



Service Years and Bridging:

A report on service years as a strategy to fuel civic renewal



May 2021



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Executive Summary

Young people can play a unique role as “bridgers” who form positive relationships across lines of difference and proactively fuel civic renewal in America, especially in this time of deep divides in our country. A bridge has a combination of attitudes, skills, and the motivation to act and produce inclusive outcomes in their community and in the nation. Service year alumni are more likely to vote, believe themselves to be better problem solvers, feel more comfortable interacting with people from different backgrounds, and feel more connected to their communities.¹

Service Year Alliance conducted a landscape scan and analysis from November 2020 to January 2021 to understand the impact of service years in developing bridgers. The findings led to invaluable knowledge about best practices, challenges, and opportunities for service year programs in the field to support the development of service year corps members into life-long civic leaders.

Based on the data gathered, we see the following as the greatest opportunities for investment to advance this work:

- Place-based approaches to support capacity and resource needs to help service year corps members and alumni become bridgers
- Field knowledge and practice dissemination for other programs and communities to adopt best practices
- Systems change to increase equity and incentivize service year corps member development among programs

Introduction

Service Year Alliance is an organization relentlessly pursuing a bold vision – making a year of paid, full-time service – a service year – a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans.

¹ 2016 *New Methods for Assessing AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes: Final Survey Technical Report*



To achieve our mission, Service Year Alliance works to grow service years in America, with a goal of reaching one million opportunities annually within a generation. Service Year Alliance is focused on growth that delivers a three-fold impact: measurably addressing needs in communities, changing the lives of those who serve, and encouraging individuals to become life-long civic leaders to fuel civic renewal in communities across our country. It is this last impact – life-long civic leaders – that takes center stage in this report as life-long civic leaders and bridgers are synonymous and represent similar outcomes.

Cultural Competence refers to an ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures.

Civic Engagement is the knowledge, attitudes, and activities of an individual who actively works to improve or influence a community.

In order to identify how service year corps members develop bridging mindsets associated with civic leadership, we conducted a comprehensive landscape scan and analysis from November 2020 - January 2021. Our goal was to understand what experiences deliberately foster values development, provide necessary tools, and promote identities that bridge across divides and changes. As a product of this work, we can now pinpoint the formative experiences deliberately structured into service year programs to foster values development and equip service year corps members with the necessary tools that empower them to bridge divides in life post-service.

Approach

To determine the impact of service years on bridging we needed to first understand the components of bridging that were measurable. Service Year Alliance’s pre-existing institutional knowledge regarding the service year field and previous research informed our approach to the landscape scan and analysis outlined in this report, and cultural competence and civic engagement were identified as the two primary components of this work.²

² We grounded our approach to this landscape scan in [terminology defined by Peter Levine](#) at Tufts University. In addition, we referenced the [self-evaluation rubric](#) by AAC&U that breaks down intercultural competencies into knowledge relating to cultural self-awareness and other cultural worldviews, skills in empathy and communication, and attitudes of curiosity and openness.



Service Year Alliance believes these concepts create bridgers that fuel civic renewal in communities.

We began this work with a set of hypotheses – based on prior knowledge of the field and past conversations with key stakeholders – about the way service year programs develop bridging attitudes amongst their corps members:

- Programs whose corps members serve in diverse communities or amongst a diverse corps develop greater cultural competence skills.
- Programs with an alumni engagement strategy have a greater influence on the development of the service year corps member.
- Programs with staff who are trained in facilitating training and reflection activities related to cultural competence and civic engagement produce better corps member development.
- Given additional capacity, programs could invest more time and resources into corps member development.
- AmeriCorps programs feel restricted by the 80/20 rule which allows only 20% of a corps member's time to be spent on professional and personal development training thus impacting how much cultural competence training programs do.
- AmeriCorps programs feel restricted in talking about civic engagement and civic outcomes in the community due to the restrictions on corps member duties – for example, service year corps members cannot participate in voter registration.
- The attitudes of and the impacts measured by major funding entities – both public and private – play an important role in determining what programs are focused on.



Methods

Our primary goal was to understand the specific programmatic elements that explicitly contribute to the development of corps members into bridgers while testing our hypotheses above.

To understand best practices for beneficial corps member development outcomes we wanted to understand specific quantitative elements regarding explicit instruction, implicit experience, and cohort makeup and cohesion. We developed and disseminated a comprehensive network-wide survey to a diverse set of approximately 1,000 service year programs. The completion rate for this survey was 83% which is consistent with other surveys Service Year Alliance has launched in the field, though it is important to note the survey was in the field for less time than usual – approximately 6 weeks – due to the project timeline.³

³ Of the programs who responded to the survey, 72% identified as State programs, 24% as National, 17% as VISTA, 11% as non-AmeriCorps funded, and 3% as international.³ 62.5% of the programs work in issues of education and youth, 29% in community and nonprofit development, 25% on the environment, 23% on economic security, and 23% on homelessness and housing – a smaller number of programs work on a variety of other topics (Figure 1). 40% of the programs are part of a national organization, and 31% of the programs are over 15 years old. The largest set of programs who responded – 39% – have between 11 and 25 corps members. 25% of the programs have between 26 and 50 corps members, 12% have between 51 and 100 corps members, and 11% have 10 or fewer corps members (Figure 2). 60% of the programs have corps members that serve full-time, and 35% have a mix of part-time and full-time members. Full-time positions represent approximately half of the positions in the AmeriCorps ecosystem; the remaining positions (which we refer to as “part time” throughout this analysis) are a mix of half-, part-time, quarter-time, and minimum time positions.

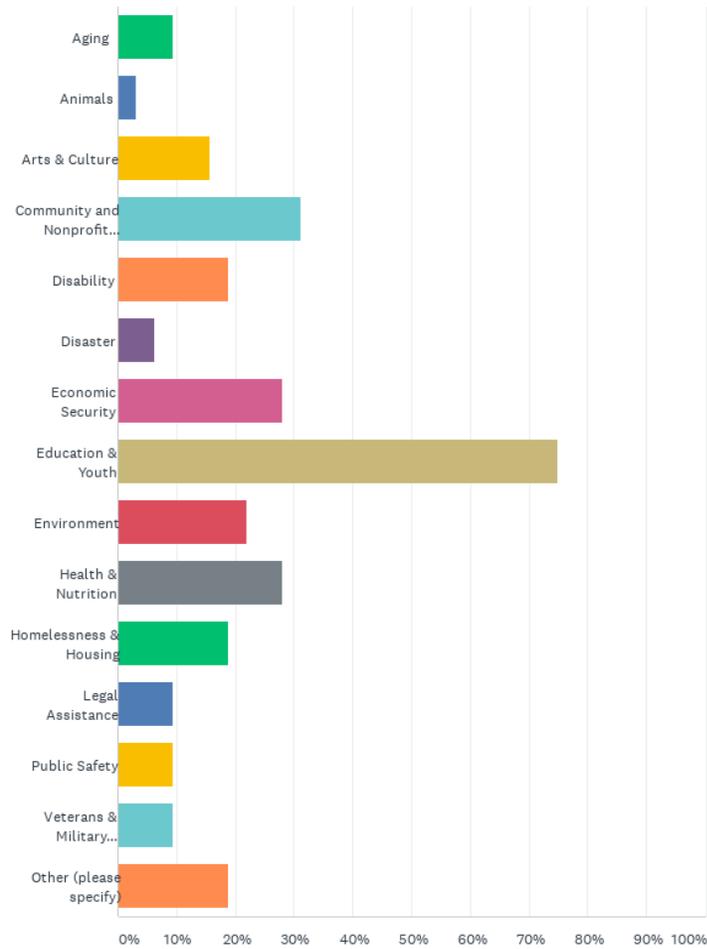


Figure 1 - The question read: What focus area does your organization support (select all that apply)?

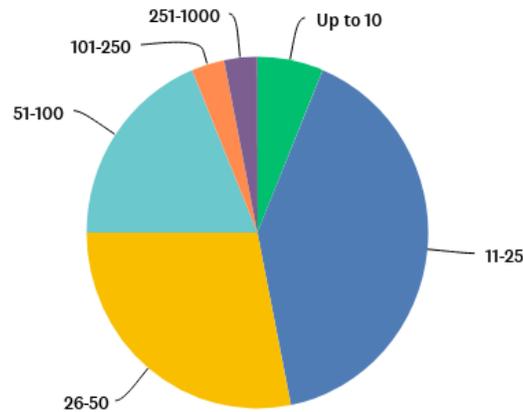


Figure 2 - The question read: On average, how many service year corps members are in your program?

Service Year Alliance also completed interviews and held small group conversations with service year programs, state and federal agencies, collaboratives, Service Year Impact Communities, service year alumni, and philanthropic stakeholders in an effort to collect qualitative data for this report. Conversations with programs and philanthropic donors ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and each program was asked the same questions. The programs we spoke with were both AmeriCorps funded and non-AmeriCorps funded (Figure 3) and represent a diverse range of focus areas. We interviewed both national and local programs to understand differences between the way programs supported their service year corps members depending on their program model. State commissions and other collaboratives that serve as a convener or support resource for programs in a city, region, or state also spoke with us to share high-level priorities they have for their programs in relation to community needs and member development. Perspectives from a group of alumni allowed us to hear directly from individuals about the elements of service years that most influenced them. Lastly, we spoke with philanthropic donors we thought would most likely fund work resulting in bridging outcomes. The findings below are compiled from all of these conversations.

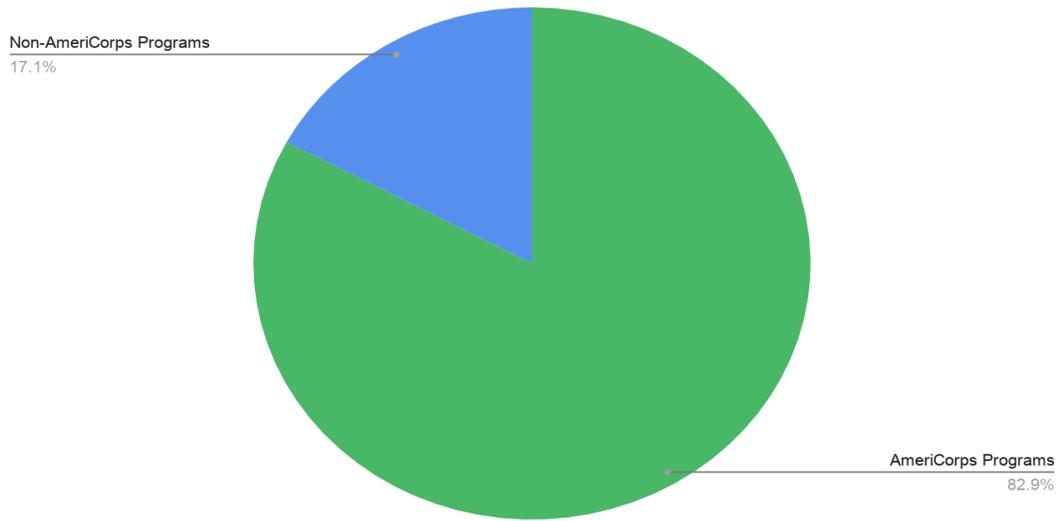


Figure 3 - Programs interviewed broken down by AmeriCorps and non-AmeriCorps funding sources.

Findings

Bridging is Defined and Prioritized Differently Across the Service Year Field

Overall, the terms “bridger” and “civic renewal” are not often widely used in the service year field. Throughout data collection we grounded in using the terms “civic engagement” and “cultural competence” assuming they would be more common than bridger and civic renewal; but they are not used either. This is problematic because it can be an indication that programs are not tracking the specific methods that contribute to how their members become civically engaged individuals through service. Tracking civic renewal outcomes is key to showing the impact of service years on both the individual and community in order to influence policymakers and funders who can advance service years as a strategy for fueling civic renewal. Many of the programs interviewed view civic engagement and cultural competence as a community development strategy, often focusing on the impact of service in the community as opposed to the development of the individual serving. Many AmeriCorps-funded programs also shared that they don’t utilize the term civic engagement because of the perception that corps members may be engaging in political activity during service. It is apparent that the perception of civic engagement equaling a political activity is common based on



many of the responses we received from programs when we led with the question “What civic engagement training do you provide your members and alumni?” Overwhelming, programs perceived that AmeriCorps regulations make raising civic engagement directly with corps members challenging so they do not often discuss “civics” in the programming. It’s important that programs understand the difference between corps members doing political advocacy work during service versus understanding how to navigate different pathways to creating solutions for community needs.

We also asked a series of questions around cultural competence as a component of service years that contribute to bridging attitudes. While this terminology appeared to be more common, the way programs defined this work still varied across the board. While there are many programs who do not prioritize the development of cultural competence

amongst corps members because of capacity and internal priorities, others have explicit reasons for not utilizing the terminology because cultural competency can create an understanding of one to another without addressing inequities. Programs that are promoting cultural competency often stated it was most relevant to social justice and community reform and like civic engagement, is a tenant of humanity and curiosity in addressing community needs. The most common response we received from programs when we asked about their training and support related to cultural competence was a larger overview of their base-level training on diversity, equity, and inclusion. When we pressed to better understand what the elements of those trainings are, programs often shared details about specific awareness and reflection activities around racial equity or identity. During the small group session with alumni, the term cultural competence was identified by almost all of the alumni as “unintentional” or a “buzzword.” Many of the alumni said the term wasn’t used during their service year but that they did gain cultural competency skills. One alum shared, “It’s impossible not to increase your cultural competence when serving. In my first year, I was exposed to so many different communities.” Despite the unease with the use of the term cultural competence, across the board, there is still a focus on ensuring corps members understand themselves and a community outside of their own – either through exposure to the community they are serving or to

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For me, my language changed so much during my service year because the organization expected me to be mindful of how my language could make others feel marginalized. Something as offhand as saying, ‘Hey guys’ could make other staff or the people I was serving feel disregarded or misrepresented.”



the corps members' cohort. In our findings, almost all programs agreed the relevance of these skills in their program was that it increased equity in their community.

Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is Integral to Fueling Civic Renewal

Many service year programs that are prioritizing civic engagement and cultural competence development, are looking at the work from a diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) and leadership perspective. These programs see cultural competence and civic engagement as an integral part of promoting equity within their communities. This commitment an organization or program has to diversity, equity, and inclusion is a direct reflection of the internal culture of the organization which, in turn, impacts the service year program they operate and subsequently impacts corps member development. Specifically, it influences the development of the corps members' bridging skills and attitudes.

Across the board, almost every service year program, alumni, and collaborative we spoke with attributed the development of civic engagement and cultural competence skills to an experience influenced by culture and by behaviors that either developed or hindered the creation of bridging attitudes. It is critical that organizations invest in a culture that models bridging behaviors inside their organization. How the organization interacts externally with constituents, the community, partners, and corps members is also critical. Many programs expressed that they are grappling with equity internally as an organization.

To address equity needs we found many programs are working to ensure equal representation on their staff, facilitate difficult conversations about racism, develop equitable hiring practices, and address the pay gaps to name a few. Staff knowledge and capability to adequately and inclusively provide equity training was also named as a barrier to supporting the development of bridging behaviors. All of these practices impact the way corps members go on to discuss equity in their personal and professional life. The DEI practices and trainings have a direct correlation to the programs doing well in bridging and civic renewal outcomes with their corps members.

Another way programs are working to ensure they create bridgers is through equitable programming and recruitment practices. Ensuring that a cohort is diverse and accessible to all – including corps members who come from within the community they serve and from other communities – benefits individuals in the community and provides corps members with the opportunity to be exposed to people different than themselves. Of the programs who responded to



the survey, 64% named they have a diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy for recruitment, while 20% do not have a strategy. Ensuring a wide range of corps members serve in a program at the same time, while also participating in intentional reflection activities to discuss differences among themselves and with the community, has demonstrated impact on the corps members development of bridging skills. But equitable corps member recruitment practices can be difficult for many programs when the organization doesn't have equitable hiring practices at-large. Some programs noted concern because there was great diversity in race, ethnicity, and gender within their service year program but not in other areas of the organization. These programs named that this inequity creates a perception that the organization sees less value in the individuals serving from underrepresented populations because there is no room, or perceived room, for corps members to advance at an organization post-service. They recognize the importance of ensuring there is equal representation at all levels of the organization to create a diverse organizational staff that is representative of the community and corps members. The corps that have demonstrated success in creating culturally competent corps members not only create diverse corps, but also create diverse representation at their organization and have meaningful goals for DEI.

Having an equally represented organizational staff also ensures that staff members understand the corps members they are supporting. Ensuring staff holistically understand equity and how to discuss it with corps members can be done through training and conversation. It is also important to ensure that staff members understand how to communicate about their own identity and experiences and that they can empathize with corps member perspectives. Across the board, programs shared the sentiment that intentional training around the components of equity are needed at a minimum, but also expressed the critical need for staff training to understand the nuance of diversity, equity, and inclusion and to support the types of training that build bridging attitudes. We found this to be particularly important for smaller organizations in communities with fewer training resources and partnerships to aid in supporting corps member development during service.

Because we know that the implicit experiences of corps members with individuals different from themselves are critical in shaping bridging attitudes, we asked programs if they are currently collecting demographic information to better understand who is participating in their program. A majority of the 106 programs that responded to the question collect some demographic information from the corps members, including 71% who collect information on age, 60% on race, 48% on ethnicity, gender identity, and geography, and 24% on disability (Figure 4). However, many of the programs that collect demographic information stated they do not necessarily use the data to

identify gaps in representation to form a more diverse cohort in future program years due to not having the capacity to take it on or not understanding how to create a diverse corps. All of these programs that are successful in understanding their organizational culture and make up, have a DEI plan internally that can be used with their corps, and utilize information they collect to build intentional corps with intentional training. These are the programs that are building bridgers and civically engaged and culturally competent corps members.

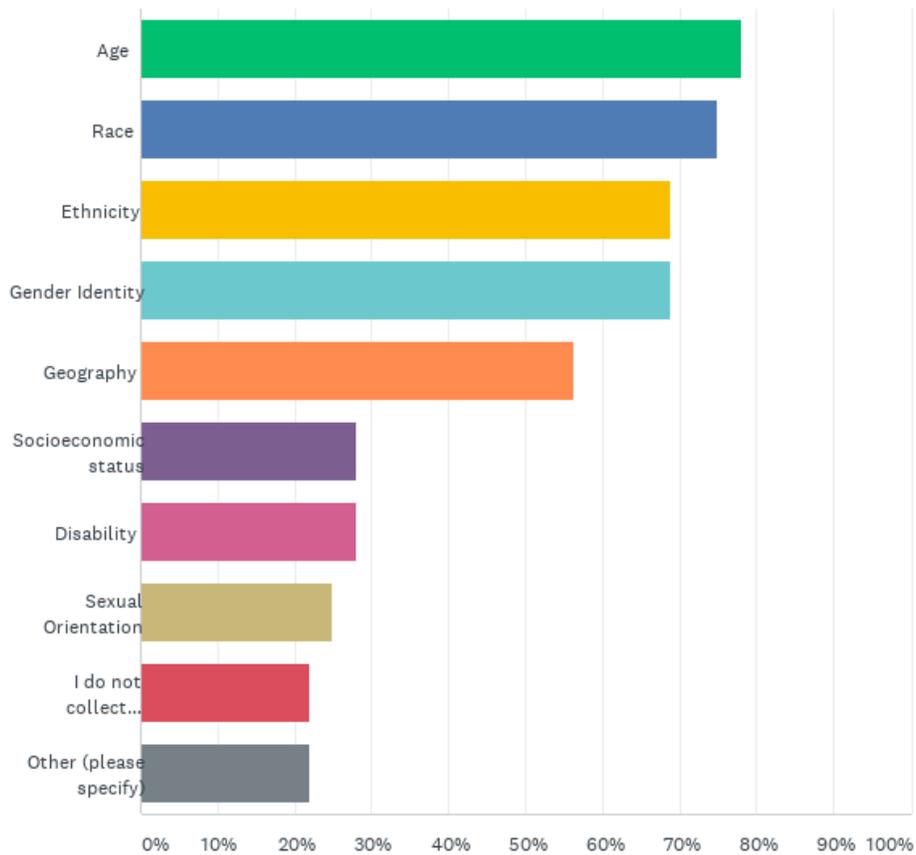


Figure 4 - The question read: If you collect demographic information about your corps members, which of the following categories of information do you collect?



Well-Defined Service Year Corps Member Development is Key to Building Bridgers

We know based on the interviews with programs and alumni that service years contribute to the development of bridging skills merely because the nature of a service year intervention creates opportunities for people serving to create empathetic and compassionate skills. Alumni see the results of that skill development during and after service. The difficulty then becomes how programs can track the inherent skills all corps members gain through their service year and be able to report out the exact bridge building skills attained by a corps member's given explicit training and supports throughout service. Of the programs that shared they are prioritizing corps member development as a core component of their programming, building bridging attitudes was not an intentional component. According to our survey, 91% of programs felt their corps members learned bridging skills through both explicit training and implicit service experience. However, a majority of programs are grappling with how they can successfully track service year corps member development. Many do not have the proper systems or processes in place to do so, not to mention a lack of staff capacity. Additionally, many AmeriCorps programs prioritize tracking the impact of corps members on the community versus tracking the corps member development due to monitoring and evaluation requirements to receive AmeriCorps funds. AmeriCorps-funded programs that are tracking corps member development efforts noted that they gather the data but don't typically have the capacity to review it or use it in the development of their program due to staff capacity. Despite these challenges, some programs and place-based collaboratives do track corps member development and utilize that data to make decisions about how their service year program impacts future corps members. This is valuable to the corps member during service and as they transition into alumni and lifelong bridgers in their respective communities.

While we heard overwhelmingly that monitoring and evaluating service year corps members is a barrier for programs; this did not show up in the same frequency for non-AmeriCorps funded programs. Several non-AmeriCorps funded programs shared that they administer some type of entry and exit surveys with their corps members to understand the impact the service and training has on their development. These programs utilized the information to see how these skills attributed to their corps members post-service and the frequency at which their alumni are going into civil-type jobs, such as community organizing, policy, healthcare, etc. Monitoring and evaluating corps member development allows programs to create better recruitment methods when they understand what matters most to their current and future corps members. It also ensures more champions of



service years through active corps member development and shows the impact of service years on the development of individuals post-service in communities in which they reside.

If corps member development is known to be important and to create bridging skills, why then would programs not invest in more civic renewal practices? According to our survey, 25% of programs said they do not assess any skills related to civic engagement or cultural competence. When asked, “What do you assess their corps members on?” – 50% said leadership and “other” skills such as communication, responsibility, and teamwork. Other responses suggested that much of their assessment was on work performance, meeting their position description responsibilities, or technical skills. These skills are also necessary for bridge building and civic renewal. In the same way DEI practices are integral to the development of bridging skills, so are other skills corps members need to be successful in their service year, such as leadership. Means of assessment included primarily performance reviews, self-evaluations, and observation. However, only a few programs do reflection exercises or group discussions that lead to some formal and informal assessments around bridging. A handful of programs are tracking critical elements of civic leadership and/or have explicit questions in these surveys around cultural competence or civic engagement. These questions are primarily in relation to leadership development. For AmeriCorps programs, there are entry and exit surveys for corps members that include civic and cultural competence questions, but the aggregate format shared back with the field does not help individual programs understand how their corps members are tracking. Having the infrastructure and capacity for monitoring and evaluation can help programs build more intentional corps member development.

Interestingly enough, while many programs are not actively monitoring and evaluating their service year corps members, they still feel strongly that corps members are advancing their skills and attitude development in a multitude of areas.

In an effort to gauge whether programs felt their corps members’ attitudes changed over the course of their service year, we asked a proxy question (*Figure 5*).

Overall, programs overwhelmingly agreed that their corps members develop skills associated with cultural competency and bridging over the course of their service year.

- Of the 100 or so programs that answered each question, 98% of programs somewhat or strongly agreed that their corps members develop empathy during service.



- 91% somewhat or strongly agreed that their corps members learn about a culture different from their own, while 5% somewhat or strongly disagree.
- 85% of programs somewhat or strongly agree that their members develop an interest in continuing to learn more about cultures different from their own, and 5% somewhat disagree. 84% of programs feel their corps members develop cultural self-awareness, and 7% somewhat or strongly disagree.
- 95% believe that corps members develop trust in one another, and that they better understand the impact they can have on their community. 86% believe their corps members develop trust in their community, and 8% somewhat disagree that their corps members do. 88% somewhat or strongly agree that their corps members develop an awareness of systemic issues, while 7% somewhat or strongly disagree.
- Finally, 85% somewhat or strongly agree that their corps members develop a greater sense that their voice matters, while 8% somewhat or strongly disagree.

This means that while programs may not all be tracking these corps member developments, it is known that corps members are inherently increasing their bridging and civic skills and capabilities during their service year. The next step for many programs is to include explicit training and track corps member skills to build more intentional bridging skills.

Lastly, throughout the interviews we conducted with programs, collaboratives, service year alumni, and philanthropic funders we heard repeatedly that building social capital is critical in shaping the mindset of service year corps members. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), considers social capital to be the links, shared values, and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and do work together. This social capital and building networks together is the fabric which, if done well, corps members feel a part of and can be utilized fully when they become alumni.

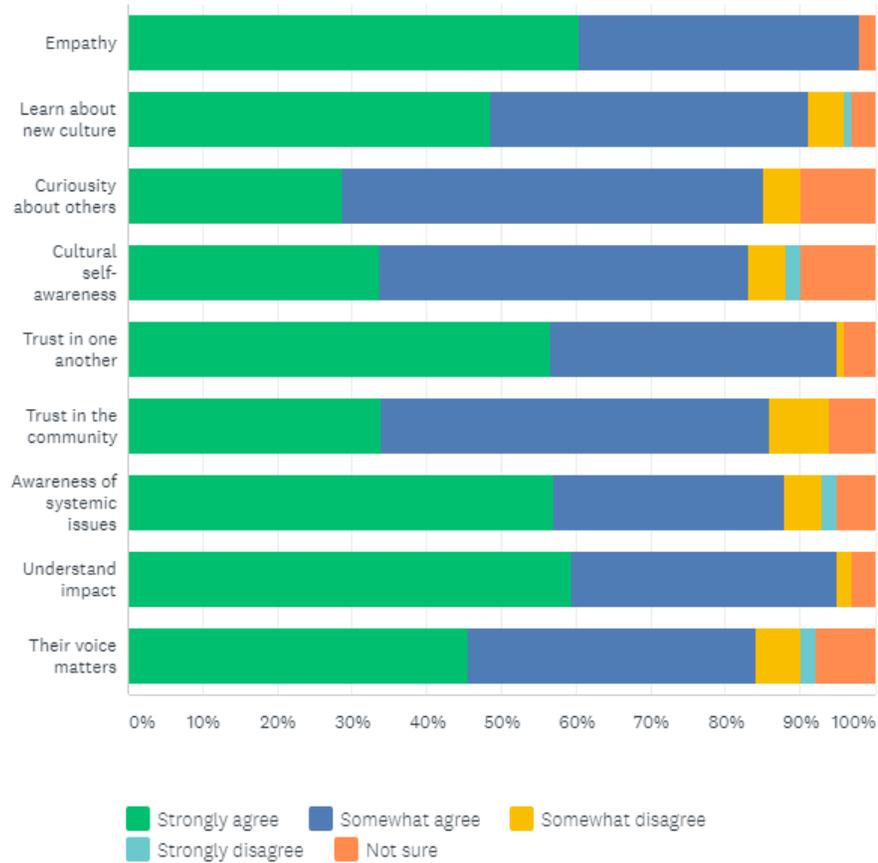


Figure 5 - The question read: To the best of your ability, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about the changes in your corps members' attitudes through their service year. "Overall, I feel that my program's corps members...."

Alumni Engagement Ensures the Legacy of Your Program and Civic Engagement Post-Service

Alumni engagement is a critical component of ensuring we can promote service years as a strategy for fueling civic renewal. Whereas the previous section was about building the skills for bridgers and civic renewal, alumni engagement is about bringing that investment into the community in which the person served or in the community in which the alumni finds themselves post-service. It is critical to build upon the social capital corps members create and support alumni in leveraging that in their next career. Anecdotally, we hear alumni are leaving service years with the skills and attitude



changes that lead to an interest in active community participation post-service. But, in order to showcase service years as an experience that truly creates bridging attitudes, we need to point to the specific experiences and skills alumni attribute to those attitudes.

Programs responses about service year corps member development was informed by minimal data collection, personal experiences with the corps members during service, and stories shared from alumni about their experience. There are inherent issues with building an alumni engagement plan. Capacity, funding, and the mobility of the current generation of alumni were the top reasons for a lack of engagement with this network. 38 programs that responded to our survey shared the barriers they face in connecting with alumni, most of which included a lack of staff capacity or an incomplete listserv of who their alumni are. Some also mentioned that it is difficult for them to stay engaged with alumni who move out of the area in which they served.

Often the most engaged alumni are just transitioning out of service and are focused on finding employment and professional development. For programs that cannot support that need or provide direct job opportunity, it can be difficult to engage alumni. In spite of these challenges, roughly 47% of programs that responded to our question on alumni engagement, indicated that they regularly engage with their program alumni through social media or newsletter updates, speaking engagements, advocacy for service year funding, or through an alumni-corps member mentoring program. There are a multitude of benefits to engaging with this community and it plays a critical role in understanding how and why corps members remain actively engaged citizen leaders throughout the duration of their lives, regardless of their path. One of the ways programs stay engaged with alumni is helping with post-service pathways and then keeping up with the careers they take after their service year experience. However, overall, most programs were unsure of what activities their alumni undertake after their service (Figure 6).

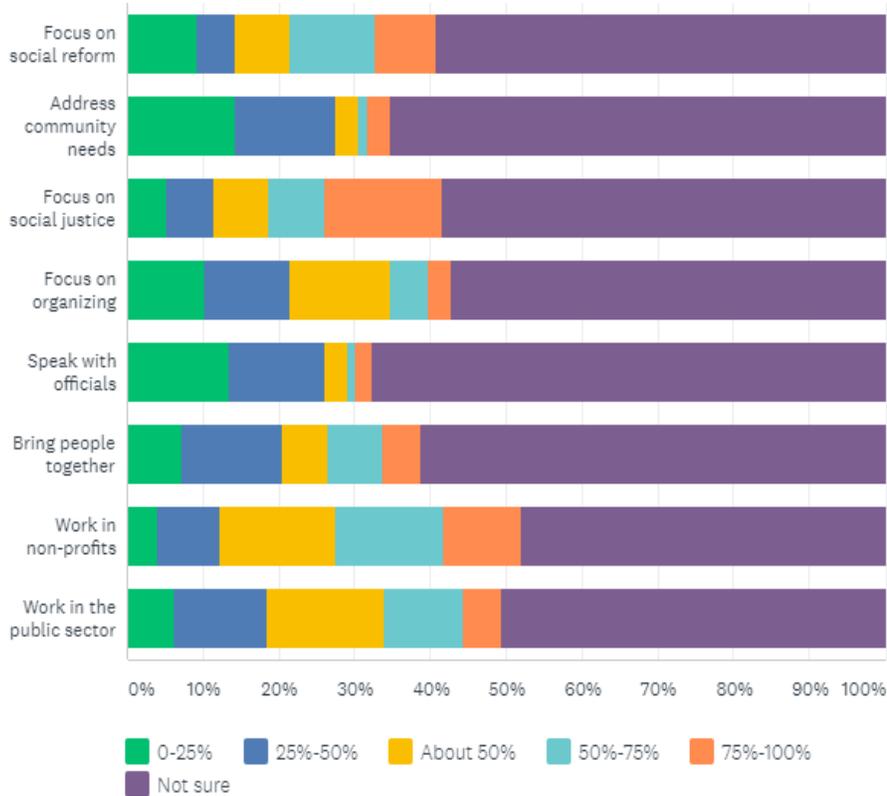


Figure 6 - The question read: To the best of your knowledge, please identify what percentage of your alumni....

One collaborative organization that we spoke to, and that is based out of the mayor’s office in their city, explained that they are working to develop a system for tracking alumni that engages corps members with a platform throughout their service year. This alumni platform administers pre and post surveys for the corps member, and asks them questions related to elements of public service such as voting, volunteering investment, engagement with elected officials, and their career post-service. The platform also allows corps members to share resources and opportunities and communicates with the alumni community as an attempt to ensure there is a peer-to-peer program for corps members. The collaborative shared that their service year programs have an intentional role in increasing civic health so tracking corps members and alumni is valuable to proving their impact. The programs interviewed and surveyed were most confident in knowing the sector in which their corps members work post-service, with about 35% of programs believing that half or more of



their alumni work in the nonprofit sector, and about 25% of programs believing that half or more of their alumni work in the public sector.

The more interesting figures to highlight are that 16% of programs believe that 75-100% of their alumni routinely focus on social justice, 28% of programs believe that less than half of their alumni routinely communicate with government officials to address community needs, and 18% of programs believe that half or more of their alumni routinely bring people together across lines of difference to solve problems in their communities. The example from the collaborative, and the data from programs surveyed, shows the need to engage alumni post-service as many of the positions alumni take are in helping out and serving in different capacities post-service. Understanding the ways alumni feel equipped to take on these roles after a service year can feed into stronger corps member development.

Alumni engagement is the critical last piece in creating bridgers and civically engaged individuals, yet it is the piece that service year programs sometimes put the least effort into because it is not required to address immediate community needs. However, we know from the interviews that civically engaged alumni are the byproduct of intentional corps member development and an investment in the service year corps member and their legacy as a life-long bridger. The value of engaging alumni to be the bridge builders in our communities and continue to bring people together to solve community issues cannot be lost.

Quality Program Design Ties All the Pieces Together

Program design plays a critical role in ensuring service years contribute to the development of bridgers. In order to ensure corps members are developing bridging attitudes and becoming life-long citizen leaders, it has to be an intentional element of how the program is designed. We found that many of the programs who can demonstrate success in building bridging skills and attitudes shared several commonalities in both training and programmatic elements offered to service year corps members.

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One tool we had to put together was a community service watch. We had to understand who in the community was driving around ensuring there was no crime. I was in an indirect role but I still had to speak with individuals from the community and understand their perspective to complete their service project."

Both programs and alumni attributed direct interaction in a community and corps members in the community as directly building the development of bridging skills and attitudes. One alum shared, "I worked a lot with refugees so I really appreciated what it must be like to be in a country different from my own." The alum went on to share that they received a series of immigration integration trainings, but that the experience itself was most enlightening for them. Even corps members serving in indirect roles noted the

impact of serving others in shaping their attitudes and behaviors. Through our survey we discovered that most programs serve diverse populations and their corps members represent that population. Only 7% of the programs that responded to the survey indicated that their corps members do not serve a diverse population. One program noted they ensure corps members are actively involved in talking with different members of the community as a key element of their program model; including listening tours with community members to hear directly from different people in the community.

For a handful of programs, the development of cultural competence skills is explicit and not a byproduct of other training and supports. 78% of programs indicated that they lead intentional trainings to develop the cultural competence skills in their service year corps members. One international program shared that within the offices that oversee programming and training support, there are devoted staff that have developed training materials that prepare volunteers for the immersive cultural experience. Similarly, they offer staff development to their oversea staff so they are also prepared to lead those training sessions. The program went on to share that the cultural training component of their program is critical to ensuring the corps member knows how to navigate a community with a different language and customs than what they are used to.

These types of immersive trainings are occurring most often in non-AmeriCorps funded programs, instead showing up in international and faith-based programs. One faith-based non-AmeriCorps funded program noted their younger service year corps members often push them to be intentional about the way they show up in the communities they serve.



Another collaborative organization mentioned it has a community-focused training as a part of its corps member orientation that includes intentional training around cultural competence. As a place-based initiative they want to make sure corps members can articulate inequities that exist in the city. The outcome of these training sessions is that corps members understand they can run for school boards or political offices and understand that they can play a role and have an impact in their community. One of the organizations this program supports developed its model to focus specifically on civic engagement. Corps members in this program take the first half of the year to do outreach in the community then develop a plan to address a specific community need based on the needs they identify. These types of trainings that are teaching cultural competence and civic engagement skills to corps members as a key component of their program are the exception.

Service year programs that either have a cohort approach to their program or are a part of a collaborative that allows individually placed corps members to connect, increase the quality of creating bridging attitudes. Also, diversity within a cohort, and relationship development between corps members that may have different backgrounds, are also helpful in developing cultural competence amongst service year corps members. 58% of programs indicated that their corps members are representative of the diverse populations they serve, and 35% indicated that their corps members are generally not representative of the diverse populations they serve. For many alumni, these experiences contributed to their ability to understand their own identity, feeling like their voice mattered, and understanding the importance of being part of a larger whole. One alum shared, "I really learned from my cohort a lot... I think group size has really been a big part of it in terms of just being exposed to so many different individuals." This alum served with AmeriCorps NCCC, a team-based service year program that typically requires corps members to serve alongside the individuals they live and travel with throughout the service year. In addition to the exposure to individuals from different backgrounds, both programs and alumni attributed opportunities for corps members to reflect about their identity and the identities of others in an unstructured environment as elements that contributed to their ability to communicate, lead, and show empathy. 87% of programs indicated that they give their corps members opportunities to discuss their backgrounds, lived experiences, and

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I think my self-awareness and my awareness of my impact on others has really been affected. I know that is a weakness of mine, but I definitely feel like I have grown more in this area and I hope to continue to grow."



perspectives with one another in an intentional setting, while 52% indicated that they give similar opportunities to staff too.

Reflection activities designed for the cohort allow corps members to get to know one another and serve as a method for authenticity in conversation and experience sharing. One third of the programs that indicated in the survey that they do not offer intentional opportunities to corps members to reflect by discussing their backgrounds and perspectives with one another indicate that their corps members develop skills in empathy in their service year. However, 90% of these programs lead trainings to develop cultural competency and believe their corps members learn relationship building and communication skills. A faith-based non-AmeriCorps funded program we spoke with shared its practice for unstructured time between service year corps members, “We meet with volunteers every other week to have dinner and share what’s going on in their world and their service sites...We have discussions around issues like voting and race, [and we] don’t avoid discussions, and try to stir things up. It isn’t formal, but we try to embrace what’s going in the world around diversity, getting their take about homophobia and a lot of other things that affect them.”

Another alumni expressed that having a cohort would have been valuable for them in shaping their perspective. “I was the only member in my county – which is also the community I grew up in. There were some opportunities to network with other AmeriCorps members, but there weren’t opportunities to share things about my experience. Without that team environment, cultural competency outside of myself was not brought up.” This individual currently advocates regularly to bring service year positions to rural communities in an effort to ensure there are more cohort opportunities for corps members.

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This year has been very challenging for me. In the process of teaching others, I have learned so much about myself. I am proud of the work that I have done and the growth I have made as a person. I feel more attuned to myself and the world around me.”



Other service year programs we spoke with also shared the importance of reflection activities and the role that has played for service year corps members. A non-AmeriCorps-funded fellowship program stated, “We bring people from different states together to talk about how culture is different in different states. Many fellows aren’t from the state they are working in.” The program went on to share the value of this activity is providing opportunities for corps members to share perspectives and ideas with one another.

We also found that the training service year programs require corps members to complete in order to successfully fulfill their role often contributes to the development of bridging attitudes. For example, service year corps members are frequently trained to conduct community assessments. This requires corps members to understand the needs of a community and the pathway to address those needs as a part of their role within the organization. The intended purpose of the role-based training is to successfully support the capacity of the organization, but the byproduct is the service year corps members’ ability to identify and solve problems in a community. Often corps members serve as part of a larger cohort and work together to identify assets and address barriers and challenges. As a result, the corps members understand their role as part of a larger whole, which allows them to feel as if they have the ability to contribute within a community. This particular component is often identified as leadership development, but in the community context it contributes on a broader scale to the development of bridging attitudes.

One alum shared their experience working with a local government entity, “In my role I was really expected to know what was going on with the community and then work on the things that were being discussed. When I left service, I got involved in political action groups, and then began to engage with AmeriCorps Alumni and Junior League. AmeriCorps really made me continue to engage in volunteering post-service. It exposed me to different ideas, especially around social justice, that got me involved at a different level than I had ever been before.”

The intentional training does not just stop at what is needed for corps members to be successful in their community. A majority of the programs we spoke with during the interview process are prioritizing workforce development strategies to ensure corps members have viable employment opportunities post-service. From encouraging local employers to hire service year corps members post-service to providing networking opportunities with elected officials, almost all of the programs we spoke with were focused on the corps members building social capital as a workforce development strategy. These practices support the corps members’ economic mobility but also



have implications in building bridging attitudes. Building social capital contributes to the individual's exposure to alternative perspectives. One program shared its method for supporting this work, "We are focused on trying to build a village around them and they feel represented in that space. We want to encourage candor and connection in those relationships. Now we are in a place where we bring in employers, it's a two-year relationship; one year of support and one year of partnership, to the members. They are engaged via an app so we can monitor the success they have in this relationship and understand how it shapes them." The development of social capital through engaging networks they had access to during service years, as well as, understanding how to work with others and solve problems in their role, increases the likelihood of developing bridging attitudes.

In our conversations with alumni they shared the importance of corps members being able to speak with alumni about their experience during their service year. "In our program we had a mentorship program that allowed us to engage outside of our cohort but still with individuals that had served," said an alumni of a non-AmeriCorps-funded fellowship program. The alum went on to say how helpful it was to process with their mentor and talk to them about the emotional difficulties of a service year. The need for an outlet for corps members to process the emotional elements of service years was a sentiment shared by nearly all of the alumni we spoke with during the interview process. Programs also shared the importance of engaging alumni in the service year corps member experience. We found that 85% of programs with staff who are encouraged to share their own experience have corps members that leave service understanding resources that are available to them and others in their community.

Quality program design is the culmination of intentional DEI practices, corps member development, and alumni engagement. The programs that are learning and amending their models around the concepts mentioned are the programs who are building the next generation of bridgers. These programs are very attuned to the corps member experience and how service can transform the life of the person serving. There are steps in all of these data points that programs can take to improve their program for the corps members serving.



Conclusion

The intent of this landscape analysis across the service year field – including AmeriCorps and non-AmeriCorps funded programs, domestic and international models, faith-based models, federal/state/local government programs, privately funded programs, and the alumni point of view – was to pinpoint the commonalities and differences that may lead to programs building more civically engaged individuals that leads to creating bridgers. The landscape analysis found that the service year intervention – in itself – can contribute to the development of bridging skills. However, programs that are intentionally weaving in DEI practices, developing an experience for corps members –beyond what is needed for them to serve in the community – engaging their alumni, building for post-service throughout the service year, and building quality programming that incorporates all of these items and lessons, are the programs excelling at creating the next wave of civically engaged Americans through service years.

Across a variety of service year programs, many are implementing similar baseline practices that contribute to the development of bridging attitudes. Service year corps members are given the tools and skills to assess community needs and make change, then encouraged to continue using those tools and skills post-service. Service years, by their nature alone, empower the individual serving to make an impact, which is critical in developing the belief among corps members that their voices matter. With the added training and supports to build on the baseline service year experience, the individual can develop a lifelong mindset of bridge-building and ensure the investment in the individual is seen for their entire career.

The barriers hindering programs from building upon the basic service year model and creating more intentional environments for bridging skills are staff capacity, differentiating training, tracking outcomes outside of the funders' indicators, and engaging stakeholders other than the ones needed for addressing the community need (i.e., other service year programs, alumni).

Overwhelmingly, we found that staff capacity and training was a major challenge for programs, many of whom noted that they manage a service year program without additional staff support, and bear sole responsibility for the service year corps members' recruitment, retention, development, and professional advancement to ensure a quality program. Subsequently, these programs have no capacity to monitor and evaluate the corps members during service, let alone track their efforts and



utilization of bridging skills post-service. Of course, staff capacity is tied directly to one of the most notable challenges for many service year programs – funding. Many programs feel they could do more to develop service year corps members into bridgers with the financial support to either hire additional staff to support alumni engagement, commission a consultant to facilitate valuable training, pay for systems and tools to support member development, or track service year program impact on corps members and the community. There is a clear message from the service year field that these elements of service year programming are invaluable in positioning service years as a strategy for fueling civic renewal and there is great interest in incorporating them given the proper funding and capacity.

Multiple programs noted other systemic barriers that hinder their ability to incorporate bridging practices and programming. Expectations for how programs track program outcomes, and training regulations that AmeriCorps enforces, put major restraints on service year programs. Similarly, programs noted that many of their private funding sources are primarily focused on the corps members' contribution to the organization or community, as opposed to development of the corps members themselves. Even funders who express an interest in workforce development and economic mobility outputs tend to focus on outcomes related to professional growth (job or internship placement post-service, professional skills acquired, etc.). Funders and programs in our interview process shared that this comes from an inability to measure outcomes related to the development of "soft skills" such as empathy, compassion, or understanding. Unanimously, programs and funders alike acknowledged an interest in studying these impacts but transparently shared a lack of understanding in what to measure, and how best to measure it.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, it was clear that programs have interest in connecting with other programs and feel challenged when trying to develop collaboratives or connect with other types of programs across the country. A majority of programs specifically noted that they wanted to hear from one another about their practices that create active and empathetic bridgers.

Additionally, most programs articulated that they have struggled to engage their alumni network. Programs noted a network of service year alumni would allow an opportunity for alumni to mentor service year corps members in their leadership development and create pathways for corps members post-service to continue utilizing their interest and ability to engage as active citizens. This was also something we heard alumni say they feel would have been valuable for them during their service year.



Given these findings, we see tremendous opportunities to advance the development of bridging attitudes through service year experiences. These barriers can collectively be solved together. There is a great sense in being able to come together and solve these challenges across the service year field.

As next steps, Service Year Alliance is proposing a framework of recommendations, grounded in collaborative action, to advance the service year field in the civic renewal and building bridgers sector. We also identified a series of best practices from programs that are prioritizing an investment in their corps members and alumni as life-long civic leaders.

Bridging in National Service: Action Framework

Convening leaders/"true believers" across the field

Develop shared definitional understanding and narrative change

Clarity on measurement, outcomes, and impact

Place-Based Approaches	Systems Change and Advocacy	Knowledge Dissemination
Collaborative Training Capacity	Legislative Action	Equitable Practices
Alumni Tracking and Engagement	Agency-level Action	Program Modules for "Bridging"
Localized Recruitment	State Service Commission Action	Civic Engagement Trainings
Community Engagement		Understanding Rules and Regulations

Overarching Themes

1. One core takeaway is that while there are many programs that are actively engaged in (and see themselves as) creating bridgers, and other programs that believe this to be a critical next step in their program development, no one is convening those partners. They are largely operating in silos or having one-off, intermittent conversations. The field would benefit from



convening the leaders and “true believers” in this concept to advance action against this entire slate of priorities.

2. Second, the field needs to develop a greater shared understanding of the concept of “bridgers” and the barriers and opportunities for national service to help young people develop their bridging ability. A common, shared message about the reasons for national service to invest in this work will follow.
3. Finally: we view measurement, outcomes, and impact as being critical to underpin this effort. They will inform the policy change we are asking for (what should be measured about corps members to determine whether they are becoming bridgers?), the programming and practices we want to see in the field (how do you know if your program is working?), and the case for change (why should we care?).

Place Based Approaches

- National service federal grantmaking is inherently structured with a bias towards place because of the reliance on pass-through AmeriCorps funding to state service commissions; additional infrastructure (collective impact efforts and other place-based collaboratives, including our own network of Service Year Impact Communities) to roll out place-based support already exists.
- In our stakeholder interviews with philanthropists, the private funders that were most interested in the “bridging” concept and related outcomes were focused on community-level change.
- This allows AmeriCorps and non-AmeriCorps programs in a place to work together while providing their corps members a greater, service-oriented identity, contributing to high-quality programming more consistently available across diverse program types.
- Programs in a place-based collaborative can also pool resources and supports, and track the impact of those supports as a collective. One of the biggest challenge’s programs identified in offering more bridging-specific training to their corps members was a lack of capacity.



- The programmatic elements that support bridging behaviors depend, in large part, on corps members being engaged participants in their communities. Working through place-based and local efforts embeds the elements explicitly.

Through this work, we imagine:

- Service year programs and other ecosystem stakeholders, such as state service commissions, government entities, local collaborative organizations, higher education institutions, and community foundations, convening around a shared sense of what it means to develop corps members as engaged and active citizens in their community.
- Coordinated training and recruitment approaches that meaningfully engage the community (e.g., shared training for corps members that feature local elected officials and community leaders; recruitment channels that ensure young adults from the community have the opportunity to serve in their corps, etc.).
- Promotion of reflection activities to allow service year corps members to discuss the ways their identity and experience impacts the way they show up to service.
- An investment from programs to train their staff to facilitate the training, support and reflection activities service year corps members need to develop bridging attitudes.
- Joint tracking, measurement, and evaluation approaches across the entire service year lifecycle (recruitment, service, transition, and alumni) that allow for shared understanding of outcomes.
- Robust alumni engagement efforts that our survey and interview indicated could substantially contribute to building bridgers.

Systems Change and Advocacy

- AmeriCorps and the federal government play an outsized role in determining the work done in the national service field.



- Many barriers to programs investing more in bridging work are the results of AmeriCorps' policies, regulations, and procedures. Specifically, current rules and expectations drive programs to focus more on community impact than corps member experience and growth.
- At the same time, the federal government, as a major source of financing for service year programs, could incentivize and support innovation.
- Further, there is a lack of clarity about what counts as awareness or education around policy, politics, and social justice and political activities, particularly in this time of great political divide. This lack of clarity is compounded by an optics challenge: programs and corps members feel they are adhering to the rules, but risk-averse program officers can perceive them as doing too much or blurring the lines between what is permitted and what is not allowed.
- Working with legislative champions, as well as within the relevant agencies (AmeriCorps) and state service commissions to change practices will be critical to changing the operating environment for programs.

Through this work, we imagine:

- Identifying the opportunities to embed policy change into the existing national service policy agenda, and the right set of core partners to drive that work.
- Identifying the most powerful messengers and ambassadors outside of the national service space to help inform this policy agenda and communicate it to decision-makers (as an example: leaders in evidence-based practice, faith-based programming, youth development, national security, and civic engagement.)
- Working to make AmeriCorps itself, and state commission offices, drivers of change that spur innovation in the field by incentivizing a variety of favorable practices, especially those that change measurement and outcomes analysis to better measure, represent, and include impact on corps members. Examples include: a member development measurement tool, embedding questions about civic engagement and cultural competence into corps member exit surveys that individual programs can access their program data, training for staff on topics like DEI, and building stronger alumni systems that mentor and support currently serving corps members so they become civic leaders.



- Pursuing specific policy changes to address the ability of programs to invest in corps member outcomes, like an increase in flexibility to the training allowance programs are given to train members. Right now, no more than 20% of the service year corps member's hours may be dedicated to personal and professional training so programs must prioritize their training objectives. Often these training objectives are focused on an introduction to service, to position specific tasks and specific community needs to be met. While these types of training do contribute to bridging attitudes, if given more time for training and support, the programs could be intentional about the development of bridging skills and increase positive corps member development outcomes.

Knowledge Dissemination

- While programs universally recognized the importance of investment in DEI training for their staff, that investment is happening unevenly. Many programs named this as a specific challenge preventing them from feeling comfortable in developing and delivering cultural competency and related trainings: their staff don't feel they have the capacity to deliver training to corps members or lead reflection activities that may need to address topics, such as racial equity, white supremacy, racial inequity, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Programs had different approaches to navigating the landscape of rules and requirements around mandatory training and allowable civic engagement activities and topics.
- Many of the programs furthest along in this space are non-AmeriCorps programs that are faith-based. Learnings from their approach that could inform secular programs are not always shared because there are few active knowledge dissemination opportunities.

Through this work, we imagine:

- Disseminating best practices from programs that already handle an aspect of "bridging" especially well (e.g. through measurement/outcomes tracking, training or reflection activities, etc).
- Supporting programs on their DEI journey through capacity-building efforts (whether training, technical assistance, or otherwise).



- Training and capacity building to help programs understand the limits (and opportunities) within the current framework of regulations to better-embed bridging programming into their model.

As noted, all these actions do not need to be taken alone. Many of these recommendations and work is to create collaboratives that can work together to build solutions. Service years are naturally poised to create the next wave of bridgers our country needs – and by taking on collective work to break down the barriers – many service year programs could see direct impacts in creating better experiences for their corps members and their trajectory into civically engaged alumni.

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