

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO FULL-TIME AMERICORPS STATE AND NATIONAL  
VOLUNTEERS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

By

Chelsey E. Butts

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Department of Educational Leadership and Policy  
Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Chairperson: Jennifer Ng

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Karen Jorgensen

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Suzanne Rice

Date Defended: 22 April 2013

The Thesis Committee for Chelsey E. Butts

certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson: Jennifer Ng

Date approved:

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine how AmeriCorps State and National volunteers in school settings think the experience has influenced them, their goals, and future plans. I used semi structure interviews to investigate this question. Members I interviewed talked about the first-hand teaching experience they receive through volunteering, teamwork, networking within the school system, personal growth, and an increased willingness to serve their communities. The discussion of these elements suggests their importance to volunteers, future employers, university education programs, and service program directors.

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## **Introduction:**

Thousands of AmeriCorps members give their time each year to work in schools teaching, tutoring, and mentoring children. Education is one of the largest areas of focus for AmeriCorps. Over 10,000 members work in public elementary schools each year (Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.13; Simon & Wang, 2002 p.524). These members spend up to 1,700 hours of their time tutoring students, creating lesson plans, and participating in professional development (Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.13). AmeriCorps is a national service initiative that connects citizens, 17 and older, with local and national organizations in need of volunteers. The program provides full- and part-time service opportunities in areas such as education, public safety, the environment, and human needs. Members receive a living stipend, health insurance, and are eligible for an education award of up to \$4,725 after finishing their terms of service (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.115; Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.6; Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.16-17).

AmeriCorps provides service opportunities through three programs: Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), and AmeriCorps State and National. VISTA connects nonprofit organizations and public agencies with full-time volunteers to fight poverty. NCCC is a full-time, residential program for 18 to 24 year-olds. Members concentrate on environmental problems and disaster relief (Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.6-7). State and National is the largest AmeriCorps program. State and National is also the least centralized of the three programs. It connects members to a network of local community-based organizations, educational institutions, and other agencies (Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.6;

Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.47-8). This paper focuses on the ways in which the experience of full-time State and National members impacts the volunteer.

As the most decentralized program in AmeriCorps, State and National provides a range of experiences for its members. Full- and part-time members work in a variety of organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, and Boys and Girls Clubs (Frumkin et al., 2009 p.395). Some organizations even partner with local universities to work in schools. Because the State and National experience is so varied, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what the experience is like for everyone. It is much easier to look at a specific group of State and National volunteers and determine what the experience is like for this group and how it influences them specifically.

People often think of volunteering as a way to benefit the community, but it can also serve the volunteer as well. Service can teach important skills and knowledge, enhance public awareness, and create social networks for people; all of which can be applied to life outside AmeriCorps. When volunteers finish their terms of service, they often leave prepared to continue living a life dedicated to service and social improvement (Marshall & Magee, 2005; Nesbit &Brundy, 2010 p.S109; Perry & Thomson, 2004; Selingo, 1998 p.4). For example, many former AmeriCorps members enter into jobs in government, nonprofit organizations, and public service (Nesbit &Brundy, 2010 p.S109). The important job skills and knowledge about one's field of interest gained through service can be significant reasons why former volunteers choose such careers (Tuma, Stanley, &Zubke, 2011 p.126). Through this experience volunteers can get an in-depth look at the specific field they are interested in.

Another reason people enter into government, nonprofit, and public service jobs is because service also enhances awareness of public issues (Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.10).

Through service, people can learn about problems, such as those facing the education system and what people are doing currently to solve them. With this increase in knowledge and awareness, volunteers become more interested in and are more willing to work on these problems. Research on public and personal opinion suggests service can also have an impact on personal feelings about the issues facing the field one serves in (Simon & Wang, 2002 p.525). With experience shown to influence personal values, it is likely the AmeriCorps experience could impact how one feels about key issues in the field. If the experience of being an AmeriCorps member in a school is a positive one, then members can come away from it with a stronger interest in, and commitment to, their field of interest.

### **Significance:**

A good service experience can influence a volunteer's future plans and goals. It does so by fostering an interest in social issues and teaching valuable skills and knowledge (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2009; Frumkin, et al., 2009; Marshall & Magee, 2005; Perry & Thomson, 2004; Simon & Wang, 2002; Tuma, 2011). Yet, the influence of a service experience is not just important to volunteers. Good service experiences in schools can encourage volunteers to continue working in the education system. With real-life skills and knowledge obtained through the experience, an awareness of issues in the education system, and an interest in working on the problems facing education, the volunteer brings valuable assets to future employers and clients.

If a volunteer chooses to go into teaching, his or her future students and employers benefit from their experience. What the volunteer learned while serving carries over into his or her job as an educator. Future students and schools get knowledgeable and dedicated teachers who are confident in their abilities and have a unique perspective other educators do not.

Similarly, the service experience is important to university education programs. When they accept former AmeriCorps members who served in schools they get students with prior experience in education and a passion for solving problems in the field.

The impact of a service experience is also important to program directors, but for different reasons. It is the program director's job to create a positive experience for their members. They make sure the members not only serve others, but learn something from the experience as well. How can program directors of service organizations affiliated with AmeriCorps State and National in schools run their programs so that members learn as much as they can about a particular field? What can program directors do to influence members' future plans and goals? What can they do to foster an interest in and commitment to the education system? By researching the experience of volunteers, I can provide insight into how volunteers think programs influence them and what programs can do to maximize their influence and the benefits passed on to their members.

I am personally interested in this topic because I was an AmeriCorps State and National member in an elementary school setting. I worked as a literacy tutor to first-graders for one school year. While I was there I had the opportunity to work with people who provided models of what good teaching is. I also learned a lot about the politics of that particular school, what policies teachers agreed with and why, as well as what they thought needed to be changed and why. The teachers and tutors I worked with taught me not only about teaching, but also about how complicated the education system is. Before serving I believed that teacher quality was the largest influence on student success, but working in an elementary school showed me there are many other social factors at play. I believe this experience influenced my decision to learn more about the education system. I also believe the experience influenced my opinions about schools



and teaching and I wonder if others feel the same way. To discover the answer, I investigated the experiences of others in similar service settings through one research question:

How do full-time AmeriCorps State and National members in an elementary school setting think the experience has influenced them, their future plans, and goals?

## **Literature:**

In order to fully understand the experience of a current volunteer, one must know the role service plays in the United States. The literature review of this paper addresses this topic by defining service and providing information on the history of service in the United States. I address how service has changed over time from an original focus exclusively on the recipients to the modern broadening to both recipients and volunteers. I also included current research on the influence of service on volunteers. This information informed my decisions about interview questions and prepared me for data analysis.

## **Methods:**

For this study I interviewed fifteen full-time AmeriCorps State and National members currently serving as tutors in elementary schools. The interviews took place during their term of service. To answer my research question I used semi-structured interviews. During these interviews I asked participants to reflect upon their experiences thus far as tutors.

Perry writes that “self-reflection combined with service may bring a new understanding of community membership and role in society” (1999 p.238). Reflection on service is important because it helps enhance the experience by providing an opportunity to think deeply about what one is doing. This aids in understanding more fully the impact of the experience. Furthermore,

reflection helps volunteers tie their values and beliefs to concrete experiences (Palmer & Standerfer, 2004 p.124). It provides a deeper understanding of the influence of service on the individual. This deeper understanding of the service experience can provide insight into the process of serving beneficial to volunteers, their future employers, teacher-education schools, and volunteer program directors.

## **Literature:**

As mentioned in the introduction, this literature review will cover civic service and its link to democracy, background information on service in the United States, and details of the influence service has on volunteers. The history of civic service is important because it shows that service is not new to American culture. A historical account of service in the United States demonstrates how it has evolved and how AmeriCorps fits within this evolution. It is also important to understand the ways in which service can affect a volunteer. This study attempts to get an in-depth look at the impact of service on the volunteer. Therefore, it is necessary to provide some information on how current research says service influences volunteers.

### **Civic service and democracy:**

In its most basic form, civic service involves giving one's own time to help others. To some, it involves some type of payment to the one doing service. This compensation allows the members to spend a large part of their time helping others without worrying about finances. Sherraden defines it as "an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant" (as cited in Moore 2006, p.307). Other researchers also embrace some form of payment as an element of service (Gorham, 1992 p.108). Many service organizations today, such as AmeriCorps, do involve monetary compensation their volunteer members. This compensation is in the form of a monthly stipend and a college financial aid award.

Volunteering has been a part of American society for many years. Participating in service is an example of being a responsible, engaged citizen. Service allows people to help their

community and oneself at the same time. Service is not just about being a good person; it is also about learning how to help oneself through helping others (Marshall & Magee 2005, p.4).

Supporters of civic service believe it teaches citizenship (Gorham, 1992 p.7). Time spent serving allows people to learn about their responsibility to others and their communities and to become active members of society. Participation in civic service activities helps safeguard people against the dangers of society (Mohan, 1994 p.330). It teaches people how to be “good” citizens who work for the better of society. While working to help others, volunteers learn about their responsibility to the community and how to be productive members of society.

Perry and Thomson believe that working to improve society and oneself is an important part of democracy. They write “nowhere is ‘civic-service-as-democratic-wish’ more popularly described than in President Bill Clinton’s 1993 announcement of the new civic service initiative AmeriCorps” (2004, p.4). To them, AmeriCorps is a great example of the connection between service and democracy. Other researchers agree that service teaches citizenship to people. It helps them gain the skills needed to engage with others and connect to the public world (as cited in Mohan, 1994 p.330). AmeriCorps in particular demonstrates how helping others can help link one to the larger community and be a responsible citizen.

## **Background:**

Federal government sponsored service can be traced back to the 1930s and President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). This early civic service initiative was a response to the rising unemployment rates during the Great Depression. The CCC provided over three million men with jobs. The men worked on improving and conserving the national environment (Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.10). Due to the improved economy, the

nations' need for and interest in civic service lessened during the 1940s and 1950s (Perry, 2004 p.169S). However, the loss of interest only lasted for two decades.

The United States saw a resurgence of interest in national service during the 1960s and 70s. This resurgence began with President John F. Kennedy's New Frontier initiative. As part of his New Frontier program, the president established the Peace Corps in 1961 (Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.11). Members of the Peace Corps traveled overseas to provide support to other countries. The interest in service ignited by the Peace Corps continued into President Lyndon B. Johnson's term. Many new service programs emerged during Johnson's administration; such as Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Teacher Corps (Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.11). Unlike Kennedy's service program, however, these new programs focused on improving social conditions at home in the United States.

In the late 1970s and 1980s the focus of service programs evolved further. Programs began to focus on their volunteer members along with service institutions. Service programs not only wanted to benefit institutions, but their members as well (Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.13). During this time people began to create small, localized service organizations rather than large, federally managed institutions like CCC and the Peace Corps. Local conservation-service programs were established in states like California and Wisconsin (Gorham, 1992 p.6). New programs also began to target youth as volunteers (Perry, 2004 p.170S). Cities like New York and Seattle created programs specifically targeted to youth volunteers (Gorham, 1992 p.6). Civic service began to be seen as a way to mend social problems while educating the youth as citizens.

The number of youth participating in civic service continued to grow in the 1990s. At this time youth appeared more interested in participating in service than the political sphere (Mohan, 1994 p.332). Because of their interest in engaging in service, youth looked to private institutions

to help them serve rather than just the government. One possible reason for this was the increased number of opportunities available to them through other institutions. Higher education in particular played an important role in helping youth participate in service. United States universities provided opportunities for students to serve their communities while in school (Mohan, 1994 p.331). Universities encouraged and supported student service in a number of ways. Some schools provided financial aid to assist low-income students wanting to serve. Others made service part of the orientation process. At these schools students were required to perform a certain number of hours for credit. Still, other schools promoted service as an extra-curricular activity which did not involve grading or assessment (Mohan, 1994 p.337). In this way, students felt more comfortable serving. At the same time youth became more engaged in civic service, the government was also taking political action to encourage citizens to volunteer.

The government helped support people's decisions to volunteer through the creation of AmeriCorps. President Bill Clinton established AmeriCorps in the early 1990s. He created it as part of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.42). The existing VISTA program became one of three service programs offered by AmeriCorps. The act also created the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) to focus on environmental relief (Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.6). The third program, State and National, provided monies to local and community organizations that were often ignored by the federal government (Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.6; Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 pp.47-8). With these three programs AmeriCorps was able to merge the federal power of the early service initiatives, e.g. CCC and the Peace Corps, with the more recent emphasis on local needs.

A fourth service program which is affiliated with AmeriCorps, although not directly under it, is Teach for America (TFA). The program was established prior to AmeriCorps in 1989,

and today its members receive AmeriCorps benefits such as the living stipend and education award (Our History, 2013). It is important to note the difference between TFA and AmeriCorps State and National because people often think that AmeriCorps is TFA. AmeriCorps State and National members do not necessarily have teaching experience or training, and they are not required to get any while serving, nor do they need to have gone to college. TFA members must receive a teaching credential before entering the classroom. They participate in a nontraditional course of study the summer before they begin teaching. Members must pass a content-knowledge test and have taken college courses related to the topic they will teach. During their term, members of TFA must continue working toward the next level of certification (Teaching Certification, 2013). Also, AmeriCorps State and National terms of service can last for as little as ten months, while TFA terms are two years.

When he established the program, Clinton articulated five goals of AmeriCorps: (1) getting things done, (2) strengthening communities, (3) expanding opportunity, (4) encouraging responsibility, and (5) supporting service infrastructure (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.46-7). Two of these goals, (3) expanding opportunity and (4) encouraging responsibility, embody the shift from changing institutions to changing the individual as well, which occurred in the 1970s and 80s.

These goals are important for this study because they emphasize the interest AmeriCorps has in improving its members. Under the goal of Expanding Opportunity members broaden their individual perspectives and receive financial aid for college, vocational training, or student loans (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.46). With the help of AmeriCorps, members gain exposure to new and different people and places, and further their education and career goals. The goal of Encouraging Responsibility allows members to learn to take responsibility for solving

community problems (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.47). This goal not only teaches responsibility, but it also encourages members to make connections to their community. Through this, members learn they can make a difference in their communities.

AmeriCorps articulates the evolution of civic service in the United States. Service in the United States has evolved in three major ways since the 1930s. First, it has become decentralized. The federal government controlled early service initiatives like the CCC. Today, however, the government provides funds for many local organizations and initiatives through AmeriCorps. Second, service now targets youth as volunteers as well. When creating AmeriCorps, government officials intended to mobilize the nation's youth to address social problems (Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.3). Today many young people participate in AmeriCorps. Third, through the goals of Expanding Opportunity and Encouraging Responsibility, AmeriCorps attempts to improve the individual as well as the community.

### **Impact of civic service:**

Service can influence a volunteer in many ways. It affects attitudes and opinions, gives insight, and creates bonds between people. In regards to volunteers, research shows that service can: enhance civic responsibility and improve self-esteem. It also broadens perspectives through exposure to new and different people and issues. Finally, service can influence future education and career choices.

Volunteering enhances civic responsibility, which leads to civic and political engagement. One of AmeriCorps' goals is to encourage responsibility among volunteers. This is done by educating them on what it means to be a citizen. Perry and Thomson write that civic service is "viewed as a means of educating citizens about the civic virtue so necessary for democratic



citizenship” (2004 p.3). This education helps to enhance a feeling of community responsibility ... among volunteers (Palmer &Standerfer, 2004 p.123).

A belief that one is responsible for others encourages volunteers to become engaged in civic and political life. They are more likely to participate in civic and political activities. Studies on service learning – in which students participate in service opportunities as part of a school course – suggest that service moves students from being passive receptors of information to active members of civic life (Palmer &Standerfer, 2004 p.125). Similar research on volunteers supports this claim. It shows that “civic service is routinely associated with the power to engage people in civic life for the long term (Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.58). AmeriCorps members are significantly more involved in their communities at end of their term of service (Simon & Wang, 2002 p.528). It is through civic service that volunteers become more involved in their communities and more actively engaged with civic and political activities.

Participating in civic service impacts one’s mental health and well-being. Studies on volunteer work and well-being show a positive relationship between the two. People with greater well-being spend more time serving, and more time serving produces greater feelings of well-being (Thoits& Hewitt, 2001 p.127). Researchers John Rietschlin and Marieke Van Willigen claim that volunteering improves one’s mental health. They argue that volunteering can mediate the negative effects of stress, decreases depression, and increases life satisfaction (as cited in Thoits& Hewitt, 2001 p.118). A longitudinal study involving Wisconsin volunteers between the years of 1992 and 2004 suggests that volunteering gives people a sense of “mattering”, which leads to positive feelings about oneself (Piliavin&Siegl, 2007 p.455). This feeling of being important positively affects the volunteer’s well-being. However, it is not just the feeling of

significance that improves people's mental health; it is also the connection they make to the people to whom they matter.

Service is important to volunteers because of the social interactions and networks it provides. People who volunteer feel better about themselves not only because it creates a sense of "mattering" but because volunteers discover a connection to a larger community (Perry, 1999 p.238; Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.17). Service can build social networks which link volunteers to their communities (Perry, 1999 p.246). Service also decreases feelings of isolation and improves self-esteem (Moore, 2006 p.308). Civic service creates meaningful social connections which make people feel good about themselves and the work they do.

Service broadens the perspectives of volunteers. As mentioned in the introduction, AmeriCorps tries to expand the opportunities of its members. One way it does this is by exposing members to new and different things, or broadening their individual perspectives (Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.46). A study involving VISTA members showed that members gained an "increased appreciation of diversity and benefits from working with people of backgrounds different from their own (p.64). People benefit from the exposure to diversity that volunteering can provide. They develop awareness for the interdependence of people. They also learn to understand and value their individual differences (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 pp.16-17). They take this understanding and appreciation for others with them into their careers and lives when they finish their terms of service.

Volunteering can also influence one's future education or career goals. Two ways AmeriCorps does this are: (1) financial support and (2) experience and skill gain. All AmeriCorps State and National members receive an Education Award after completing their term of service (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.115; Marshall & Magee 2005, p.6; Perry &

Thomson, 2004 p.16-17). This award can be used for future education or vocational tuition, or to pay off existing loans. With the help of the Education Award many members, who did not think they could, are able to continue their education.

AmeriCorps members also gain important skills while serving. These skills can be applied to later education or jobs. Research on service learning claims that service learning opportunities provide students with experience in, and a deeper understanding of their fields of interest (Tuma, 2011 p.126). Similarly, volunteering in a particular field of interest through AmeriCorps provides experience and an understanding of that field. Many volunteers even use service as a trial period in which to test their interest and ability in different career fields (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.129). By providing experience and knowledge about specific jobs, service is able to influence members' educational and career decisions after their term of service.

Volunteering can impact a person in many ways. Researchers claim it teaches responsibility for oneself and one's community (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2009 p.396; Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.28; Palmer &Standerfer, 2004 p.126; Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.58). This sense of responsibility often leads to increased participation in civic and community life among former and current volunteers. According to Perry and Thomson, service is often attributed the power to engage people in civic life (2004 p.58). These engaged citizens participate in their communities with a wide range of viewpoints, an appreciation for others, and valuable skills.

Research exists on the benefits of volunteering for both volunteers and receiving institutions. Most of this research is quantitative in nature; it describes the likelihood that former volunteers will continue serving their communities or participating in advocacy and politics. Other research describes how successful volunteers are in terms of how much they help their organizations. Qualitative research on this subject is more limited. However, there is some research on the

influence of volunteering on VISTA members. It is likely that the lack of qualitative research on the experience of AmeriCorps State and National members is due to the decentralized nature of the program. There is not one experience for all of these members. Volunteers are spread out among a variety of different locations and organizations, and they address a range of needs in their communities. With this study, I focus specifically on the experiences of full-time AmeriCorps State and National tutors in elementary schools.

## **Methods**

This is a qualitative study on the experiences of full-time AmeriCorps State and National members in elementary school settings. How do they think their experiences while working as a volunteer have influenced them? To investigate this question I used semi-structured interviews. To select participants I used the AmeriCorps website to identify full-time State and National volunteer programs in elementary schools. I identified two programs in this manner. With the first program I contacted the director of the program by email, briefly explained my project, and asked if I could interview her members. With her permission I sent an email for her to forward to the members asking them to participate in my study. In the email I provided my email address for members to respond if they were interested in participating. I conducted five interviews with the members that responded to my email.

With the second program I contacted the director by email, briefly explained my project, and asked if I could interview her members. After looking at my consent form and interview protocol she directed me to the assistant program director to set up interviews. The assistant program director offered to tell her members about my project and have them sign up for interview times at their weekly Wednesday meeting; this was in order to maximize the number of volunteers as opposed to sending out a mass email and waiting for responses. I conducted ten interviews with the members that signed up to meet with me.

### **Participants:**

The participants are current full-time AmeriCorps State and National members in elementary school settings. Due to the nature of the program, members of the first program ages are between 18 and 30, and many of them are college graduates. Members of this program work

in a large urban area as literacy tutors to at-risk students. The volunteer program is an early-literacy program which attempts to ensure that all students are reading at grade level by grade three. Tutors provide kindergarten, first- and second-grade students in English and Spanish classes with research based literacy instruction. They work at least 40 hours a week and their term of service lasts for ten months. For some of the volunteers this is their first experience as literacy tutors, for others it is their second year. Some of the returning members are campus leaders. It is their job to oversee and guide new volunteers. None of the participants have more than two years of experience with this program. I interviewed five members of this program; however one of them later requested that I not use her interview, so only included data from four of the interviews.

The second program is in a school district that stretches across three small cities, one of which is home to a military base. These members perform a variety of tasks in elementary and secondary schools in the district. They tutor small groups of students in reading or math, assist in the classrooms, and meet with children one-on-one to “check and connect”. These members also work at least 40 hours a week and their term of service lasts for twelve months. For some of the volunteers this is their first experience others have been with the program for up to three years. Due to the nature of the program, members of this program are between the ages of 18 and 60. Some of them are recent high school or college graduates, mothers, grandmothers, and former teachers. However, due to the purpose of my project I choose to focus on the information provided by the younger members in the 18 to 30 age range. I interviewed ten members of this program, but three of them fell outside the desired age range. Therefore, I only used data from seven of these interviews.

I conducted all the interviews in the middle of the members' term of service. I did this for two reasons. First, it was easier to get a hold of them when they were still working with AmeriCorps. Otherwise I would have had to get the programs' alumni email lists and send out individual emails to everyone and then wait for responses. Second, these members are more likely to be able to distinguish between their thoughts and opinions prior to AmeriCorps and their thoughts and opinions while in AmeriCorps. If I had chosen members already finished with their term of service they would have needed to untangle their thoughts and opinions from prior to AmeriCorps, during, and after. It is possible that I would have gotten different responses from members who already completed their service. Perhaps the opportunity to step back from the situation and see first-hand how it affects a person's life after AmeriCorps would give members a different perspective than they have while working. It might be useful, in the future, to perform a similar study with former volunteers.

I interviewed members of two AmeriCorps State and National programs for this project. Initially I planned to interview members of just one program. However I did not get a lot of responses to my email so I expanded the project to include a second program. I believe the addition of this second program was beneficial to my project for two reasons. First, I was able to use the first set of interviews to adjust my interview protocol for the second set. Second, using another program made the research more generalizable. As mentioned in the introduction and literature review, AmeriCorps State and National is a decentralized program and each of the individual programs is different. By looking at two similar programs I could identify common features of the experience. These are features that may be part of multiple programs rather than just one specific program. Also, I could identify features that are unique to each program. These are features that may vary from program to program.

## **Interview Questions:**

For the initial interview protocol I divided the interview questions into three groups: background, job, and influence. The first group of questions is about the participants' background experience with public schools, volunteering, and AmeriCorps. It is at this time I asked why the participant chose to enter AmeriCorps and this program, if the answer is not provided by the previous questions. The second group is made up of two questions about participants' current job. Answers to these questions helped me provide a detailed description of the participants' jobs. The final group of questions is about what they think they have learned, and how they feel the experience has influenced them and the process by which this happens.

### **Background questions:**

To begin, I asked why they joined AmeriCorps, and the specific tutoring program. There are many possible reasons why a person chooses to serve with AmeriCorps. For the education award, to make friends, to help others, or to learn a particular skill set. Also, I wanted to know what they already knew about volunteering. What did they think volunteering? Knowing their prior experiences can provide insight into how important they think volunteering is.

I also asked about their prior exposure to public schools to see what they already knew about public schools. Similarly, I wanted to know what they already knew about AmeriCorps. Maybe they knew AmeriCorps members prior to this, and those people told them what to expect. Perhaps, as a child, they received tutoring from an AmeriCorps member and this inspired them to join when they got older. Maybe members of their family were AmeriCorps members and joining was expected of them. Based on prior knowledge of public schools and AmeriCorps, they



may have entered the program with certain opinions or expectations about what being in one is like.

**Job questions:**

It is at this time I asked the participants about their job. What is it like? What tasks do they do? Who do they work with? As a former member of the first program, I know a little about the program. However, the program has made a few changes since I left, so I was not familiar with everything they do now. For example, I do not think they work as closely with classroom teachers as I did. For me, this relationship was very important and I learned a lot. Because they do not work as closely with teachers, their relationships with them are different than what I remember. Also, asking about their job showed I was interested in their job and facilitated communication.

The second question in this group asks about their expectations of the program prior to being a member compared with the real experience. Maybe they expected it to be really easy and it is not, or maybe it is a lot easier than they expected. Have they changed their opinions and expectations about being an AmeriCorps volunteer since they began? Have they learned anything since they joined? This question helped lead into the next group of questions – experience and influence questions.

**Influence questions:**

The third group of questions is about the experience of being a literacy tutor. These questions focus on what they have learned from teachers, co-workers, and students, and how the experience of volunteering in an elementary school has influenced them. This group is broken into subsets – relationships and self, citizenship and responsibility, and future questions.

The first subset is about participants' relationships with co-workers and cooperating teachers. I began by asking them to describe the relationships they have built while serving in this program. This is to get an understanding of who the participants interact with and how. Then, I asked what the members think they have learned from their co-workers and cooperating teachers. One goal of AmeriCorps is to broaden perspectives and develop an awareness and appreciation for people's differences (Perry & Thompson, 2004 p.46; Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 pp.16-17). By asking what members have learned from each other I am able to gauge if the program has been successful at this. I can also try to determine how the program attempts to accomplish this goal. I also asked about the value members place on relationships, how these relationships influenced members, and what members think the program does to support relationships. These questions are important because research claims volunteering can increase people's emotional well-being by creating meaningful social connections (Perry, 1999 pp.238-246; Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.17; Moore, 2006 p.308). For me, the relationships I made while serving helped me decide what to do next in my life and encouraged me to have confidence in my abilities.

The second subset of questions is about how the program encourages citizenship and civic responsibility. Current research provides quantitative data about the influence of service on community responsibility and citizenship (Perry & Thompson, 2004 p.3; Palmer &Standerfer, 2004 p.123). What it does not cover is process, or how this happens. Is it explicit lessons on "this is what it means to be an American citizen" and "you should be responsible for and engaged in your community"? Or does the program try to instill a sense of citizenship and responsibility through civic engagement opportunities? Is there another way I have not thought of? It is at this

time I asked participants if they feel volunteering has influenced their sense of citizenship and responsibility, and how they think the program tries to do so.

The third and final subset of questions is about what the participants plan to do in the future. Here I try to get at any possible connection between service and career interest/future plans and what the program does to impact these decisions. AmeriCorps claims it expands volunteers' career and educational opportunities (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.115-129; Marshall & Magee, 2005 p.6; Perry & Thompson, 2004 pp.16-17; Tuma, 2011 p.126). There are multiple ways this can happen: instruction on specific teaching skills, networking, encouraging interest, or supporting decisions. What does it look like from the volunteer's point of view? What do they see as most helpful or influential?

## **Interviews:**

Face-to-face interviews were audio recorded and lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. During this time I met with the participants one-on-one and discussed the questions described above. After the interviews I transcribed the audio recordings. I saved the transcripts, along with the notes taken during the interviews, on a password protected computer. The audio recordings were deleted after transcription.

After the first set of interviews I chose to make some changes to the interview protocol. I changed some of the language and removed/added some questions. After reviewing my interview protocol, the program director of the second program suggested I change references to "coworkers" and "volunteers" to "members". This was the language that they used to talk about their program and what their members would best understand. Similarly, I changed the word "volunteer" to "service". Not only did the program director suggest this, but during the first set

of interviews I found that many participants preferred to use the word “service” to describe their work. When asked about their prior volunteer experience, several members talked about both types of work. The implication of this was that they felt their “service”, or work for which they were compensated, could often be just as important as their “volunteer work”, or work for which they were not compensated.

I also removed/added some questions based on their success during the first interviews. Specifically, I removed the question in the Background section about exposure to public schools. I found that members did not provide much detail when asked this question. Also, often they would refer to experiences in public schools when answering other questions, so I felt that I could get the information without specifically asking this question. I also removed the question in the Relationships and Self subset about the importance of relationships. Again, the participants did not elaborate much when asked this question and I was able to get the same information from answers to other questions. Likewise, I removed the last part of a question in the Future subset. This part of the question asked about the program’s role and influence on the likelihood that the participant would work in a school in the future. I realized that I already asked this question earlier in this subset and did not need to repeat it.

I added to the questions in the Relationships and Self subset. To begin, I added follow-up questions, or probes, to the first question about building social networks. During the first set of interviews I found myself asking participants to elaborate on whether they felt the program helped them build relationships and social networks, and how and why this was done. This helped them articulate the importance of these relationships and think about the process. I also combined the questions about what members learned from other members and cooperating teachers and what they learned about themselves as community members/teachers/people. These

questions addressed very similar topics and the first set of participants often addressed them together. In this section I also added a question about how the participants would apply what they learned in the program to life outside the program. This question came up in an interview and the participant provided a very thoughtful answer. I wanted to know what other participants would think.

In the Citizenship and Responsibility subset I added a question about what the participants felt the program could do better to help them. During the first set of interviews I found that this question often helped the participants focus on what the program already does and how they feel about these efforts. Finally, in the Future subset, I added follow-up questions to the question about how the program has influenced the participants' plans for the future. During the first set of interviews I often found myself asking participants to elaborate their answers to this question and I chose to include some of the prompts that were most successful.

## **Analysis**

Following the transcription process described above I coded the members' statements topically and analytically. I first organized quotes by topic, looking for key words and phrases that occurred in multiple conversations (Richards, 2009 p.100-2). I started with ten groups, and then organized these into five larger groups. Some statements started out in one group, but were later moved to another once I began writing up the results. After organizing the statements by topic I then tried to identify the significance of the statement, or what did it say about the topic (p.102-4). This type of coding was particularly useful for writing up the results and discussion sections as it caused me to ask questions about the data and why I felt these particular statements were important.

## **Results:**

How do AmeriCorps State and National members in elementary schools think the experience has influenced them, their future plans, and goals? Through interviews I identified five ways the experience of being an AmeriCorps State and National member in an elementary school influences members:

1. It provides first-hand experience in a school
2. It teaches members how to work on a team
3. It opens doors into the school system for future employment
4. It provides an opportunity for personal growth
5. It increases the members' willingness to serve their communities

### **First-hand experience:**

Through the AmeriCorps experience members gain first-hand knowledge of the teaching profession. Members are often surprised to learn what teaching entails. This was most true for members with more recent experiences of being on the other side of the desk: recent high school graduates and, in one case, a mother of three young children. Members explained how they were surprised to discover how much work teachers do for their students:

See I had no idea exactly what happened in a classroom. I always thought “oh the teachers you know, they have this basic outline, they know what to do and all”. But then I’ve learned there’s so much outside work and they have to make up so much to time to squeeze stuff into a schedule that I just never thought of them doing.

Another member had a similar realization about the work teachers do:

It’s kind of surprising, because I knew that they did a lot and they helped us, but knowing now exactly what they do and all the paper work they have to turn in and the students that they stay and help, just, it’s a lot of work.

Similarly, another member talked about how many people are not aware of what teachers do for their children:

There're some really great teachers out here that I feel like a lot of people don't realize and a lot of parents don't realize. Just that they give hours and hours of their time and service to making – to finding ways for their kid to learn. I feel like teaching is another job that's really un- it's kind of a thankless job sometimes.

Exposure to what teaching really involves challenged some members' existing ideas and opinions about the profession. Some members came into AmeriCorps with the idea that teaching was easy, or that only certain types of people can be teachers. Working with teachers caused them to reevaluate these ideas. After reflecting on the experience of working with elementary school students, one member said:

I feel like one would underestimate that “oh it is elementary school, it's kind of basic core curriculum, it'd be easy to teach”, but it's not the curriculum itself that's difficult. It's actually teaching that's difficult. And reaching each student and trying to figure out, what are their kinds of “road blocks” and what are their needs? So in that I think that I underestimated.

One member expressed how she previously believed she was not the “teacher type”, but that this experience changed her mind:

People kind of like think “oh there's a teacher type” or there's a certain type of person who's a kindergarten teacher, there's not. ... You actually, you can do it and it's a good thing for people with different personalities to teach different grades. It's not like “oh well you just seem like you should be teaching tenth grade”.

The opportunity to see that teachers have a range of personalities and how this benefits the students made this member more sure of herself as a teacher. The exposure to the school environment, from the perspective of a teacher, influenced members' views on teaching and what makes a good teacher and in some cases, changed their existing ideas about the profession.

Members also became more confident in their abilities because of the examples teachers provided. They talked about exposure to different teaching styles, strategies, and classroom

management skills. In terms of teaching styles, members appreciate the opportunity to get to see a range of styles. Eight out of eleven participants had no formal teaching experience and while some we currently engaged in a teacher education program, they were in their first year. Therefore, the majority of participants did not have exposure to teaching strategies or styles prior to their AmeriCorps job. This experience served as an introduction to the possible teaching methods. For example, they said:

I pushed-in on a classroom before and just watched the teacher. I just love watching them and how they interact with the kids because every teacher is different but I learn something from each and every one of them even though they're just so different.

Another member also said:

Like I think my teaching style is correct, but no, everyone has their own style that works for them. Of course it seems really obvious but not ... a varied teaching style through adults is best for students, not just one way.

Serving in a school full-time gave members the opportunity to see a range of teaching styles.

One member pointed out that the opportunity provided both good and bad examples:

I've had some really good example of high caliber people and some counter examples. And I think those two things just really showed me what was right and what wasn't. What I want to be and what I never want to be.

While this member recognized that not everything he observed was positive, other members did not see the negative side. Instead, the majority of participants view their job as a positive learning experience. The experience allowed them to choose a style that they think works best for them and apply it to their current teaching, and it also taught them to appreciate other's styles.

Members often mentioned learning different teaching strategies when talking about the opportunity to observe and work with teachers in the classroom. They learned various ways that teachers in their schools instruct and manage their students. They looked to teachers to show



them what to do in the classroom. When describing what they have learned and how they use these skills in their current jobs, members said things like:

Seeing how they expect kids to behave and what they do in different situations. Just, noticing classroom setups and stuff. Just a lot of it now is just engrained in my head because I've been there long enough that I'm just like "oh, this is how you do this; this is how you make sure this happens.

A different member told me:

Being able to step back and watch a teacher in the classroom and see how they handle the kids, especially the younger ones, how they speak softly, and how they get down on their level, so I've just learned how to interact with the kids to make them pay attention to me, let them know that I am in charge.

When members saw teachers in action and learned styles and strategies to use in their current jobs, they became more confident in their abilities as teachers. This confidence led to a feeling of preparedness for their future as teachers. Throughout the interviews members spoke about how they now feel ready to be teachers themselves because of this experience. When asked to compare themselves to other first time teachers who have not had this experience with AmeriCorps, those members who had finished teacher education programs and planned on becoming teachers said they felt more prepared and comfortable in the environment:

I feel better prepared. Because these fifty hour plus workweeks, I feel a lot better prepared now, knowing I can, I don't know, for example present curriculum or present the material in different ways that maybe it's easier for them to understand. I feel more comfortable being a disciplinarian; I feel more comfortable like trying to understand my students' behavior, why they would feel that way, what are their motivations. In those particular areas I feel more comfortable.

This same member had the opportunity to observe a teacher as part of her teacher training program. After the observation she said:

I watched this whole lesson and I thought the teacher was great, she was wonderful, but at the end of it I went "I already do this". I already know that I can do this job. ... it's invaluable to be able to walk into something knowing you already know how to do it. Knowing you still have much to learn yes, but I've

been doing what I want to do. So, that makes me feel pretty good. It's a lot of work, yeah, but I'm good at it and I enjoy it and I think I will down the road too.

When asked to compare herself to student teachers in her school, another member, currently enrolled in a teacher education program, also expressed a feeling of confidence in her teaching abilities due to this experience:

I feel – even the student teachers that are in the building, they just look like, so like “oh my gosh! I hope I'm doing this right!” you know and they just look so nervous and I feel like when I'm going to be student teacher I'll already be used to that environment and working with the kids and being, I'll just be really confident, I already know that.

The opportunity to work in a school is valuable to many of the volunteers because of the things it teaches them. They get exposure to the classroom environment and learn skills they expect to be able to use in the future.

## **Teamwork:**

The AmeriCorps State and National in an elementary school experience teaches members about teamwork. As one member said, “you can't do this job alone, so it's inherently this one big team builder”. The programs are structured in a way that requires members to build relationships with one another. They have brother and sister campuses, bi-weekly meetings, weekend service events, social events, and members work together in the same space for long hours. Through the experience members learn the important elements of teamwork.

When discussing their relationships with other members, participants talked about how important it is for them to know each other's personalities and strengths. Knowing one another can prevent conflict and create a positive work environment. One member tried to explain this by saying:

If you don't know who you're working with like on a level, then you don't know how to approach that person. Because if they're like a really quiet person that likes to do things themselves and you're just like "oh here let me help you" and they kind of yell at you and you take it offensively.

Knowing each other is also helpful because members know who to go to when they have specific problems. Another member described what happens when they know each other's strengths and how they can use each other for support:

Just because you're weak in one thing doesn't mean that's a bad thing. It just means that you need to work on it. And then someone else may be really strong in one area and really weak in another. And if you come together and find these differences between each

Trust is also helpful in solving problems. It makes members more comfortable to ask each other for help. One Member talked about the positive relationships she has and how her co-workers help her at work by encouraging her and giving her support:

I love that for the most part people really want to make you feel good about what you're doing and they'll say "hey I really like how you do this and I really like how you do that, can you show me how you do this?" and so, I think they're very good at making me feel confident as a teacher, but also I feel like if I have a question or if I'm like "I don't know if I'm doing this right" I feel like there are some people I can go to and be like "hey do you think I'm doing this to the best of my ability or is there something I could be doing better?" and I trust that they will give me the feedback I need and not just "oh no you're fine". That they'll be honest, but not brutal, and so we can learn from each other.

This sense of trust that members build with one another through knowing each other's personalities and strengths makes them better at their current jobs. The AmeriCorps members I spoke with believe that teamwork enhances their ability to be good teachers. One member thinks it makes them better able to solve problems and learn together:

The fact, if just one of us was at a school by ourselves we'd probably be questioning ourselves all the time about like little things, that since we're all there it's just "oh hey, do you do this?" or "what do I do when this happens?" and we kind of figure it out together. So it's kind of group learning I guess. When I don't, any of us really know, we talk it out and figure it out.

Other members talked about how teamwork impacts the students they work with in a positive way. One member compared it to a parent-child relationship, “it’s easier if the mom and dad are on the same side so the kids can see, you know, all of the adults are holding them to the same standard”. Another member talked about the benefit of the positive atmosphere and environment created when members get along:

Especially for my team on the days that we’re kind of flowing well together and supporting each other and just like have good vibes in the room. You’re also then able to bring a student into that space and kind of sharing that ... if there’s like tension ... it defeats the purpose of like teaching them about learning because it takes an entire community to learn.

Overall, the members I spoke with agreed that teamwork was essential to their AmeriCorps jobs and that the programs provide opportunities for them to get to know one another and build team relationships. Through this experience they realized how being a team player can not only help them, but their students as well. Even the “little” things like placing members in the same space or planning whole group meetings helps members build relationships that benefit everyone involved.

### **Opening Doors:**

Members used this job as a way “in” to the school system. A number of members I talked to expressed frustration at trying to find a job in their school district. For example, one member said, “I would never get hired, as teacher. I would have to sub for like four or five years first even to be considered as a teacher ... because there's so many”. For this member, the opportunity to work in an elementary school would not have been possible, or would have taken longer to accomplish, without the help of AmeriCorps.

Several members actually found their AmeriCorps opportunity while searching for jobs in their school districts:

I joined because I wanted to teach and I was trying to find a way into the school system. I was having a hard time with that and then I kind of fell across this.

Another comment a different member made was:

So I was looking for paraprofessional positions and that sort of thing and um, none of those were working out, I just wasn't getting any calls, nobody knew who I was, I didn't have connections, and so that's what led me to [AmeriCorps].

Members felt that AmeriCorps not only gave them experience needed to become teachers, but it also helped them get their foot in the door. Once in the AmeriCorps program, members discovered that their supervisors were well-connected and knowledgeable about the school systems. They expressed an interest in asking these supervisors for career help in the future. Members believe they can ask supervisors for letters of reference, and for information about what to do and who to contact when they are looking for a job. When discussing this, members said things like, "I would probably ask [my supervisors] for letters of rec. ... But also, I do ask them for kind of personal career advice. In terms of how I'm pursuing my teaching credentials" and "I mean a lot of people in [my program], supervisors, they're former teachers. They know people in schools". Generally, the members that were aware of their supervisors' connections in the school district expressed an interest in talking to their supervisors and taking advantage of their connections.

Members I talked to also mentioned building positive relationships with school staff and teachers who can help them career-wise in the future. For some, this means finding teachers they trust to give them advice:

I just feel very comfortable with my principal at [my school], I feel like I could just talk to her about anything ... we built a relationships where she can trust me, I trust her. She can give me advice; she's just a good "go-to" person. And my

mentor teacher from my first two years as well, I just feel like I could go to her for anything. I send her emails every now and then if I have a question, just because she's so good at handing out information

Other members look to school staff as people who can connect them to future jobs:

Just yesterday the speech pathologist that works in our classroom with us on Mondays and Wednesdays was asking me questions about my career goals and was telling me "oh I think I might know someone who has this nonprofit"

Another member agreed, stating:

You know to see if they know of any openings and stuff because I'm almost done with my degree, I probably have a good six months left. So I'm definitely going to try and see if my principal has any jobs open.

For AmeriCorps members in schools, the experience does not just point out key people in the school district they can go to for career help; it also gives them the opportunity to build a good reputation within the school district and make an impression upon these key people.

Members believe that they can reach out to these principals and teachers because these people have seen them in action and know what kind of workers they are. Those I talked to told me how their performance as AmeriCorps members has caught the attention of certain key people in the schools:

In my school right now I'm currently networking to be hired as a full-time teacher next year. And they basically told me "you're a shoe-in" and one administrator said "you called dibs on first grade". And for me to compete against other applicants without them knowing me, I would have so much less of a chance. But now they know me, they know how much I know, what I care about, how I speak at a meeting, and how prompt I am. They already know all that stuff you know.

Another member had similar thoughts:

When we're working at a certain school ... when we're working with other teachers, other teachers tell the principal "hey this is a really good person; we should totally get them on board".

This experience has helped a lot of the members build networks within the school system. They feel confident that they can rely on the people they have connected with in the future to help them make career decisions and find jobs.

## **Personal Growth:**

Working as an AmeriCorps State and National member in an elementary school provides the opportunity for personal growth. The experience does this in two ways; it gives members an awareness of their existing traits and skills, and teaches them new skills.

Members become aware of existing traits and skills that they have through this experience. Sometimes, they are even surprised to discover they are good at a particular task or job. For example, one member talked to me about her anxiety about working with small children prior to joining AmeriCorps:

I didn't think it was my thing and when I decided to do this program that was actually my biggest concern, was do I want to work with little ones, can I do that? And yes, yes I can and I'm actually good at it and they like me.

Another member became aware of the skills and abilities he had, and how important these were not only to his job as a tutor, but in life outside the classroom as well:

I found that I have excellent work ethic and presentability. And I think for the first time in my life I have been able to meet my desire for the respect that I want from people who are educated.

Members also talked about learning new skills during their term of service. They most commonly referred to learning patience and maturity, or how to behave like an adult. When speaking generally about patience they said things like "As a teacher, I'm much more patient than I used to be" and "I've learned to be more, it helped me learn to be more patient". More

specifically, some members mentioned learning how to deal with problems or address difficult situations in a calm manner:

It's made me kind of relax and realize that not everything is a crisis and the day will go on and people will live. I don't know, I've relaxed a lot. I have learned how to work with very low kids. Like if they don't understand it one time don't get frustrated.

Members also claimed the experience has helped them grow in maturity. For example, one of the younger AmeriCorps members believes being an AmeriCorps member has made him more responsible:

I think I've grown as a person, you know, and I'm only 20 years old. I've done a lot of development. I did not have the sense of responsibility that I have, when I started.

Another young member said she has learned how to interact with people in a more adult way and she recognizes the influence this lesson will have on her future behavior:

I know that it kind of teaches me to be mature for my age, like if I go out of town and stuff and I see a friend I'm not going to be like "oh wassup!?" anymore you know? I'm going to be like "hey, how are you doing?" ... that's a big thing for me.

I recently graduated high school last May and I've never had a job before so this is my first step out and this has actually told me that I really need to "mature up" and not take things so personal all the time because people do just want to help and I think that's gonna help me like later in on in life.

Generally, the AmeriCorps members that I spoke with agree that the experience has helped them grow a lot. They express this growth in terms of the confidence they feel about their existing abilities as well as new skills they learned.

## **Willingness to Serve the Community**



The final topic members discussed when talking about their experience was how the program impacts their willingness to serve their communities in the future. AmeriCorps programs expose their members to both the need for service and service opportunities.

One member, who moved to a new city to participate in the program, said working with AmeriCorps gave members the opportunity to learn a lot about the local community and its needs:

You're put in situations where you are relating to people who are different than you. Or at least, especially a lot of us are not from here. So we don't know what it's like to live [here] ... So it's making us aware of things that, unless we just want to be completely closed-minded and put blinders on while we're doing this job, we're going to notice things.

Even members who did not move to a new city agreed the job exposed them to the needs of the community. Sometimes they actually discovered things about their own communities that they had not known before:

I think they definitely open your eyes as far as what the community needs, or what is lacking, or you know stuff that I definitely never knew about. As far as, we have ... the shelter for abused and battered women. I never really knew anything about it, it was just a building I passed every day. Or how many people actually go hungry, how many kids go hungry. It's really, like when you step back and just look at the numbers it's just really, just right in front of your eyes sometimes.

Working with AmeriCorps not only opened members' eyes to the need in their local communities, but also the opportunities to help. Programs did this by requiring members to work a certain number of hours off-campus with local nonprofit organizations. Although this requirement meant longer work weeks for the volunteers, sometimes up to fifty hours, it did not deter most of the volunteers from seeking volunteer opportunities outside of their schools. When talking about off-campus work, members said:

You know, we get hours working at other nonprofits, so it's really cool to see what other people are doing that have nonprofits and it does encourage me to go out and volunteer more.

Another member said:

AmeriCorps has just shown me so many different things I could do to be helping my community. Just like volunteering ... or picking up trash at the park or doing things, that the small things really do make a big difference. I feel like they are easy things that you could be doing and they help so much and you don't even realize it.

Like this last member, others were also surprised to discover the impact their actions had on the community. One member stated that her AmeriCorps experience showed her "it only takes one small, or you know or one hour of your day, or whatever to help people". Other members echoed her sentiments, saying:

I've learned how important we are to the community. ... and when I see some of the parents sometimes ... and they're just like "hey you're doing a good job with my kids" and "noticed his reading skills, he's getting better with reading" just like positive things it's like "oh wow we really do make a difference in this whole community". It's not just, not thinking about it just at the school but you know what you do affects one person that affects another person.

A different member said:

Even if it's volunteer service and you're not getting paid for it, even a couple hours at a time to help some teachers out sometimes makes a lot of difference.

As members became aware of the need and the opportunities for service in their communities, as well as the impact they have on the community, they were more willing to take responsibility for helping. Most members agreed that AmeriCorps enhanced the value they place on helping their communities and schools, saying things like:

It really does emphasize to me the need, the need to do it. And we can't, we can't pass volunteering off as something we do in high school or for someone else who likes philanthropy.

Another member told me:

There's a lot more things I'm aware of and a lot more things I find important. It's made me much more selfless.

When discussing their interest in serving their communities and schools, one thing members also mentioned was that they preferred service projects that were optional. Often times the programs hold required service events and are strict about how much time the members must put into the project, and some of the members expressed a dislike of this practice:

Sometimes I'm like "you know, I didn't really wanna come in to this today "and I was like five minutes late and ... I walk in and they're like "you're late" and I'm like "it's Saturday right now".

Another member from another program expressed a similar dislike of this practice, but also pointed out how the program could encourage participation in a more positive manner:

I think that when they say "highly recommended that you go" and "it will help" I think that actually motivates me a lot more than "you have to do this" ... you know how kids don't like to be told what to do, they kind of "hey can you do this for me?" or "hey can you do that for me?" it, that's another way I think it actually motivates me a lot more. And to know that it's of my own freewill, that kind of makes it that much better.

The AmeriCorps State and National experience provides members with the chance to see what their community needs, and gives them a way to address these needs. While the members do appreciate the opportunities programs provide for them to do service work outside of the classroom, they also believe it could be approached in a more positive manner that would encourage their participation rather than require it.

## **Discussion:**

### **Summary of results:**

AmeriCorps State and National members working in elementary schools identified five ways that the experience influences them, their future plans, and goals. First, members talked about the first-hand knowledge they gain by working side-by-side with teachers. Several of them

went into this job with existing opinions and ideas about what teaching entails and its level of difficulty, and through their experience, their opinions changed. The experience also improved the confidence members felt about their own ability to teach in the future. For many members, this confidence increased their interest in becoming teachers.

Second, members expressed an understanding of the value of teamwork. The experience made them aware of how working together as a team can affect not only the individual, but the other members around them and their students. Third, the experience opened doors into the school system for members interested in teaching in the future. While working in the schools members met and made themselves known to key people within the school system.

Fourth, the experience provided an opportunity for members to grow in their awareness of their strengths and develop new skills. Finally, members felt the experience positively influenced their willingness to serve the community. They felt that the programs opened their eyes not only to the need in their communities, but also the available opportunities to address this need. The programs also showed the members how much their contributions helped, making them more willing to volunteer in the future.

### **Comparison to Literature:**

Current research on service suggests that service opportunities teach volunteers important skills and knowledge about their field of interest (Tuma, 2011 p.126). AmeriCorps members I met with agreed with this idea. Many of them talked about the skills they learned from teachers, such as teaching strategies and classroom management. They expressed appreciation at the chance to watch experienced teachers and to practice using the skills they learned with the students they tutored. Members not only learned teaching skills, they learned what really goes

into teaching. Some of them were pleasantly surprised by what they learned and changed their opinions about teaching. One member in particular questioned her suitability for teaching, and this experience encouraged her to pursue a teaching degree and job. Without first-hand knowledge about the teaching field it, is possible she would not have made this choice.

Existing literature asserts that AmeriCorps encourages responsibility for the community among volunteers by teaching them what it means to be a citizen (Perry & Thomson, 2004 p.3; Palmer & Standerfer, 2004 p.123). What the literature does not do is explicate the process of learning about being a citizen. During the interviews I asked members to describe how they thought the programs teach them about citizenship. Many of the members found it difficult to explicate this process. One possible reason for this is that the second program was in a school district near a military base. The majority of these members had family in the military, and they were active in military service organizations and activities. I think that many of them had existing ideas about what it means to be a citizen prior to joining AmeriCorps. It was probably difficult to untangle the prior influence of the military from that of AmeriCorps within the short time frame of the interview.

The members I spoke with from the first program, or those in the second program who were able to distinguish the two influences, described a process by which they are exposed to community need, opportunities to address this need, and the results of the help they provided. The product of these this exposure is a desire to continue helping the community. They did not discuss any direct instruction on citizenship, in fact, when asked about the possibility many of them claimed they thought their programs could do more to teach them about citizenship. Therefore, these AmeriCorps program indirectly teach the importance of serving the community and encourage responsibility.

Similarly, the research on how service broadens the perspectives of volunteers is vague. Perry and Thomson claim that service exposes members to new and different things, which broadens their individual perspectives (2004 p.46). Other research suggests that working with a diverse group of people helps members understand and value difference and develop an awareness of people's interdependence (Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.16-17). Again, the literature fails to detail the process by which this happens. I talked with members about their relationships with coworkers and how they thought these relationships impacted them. Members of the first program had difficulty discussing their relationships with other members. They often admitted that their program was so large that they did not know everyone in it. While they agreed that teamwork and relationships were important parts of the job, their relationships were limited to the two or three people who they worked with on a daily basis.

The second program, however, was smaller and provided many team building activities for the members to get to know each other. These members provided a number of details about the nature of their relationships and how they believed the relationships affected them. Through the interviews, I discovered that members learn to value other's differences and the importance of working together through team development such as team building activities at weekly meetings and spending a lot of time together. The experience of working on a team in close proximity for long hours meant that they had to get to know one another and rely on each other for help. When they worked well together, they began to realize how teamwork helped them solve problems and benefitted their students.

Literature about AmeriCorps claims that the networks members build while serving positively impacts their well-being (Perry, 1999 p.238; Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.17). However, this study presented another reason networks are important to the volunteer experience: the

experience of working as an AmeriCorps State and National member in an elementary school provides opportunities for networking within the school system. Sometimes these networks come in the form of program supervisors, other times it is the teachers and school staff members who they work with on a daily basis. Members are able to identify key people within the school system and make a good impression which allows them access into the school system they would not otherwise have. While networks built during service may be important to the volunteer's well-being, they also impact the volunteer's ability to continue working in the education field.

Studies show that volunteer work has a positive effect on one's well-being. Researchers suggest this is because volunteering makes people feel like they matter, and this feeling leads to positive feelings about oneself (Piliavin&Siegl, 2007 p.455). While this may be true in some situations, my data suggests another reason. In the case of AmeriCorps State and National volunteers in elementary schools, learning new skills and gaining an awareness of their existing strengths leads to a feeling of confidence. It is my opinion that this feeling of confidence leads members to feel good about themselves and their abilities, and is therefore a significant influence on their well-being.

### **Application:**

As stated previously, I believe that understanding the influence of an experience is not only important to volunteers, but also to education programs, future employers and clients, and service program directors as well. Both university education programs and future employees gain skilled and confident students and employees. Volunteers enter into these programs and jobs confident in their abilities and prepared to work in the classroom. The skills they learned while volunteering in elementary schools transfer easily into education programs and jobs as teachers.

Volunteers know how to work on a team, and this can be important to those running education programs and schools. In education programs students are often asked to work together on projects or presentations. Volunteers turned students may find this easy to do because of their team experience with AmeriCorps. The experience also teaches them what their strengths are and how to use them. This is helpful not only when doing team tasks in school, but also when performing individual tasks. These students know what they are good at and how to use this to their advantage to do well in school. Finally, former volunteers who worked in a school setting expect to be comfortable in a classroom setting in the future. They have been in the classroom and seen what teaching entails, and are less likely to be nervous or change their minds about going into teaching later down the line.

Future employers and clients benefit in a similar way. Teamwork is an important part of a teacher's job; he or she may be asked to collaborate with other teachers on curriculum and activities. AmeriCorps volunteers know the value of working on a team and how to do it well. They can transition well into working with other teachers. Also, they know their strengths and weaknesses and what situations are difficult for them. These teachers are likely to go to another teacher for help when a problem arises in the classroom that they cannot handle. They also know a variety of strategies and styles, and which ones work best for them, and can apply them to their teaching.

Volunteers' networking while serving can also benefit future employers. Members mentioned that school staff and teachers get to see them in action. This means that school staff members, like principals, know what kind of worker the volunteer is, and can take this into account when making hiring decisions. They do not have to guess about what kind of teacher the



volunteer will be in the future, because they have already seen their performance in the classroom with students.

Understanding the influence of the experience is also important to service program directors because it shows them how they are influencing their members and what they can do better. The members I spoke with valued their relationships with teachers and other members. They learned a lot about themselves and how to do things from these relationships. If programs want to have a positive impact on volunteers and help them learn about themselves and skills, they should continue to provide multiple opportunities for volunteers to interact with teachers and members.

Members also said they value the exposure to service opportunities in the community. One aspect of these opportunities members especially liked was the ability to choose. Members agreed they were more likely to enjoy a service opportunity or task, and want to do it again, when they were not forced or mandated to participate. Programs that want to enhance members' willingness to serve should take this into consideration. Forcing members to participate in many activities and being strict with when and where they have to be, does not appear to have a positive effect on their interest in serving others. This is important because one of AmeriCorps goals is to encourage responsibility, and therefore encourage members to continue serving in their communities. If members do not enjoy serving with AmeriCorps, there is a possibility the experience can negatively impact their willingness to serve in the future.

Another important aspect of the experience is the opportunity to network. Several members expressed an appreciation for the support and networks their supervisors provided. They realized that their supervisors had connections within the school system and were eager to take advantage of these connections. They also recognized that if they did well at their job they

increased the likelihood that someone in the school would notice and consider them in the future. Those members that did not express an appreciation for these networking opportunities, especially those provided by the supervisors, seemed unaware of their existence and their supervisors' willingness to help them. Perhaps if supervisors made their connections more known to the group, more members could take advantage.

### **Critical Considerations:**

My attitude towards AmeriCorps is largely positive due to my own experience and this may have affected my interactions with members as well as my interpretation of their responses. During the interviews I actively tried to let the participants do most of the talking and not to lead them in any one direction. Sometimes when I agreed with what they said I even tried to present an opposing suggestion in order to further discussion and make sure I was approaching the topic critically. While compiling my results and putting together a discussion, I tried to be open to ideas that come up and did not exactly match what I initially believed about AmeriCorps. I also reminded myself that I had a bias toward AmeriCorps, and I think being actively aware of this helped me take a more critical approach. However, the overall tone of this paper is positive toward AmeriCorps. It is important to keep in mind my bias when considering the applications I suggest because someone with a more critical personal attitude may feel differently and disagree with my suggestions.

Someone with a more negative, or even neutral, opinion of AmeriCorps may believe these programs only prepare members to continue working in existing school environments rather than encourage them to be critical of what currently happens in schools. Such a person may argue that these programs should do both, in order to produce members who not only want to teach, but also work to improve the existing school system. However, I believe it is important to note that eight out of the eleven participants whose data I used for this paper have had little to no formal teaching experience. They have not had exposure to any strategies and practices used in classrooms from the perspective of a teacher. This

experience may not push them to think critically about the education system, but that may not be its purpose in their particular case. For them, this job serves as an introductory experience into teaching. Before they can begin to question the practices of the education system they need to first be aware of what happens within it and these programs provide that awareness.

For those members interested in becoming teachers or learning more about the education system, the next step is to enter into teacher education programs. In these programs they can learn about the flaws and inequalities of the current system, its practices, and ideologies. With an understanding of these, they can begin to think critically about the education system, to question existing practices and the reasons behind them, and to propose alternatives in order to transform and improve the existing situation.

Another possible explanation for why my participants did not address how AmeriCorps encourages them to question the existing system and educational practices may be that I did not directly ask them to. During the interviews I focused on the participants' observations of the schools and how this experience might influence them in the future, rather than if they agreed with what they saw. Other questions, about their opinions of what they observed and how the programs prepare them to challenge existing practices, might produce more critical comments and an explanation of how AmeriCorps does, or does not, encourage them to do so.

The positive tone of this paper may also be due to the research method that I chose to use. The majority of interviews lasted less than an hour, therefore participants did not have a lot of time to reflect on my questions and provide the most thoughtful and critical responses. While participants did offer some criticism about the programs, these were based on personal preference; for example, one did not enjoy the social activities as much as others, their responses were largely positive. Had I given them more time, or used a survey for them to provide written responses to my questions I may have gotten more reflective and thought-out responses. Therefore, the data in this paper does not give a complete picture of the experience and this should be remembered when considering its applications.

For example, participants suggested ways in which the experience may benefit them in the future; they did not discuss how it might hinder them or their goals. Because they did not provide this

information, it is difficult to speculate what negative side effects they might encounter. It is possible that they will enter into jobs and education programs with preexisting ideas about education based on their experience with AmeriCorps. And if, as suggested above, AmeriCorps does prepare members to fit into the existing education system rather than challenge it, this may not be beneficial in schools and programs that are trying to encourage change or critical analysis.

A final note is the timing of this project. Because the members I spoke with are currently serving, they could only speculate on how the AmeriCorps experience will influence them in the future. While they could tell me how important the relationships are to them now and how they might be in the future, the responses are not definite. Given more time and resources I could have done a longitudinal study and returned to interview the members again after they completed their terms of service. Another possibility would have been to interview past members. Both alternatives would have provided more concrete examples of how the experience influences them. Furthermore, they might have provided ways in which the experience has not positively influenced them as they imagined. Perhaps the benefits members perceive while serving do not match life after AmeriCorps. It is possible the skills and networks described in this paper, which current members believe will be helpful in the future, are not as beneficial or influential as they believe they will be.

It is important to remember that the data provided in this project is speculative, and is the opinions of a specific group of members. Right now, these participants are not focused on the negatives and possible downfalls of the experience. They believe they are doing something good, and choose to focus on the positive results that may occur.

## **Conclusion:**

Overall, it appears that the AmeriCorps State and National experience within an elementary school has a positive influence on the volunteers, their goals, and plans for the future. The experience does, like research suggests, teach volunteers skills that they can apply outside of AmeriCorps. It also encourages community responsibility by showing the volunteers how their

actions positively benefit their communities. AmeriCorps service broadens members' perspectives by providing opportunities for them to work with other people and develop interpersonal skills. Finally, the service experience connects volunteers with key people in their field of interest, in this case the school system, so they can hopefully find jobs in the future. The influence of the experience is important to education programs, future employers, and program directors. Education programs that know about the influence the experience has on members know they are getting students who are comfortable working with other and in the classroom. Similarly, future employers know the members they hire are team players and know a variety of teaching strategies.

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## Appendices:

### Interview Protocol 1:

#### **Background questions:**

1. What made you want to join AmeriCorps? What made you want to join this particular program? What are the benefits to joining AmeriCorps/this program?
2. Before joining ACE, what exposure did you have to public schools?
3. Before joining ACE, what exposure did you have to AmeriCorps?
4. What prior volunteering experience, if any, did you have?

#### **Job questions:**

1. What do you do? What is a typical day like?
2. Is it what you expected? Were there any surprises?

#### **Influence questions:**

##### ***Relationships and self:***

1. Research claims that volunteering helps build social networks (Perry, 1999 p.246; Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.17; Moore, 2006 p.308) do you think this is true? What kinds of relationships or social networks have you built while working for AmeriCorps?
2. What have you learned from fellow members?
3. What have you learned from the teachers you work with?
4. How important are your relationships with fellow members to you? How does your program facilitate building relationships among members/teachers? Why do you think the program tries to build relationships between members?
5. What have you learned about yourself as a community member/ teacher from you relationships with other members/teachers?

##### ***Citizenship and responsibility:***

1. Researchers believe service teaches people what it means to be a citizen and creates a feeling of community responsibility. How do you think this program teaches about citizenship? How do you think it encourages community responsibility?
2. In what ways does being an AmeriCorps member encourage you to be active in your community? How has the program prepared you to participate in civic life?
3. Has it changed the value you place on participating in the community, politics, or schools?

##### ***Future:***

1. Have you thought about what you want to do after this? How has the program influenced/supported you?
2. AmeriCorps claims it expands its volunteers' career and educational opportunities, how does the program try to do this for you? In what ways has it been successful?
3. How likely are you to continue volunteering after this? What has the program done to influence this decision? What kind of programs are you most likely to volunteer with in the future?



4. How likely are you to work in a school after this? What has the program done to influence/support this decision?

## Interview Protocol 2:

### **Background:**

1. What made you want to join AmeriCorps? What made you want to join this particular program? What are the benefits to joining AmeriCorps/this program?
2. Before joining your program, what exposure did you have to AmeriCorps?
3. What prior service experience, if any, did you have?

### **Job:**

1. What do you do? What is a typical day like?
2. Is it what you expected? Were there any surprises?

### **Influence Questions:**

#### *Relationships and self:*

1. Research claims that volunteering helps build social networks (Perry, 1999 p.246; Frumkin&Jastrzab, 2010 p.17; Moore, 2006 p.308) what kinds of relationships or social networks have you built while working for AmeriCorps?
2. Do you feel like the program helps you get to know the other members?
  - a. Yes – how and why
  - b. No – what could they do to support building relationships?
3. What have you learned from your fellow members?
  - a. As a teacher, community member, person
4. What have you learned from the teachers you work with?
  - a. As a teacher, community member, person
5. How might you apply the things you've learned to life outside the program?

#### *Citizenship and responsibility:*

1. Researchers believe service teaches people what it means to be a citizen and creates a feeling of community responsibility. How do you think the program teaches about citizenship? How do you think it encourages community responsibility?
2. In what ways does being an AmeriCorps member encourage you to be active in your community? How has the program prepared you to participate in civic life?
3. Has it changed the value you place on participating in the community, politics, or schools?
4. Is there something the program could do to better support you in this area, what would that be?

#### *Future:*

1. Have you thought about what you want to do after this? How has the program influenced/supported you?
  - a. Can you pinpoint any specific things that they do?
  - b. You said being an AmeriCorps member has influenced you a little to go into \_\_\_ in the future; can you think of how it's done that? What about this experience makes you want to \_\_\_?
2. AmeriCorps claims it expands its volunteers' career and educational opportunities, how does the program try to do this for you? In what ways has it been successful?

3. How likely are you to continue serving in the future? What has the program done to influence this decision? What kind of programs are you most likely to serve with in the future?
4. How likely are you to work in a school after this?

## HSCL Consent Form:

### INTRODUCTION

The School of Education at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. This consent form is provided to help you determine if you want to participate in the above mentioned study. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this project is to learn how full-time AmeriCorps State and National volunteers working in an elementary school setting think the experience has influenced them, their future plans, and goals.

### PROCEDURES

This study will consist of an interview. Interviews will last about sixty minutes. With your permission I will audio record the interview for transcription purposes. As a participant you will be asked about your background experience with public schools and in volunteering. You will also be asked about your job as a tutor in an elementary school and about your opinions of volunteering and being an AmeriCorps member. Transcripts of the interviews will be made from the audio recordings. Once the transcripts are made, the audio recordings will be destroyed. These transcripts, along with notes made during the interview, will be kept on a password protected computer. After transcribing the interviews I will ask you if you want to review the transcript to make sure it accurately reflects you interview. At this time you may request that I add or delete information to the transcript.

### RISKS

No physical, mental, or emotional risks are anticipated with this study.

### PAYMENT

Study participants will not be paid for their involvement in this study.

### PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

If you choose to participate in this study, your name and institution's name will not be associated in the publication or presentation of the information gathered from the study. The researcher will maintain confidentiality by using pseudonyms for both the individual participants and their institutions. Any identifiable information will not be shared (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission."

### REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to sign this consent form. You cannot participate in this study if you do not sign. Refusal will not affect your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas.

### CANCELLATION OF CONSENT

You may withdraw your consent at any time. If you withdraw your consent, any information gathered prior to your cancellation will be used in the study unless you request otherwise. To request that information gathered prior to your cancellation not be used send a written request to the investigator listed at the end of this form.

#### QUESTIONS

Any questions about the procedures of this study should be directed to the investigator listed at the end of this form.

#### PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email [irb@ku.edu](mailto:irb@ku.edu).

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

\_\_\_\_\_

Type/Print Participant's Name

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature