



Institutional Impacts of AmeriCorps on the University of Michigan

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AmeriCorps is about "getting things done" in the community, but what are its institutional impacts on the university, and its educational effects on the students who participate?

In the rush to show program results and build constituency support for AmeriCorps, such institutional and educational questions have been secondary to the community ones, but since the program operates on several university campuses and has implications for students who participate and the schools they attend, they are worth addressing, as is done here by a professor who also serves as a program co-director.

The Michigan Neighborhood AmeriCorps Program is a unique collaboration of five graduate professional schools at the University of Michigan — Business, Public Health, Public Policy, Social Work, and Urban and Regional Planning — and twelve community-based organizations working with the Michigan Neighborhood Partnership, and neighborhood coalition in Detroit. Forty AmeriCorps members, twenty community residents and twenty university students aim to solve problems, plan programs, and provide services in neighborhoods citywide. Working together in teams, they address unmet community, environmental, and human needs defined by residents themselves.

Since launching the program in January 1995, AmeriCorps members, working with Detroiters, have:

- Planned the Martin Luther King Redevelopment Project at Core City Neighborhoods in Detroit's Empowerment Zone;
- Developed a community-based health clinic for residents served by Operation Get Down;
- Planned an academic center for youth from public housing at Rosedale Park Baptist Church;
- Tutored children and assisted immigrant families at the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services;

- United Chaldean store owners and African-American community residents in mutually beneficial business enterprise at REACH, Inc.;
- Organized a summer weekly outdoor Mexicantown Mercado for local vendors with Southwest Detroit Business Association;
- Conducted a community campaign against tuberculosis in public schools and civic agencies at Islandview Village Development Corporation;
- Opened a survival school for young people at Latino Family Services; and
- Conducted after-school, summer-enrichment, and parent-involvement programs in several community-based organizations;

For these activities, we have established a new institutional infrastructure for service and learning on campus and in the community. Two program directors and a community and campus coordinator have responsibility for overall leadership and management; academic liaisons work with students in each university unit; and field supervisors facilitate the process in each community-based organization. We meet regularly through committees, task forces, and other components of a supportive network.

The program was launched in January 1995, when the first members were sworn in and started service. Although evaluation is in the initial stages, early evidence enables the following preliminary conclusions.

Student Learning

Students learn a great deal from their involvement in AmeriCorps. Working together in "community-service teams," they address a wide range of educational, environmental, public safety, and human-needs projects. These projects, selected and supervised by community leaders, require students to apply knowledge and skills from different disciplines and professional fields to real-world situations that transcend the expertise of any one field. Thus, for example, urban-planning and social-work students combine efforts to actively involve young people in community development in one neighborhood, while business and public-health students integrate a health-education campaign with economic development in another, in which students from five schools combine to plan a series of environmental-improvement projects citywide. While university officials give lip service to increasing interdisciplinary interaction and collegial collaboration, AmeriCorps members actually do it.

AmeriCorps is a form of pedagogy which provides students with substantive knowledge and practical skills. Unlike an approach in which the teacher lectures to listening students, AmeriCorps members actively participate in experiential-education situations with learning opportunities not readily available in the conventional classroom, such as: assessing the needs and strengths of community residents; involving traditionally underserved groups in neighborhood planning; analyzing the effects of investments and disinvestment by public agencies and private institutions on neigh-

neighborhood change; writing reports under time constraints for community clients; and formulating plans for urban revitalization which are responsive to community priorities. This type of "know how" is different from the "know about" information available in the conventional classroom.

AmeriCorps provides new life experiences for students. In their journals, students stress the value of working with people who are different from themselves; seeing the community through the eyes of local residents who experience discrimination and oppression; and addressing problems whose solutions seem beyond reach in order to have a real impact on the world. Since most students have not had earlier experience in such situations, the program has educational effects on more than knowledge and skills, but also in terms of attitude development, values clarification, and greater awareness of problems in society.

The real-world environment of AmeriCorps is a unique educational experience for the students. University students often operate in an institutional environment in which deadlines are easily met, information is readily available, and individual performance is rewarded. In contrast, AmeriCorps often work in an environment with immediate deadlines, incomplete information, and shared responsibilities. Students receive feedback from community clients who are directly affected by the outcome of discussions and have mechanisms of accountability and tests of reality uncharacteristic of university curricula.

AmeriCorps provides experiential credentials for community careers. The program is too new to provide definitive conclusions, but its first graduates are using it as an employment credential and taking positions which complement their community experience, such as the student who took a job as a planner in a large neighborhood-development organization or who oversees a community-design project down the street from his original placement, and another who went to work as an organizer in a labor union concerned with employment conditions. Following their term of service, students are expected to take positions in planning agencies, human service organizations, grassroots neighborhood groups, community-development corporations, and private companies.

AmeriCorps consciously seeks to strengthen members' knowledge and skills through direct service supported by pre-service orientation and in-service training. The continuous orientation and training program features a five-day immersive introduction to the program, emphasizing its policies and procedures; regular meetings offer opportunities for discussion of programs and activities in its several sites. These meetings are a vehicle for reflection on the lessons learned from experience in accordance with the service-learning objectives of the program.

Our observation is that AmeriCorps has potential to strengthen a sense of social responsibility and civic competence of student participants. In contrast to students who sit silently in the classroom and accept community problems as given, student members raise

questions about issues, identify root causes of problems, and formulate strategies for improvement. Our expectation is that these students will demonstrate higher levels of community participation in later life than do students who study about community in the classroom. At a time when most universities have deemphasized their earlier commitment to "education for citizenship," AmeriCorps provides a way to reintegrate values into the curriculum.

AmeriCorps also seeks to strengthen social diversity. Its members include African Americans developing after-school programs for young people, Arab Americans enhancing education for new immigrant families, Latinos establishing an alternative school for at-risk youth, and white students working with people who are different from themselves. They receive diversity training, work together in multicultural teams, and develop citywide projects that recognize differences and build bridges across cultural boundaries.

In March 1996, we prepared a questionnaire and surveyed student members about the effects of the program on their learning. Their responses do not represent what might be found elsewhere, but provide a source of information nonetheless. Nearly all students agreed that they are learning a great deal from the program. Specifically, they agreed that they are gaining new factual knowledge, developing practical skills, and increasing their understanding of societal problems. They also agreed that they are strengthening their sense of social responsibility and increasing their commitment to community service. However, only about half of them agreed that they are learning more from AmeriCorps than from the same amount of time spent in courses at the university.

Members report that the program is affecting their lives. According to a report by the program's external evaluator, members emphasize the positive impacts on their personal growth and knowledge development, as suggested by statements such as: "AmeriCorps has exposed me to people of different experiences, cultures, values, and backgrounds." "It has strengthened my desire to work in an urban community." "I have a more collective view of how to get things done." "AmeriCorps has exposed me to people of different experiences, cultures, values, and backgrounds." "I've learned how to approach people I don't know and work with them much easier." "I feel much better about myself."

Overall, AmeriCorps is a powerful pedagogy and way-of-knowing consistent with the "learning by doing" philosophy of John Dewey through which some students learn more than they would from conventional classroom instruction. There is substantial evidence that community service learning increases academic achievement through gains in factual knowledge; provides practical skills through experiential education in problem solving; and develops social responsibility and long-term civic values in a diverse society. Early evidence suggests that our program has educational effects enhanced by the combination of service and learning on campus and in the community.

Faculty Involvement

A few faculty and staff members participate actively in AmeriCorps. They testified in the congressional hearings which formulated the program, convened a White House Working Group which emphasized the "in-school approach," and contributed to the process which produced the final regulations. In Michigan, they collaborated with community residents to conceive of the local program, prepare the proposal for funding, and negotiate agreements with federal funders. They presently hold leadership positions in the program, serve on its operating committees, and work closely with student members and community counterparts. They view this work as consistent with their professional responsibilities, and seek to integrate its ideas into research or teaching. They are few in number, but they care a great deal about the program.

AmeriCorps promotes professional development for these faculty and staff members. In contrast to those who have narrow academic backgrounds and small social circles, they increase interdisciplinary interaction with academic colleagues, form partnerships with community collaborators whose experiences are different from their own, and develop knowledge to address problems that transcend their distinct disciplines. It is not surprising that they seem more able than their colleagues to integrate research, teaching, and service — in new cutting-edge combinations that are untraditional in the academy.

Although the program's most active faculty and staff members are few in number, they share their experience with their peers and affect their home university units. For example, one faculty member has built on her AmeriCorps experience to reconceptualize research beyond the prevailing positivist paradigm to include community members as partners and participants in knowledge development. In this new "community-based" paradigm, research involves the community as partners in problem definition, data collection, and discussion of action steps. This faculty member has led a successful research initiative in her home unit and also integrates service into teaching by taking the "classroom into the community" and bringing the "community into the classroom," and this approach, too, is having an impact in her unit.

Reconceptualizing research is an epistemological and methodological matter which involves unconventional ways of knowing. Most faculty members in the university are trained in positivist scientific research methods which discourage community participation in defining the problems, gathering the data, and analyzing the results; and in banking approaches to education which view teachers as providers of knowledge to passive student recipients. It is unrealistic to expect researchers and teachers to develop knowledge or facilitate learning in ways which they have not experienced themselves, and thus it is not surprising that AmeriCorps sometimes seems counternormative in the institution. Reconceptualizing research is a formidable task in institutions whose members are themselves invested in the status quo.

Also, most faculty members in the university perceive few institutional rewards and little support for community-based research and community service-learning. They perceive that service learning does not weigh heavily in promotion, tenure, salary, or other components of the reward structure. They may even become conditioned to regarding service learning as a waste of time, distraction from work, or threat to their careers in the university. They are difficult to convince of the academic merits or educational benefits of community-based research and community service learning when they have been conditioned otherwise from their first days in graduate school into their academic careers, or when their deans and department heads dissuade them from such work in the interest of academic productivity.

It is ironic that this is the case, for there is research evidence from studies elsewhere that faculty who engage in significant service score higher in the number of funded research projects, in the numbers of professional peer-reviewed publications, and in student evaluations of their teaching, than those who do not. However, the evidence that service strengthens rather than weakens research and teaching is not well known and runs against the conventional wisdom in the academy despite evidence to the contrary.

AmeriCorps integrates service into academic study through new teaching and training in areas of professional expertise and community need. *First*, the program has established pre-service orientation to prepare students who come with varying levels of readiness for community service, including community assessment and multicultural competence; and in-service training which provides practical hands-on skills for specific service assignments. Designed in consultation with a faculty member who has extensive experience as a Peace Corps trainer, AmeriCorps offers a model for adaptation and replication campuswide.

Second, AmeriCorps has stimulated the creation of new for-credit courses, such as "Community-Based Planning in Detroit," proposed by a student member in coordination with the campus coordinator and two professors, involving twenty students from eight graduate schools in experiential education and service learning with community-based organizations; "Nonprofit Management of Community Service Organizations," enabling students to strengthen nonprofit management through program planning and organizational development; and "Detroit in Crisis? Rethinking Local Communities and Reshaping the Future," proposed by an AmeriCorps member for undergraduates to examine several strategies of community development.

Educational programs such as AmeriCorps are not "normal" in the academy. They combine formal and non-formal learning, student and faculty facilitation, and continuing education of practitioners in the field. They are not in the present institutional mainstream, but they are consistent with the core educational objectives of higher education.

Institutional Impacts

AmeriCorps has improved the infrastructure and developed the capacity for service and learning on campus and in the community. Building on a strong tradition of community service and service learning at the University of Michigan — from its historic role in the founding of the Peace Corps to the involvement of more than 7,500 students today — AmeriCorps has enabled individuals and groups to join together to accomplish more than any one of them could by acting alone.

First, AmeriCorps has established the Campus Coordinating Committee as a vehicle for planning and coordination of activities. Committee members include faculty and staff representatives of the five schools who meet regularly to discuss policy, planning, and program issues. These issues are usually very concrete, such as recruitment, selection, orientation, placement, and training of members, but their discussion often raises questions for which there have been few mechanisms for campuswide consideration, such as: How should we prepare students with varying levels of readiness? What are the roles and responsibilities of field supervisors in enhancing the education of students? What learning activities will best enable students to reflect on their experience and learn lessons for the future? How should student assignments balance the learning objectives of students and the needs of the community? Such questions have had few vehicles for campuswide consideration.

Second, AmeriCorps has brought together representatives of five schools to establish working relationships which are unprecedented in the academy. In addition to its concrete agenda, the Campus Coordinating Committee enables faculty and staff members to exchange information, learn from each other, generate program ideas, and build mutual support for new initiatives. As individuals reduce their isolation, they increase their interaction, unite in solidarity, and realize that their individual interests can have a collective level of intervention. On a campus whose individual institutional units usually operate like autonomous little villages rather than as a coherent institutional whole, such solidarity stimulates creative thinking and generates new program possibilities.

For example, AmeriCorps provided a foundation for the Urban and Regional Planning Program faculty members to work with counterparts at Wayne State University and Michigan State University to propose the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC). Urban and Regional Planning Program faculty members had been involved in the Detroit metropolitan area for years, but their involvement with other university units and collaboration with community-based organizations had occurred on an individual or incremental rather than a systematic or structured basis. However, involvement in AmeriCorps enabled faculty members to visualize the COPC possibility, join together with other graduate professional programs in partnership with the Detroit Eastside Community Collaborative (DECC), and prepare a joint proposal which was funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The new program

involves student-faculty teams in projects which are approved by DECC and which develop creative approaches to economic development with a coalition of fourteen community-based organizations on the city's east side.

Also, AmeriCorps enabled the School of Public Health to increase its involvement and establish the Detroit Community-Academic Prevention Research Center. Public Health faculty had already been working with public-health agencies and community-based organizations to promote a bottom-up approach to community-based public health in northwest Detroit. However, involvement in AmeriCorps enabled them to join together with other graduate programs, the health department, and community-based organizations to propose a new partnership which was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in order to implement programs and conduct research that addresses the health concerns of the neighborhood in ways which strengthen campus-community collaboration. As one initiative helped give birth to another, faculty and staff members who serve as academic liaisons in the AmeriCorps program have taken additional responsibilities with new programs in the community.

AmeriCorps also has offered opportunities for educational enhancement in traditional academic disciplines. Building on the relationship with the Michigan Neighborhood Partnership which serves as the primary partner for AmeriCorps, psychology professors have undertaken an initiative to enable students and faculty members to create courses that include involvement with neighborhood organizations, conduct community-based research, and develop knowledge of intervention methods which affect urban communities.

Finally, AmeriCorps was instrumental in establishing the Center for Learning through Community Service as an entirely new unit at the University of Michigan. Building on the efforts of the AmeriCorps program and the tradition of this type of work at the university, program participants joined a proposal for the new center. Established by the provost, this new center will be a place for the planning and coordination of activities to strengthen student learning through community service, assist faculty members in integrating service into teaching and conducting community-based research, and develop collaborative relationships between the university and the community. The center, whose work is just beginning, will serve as a base of operations for a wide variety of service-learning activities, a meeting place for campus and community, and a national model for service and learning. When the history of the center is written, AmeriCorps should be viewed as a catalyst for its creation.

Overall, AmeriCorps has enabled university units to develop more durable linkages and collaborative partnerships with community-based organizations and civic agencies with interest in improving the city. The university has a history in Detroit, from its first classroom building to more than one hundred projects there today, but these projects usually operate in isolation from one another.

Through AmeriCorps, however, some university units have a new institutional infrastructure for planning and coordination of activities in all areas of the city, and generated new combinations and activity levels which are unprecedented in the institution.

AmeriCorps has also enabled university units to generate new sources of external funding for university programs built partly on our own internal institutional working relationships. There has been no calculation of the external funding which can be attributed wholly or partly to the new combinations made possible by AmeriCorps, but it can safely be estimated that at least \$5 million of such funds has been generated by the program to date.

As part of the efforts by AmeriCorps to develop durable linkages and collaborative partnerships between the campus and community, Campus Coordinating Committee members planned a major symposium called "Commitment to Collaboration: New Strategies for Community-Based Development in Detroit." The symposium provided opportunities for community-based organizations, civic agencies, and educational institutions to strengthen working relationships, critically reflect on projects, and promote partnerships for future collaboration. Participants included 275 educational and community leaders committed to university-community collaboration, with emphasis on those who have had extensive experience and who wanted to address cutting-edge issues at an advanced level. The conference featured Housing and Urban Development Assistant Secretary Michael Stegman, Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, and University of Michigan President James Duderstadt.

Service to Society

AmeriCorps has helped the university to strengthen its social responsibility and provide public service to society — by making knowledge more accessible, improving communications with constituencies, and building support for educational programs that contribute to university-community collaboration. Although some university officials emphasize the social responsibility of the university to society and discuss service as central to the institutional mission, there are relatively few institutional incentives and rewards to support this type of work. University officials do not articulate a consistent mission for service, nor do they formulate systematic strategy for its development, or for research and teaching.

This is ironic, because programs like AmeriCorps are strategically situated to enable the university to make research and teaching more responsive to society while also serving the core academic objectives of the university. Such programs do not require bureaucratic structures or special staff, but instead allow the university to extend its objectives to community constituencies. In this way, AmeriCorps serves the dual purpose of unmet community needs and enhancing the educational process and scholarly responsibilities of the university, although this is not widely recognized in the institution.

Window of Opportunity

What will be left behind after the window of opportunity closes on the new national service program? From the outset, the author viewed AmeriCorps as an episode in the history of American social programs which do not have a record of steady advance, but rather follow a cycle whose legacy is measured by what is left behind after the cycle concludes. In this process, legislation is formulated with high hopes and lofty language, agency administrators implement the new program and set an ambitious agenda, and local communities try their best to implement programs. At the same time, critics attack the program, mobilize opposition to the original idea, and eventually cut the budget. Evaluators then document the program's impacts, analyze the lessons learned, and find seeds of hope for renewal at a later time, when the cycle will begin again, with a new name and a new cast of characters, a few decades later.

President Clinton opened the window of opportunity when he advocated the idea, signed legislation into law, and created AmeriCorps as a national program, based on local participation and community control, whose long-term effects would be measured by the increases in institutional infrastructure, organizational capacity, and community development. AmeriCorps is a national program about getting things done in the community, to be sure, but its purpose is also to enable people to develop the capacity to solve problems, plan programs, and create change at the community level. This is the language of the legislation, the government approach in the 1990s, and the purpose embraced by our program.

Our AmeriCorps program gets things done in the community, but it also has institutional impacts on the university and educational effects on the students who participate. The program is still in its initial stages, but early evidence is promising in its implications for service and learning in accordance with the core educational objectives of the university.

What would happen if every U.S. college or university student had an opportunity to learn through community service this year? The legislation that created AmeriCorps placed primary emphasis on involving students before or after college, whereas our program represents an "in-school" approach involving students in service learning as an integral part of their education. Our experience is unique to our particular situation, and our evaluation is still in its initial stages, but early evidence makes us wonder if the in-school approach might extend service learning to millions of students who are presently enrolled but unable to participate before or after college. If only a fraction of today's students were able to serve and learn during the college years, the results would be extraordinary.

About the author

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