%

Table 6

AGE OF AMERICORPS MEMBERS

	NATIONAL POOL	NINE STUDY STATES	20 SAMPLE PROGRAMS
Mean Age	25.6 years	25.5 years	28 years
Median Age	22 years	22 years	24 years

Table 7

RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF AMERICORPS MEMBERS

	African America n	White	Asian	Hispanic	American Indian	Unknown*
National Pool	30%	42%	3%	14%	3%	8%
Nine Study States	29%	40%	3%	16%	2%	10%
20 Sample Programs	32%	35%	4%	18%	1%	10%

* AmeriCorps members who checked off "other" or "prefer not to respond" in response to this item.

Table 8

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF AMERICORPS MEMBERS

	Less Than High School Graduate	High School Graduate Or GED	Some College/ Technical School/ Associate Degree	College Graduate	Graduate Study Or Advanced Degree
National Pool	12%	24%	41%	17%	6%
Nine Study States	11%	27%	42%	15%	5%
20 Sample Programs	9%	25%	44%	14%	8%

Source of Tables 5 to 8: Corporation for National Service, 1995 experience, and 23 percent have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. The educational background of participants within our sample programs closely mirrors the national statistics.

Member Placement

The way the sample programs organized and placed their AmeriCorps members—whether in teams, small groups or individually—was determined by the kinds of service activities each program was undertaking. As shown in Table 9, about a quarter of the programs organized AmeriCorps members into teams of eight to ten people who served together on group projects, while a smaller number of programs divided the members into small groups of two to three members and placed them together in host agencies. Half the sample programs assigned members to work individually at various host sites, usually other nonprofit agencies, that were either concentrated in one neighborhood, spread across a metropolitan region or, in several cases, scattered across the state.

Table 9

PLACEMENT STRATEGIES OF SAMPLE PROGRAMS

	Individually Placed	Crew-Based	Small Groups	Crew Based/ Individually Placed
Number	9	6	4	1

The programs that placed their participants individually or in small groups faced the challenge of ensuring strong supervision of AmeriCorps members at their host sites, and of promoting a sense of "team" and AmeriCorps identity among participants who were serving in widely scattered locations.

Programs handled these issues in a variety of ways. CitySERVE!, in Connecticut, tried to ensure that members receive regular supervision by charging each host site $1,500 in upfront money. The money is then charged back to the agency each month in return for hours of regular supervision. Some programs developed explicit contracts with their host sites that detail supervisory requirements. Still other programs provided training for host site staff who will be working as AmeriCorps members' supervisors.

To promote a sense of team and AmeriCorps identity, all the programs in our sample provided participants initial training that included at least some focus on teamwork and service, as well as on developing the skills that members would need in their AmeriCorps positions. Most programs also bring their members together regularly—generally once a week—for additional training and team-based service activities. Some programs added team leaders to help support and supervise geographically isolated members.

Service and Work

AmeriCorps is meant to be a service initiative, not a work experience program. Still, from the start, AmeriCorps was faced with criticism that it was doing little more than providing participants with work opportunities—even if that work was meeting demonstrable needs and was effectively managed.

In our review of programs, we attempted, in a limited way, to come to terms with that issue, which in turn raises the larger question: What is service? We did not try to answer the latter question in full. Instead, we examined the programs in our sample in light of the following criterion. We judged that a program most strongly embodied service principles if it had an explicit definition of what "service" meant, if that definition was embedded in program components and activities, and if there were indications that both program staff and participants recognized and were influenced by that definition. (An example of a "definition" might simply be: responding to the needs of others.)

The extent to which AmeriCorps programs identified themselves as service programs was often reflected in their approach to recruiting participants. A number of programs selected applicants on the basis of previous service experience. During the interview process, many programs engaged applicants in lengthy discussions about the meaning of service. In one program, for example, potential participants were screened on the basis of their expressed willingness to make a long-term commitment to the education field, extending beyond their service term and, in fact, explicitly discussed in terms of "life-long commitment."

The extent to which an AmeriCorps program embodied service extended, of course, beyond the interview process and the criteria for accepting applicants into the program. It included guidance and supervision that stressed appropriate provision of services, and opportunities for participants to reflect on and relate their service activity to the theme of the program through, for example, journal writing.

The criteria we devised cannot be defined in a clear-cut way, and there are variations both in the clarity with which they are found and in the regularity, consistency and creativity with which they are built into programs. Nonetheless, we found that about a quarter of our programs did stand as examples of service programs, and likewise that in about a quarter of the programs, participants' activities differed little from work experience. The remainder fell somewhere in the middle, either having vague definitions of service activity, or fairly weak and/or inconsistent incorporation of the definition into program activities, or limited awareness on the part of staff or participants of how their activities differed from a job. We are inclined to characterize this finding in a positive rather than a negative fashion. Given the inherent vagueness and value-laden nature of "service," we were impressed that a quarter of the programs seemed to attain high standards not only in their management soundness and compliance with regulations, but also in their creative efforts to embody in their programs well-thought-through definitions of service.

IV. SEEKING A BALANCE: THE CORPORATION AND THE STATES

During the period when the 1993 service legislation was being shaped, the debate about institutional format and responsibilities revolved for the most part around the state role: its rationale, extent and primacy. In part, this debate reflected a muted but important tension between the idea of "national" service, with its suggestion of consistency and a tangible federal role, and the consensus across partisan lines that states should be granted significant voice and responsibility in the design and implementation of what was to become AmeriCorps.

The language in the final legislation was clear enough about the state role. It also established a new Corporation for National Service to administer both the newly minted service streams and existing federal service programs, absorbing the staff and responsibilities of the ACTION agency that had previously run them. In so doing, the legislation aimed for institutional simplification: the previous Commission on National and Community Service and the ACTION agency were merged into the new entity, which was described as a new kind of governmental entity, one that would reflect the concept of "reinvented government" that the Clinton Administration had espoused.

This new entity moved with marked swiftness to undertake its new duties. As described earlier, the new legislation had passed with somewhat surprising rancor. It seemed clear that the new federal entity would be scrutinized, as would the new programs it brought into being. To the core staff who established this new Corporation, it also seemed clear that there would have to be rapid progress and accumulation of results if the fledgling AmeriCorps program were to garner the political support it needed.

These core staff also had a strong vision of how they wanted the new AmeriCorps initiative to be shaped, and a vision of how they wanted to see it operated in the field. A good many of these individuals had been involved in developing the legislation or had been senior staff in the previous national Commission. They were able to move quickly to begin developing new regulations and mobilizing states to action.

The role of the Corporation thus loomed large from the outset in the implementation of AmeriCorps. The Corporation chose not to stand back in the role of neutral generator of regulations. From the outset its posture was activist. It chose to concentrate its main energies on shaping and putting into place the new AmeriCorps program, and to put less effort into the extant ACTION programs and their administrative apparatus, which, after all, had been operative for close to 30 years. The Corporation energetically developed and articulated its version of what high-quality AmeriCorps programs should be, and to a considerable degree, over the first 30 months of operation, it succeeded in making its own AmeriCorps priorities ones that states adopted as well.

In 1994, with its vision of service, its single-minded attention to AmeriCorps and its control of the agenda and clock, the Corporation shaped and drove the process of AmeriCorps implementation, as we described in the report *Launching AmeriCorps*. By the end of AmeriCorps' first year, states had completed the implementation basics and had to some degree caught up with the schedule. By Year Two, the Commissions' focus had shifted to the programs, where they were responsible for monitoring and technical assistance—and they were beginning to feel discontent at what they perceived as their own limited say in the plans and programs they were overseeing. Commissions wanted the federal-state balance of control to shift in their direction so they could have greater freedom to manage the shape of national service in their states. This chapter looks at the ways that shift in balance was supported and hindered by Corporation regulations, interactions among the Corporation and Commissions, and Corporation funding streams.

COMMISSION/CORPORATION RELATIONSHIPS

Following the hectic pace of the first year, the granting process became less harried in Years Two and Three, and Commission staff felt that they generally had more control over program selection—in part because they had learned what the Corporation wanted in programs and because they had learned to maneuver between the competitive and formula funding streams. But they also felt that the Corporation was at times working against their own efforts to build strong AmeriCorps programs in their states. In particular, they pointed to the volume and changeability of Corporation regulations and requirements, sometimes unclear communication, and what they perceived as unwillingness on the Corporation's part to be flexible in response to unique characteristics of particular states. These difficulties in relation to the Corporation had, in turn, an impact on Commissions' relationships with their programs.

Corporation Regulations and Requirements

Commission staff described a range of problems with the Corporation's regulations and requirements. In one of the study states, for example, the executive director said that although no single regulation caused problems, the sheer volume of regulations and requirements was "onerous." Commission staff in the majority of the study states felt that the quarterly reports required by the Corporation were unnecessarily burdensome. The Corporation "asks for much too much" paper, one executive director said, adding that the paper requirements seem even more burdensome because the Corporation "asks for all this information," then does not respond to it.[19]

Commission staff also noted that "the Corporation keeps changing things." They were referring to both the required content of reports and their due dates. While state staff had been more accepting of these changes during Year One because it was the start-up period and changes seemed inevitable, they indicated some impatience with the flux that continued to be characteristic of Year Two. In addition, Commission staff felt that Corporation requirements were having an affect on their ability to concentrate on their primary focus: the state AmeriCorps programs. Executive directors felt their small staffs should be spending their time monitoring and assisting programs instead of meeting Corporation reporting requirements that seem excessive to the states.

[19] In fact, despite the number of reporting forms that states and programs have had to complete and send to Washington, they have not yet received the MIS data that the Corporation had promised to generate from those forms.

Individual programs were similarly affected. Even seemingly straightforward changes to reporting requirements had an impact on them, since they were forced to alter their reporting forms. The director of at least one program complained that instead of simply being able to enter data into his computer for each reporting period, he had to spend hours re-creating the often-changing report format, time he should be spending on program operations. In other words, decisions made in Washington have an impact on the ability of AmeriCorps programs to "get things done."[20]

An additional aspect of states' and programs' belief that the Corporation was overly involved in state and local functions was the negotiation about program objectives during Year Two. While the Corporation's scrutiny in part reflected its efforts to ensure high-quality programs, it was also responding to the political pressure in Washington to "justify" the existence of AmeriCorps.

As a result of this pressure, the Corporation in turn put continuing pressure on programs to make their objectives "measurable." While Commission staff understood the reasons for the Corporation's insistence, they were also frustrated by what they considered to be a lack of clarity about what the Corporation wanted and by what one executive director called "the ever changing nature" of the standards. According to one executive director, even after programs were up and running, the Corporation asked them to change their original objectives.

The heavy oversight of programs' written objectives had multiple effects. Instead of monitoring and assisting programs, Commission program officers spent hours on the phone with the Corporation asking for clarification, then additional hours explaining the Corporation's guidelines to programs. Complicating the situation was the fact that some outcomes are difficult to quantify: while it is relatively simple to measure the number of hours that AmeriCorps members spend tutoring children, it can be harder to measure the outcomes from educating migrant workers about health and social services.

One executive director said that changes insisted on by the Corporation at times affected the substantive nature of program operations: the objectives that programs were ultimately required to write were inconsistent with what they had proposed to do in their grant applications and, in the cases of programs that were already operating, with what AmeriCorps members had been accomplishing.

Most often, the objectives-writing process became an exercise that lost its meaning for programs after their second or third attempt to bring their objectives in line with Corporation requirements. Programs ultimately worried more about what they "should" write in order to get the process over with than about using the process as a way of strengthening the programs themselves.

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[20] As another example, one executive noted that when programs originally received the lengthy Annual Accomplishments Review Form—which came directly from the organization that does evaluation for the Corporation, not from the Corporation itself—they were told in writing that it was not mandatory to complete. However, in the middle of the proposal-writing process, programs were suddenly notified that they would not receive their renewal grants unless they completed the Review, so they had to drop what they were doing in order to complete this very long form.

Communication with the Corporation

The Corporation communicates with states through two primary means: (1) written information sent to all the states through regular updates and special communiques, and (2) individual state contact, usually through conversation, with the state's Corporation program officer.

A number of executive directors said that they felt both overwhelmed by the amount of information that comes from the Corporation and underinformed about certain key issues. Several of the executive directors referred to the "barrage" of Corporation faxes and Federal Express packages. They were receiving too much information too often: the sheer bulk made the information difficult to use. The Corporation has responded to this problem, in part, by now including routing pages that indicate whether material is meant for the state Commission or for programs. (To save money, it has also begun faxing more material and following that up with mailings, instead of using Federal Express.) However, the problem remains that it is difficult for Commission staff and programs to find the time to sort through all the information and identify which pieces are vital and which are incidental.

Commission staff speak regularly to their Corporation program officers, and they all implied that they have, at the least, a comfortable relationship with them. However, while the program officers are intelligent and energetic, they are also often young and inexperienced. While many have participated in service programs, few have had responsibility for setting up and managing them. As a result, it can be difficult for them to fully understand the points of view of Commission staff and program directors. That inexperience is a key to Commission staffs' frustrations with Corporation program officers. The few program officers who are more experienced were the ones that Commission staff praised for their insights and practical help.

Exacerbating the problem is the fact that all nine of the study states have had turnover in their program officers: states have had as many as five different Corporation program officers during the three years of AmeriCorps. The lack of continuity is frustrating and can have significant impact because each program officer brings her or his own interpretation of responsibilities and regulations. In fact, program officers do not necessarily deliver consistent information across states.

The communication gaps have led to significant misunderstandings. Commission staff and AmeriCorps program directors, for example, frequently referred to their puzzlement about why the Corporation does not allow program directors to do fundraising—particularly in light of Corporation requirements that they raise non-federal funds. According to a Corporation representative, however, program directors are allowed to do fundraising, but not while they are working on government time and being paid with federal dollars. This distinction, however, has rarely been made clear to programs.[21]

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[21] At times, unclear communication has led to potentially damaging consequences for programs' abilities to "get things done." In at least one state, some programs were paying AmeriCorps members hourly wages rather than stipends. The distinction was more than semantic. When the state Commission and programs discovered that the Corporation required that AmeriCorps members be paid stipends, the programs made the change and in some cases faced significant problems. With stipends, members began receiving their pay whether or not they showed up for

National Identity vs. Local Realities

As local programs' and states' vision of service achieved sharper definition in Year Two, details concerning what was best mandated through and delivered from Washington also became clearer. These included both larger conceptual issues and concrete services and benefits.

The conceptual issues centered on points where the states' definition of how AmeriCorps could best meet local needs was at odds with the Corporation vision of a national service program. The contrast was most obvious in the two rural states included in this study. Both felt that the Corporation's requirement that AmeriCorps programs have at least 20 members and that members be concentrated in a few sites was inconsistent with the demographic realities of their states.[22]

Similarly, one state, which has a very high percentage of non-college-bound youth as well as relatively low-cost public higher education, encouraged its programs to recruit as many part-time AmeriCorps members as possible. The state saw this as a way to encourage its young people to set higher education goals for themselves and to increase access to the education awards (or the half-awards earned by part-time members). This strategy met with resistance from the Corporation, which pushed for more full-time members because they provide greater visibility to AmeriCorps.

There is also, at times, a gap between the services and benefits provided through the Corporation and the particular needs of states and programs. The most obvious example of this is the national technical assistance (TA) services provided through the Corporation.

One of the states used the national TA providers regularly because, as the executive director said, they were free and they were at least adequate. One other state planned to use them. However, in the other study states, the executive directors either had not used or did not want to continue using national TA providers. Their primary reason was that the national providers' approach to technical assistance was too generic to be helpful: they did not focus on the particular needs of individual states and programs. In one state where both the Commission and

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work on time or at all, and in some cases, attendance and punctuality became a problem. Programs had to spend significant time reorienting members to the fact that their conceptual role was to deliver service, not to fill an hourly-wage job.

[22] The nature of funding decisions and the interaction of formula and competitive grant funding can also be viewed, in part, in the context of the tensions between national identity and local realities. The Corporation, through the latitude provided by regulations governing formula funds (awarded to states on the basis of population and sub-granted to programs the states selected) and competitive funds (awarded to state programs that were competitively selected by the Corporation), not only had final say over which programs got competitive grants but also directly influenced states' formula selections. In reality, the Corporation individually reviewed all programs states submitted, whether for formula or competitive funding. This was done, the Corporation argued, as an added quality-assurance mechanism; however, the end result was a program mix in which the Corporation had a say in both its own and in the state decisions. This was acutely obvious in the first year. Essentially the same regulations were in effect during the second year, but since there were limited funds for new programs, the effects were not as large.

several programs had used national providers, Commission staff reported that the feedback on the providers was usually poor. Participants felt that the national TA events covered only general issues and offered no answers to their specific questions.

Commission staff in several of the states also complained that the national TA providers were too persistent: they repeatedly called Commissions to offer their services and even began to bypass Commissions and call programs directly. In one state, Commission staff said they felt "inundated" by calls from national TA providers, while in another state, staff said the calls made them feel "harassed."

The Corporation's benefits packages have, in general, been more successful. Commission staff and program directors praised the Corporation's child care provisions. With the Year One confusion about child care eligibility resolved, one Commission director called the child care benefits "the best thing the Corporation has done."

There was less universal praise for the health care benefits. Programs that were able to select other health care insurers—most often the insurance package that the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps provides for its members—tended to opt for those insurers because of the relatively high cost and low benefits included in the Corporation package. Several programs whose members come predominantly from low socioeconomic backgrounds expressed strong reservations about the Corporation's health insurance. They reported that their members could not afford to pay the deductible or the copayments required by the Corporation provider. The situation was exacerbated because these same members were often the people who had not received preventive health care and, consequently, were more likely to have health-related problems. Thus, while the health insurance was adequate for middle-income members, it was less so for those from poorer backgrounds.

COORDINATING NATIONAL SERVICE

Commission directors in all nine of the study states acknowledged that they should be making efforts to coordinate at least some of the various kinds of national service programs in their state. These include the state AmeriCorps programs, the National Directs, community-based Learn-and-Serve, K-12 Learn-and-Serve, VISTA and Senior Corps. They see coordination as a way to help programs learn from one another, to achieve some economies of scale and to bolster the image of service in the state. In addition, coordination is essential if, in fact, Commissions are going to take a lead role in service in their states.

This section looks at the ways that Corporation policies and practices have both fostered and hindered the possibilities of collaboration.

Funding Streams

While the Corporation has always encouraged more collaboration among streams of national service, categorical funding streams and disparate loci of state control present substantial challenges to accomplishing that. Community-based Learn-and-Serve programs receive funding through the state Commission and are overseen by that office, while K-12 Learn-and-Serve programs receive their Corporation funding through the state Department of Education. The Corporation state representative, generally a former ACTION staff member,[23] oversees the state's VISTA and Senior Corps programs, which have their own funding streams. The complexity of the system results in technical impediments and, at times, interpersonal strains that preclude or hamper efforts to coordinate among programs and build a coherent identity for service in the state.

At the Corporation, staff is similarly organized by funding stream. Separate program officers are responsible for the National Direct and state AmeriCorps programs in each state; a third program officer is responsible for the state's K-12 Learn-and-Serve programs, and so on. Without real mechanisms in place to promote collaboration among these program officers at the Corporation level, the organizational staffing pattern reinforces the inherent separateness of the streams of service in the states.

<u>Learn-and-Serve and the State Commissions</u>

In two of the nine study states, relationships between the state Commission and the director of the state's K-12 Learn-and-Serve programs are particularly difficult, and this has had an impact on the possibility of coordinating Learn-and-Serve and AmeriCorps programs.[24] But even in states where there is more comfortable communication between the Commission and the K-12 Learn-and-Serve office, Learn-and-Serve directors feel that the Corporation could be encouraging more collaboration. For example, while the K-12 Learn-and-Serve directors are required to send reports to the Commission and to indicate in their funding proposals how their work intersects with the state plan, there are no reciprocal requirements for the Commission to indicate how its programs can intersect with Learn-and-Serve. One Learn-and-Serve director described the situation as "the Corporation giving the Commission 'official permission' to ignore us."

<u>VISTA, Senior Corps and the State Commissions</u>

Relationships between the state executive director and the Corporation state representative range from a total partnership in one state to a complete lack of communication in another. Relationships in the remaining seven states fall into a less dramatic middle. State Commission staff typically describe the Corporation state representatives as "being there when we need them," but not, in general, initiating substantive communication with the Commission. A number of state executive directors noted that they do not understand the reason for Corporation state offices:

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[23] ACTION had been responsible for overseeing VISTA, RSVP and Foster Grandparents. Under the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, it was merged into the newly formed Corporation for National Service.

[24] In both cases, the problems date back to the fact that the state Department of Education was the lead agency for national service under the original 1990 legislation and, in the words of one executive director, "hard feelings" developed when the state Commission was set up elsewhere in state government in response to the 1993 legislation. However, these problems are not always insurmountable. In another of the study states, where there was initially a similar tension, intentional efforts on the part of the Commission executive director and the Learn-and-Serve director led to greatly improved cooperation.

the structure seems redundant. "Everything should be done through the state," one Commission chairperson said.

For their part, the Corporation state representatives—former ACTION staffers who are responsible for the VISTA and Senior Corps programs in the state—point to differences in treatment between AmeriCorps and the former ACTION programs. Some of these differences can be specified: for example, until very recently, VISTA volunteers were not eligible for the child care benefits that AmeriCorps members receive. Others are more intangible: one Corporation state representative said that some of her counterparts pick up an implied message from the Corporation to "back off" from the state Commissions.

While most states are at least inviting VISTA volunteers and/or Senior Corps members to state service-day activities and other Commission-sponsored events, the structural obstacles to coordinating state AmeriCorps programs with these former ACTION programs are best illustrated through the experiences of the one study state that has attempted more substantively to draw together these streams of national service. This is a small state where the executive director of the state Commission and the Corporation state representative have what they describe as a trusting and close working relationship—and, in fact, because of their tiny staffs, they rely on one another for practical help. They describe their thinking about service as "holistic": they would like VISTA, AmeriCorps state programs and National Directs, and Senior Corps to function as one working unit. Their reasons are political as well as practical. Since there are only about 40 corpsmembers in this state's AmeriCorps programs, they consider it "a lot more convincing" to say that there are hundreds of national service volunteers in the state.

The executive director and Corporation state representative say that in their efforts to integrate their activities—including joint trainings and shared site-visit and monitoring responsibilities—they have run into obstacles. Because AmeriCorps funds come from a different pool than VISTA funds, they cannot be commingled. This is a legislated "wall," they say, that they have not been able to break through.

National Directs and State AmeriCorps Programs

Commission staff expressed continuing frustration about their linkages to the National Direct programs in their state. These programs are screened and selected directly by the Corporation. They are meant to be national in scope, and one agency may operate programs in several states. The selection process did not, however, coincide with other funding decisions and, in Year One, Commissions often had a difficult time even finding out what National Direct programs were operating in their state. While the National Directs are required to send copies of their grant proposals to the state Commissions, there is still not full compliance with this regulation.

The majority of state executive directors make some effort to communicate with the National Direct programs by at least inviting them to statewide AmeriCorps trainings and service days. But Commission staff typically describe these efforts at communication as moving in only one direction. One executive director said, for example, that the National Directs have never taken any initiative to contact him.

This was a typical comment. Executive directors said that the Corporation has not communicated well with Commissions about the National Directs in their state, that they still know very little about them and that the Corporation should have policies in place that make the National Directs more cooperative with the Commissions.

Corporation Initiatives

The Corporation has made some changes in regulations and practices aimed at fostering collaboration. A relatively new Corporation regulation calls for up to 20 percent of PDAT funds in each state—program development and training funds that go directly from the Corporation to state Commissions—to be used for Learn-and-Serve, Senior Corps and VISTA programs. While Commissions are not required to use the funds for these programs, the regulation establishes the expectation that the money will be used for them, and in fact, state Commissions are using it to bring VISTA and Senior Corps volunteers to trainings and related state-run activities.

In addition, the Corporation has been actively encouraging at least some states to forge links between various national service programs. In one of the study states, for example, the state Corporation representative and the K-12 Learn-and-Serve director are creating a joint project that will train VISTA volunteers to act as service-learning coordinators in area schools. This initiative is an effort to replicate a program that was developed in another state, an indication that the Corporation is beginning to learn from the states and from programs in the field; in this way, the balance may be shifting.

Still, national service remains structurally what one state Commission director termed an "irrational system with multiple chains of command and separate lines on the organizational chart" for National Directs, state-funded programs, Learn-and-Serve programs, and VISTA and Senior Corps. But, she added, there is evidence that the system is somehow working: strong AmeriCorps programs are providing needed service to communities.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What can we conclude about the shape and possibilities of national service from our three-year experience with AmeriCorps and the states? In particular, what can we learn about the scope of state and federal roles, an issue crucial to the existence and maintenance of a credible form of "national service"?

The conclusions that follow derive from that experience. They must be viewed in light of the intense political currents that have swirled around the AmeriCorps program from its inception—indeed from before its legislative passage. Throughout its history, key decisions regarding the program were made or influenced by a level of Congressional scrutiny not commensurate with the program's scale, and a degree of partisan hostility that in its tone was strikingly at odds with the aims of citizenship, participation and service that AmeriCorps was meant to advance. Absent that constant pressure, AmeriCorps might well have developed differently.

That caveat stated, we believe our examination of the AmeriCorps experience to date supports a number of useful conclusions and permits us to frame some broad recommendations for the future of national service. The remainder of this chapter presents both.

CONCLUSIONS

We list our conclusions under three broad headings: the role of states; programs and participation; and the federal-state partnership.

The Role of States

The two key organizational features of the AmeriCorps program are its nominally decentralized operation through states and the creation of a quasi-governmental entity (the Corporation for National Service) at the federal level. States are viewed as critical parts of the service equation. They would identify local needs and service opportunities; make decisions about which initiatives best responded to those needs (or afforded the best service opportunities); make program decisions competitively; and serve as advocate for the benefits and value of service. State Commissioners, appointed by governors in each of the states, were to assume the leadership responsibility for these tasks. They were, by some expectations, meant to "govern" service in the states.

Our first conclusion is that the state role, though competently executed, fell short of the perhaps overly broad expectations set for it. The idealized vision of AmeriCorps in the states saw Commissioners as leading the Commissions, which would be strong, active entities that would symbolize civic commitment to service, democratically shape an agenda of service, direct the commitment of public funds to state programs, and help augment the resources and political capital dedicated to service activities.

In actuality, the Commissioners have only limited inclination or capacity to assume such roles. Usually screened if not selected by governors' staffs, Commissioners often have only superficial knowledge of service issues. Volunteers themselves, they were heavily challenged by an extraordinarily rushed first-year process. While there were individual Commissioners and one or two Commissions that got deeply involved, most had little choice but to defer to the professional staff, who interpreted the rules, set the agendas, narrowed and presented choices for decision-making by Commissioners, developed plans and, in fact, did much of the service policymaking in states.

By the second year, Commissioners in our study group of states had, for the most part, settled into roles of defined and limited scope. They ratified choices presented to them by staff; they helped advocate on behalf of service programs; they served as buffers (though not always effectively) between Commission staff and potentially distorting or inappropriate political influence; they sometimes visited and championed individual programs; and they made some effort to help identify sources of additional funding.

These are worthwhile if modest roles. They also, we conclude, represent the functions whose performance on balance is most likely to typify voluntary boards having their kind of specialized purview, and overseeing the distribution of comparatively small sums of money. In short, the Commissioners came to play the roles one might have expected. We think it would have been surprising to find anything different. Beyond capably serving in the roles we have described, the Commissioners had little bearing on the shape or quality of service activities in any of our study states.

What differentiated states in their behavior and performance around service, we conclude, was the quality and energy of their staffs, and the maturity, quality and sophistication of service activities that had existed prior to the beginning of AmeriCorps. The executive directors, in particular, were pivotal in setting the pace, the direction and the standards for AmeriCorps programs in states. In those states where strong leadership in that position combined with a strong preexisting "infrastructure"—i.e., a mix of knowledgeable organizations, individuals and programs—AmeriCorps, and service in general, seemed to flourish.

None of the states we examined had gone far in integrating AmeriCorps programs with other service activities. In good part, it was the energy consumed in establishing the AmeriCorps program, and its supporting administrative structure, that prevented states from broaching that wider agenda; in part, it was the structural separation of old (i.e., the former ACTION programs) and new (AmeriCorps) service programs. States did recognize that the "streams of service" do not yet have a point of confluence and that they need one, but their efforts to address the problem were limited.

Overall, then, the state role in the delivery of AmeriCorps was competent and relatively modest. A degree of administrative efficiency and "localness" certainly was achieved by the formalized responsibility for AmeriCorps that states were given.

At the same time, rather than being "as far as states have gotten" thus far, we conclude that the limited function of Commissioners is likely to be the upper bound of what this format can achieve. A more substantial contribution is unlikely without significant new directives from the federal level.

AmeriCorps Programs and Participants

We examined a randomly selected group of 20 programs in our nine states. We did not evaluate the programs, but rather looked at their design and operation in order to determine what kind of service actually resulted from AmeriCorps funding. We were interested in examining the funded programs' fidelity to the goals and regulations of AmeriCorps; how they were related to their parent organizations; their specific aims and operations; recruitment practices; the way and degree to which they sought to incorporate some notion of "service" that would differentiate them from typical human service or work experience; and any (admittedly casual or anecdotal) indications about their success.

We conclude that the programs we studied were highly consistent with AmeriCorps' aims; that they were for the most part well-conceived and capably managed; that AmeriCorps participants performed work of clear value, addressing clear needs in their communities that would not otherwise have been met; that the participants were diverse in terms of gender and ethnic origin; and that there was no evidence in the programs we examined of politically questionable activity (though, as would be expected, there were routine minor infractions of the rules limiting administrative activity).

Some qualifications to those broad conclusions should, however, be noted. Predictably, the programs we examined varied in their quality, in their fidelity to goals and regulations, and in the degree to which, in our view, they constituted "service" programs. We determined that about a quarter of the programs in our sample were of superior quality, and in particular—in terms of their success in espousing and putting into practice a clear sense of service—that they were examples of high-quality service programs. At the other end of the scale, in about a fourth of the programs, participants were performing useful work, to be sure, but work that was largely indistinguishable from that in traditional work experience programs. The remainder fell somewhere in the middle, combining elements of well-conceived service activities with typical work experience.

We think these conclusions are unremarkable. The programs we examined showed the typical distribution of quality and uniqueness to be found in any collection of social or human service programs, even those chosen by a competitive process. Only a small fraction in any such collection is likely to be markedly above the norm. Indeed, given the pressure under which the AmeriCorps process unfolded, the general quality of programs we examined was higher than might have been expected.

Besides the programs themselves, we also looked at the AmeriCorps participants in the 20 programs, in the nine states and nationally, using data furnished by the programs and by the Corporation itself. Although these data provide no more than a broad descriptive picture, they do suggest that participants nationally and within our states were broadly diverse in terms of gender and race (though typically young, as might be expected), that they tended to be generally well-educated (23% are college graduates, while another 41% have at least some college education), and that they represented a reasonable cross-section of income levels. AmeriCorps was able to attract reasonable numbers of minorities and people of low income.

The program-by-program data we examined in connection with our program review suggest, though, that within the aggregate diversity, individual AmeriCorps programs tended to have fairly homogeneous participants—i.e., specific programs tended to recruit largely white, or largely African-American, or largely college-educated participants. We were unable to determine whether that pattern was more widespread, though past experience suggests that some programs (e.g., urban youth service corps) are likely to have fairly homogenous (i.e., poor and minority) populations of young people.

We also conclude that an important aspect of AmeriCorps programs was that they permitted local organizations to address needs and problems that, typically, categorical programs do not permit, or make difficult. AmeriCorps participant "slots" were thus a flexible resource that human service organizations (principally) could utilize to provide different services, or provide services to different populations, than they otherwise would have been able to. Creative organizations in our study sample seemed to recognize this implicitly, and made good use of it.

<u>The Federal-State Partnership</u>

Although our principal task was to study and assess the state role, our work inevitably had to consider the overall federal-state relationship: in particular, how the Corporation for National Service chose to define its own role and, in so doing, to structure the role that states could play.

We conclude that the Corporation's role, consistently energetic and involved in individual AmeriCorps programs, was overall a plus, despite being excessive and intrusive at times. The Corporation consistently kept the initiative in setting the objectives, articulating in considerable detail its desired outcomes and, most of all, devising and keeping to a timetable that left states, especially during the first year, with little opportunity to have much voice in decisions. The Corporation centralized the provision of health care, took a strong oversight role in the provision of child care, and funded a network of national technical assistance providers, all with good intentions and varying degrees of success. At the same time, its handling of the legislatively mandated funding arrangement—the formula and competitive grants—promoted confusion rather than balance, and somewhat strengthened the Corporation's role.

In fact, the Corporation was activist not only in its relationships with states but also in the very hands-on role it assumed in the selection and refinement of individual programs. The approval of states' program selections marked not an endpoint in many cases, but the start of a new phase of Corporation oversight that focused on the specification (and often respecification) of goals and objectives, and that sometimes included a range of other "negotiation issues" regarding programs. Corporation oversight also, at times, extended to such issues as the staffing of state Commissions and the function of Commissioners.

The Corporation's energetic prosecution of such a close-in selection and monitoring agenda was fueled by a staff cadre that was energetic, highly intelligent and extremely dedicated (at times zealous), but typically young and frequently criticized for its inexperience. Many had been participants in service programs themselves; few had had responsibility for setting up and managing them. In their determination to make AmeriCorps succeed, they were from time to time too energetic in espousing the Corporation's ideas about programs, impatient with or ignorant of the difficulties state officials faced in responding to the Corporation's push, and too unseasoned to provide helpful advice and guidance to states at times they most could benefit from it. Added to that was marked volatility among Corporation program officer assignments, so that few states in our study group established relationships with continuity.

The end effect of the Corporation's actions was, we concluded, to limit the state role and, in some respects, to slow the capacity and motivation of states to widen that role. State staff were hard-pressed to respond to the stream of requirements imposed on them by the legislation and the Corporation. Their major role (which the more skillful and experienced state directors in our study group were able to transcend) was to put AmeriCorps programs into place on a "just in time" basis. The state Commissions could play an important role in the selection of candidate programs, but came to recognize that the Corporation had, and would exercise, final say. Put another way, Commissions had substantial but not sole or final say in the disposition even of their own formula funds.

Exacerbating this situation was the administrative clumsiness that arose between the Corporation's program officer staff and the Corporation state representatives, the former ACTION staff who had worked in the states, often for many years. These individuals, and the traditional service programs they managed (including VISTA and the Senior Corps programs, RSVP and Foster Grandparents), had at most peripheral and blurry roles in the implementation of AmeriCorps; in the majority of our study states, they had no role at all. The state representatives made their own programming decisions independent of the Commissions (with one exception), and without reference to AmeriCorps programs the Commissions were considering. In the end, the Corporation was operating, at least within our study states, two separate programs of service.

Although our major conclusion is that the roles were not balanced, we should stress that the Corporation's role was, to a considerable extent, positive. Despite the stress and often the confusion it entailed, the rapid implementation timetable spurred progress and results that a more routine and studied implementation pace would not have. And in its insistent (if not always consistent or clear) emphasis on "quality," the Corporation raised the stakes for states. It chose not to establish and maintain minimum acceptable standards, but instead to set expectations high, and push states in their selection of programs to meet them. It did, we conclude, prod states to look more closely at their program choices and make those choices with an eye toward quality and tangible outcomes. Indeed, we conclude that the overall quality of the programs would have been lower absent the steady pressure the Corporation applied.

PUBLIC POLICY AND NATIONAL SERVICE

We have stressed previously the interplay between AmeriCorps implementation and the notable political heat that AmeriCorps generated from the time of its legislative passage (indeed, even earlier). It seems plain that partisan jousting affected implementation, in some ways probably for the worse: in the truncated scope that Commissions ended up with, and in the failure to integrate the new AmeriCorps successfully with the existing ACTION programs, which are now renamed but essentially unchanged.

Yet we think the experience points to a larger conclusion: for the foreseeable future, there will be a "politics" of national service, closely tied to policy and implementation issues; addressing the politics successfully is a key dimension of making national service a reality. Put another way, the political currents that affect AmeriCorps are far from random and exogenous; they are a part of the underlying policy issues inherent in national service.

National service as a topic differs from most other policy issues in this way: if there is no national service, there are no measurable negative consequences, no tangible segment of the population that feels injurious effects. There are likely opportunity costs (in the form of fore-gone services and production, diminished opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment, etc.), just as there are visible benefits when service activities are performed. But the enumeration of opportunity costs is usually somewhat speculative—assuming a partisan look when carried too far—and the measurement of benefits is similarly open to dispute. A pragmatic rationale for national service cannot be constructed in the way it can for public education, or even public welfare, where the victims of a failure to act can be identified, and the costs of inaction visibly demonstrated.

The politics is exacerbated in part because, past the broad and vague appeal based on citizenship, participation, selflessness and concern for social needs, there remains (and, we conclude, will always remain) disagreement about what service is, what national service is, whether there ought to be a federal role or support for it, and if so (a large "if," in the eyes of a not inconsiderable group of opponents) what the shape, extent and limitations of that role should be.

These imprecisions were on display in the debate about AmeriCorps and its implementation: arguments that there should be no paid service; that there should be no AmeriCorps logos or uniforms; that the Corporation for National Service's role was too intrusive; that AmeriCorps was but another failed Great Society program; and that its cost-per-participant figure was too high. These objections were lodged in response to an initiative that both stipended participants and rewarded them with college tuition; sought to establish a visible and coherent "national identity"; and defined and exercised an active, aggressive and large role for the federal government in the establishment of service programs within states.

The AmeriCorps experience is evidence that any attempt to operationalize the concept of service at any perceptible national scale will raise hackles precisely because national service finds its support most readily as an ideal rather than as public policy. Once service is implemented in some form, the disagreements that conceal themselves under the inclusive rubric of national service will come to the fore: this or that tangible version will prove to be too elitist, or too indistinct, or too expensive, or too large, or too tilted toward established organizations, or too partisan, etc.

We do not mean to suggest that national service should be abandoned as a strategy in the United States. Instead, we argue that there are several core issues around which political consensus must be developed if service can become a stable program. Most fundamentally, perhaps, is some tangible answer to the question: what is meant by "national service"? While we do not attempt to answer that question in full, we would instead propose to consider two key aspects: full-time stipended participants, and structure and management.

Full-Time, Stipended Participants

The most salient and defining element of national service is the full-time, stipended participant.[25] Most observers agree that such "slots" capture a key part of the service ideal: the individual (usually young) who wishes to make a full-time commitment, at some personal expense, to meeting some real need, but who needs basic living support in order to do so. Funding such slots creates the framework for a cadre of individuals whose contributions and effort measurably transcend intermittent volunteering or low-paid, part-time work in a human service setting. If those "slots" are publicly funded, it demonstrates support for an ideal of service, a commitment on the part of government; if federally funded, it approaches the idea of "national service."

The full-time, stipended slot is problematic, however. Stripped of its service connotations, it is no different than work experience, raising among critics questions about whether the work is needed,[26] whether it displaces "true" volunteers with paid volunteers, and whether the participants might be drawn into partisan activity. It is irreducibly costly, and the cost issues can be readily exacerbated—as they were in AmeriCorps—by the addition of plausible elements: setting the stipend at around the minimum wage, providing health benefits, offering tuition benefits for a completed tour of duty. Though real enough, the cost issue quickly becomes a facet of partisan debate. AmeriCorps slots indeed were criticized for being too costly and were characterized as siphoning funds from other important social needs.[27]

There is evidence for arguments on both sides, our research shows. There were indeed some programs whose service was largely undistinguishable from work experience. Yet those were the exceptions, and all the programs we saw were consistent with AmeriCorps regulations and were satisfactorily operated. The number of exceptions we encountered was modest, within a range one might expect to find in any set of programs that is closely scrutinized. We would, indeed, have found it noteworthy had we found uniformly high-quality service positions. Over time, better and more experienced management will reduce but not eliminate the variations we noted, for they are inherent in any kind of large-scale program that puts individuals into work settings and has comparatively flexible aims.

The AmeriCorps history demonstrates the amount of disagreement that support for full-time, stipended participants can engender, how divisive the issue can become, and how difficult it is to resolve either in terms of service or in terms of the work itself. To be sure, the disputatious nature of the debate was partly caused by broader partisanship. It was augmented by the fact

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[25] We do not necessarily connect the tuition reimbursement now offered by AmeriCorps in this formulation, since, despite its appeal, it is not inherently a defining part of service.

[26] Youth corps programs, for example, must frequently respond to the criticism that their slots are no different than "make work."

[27] Complaints that costs might be running even higher than the original estimates (though never fully proved) prompted concerns that the program was "too expensive," though its major cost elements had been known from the outset. The cost criticisms seemed more convenient than logical.

that AmeriCorps was consciously intended to be a relatively large program: the scale and the projected growth of the full-time AmeriCorps program in part sharpened opposition.[28] But in the end, the inherent nature of public support for full-time, stipended service work is an issue that invites strong disagreement.

The Structure and Management of National Service

A second key aspect of any definition of "national service" centers on the way that service is structured and managed—the major theme of our study. Our work suggests the importance of the states' role in carrying out AmeriCorps and their overall success in fulfilling that role. In part, this would be true simply for reasons of administrative logic. States are at the natural midpoint, poised between individual communities (and programs) and the federal government. States also have the fiscal accountability and payment systems, and the requisite expertise to respond effectively to a federal initiative with its frequently technical and complicated rules.

States traditionally work competently, though not always strategically, and this has been borne out in the history of AmeriCorps to date. In the study states, the early response of governors' offices rarely went much beyond the minimum necessary to meet federal requirements, and receive then disburse funds. Governors' offices acquiesced in the states becoming AmeriCorps applicants; assisted—for the most part in purely reactive fashion—in the formation of the required Commissions; administratively housed and supported the Commission staff (who with one exception were all either career civil servants or governor's staff); and made provisions for grant administration. The broader expectations of "the state role" were largely unrealized. Beyond initial help in getting the Commissions formulated and, in some cases, reviewing and approving the staff, governors' offices remained uninvolved.

The Commissioners themselves took on a variety of roles in the early going: from active involvement in public hearings, proposal solicitation, program review and selection; to a board-like review-and-approval function; to a largely passive and ceremonial role.[29] In none of the states did a strategic vision or emphasis originate with the Commissioners; if they espoused one, it was one that had been designed and written by their staffs. By the second year of their existence, Commissions (though not their staffs) in our study group had begun to resemble each other in function: they were for the most part figurehead organizations that spoke on behalf of service in their states, ratified decisions regarding the funding of individual programs and assisted, minimally, in seeking funding or other resources.

It was the professional staff that brought AmeriCorps into being in the states and did so on the shortest of timelines. Once named, professional staff often had major responsibility for the formation of Commissions, and orchestrated (or performed) the other key functions necessary to get AmeriCorps launched on time and in compliance with the Corporation's rules and directives.

[28] The VISTA program, in contrast, has never had more than 5,000 participants nationally at any given time. It is structurally quite similar to the full-time version of AmeriCorps, has been in existence for close to 30 years, and though it has been threatened on occasion with defunding, it has continued to survive.

[29] In one state, the Commission was not fully named until well after first-year programs had been selected.

And staff kept the AmeriCorps programs supported, acted as buffers between programs and Corporation staff, and established the monitoring, program reselection and grants management procedures that were the beginning of the formal service infrastructure in some of the states.[30]

The Corporation's role was also, of course, critical in shaping the process, making quality a prominent theme, and keeping work moving ahead at an accelerated pace. Two facets of its role are important to understand. First, the Corporation was seeking consciously to approach its work in an untraditional and innovative way. Its motivation seems genuinely to have been to implement AmeriCorps with an effective stress on the quality and tangible results of its programs. There was also (perhaps because the Corporation's first president was a private sector executive) a propensity toward experimentation, and toward a non-bureaucratic style of organization and management. The aim of proceeding as a "reinvented" organization was clear from the outset.

Second, the Corporation assumed the role of strong managing partner in its relationship with the states. In part, that was its predilection: the core individuals who founded the Corporation were committed to the idea of service and wanted its new national operating entity to have a strong hand in shaping service programs in the states. In part, too, there was genuine concern that AmeriCorps would become a partisan target if it failed or if substantial and visible problems arose during its implementation. It became imperative, in the Corporation's eyes, to build a substantial record of achievement by the time the legislation was scheduled for reauthorization; its timetable reflected this sense of urgency. From the beginning, the Corporation defined its authority broadly, and so exercised it.

Thus, implementation of AmeriCorps was shaped principally at the federal level. The standards for quality were promulgated by the Corporation and used (consistently but unofficially, since these standards were not regulations) as a measuring rod for programs the states proposed to fund. The Corporation maintained that its quality assurance role extended to formula-funded programs as well as to those supported with competitive funds. This stance, along with the "window" rule, whereby states could shift their funding decisions in response to the Corporation's choices, weakened the distinction between programs the Corporation approved and those that states approved. In the end, the Corporation's approval was critical. Aggravating that tendency were the "National Direct" programs, which the Corporation funded directly without state input, even though its choices almost always affected the states and sometimes created friction within individual states.

The Corporation also, to a marked degree, combined its substantive role with the political concerns it felt about reauthorization. From early on, Corporation staff stressed to state directors the fragility of support in Washington for AmeriCorps and the risks the program faced, and early on conveyed to states the importance of public relations and image-building. Program directors were pushed to develop lists of measurable outcomes that programs would achieve, and that rewriting became an irritant to states and to programs. The Corporation designed the

[30] Some states, as noted previously, had prior organizational support for service programming, but others had none—excepting the ACTION directors, who had little role in the AmeriCorps state grants.

AmeriCorps logo and brokered the sale of AmeriCorps uniforms in an effort to promote a national image. It also issued "media kits" to states, and at one conference provided briefings about how to handle press visits to programs, including use of an AmeriCorps videotape.

In short, the Corporation sought both to establish programs of good quality and also to market them in response to, at first, weak support and later to partisan hostility. In so doing, it was seeking both to create a "national service" program and also to position that program for continued appropriations and eventual reauthorization. That the program has been as swiftly and widely implemented as it has, with as few problems, is a tribute in good part to the Corporation's zeal in launching it. That the program is still very much a Washington-driven entity, with states still struggling for a sense of ownership, is a result of the forceful and at times excessive role the Corporation played. Likewise, the largely uncoordinated nature of the former ACTION programs and AmeriCorps, either at the state level or within the Corporation, reflects the single-minded attention the Corporation paid to the AmeriCorps initiative during its first three years of existence.

RECOMMENDATIONS: THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL SERVICE

A majority of Americans continue to believe that providing service is both a fundamental aspect of good citizenship and an effective way to accomplish work that meets critical community needs. AmeriCorps' early success in providing productive and high-quality opportunities for service, and establishing a framework for implementation, seems useful to build on and improve. In that spirit, and based on the data and findings of this study, we make the following recommendations, directed to three distinct audiences: the Corporation, the states and the Congress.

Recommendations to the Corporation for National Service

We recommend that the Corporation redefine the responsibilities for service between the federal and state levels of government by taking the following three steps:

1. Substantially increase the responsibilities of state Commissions for all Corporation-funded programs. Under the current arrangement, Commissions have only limited say in many of the federally funded service programs that operate within their states. In particular, the previous ACTION programs (VISTA and Senior Corps) are primarily managed by the federal government. Shifting those responsibilities downward would add to the scale of the state effort. This would, of course, require more coordination within the Corporation's organizational structure—particularly, again, regarding AmeriCorps and the ACTION programs. We also think that the quality standards that thus far have been applied with good effect to AmeriCorps would strengthen the VISTA and senior programs as well.

2. Limit its own role in program selection and refinement. The Corporation's greatest strength has been in articulating the importance of quality standards and pressing states to use high standards in selecting and supporting programs. The Corporation has been less successful in allowing states full responsibility for their program selections.

Through the practice of reexamining state program selections and pressing for refinements even after approving choices, the Corporation has undercut states' own responsibilities. A more appropriate role, we suggest, is for the Corporation to be vigorous and insistent on the quality issue, explicit and timely regarding issues of compliance standards and monitoring, and relatively hands-off on actual selection and negotiation regarding individual programs.

3. Establish and maintain clear and realistic expectations for state Commissioners. Commissioners now are being encouraged to assume broad leadership roles, yet in our study states their activities were generally more limited: representing some of the appropriate constituencies (service organizations, public agencies, volunteer organizations, etc.), ratifying program choices presented by their staffs, and serving as advocates for service. This represents a scale of commitment most Commissioners are willing to fulfill, and one that, well carried out, could be an important base for further strengthening their role over time.

Besides these balancing steps, we also recommend a continued push toward cost-sharing, not just to ease the federal support burden over time, but also to formalize and augment the state commitment to service. Rather than asking states to provide any funds for stipends, we would suggest an arrangement where states must provide needed administrative support funds for all stipended service participants as a condition for receiving federal service funding. Variations might include forward funding commitments (of two to three years) on the part of states, state commitments to pay for specific program elements, and strong provisions requiring that a fraction of needed funding come from the private and/or philanthropic sector.

Recommendations to the States

While the Corporation should continue its efforts to rebalance responsibilities, we also recommend that states take greater initiative in leadership responsibility for service programs. Although the Corporation will continue to play a visible role in the federal-state partnership and will in many ways influence state actions, there are clear opportunities for a stronger state role that should be acted on.

States can take independent steps to strengthen representation and membership on Commissions; begin connecting and integrating service and volunteer programs more completely; establish fundraising and cost-sharing goals and carry them out; and monitor and assess their own programs more extensively. In addition, states can empower their Commissions in more far-reaching ways. Several states, for instance, have considered incorporating their Commissions as separate nonprofit organizations with expanded service and voluntarism agendas.

Taking the initiative through such actions as these will, at times, create tensions and disagreement over the nature of the federal-state role. On balance, though, that process will probably lead to strengthened and improved contributions at both levels. Our judgment is that the federal role can be usefully modified to promote leadership on the part of states, but that leadership will happen only if states move energetically to make the most of those opportunities.

Recommendations to the Congress

We urge Congress, in considering reauthorization or new legislation regarding national service, to continue the active federal role. In particular, we do not believe that a pure block-granting approach is necessary or appropriate. The federal role in setting priority areas for service, seeking to establish and maintain quality standards, highlighting promising or effective service programs, assuring compliance with fiscal and other standards, and providing funding directly to pilot or demonstration efforts and to programs whose scope may be national or regional, are all important functions. With regard to AmeriCorps, these roles were largely successful and can be faulted only for having limited the development of state autonomy. That is a balance issue that can, we think, be successfully addressed if it is carefully provided for in new legislation.

One specific change we recommend concerns formula and competitive funding arrangements. The intent of the 1993 legislation was to recognize state autonomy by establishing a distinct state formula funding stream; in practice, the distinction was lost, and formula and competitive funds were treated somewhat interchangeably, thus limiting state autonomy. A change that would increase the fraction of AmeriCorps' funding directly under the control of states, and permit greater flexibility in decisions about competitive funding, would encourage a stronger state role.

Finally, on a broader scale, the early history of the implementation of AmeriCorps is representative of the difficulties and challenges involved in developing a truly decentralized operation and the need to develop legislative priorities and timetables accordingly. The 1993 legislation created a significant conflict between institutional goals (development of state leadership through establishment of strong Commissions) and performance goals (rapid implementation of high-quality programs). That conflict was resolved at a cost to the first goal.

New legislative initiatives need to reflect the reality that devolution is not automatic and that development of state capacity and leadership in a relatively young field, such as service, will take time and may slow the achievement of performance objectives. For any reauthorized or new legislation, we recommend that there be adequate provision of both time and resources for the careful and complete development of governance and leadership mechanisms at the state level. The federal partner—in this case, the Corporation for National Service—should be directed to promote that development, and not be compelled—as in many ways it was—to choose between that aim and the achievement of the legislation's programmatic objectives and implementation timetable.