



Project Impact Reports

Washington AmeriCorps

Serve Washington

Changing Communities. Changing Lives.



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PREFACE

Building AmeriCorps Programs' Evaluation Capacity

AmeriCorps programs in our state are touching lives and transforming communities every day. We at Serve Washington, the Washington state commission on service and volunteerism, want to build our collective capacity to prove and to improve our impact. By supporting programs in gathering evidence about the efficacy of their work, we hope to help them adapt their programs to make them more effective.

We chose to host Dialogues in Action (DIA) to provide Project Impact for a number of reasons:

- This model invites organizations to convene an evaluation team of program leaders and stakeholders (e.g. program staff, board members, service site partners and in some cases AmeriCorps members) to develop and pilot evaluation strategies. The team works together to collect data, determine findings, communicate impact, and produce data-informed program experiments and improvements.

- With the ongoing coaching and feedback that DIA provides to the evaluation teams, not only is the quality of their evaluation tools prioritized but organizations are expected to grow their capability to design and implement further evaluations on their own.
- AmeriCorps programs have evaluation requirements to meet. While compliance with requirements is important, we support the underlying value of evaluation: being a learning organization. A learning organization is one that increasingly makes decisions based on good data and evidence rather than entrenched beliefs. Project Impact supports this process.

Each participating AmeriCorps program has conducted a rigorous mixed-method outcome evaluation with an evaluation report articulating qualitative and quantitative findings and strategies for program improvement. They also have the tools developed to support ongoing evaluation including an evaluation plan, a qualitative interview protocol and a quantitative questionnaire.

Building Serve Washington's Evaluation Capacity

As part of Project Impact, Serve Washington staff received instruction and coaching to provide us with the training and technical assistance to support our AmeriCorps programs in future program evaluation. Designated commission staff participated in each of the Project Impact modules alongside the AmeriCorps teams.

DIA also invited and encouraged Commission staff to conduct an evaluation of our impact as part of this process. We assembled an evaluation team to initiate our own inquiry. Serve Washington chose to design a “discovery process” to explore organization's experience with service and volunteerism specifically in regards to the concept of service leadership.

What is Service Leadership? What does it look like? Service Leadership means cross sector leaders are aware of and invest in an organization's and a community's ability to deploy service as a strategy. These leaders share the impacts of their volunteers and national service members with the broader community. They commit resources to support service and with their knowledge turn to service as a key strategy to meet community needs. Recognizing service leadership is essential to growing service programs as well as sustaining the existing service network in our state. Serve Washington will serve as a catalyst to inspire service as a strategy to meet local community and organizational needs.

Our participation in Project Impact happened to coincide with the development of our State Service Plan, which is a three-year, comprehensive national and community service plan and establishes state priorities. This State Service Plan serves as the blueprint for achieving Serve Washington's vision: National Service, volunteerism and civic engagement are the foundation for caring communities and a thriving Washington. We wanted this plan to be informed by robust data gathering and community engagement to better understand and test our assumptions around the national service and volunteer landscape. Our project impact inquiry led us to a number of key findings regarding why organizations and individuals are so committed to service and volunteerism, what tools and resources are needed, and how important networks, partnerships and community engagement truly are. These findings will guide the formation of the final service plan.

What's next?

Commission staff received coaching from the DIA evaluation consultants to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the participating programs' evaluation strategies and tools developed during Project Impact. We commit to developing an action plan for participants to implement data-informed adjustments and

experiments for their programs as well as strategies for ongoing evaluation.

Project Impact has enabled us to learn more about our programs and expand understanding of the work they do. Through their inquiry, programs uncovered their own findings, which we can examine for themes across the portfolio. This will guide us in determining where to invest our resources as a commission and will further inform our understanding of service leadership. Seeing and hearing the passion and excitement AmeriCorps teams have about the work that they do and how evaluation has informed efforts to improve programs has renewed the commitment of our staff to support and assist the programs as they work to grow members and address community needs.

We commend Washington AmeriCorps programs for their ongoing dedication and commitment to learning and express our gratitude to Jessamyn Luiz and Steve Patty, Ph.D, our consultants for the project, who guided us all in building evaluation capacity in a meaningful way. This important evaluation effort was financially supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Introduction to Project Impact

The aim of Project Impact is to develop in social sector organizations the ability to do credible self-studies of their impact.¹ As such, this is a capacity-building project. The reports in this compendium are written by the teams from AmeriCorps programs serving the State of Washington and represent the findings from their data collection and analysis.

This project follows the traditions of participatory evaluation. In a participatory evaluation approach, those who are doing the work also become the evaluators of the effects of the work. This requires capacity-building for the teams, for a self-study form of evaluation requires the development of skills, theoretical understanding, practice in the techniques, and attention to fidelity of implementation in order to ensure the proper level of rigor.

¹ This project is primarily focused on developing the ability of staff teams to implement self-studies about the effects of their programs. It is not designed to provide an experimental or quasi-experimental version of impact evaluation. Instead, it is an effort to upgrade the existing capability of each organization and give them the tools to gather data on the attributed impact both qualitatively and quantitatively from the subjects they serve.

The development of evaluation capacity takes time and iteration. It requires both instruction and practice – training in some of the leading techniques of research accompanied by ongoing applications and practice. This project recognizes the power of partnership, the enrichment of cross-pollination of ideas among like-minded organizations, the durable impact of a learning community, and the potential inspiration for a sector when exemplars are developed and elevated.

Project Impact takes teams of leaders from nonprofits through a process of discovery about the power of evaluation. The idea is to develop the ability to see and communicate the effects of the programs on the people they are designed to serve. There are three primary movements to the project: (1) Intended impact, (2) Inquiry, and (3) Implication.

Project Design

The project begins with a focus on the work of identifying and clarifying the intended impact of each of the participating programs. Once the ideas have been developed and indicators identified, the teams then design a questionnaire to collect data about quantitative measures and a qualitative interview protocol to collect qualitative data. These data are analyzed. Themes are identified and then translated into findings. From the findings, the teams develop program responses and communiques of their impact.

The fundamental elements of the Project Impact follow an arc of evaluation design:

Part 1 - Intended Impact

This project begins with the identification and clarification of what effects are intended through the work of each of the projects. Each team develops an articulation of intended impact to include the components necessary for evaluation design.

A. Main Ideas of Impact

Each team identifies and crafts ideas of impact to frame the intention of direct impact for the program. In some cases, these ideas are mapped in relation to the secondary and tertiary impacts of the program to gain clarity about the fundamental notions of desired effect as a direct consequence of the program or service rendered.

B. “What We Mean”

From these primary ideas, the teams then develop a brief explication of the meaning of their ideas of impact. This translates ideas that are occasionally technical and into messages accessible to all.

C. Quantitative Indicators

Teams then identify Quantitative indicators for each of the ideas. The aim is to generate five or six of the most critical indicators for each idea, paying attention to the data power, proxy power, and communication power of each of the key ideas. As well, the intent in this step is to identify a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral indicators that can be measured through metrics.

D. Qualitative Indicators

Teams also identify qualitative indicators in this stage. These indicators are articulations of the structural and qualitative elements of growth and development that signal progress toward key ideas of impact. The qualitative indicators become the basis for the protocol construction to inform the in-depth interviews in the inquiry phase.

E. Principles of Change

Recognizing that an underlying logic exists for each

program, the teams articulate the rationale for their intervention. This step connects what they do (action) to what will result from what they do (outcome). Each team builds a set of principles that explain why they do what they do in the way they do it. In so doing, the underlying philosophy of logic is exposed and can then be examined through the data from the evaluation.

This section of the project leads each team to develop a clear theory of change, including the outcomes, indicators, and principles embedded in the particular approach that is implemented by each team.

2. Inquiry

In the inquiry stage of the project, each team designs and implements a strategy for data gathering. These take two forms: a questionnaire to collect quantitative data and an in-depth interview to gather qualitative data.

A. Quantitative Data and Analysis

For each of the quantitative indicators, teams construct items for a questionnaire. Since these projects are not intended to provide experimental or quasi-experimental inquiry, the attribution of effect is built into the questionnaire items. The questionnaire is deployed, in most cases, to the entire population of recipients the program reaches. Data are analyzed mostly using measures of central tendency. The teams then design displays of the data and narrative for their report.

B. Qualitative Data and Analysis

The development of a qualitative design encompasses a number of steps, including the following:

1. Protocol Design. Each team designs an in-depth interview protocol that uses the *Heart Triangle*™ method

of question design. These produces a protocol of about nine sequences of questions (18 questions in total) to be used as a guide for seeking data about the awareness and reflection of subjects' structural shifts and developments of growth and progress.

2. Sample. Each team identifies a sample of subjects using a purposeful stratified technique to identify a selection representing of the population being served.
3. Data Collection. Interviews a convened, most lasting between 45 minutes and 1 hour in length. Data are collected via notes during the interview, and then augmented immediately following the interview to provide a substantive rendering of the interview.
4. Data Analysis. Team members apply a four-step model of analysis to each of the interviews. This process provides them with an accessible version of analysis and interpretation to illuminate the primary themes from each interview. While the process is accessible, working through the data from each interview four times using different lenses of analysis each time provides a rigor to the analytical process that yields insight far beyond what is overt and obvious in the data.
5. Thematics. Through a guided and facilitative process, the entire data corpus is then examined. Themes are mapped through meta-analysis of the emerging insights.
6. Findings. The teams then examine each of the themes to discover and communicate the findings. These are rendered with explanation, illustration from the raw data, and significance.

3. Implication

The intent of the project is not to leave teams simply with a report about their program's effects, but rather to use the

insights from the evaluation to guide the further development of the program. This takes two forms:

A. Program Adjustments

The team then takes each of the findings from the evaluation and considers possible program adjustments informed by the discoveries of the evaluation. This keeps the evaluation relevant for program application and improvement.

B. Program Experiments

In addition, the teams work to identify potential design experiments that they might run as an implication of the insights gained through the evaluation.

In this stage, the teams also begin to develop a report of the evaluation findings as well as other possible communiques of their discoveries to staff, stakeholders, funders, and other members of the community.

The Reports

The reports from the organizations in this cohort are included in the following compendium. These include highlights from the three movements of Project Impact. For each participating organization, there is an explication of the primary findings from the evaluation accompanied by the programmatic responses of strategy and design. Since each organization has unique strategy and ethos, each report exhibits unique character and personality. Each report also includes both “prove” findings (evidence of impacts being achieved) and “improve” findings (areas for attention and further development). These reports are windows into the effects of the work of these organizations in the lives of the people they serve.



Common Threads Farm

School-Based Food Education Programs

Rainey Aberle

Sydney Latas

Jessica Moerman

Laura Plaut

Organization and Program Overview

Common Threads is a Bellingham, WA based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that connects kids to healthy food in the garden, in the kitchen, and at the table. We want kids to grow up making food choices that are good for their bodies, their communities, and the environment. We “grow good eaters” because we believe that when kids eat better, they learn better, act better, and feel better.

In our school-based food education programs, Common Threads AmeriCorps Food Educators garden, cook, and eat with over 7000 students at 21 schools across Whatcom County. The program includes 8 lessons in school gardens spread over the fall and spring and 4 cooking lessons in the classroom during the winter. Students are taught gardening and cooking skills and given opportunities to try new healthy foods, both by tasting foods growing in the gardens and by tasting dishes that they prepare together in the classroom.

Some of the distinguishing features of our program model include:

School-based during the school day: this gives all kids access to food education programming, not just those whose parents elect to send them to programs during out of school hours.

Real tools, real recipes: we believe that kids are capable of safely handling cooking tools (including knives) given appropriate instruction and supervision, and that their palates are far more adventurous than adults often give them credit for.

The creativity and passion of AmeriCorps Service Members is a key component of program success: kids respond positively to young adult role models (see Principles of Change, Appendix.)

Intended Impact

Intended impacts identified at the start of this study were:

1. Kids are able to grow, prepare and recognize healthy food. Kids will be able to do things such as planting and caring for vegetables in the garden, use common kitchen tools, and follow simple recipes.
2. Kids develop a joyful, positive, and nourishing relationship with food. We aim for kids to have positive exposures to and potentially some excitement about new healthy foods through our programs.
3. Kids develop nutritional literacy. Kids will recognize healthy food, and know what makes something healthy or not healthy. In particular, they will begin to understand the importance of eating vegetables on health and how their bodies feel.
4. Kids feel both capable and empowered to make healthy choices for their bodies. We want kids to see themselves as having agency both in how they treat their bodies and in how hands-on food education grounds them as learners.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact Common Threads' school based-food education program is having on the students we serve in elementary and middle schools across Whatcom County. To understand this, we explored two broad evaluation questions:

1. What kind and quality of impact are we having on students?
2. What aspects of our program are causing this impact?

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented a mixed methods outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, (c) identified themes and findings, and (d) considered the implications to those findings for program improvement and innovation.

This project began by identifying and clarifying the intended impact of Common Threads' school-based food education program. Once the ideas of impact had been developed, we used the Heart Triangle™ model to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact on the mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in our participants. We used these indicators to design a qualitative interview protocol and a quantitative questionnaire to evaluate progress toward achieving our intended impact.

Some of the potential limitations of this study are that (a) we interviewed teachers whose perspective on Common Threads' program impact on their students' lives is necessarily limited to what they observe in their classroom. Teachers are not well positioned to observe or comment on changes in students' attitudes and behaviors towards food in the cafeteria or at home and that (b) our stratified sampling method involved interviewing teachers at two grade levels (2nd and 5th) at four schools. Had we interviewed teachers at every partner school, or across every grade, it's possible that our findings could have been somewhat different.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to gain data about the structural, qualitative changes resulting from our program. We used a purposeful stratified sampling technique to select a representative sample from the population we serve. The number of program participants was 6738. Since elementary school aged children are, in most cases, not developmentally ready to reflect on their growth and development, we interviewed teachers. Of the 297 teachers whose classrooms we serve, our sample of 18 was drawn from the following strata of our population:

- All 2nd and 5th grade teachers at four schools chosen because they represented the diversity amongst Common Threads 21 partner schools: one school in a more affluent neighborhood, one high poverty rural school, one high poverty urban school and one school serving a more socioeconomically mixed student body.
- One teacher was disqualified because she was a long-term substitute who had only observed one of our lessons and did not feel like she knew Common Threads' programs well enough to be interviewed

Our interview team consisted of Rainey Aberle (AmeriCorps Food Educator), Sydney Latas (AmeriCorps Food Educator), Jessica Moerman (Operations Manager), and Laura Plaut (Executive Director). We conducted one-on-one interviews, each lasting around 30 minutes.

We analyzed the data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. Each interviewer implemented the first three phases of thematic analysis (becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes) for each interview. Together, we developed common themes from the entire data corpus identifying the overarching and inter-interview themes

that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the collective insights and discoveries. We mapped these themes visually and examined the dynamics among the themes, causes and catalysts of the themes, new or surprising insights related to the themes, and relationships between the themes that were revealed in the data. We then determined the most significant and meaningful discoveries and brought them forward as findings to be described in the final phase of thematic analysis, this report.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We administered this instrument to 297 teachers and had a response of 97 teachers, a 32.7% response rate. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency. We identified key insights, patterns, and gaps within the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings. The most significant insights from the quantitative data are described in the following narrative.

Findings

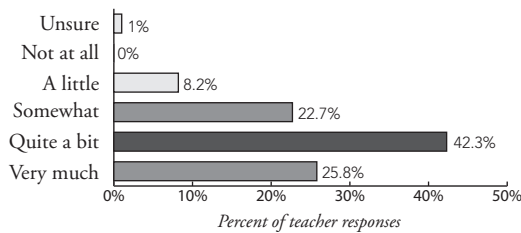
Finding 1: Adventure bites and cups of tea open doors to new foods

Key Insight: Kids are becoming more open to trying new and healthy foods.

Throughout our interviews, teachers revealed their belief that repeated exposure to Common Threads cooking programs has helped kids become more open-minded about trying new healthy foods—in particular, vegetables. The data revealed that taking an “adventure bite” – a taste of something new – has become part of school culture. One 2nd grade teacher from Lowell Elementary said, “I don’t have anybody completely refusing to put anything

green in their mouth, but I did a few years ago, when those kids didn't have that exposure. Now everyone tries... they'll do the whole, 'It's not my cup of tea,' but at least they'll give it a go now which I think is a shift in attitude."¹ 99% of the teachers responding to our online survey observed a significant increase in students' sense of excitement or adventure when trying new foods or recipes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. My students have an increased sense of excitement or adventure when trying new foods or recipes. (n = 97)



Teachers perceive that kids are more willing to try new foods largely because they get to help grow and prepare them; because they taste new foods in an environment of positive peer pressure; and because Common Threads fosters a strong sense of choice and agency for kids.

Notably absent from our interviews were any criticisms of our recipes (which consistently and purposely include things like borscht and kale salad that don't obviously fit the mainstream definition of "kid-friendly.")

Our study suggests some potential differences in how kids approach cooking and gardening programs at higher poverty versus more affluent schools. Some teachers speculated that the "adventurousness" of kids who are living in poverty may be less

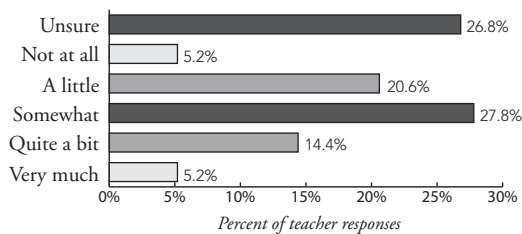
¹ Common Threads teaches kids the phrase "It's not my cup of tea" as a respectful way to say they don't like something after they've tried it. We consistently heard from teachers that kids also use this phrase outside of gardening or cooking time as a polite way of expressing preference.

about them not being picky, and more about them being hungry and therefore willing to eat any foods made available to them - healthy or not. This merits further inquiry, as our experience working with partners in the school food service program is full of examples of hungry kids rejecting healthy food - and suggests the possibility that the positive food experiences provided by Common Threads serve as a critical “tipping point” in students’ willingness to try new foods, regardless of underlying hunger or food insecurity issues.

Our findings are limited to what kids eat in school settings in view of their teachers. Many teachers expressed that they were limited in their capacity to assess kids’ willingness to try new foods. As one teacher said, “I see their lunch boxes, but I don’t see their lunches” Although some teachers referenced conversations they had with parents about kids becoming more adventurous at home, they were also quick to note that their personal observations were from the school setting only.

68% of the teachers responding to our survey perceived that their students had increased their consumption of fruits and vegetables at school, but 27% said they were “unsure” - a datapoint consistent with our interview findings that teachers are not necessarily well positioned to observe students’ eating behaviors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. My students have increased their consumption of whole foods, particularly fruits and vegetables, at school. (n=97)



Significance

Our data reveal that adults are often surprised and delighted by how willing kids are to try new foods when those foods are presented

in an engaging peer-based classroom setting. Common Threads programs contribute to a positive shift in kids' attitudes towards trying more vegetables and also challenge adult perceptions that kids are naturally picky eaters. As Bellingham Public Schools, our main school district partner, moves toward a scratch cooking kitchen, Common Threads can play a strategic role in increasing kids' enthusiasm for healthy food so that the healthy foods served to them in the cafeteria are more likely to be eaten rather than rejected. Building kids' willingness to try healthy foods when they're young also increases the likelihood that they will choose healthy foods as they age.

Possible Responses

- Include more agency and food choice for students into our lessons
- Share examples of the enthusiasm and adventurousness that students show in our classes to families through social media and video projects.
- Make sure to keep socioeconomics and culture in mind when discussing food preferences.

Finding 2: Because “it’s fun” is reason enough

Key Insight: Our data affirmed that both kids and teachers find in-school cooking and gardening lessons to be joyful learning experiences. Many teachers cited joy as reason enough to spend class time cooking and gardening.

Not only are kids trying new vegetables as a result of our gardening and cooking programs, but they are having fun while doing it. Nearly every teacher interviewed mentioned the word “love” or “joy” in describing gardening and cooking experiences. Teachers cited kids' pride in cooking, stating that kids were respectful about

learning cooking techniques—including safe knife usage—and were excited about tasting the end product whether they ended up liking it or not. Teachers also mentioned kids’ delight in trying garden edibles and noted that they experienced peace during garden classes. One teacher said, “Sometimes if they’re writing in their garden journal, sitting still in the garden, [kids are] feeling a kind of peace or a calm.”

Interviews affirmed that kids and teachers alike look forward to spending time outside of their regular classroom. One teacher said, “If gardening or cooking is up on the schedule, people definitely are excited.”

We had expected to hear more from teachers about how Common Threads programs are building on and supporting in-class curricular goals. While we did hear some of this, most teachers were more excited to tell us about how gardening and cooking experiences have provided students with a much-needed opportunity to achieve socioemotional learning goals and to develop as humans. One teacher said, “You might expect me to say, ‘I wish this matched my curriculum better’ - but honestly, I just want them to get outside. I want them to try something new and feel brave about that. It doesn’t have to match my curriculum at all.... depth of instruction isn’t so much my worry - I just want them to get their toes wet and have fun doing it with someone who really cares.”

Significance

The Common Threads team has worked hard over the years to ensure that cooking and gardening curriculum are aligned with academic standards. It was illuminating to hear how many teachers are satisfied or even prefer that the focus be on fostering a simple sense of joy, teamwork, and camaraderie. We view this finding with a bit of caution as long-term staff have watched the pendulum swing both ways on this topic. Particularly when teachers are presented

with new curricula or standards, the pendulum has swung more towards teachers feeling a need to justify gardening and cooking time as supporting those standards. Our conclusion is that we are currently doing a generally good job of finding the “sweet spot” of balancing fun and exploration with rigor and clear learning objectives, and that Common Threads’ programs are making a difference in kids’ lives by giving them valuable opportunities to feel brave, capable, and engaged at school.

Possible Responses

- Clearly claim and advertise joy and fun as legitimate program goals. For instance, create an infographic for teachers that highlights program goals and motivations, including joy and fun.
- Collaborate with Bellingham School District partners to connect successes that kids are experiencing through gardening and cooking programs with socioemotional learning goals.
- Continue to incorporate games, songs, books, and videos into our curriculum.

Finding 3: A space for kids to blossom

Key insight: Some students who struggle in more traditional classroom environments “show up” in new and positive ways during Common Threads cooking and gardening classes.

Many of the teachers we interviewed see Common Threads’ cooking and gardening time as an opportunity for kids to shine and feel successful. This is particularly true for kids who struggle in other parts of their school day.

Teachers reported that some students claim cooking or gardening as their “thing,” or their time to act as leaders. One teacher said, “It’s a fun thing, something they can succeed at. Many students have

struggled academically and [in the garden] they may not.” Another teacher said, “I notice more bravery out in the garden and more bravery with cooking. It gives them a chance to shine - when a kid is given something to chop, they can say, ‘Oh! I’ve done this before!’ and it gives them more elevated status - or when we’re out in the garden and someone isn’t scared of holding the earthworms or the spiders... they can feel excited and powerful in a new realm.” Yet another teacher appreciated that cooking and gardening is a time with “all of the expectations but none of the pressure” of traditional classroom time.

Teachers notice and value the opportunity for kids who struggle in traditional academic settings to shine. Throughout our teacher interviews, teachers became most animated when telling us stories about this aspect of gardening and cooking programs. Common Threads programs help teachers see a different side of some of their most challenging students. For instance, one teacher excitedly pulled out her phone during the interview to show some pictures of kids learning in the garden. Pointing to a young boy with a clipboard and pen in his hand, sketching a plant, she said “he’s a real low achiever - this is the first time I saw him imagine himself as a scientist.”

One teacher said, “I have one student specifically who, he knew a lot of trauma. Cooking was the first time I’d seen him engage or connect to kids at all. And then I was able to share that with his mom and he and his mom made cookies together and that was a powerful thing.” Our interview findings were supported by responses to our quantitative survey in which 97% of teachers responded affirmatively that students who are typically less successful or engaged could shine when they are cooking or gardening with Common Threads.

The data also show that Common Threads recipes affirm students’ home cultures. A teacher at Alderwood Elementary noted, “My Russian students love seeing things they eat all the time,” and,

“My Indian students say it’s just like what they eat at home. The cultural connections evoke a sense of pride... it’s neat to see them connecting that way.”

Multiple teachers noted that for students who already garden or cook at home, Common Threads programs affirm and reinforce skills learned at home. One teacher shared that “one little girl would always bring her little garden gloves because she was so excited about weeding and didn’t want to get her hands dirty. Some kids help garden at home and quite a few raise chickens, so they’ll talk about composting and feeding the chickens.”

In contrast, other teachers commented that for students who lacked previous exposure to gardening or cooking, Common Threads programs were providing exposure to new skills and “planting a seed” of enthusiasm and excitement for these subjects.

It’s worth noting that not all teachers agreed that there was better behavior in gardening or cooking. Some teachers expressed concern about students who struggle without the predictable routine of the classroom environment. One teacher said, “the students who struggle during my lessons are the same ones I see struggling during the cooking lessons.”

Significance

Our interviews revealed that the positive impact on students’ capacity for improved teamwork and heightened sense of self are among the aspects of our programming that teachers value most highly. We advertise ourselves as a program that helps kids fall in love with healthy food, but our interviews and surveys reveal that we are actually a program that helps kids fall in love, not just with food, but also with themselves, their peers, life, school, etc. We invite kids to “show up” as their best selves at school.

Gardening and cooking classes offer the opportunity for teachers to “hit the reset button” on challenging dynamics between themselves and struggling students. Gardening and cooking classes

are times when teachers may feel more compassion for and more pride in some of their students who struggle in a more traditional classroom environment and remember that it's possible to see these kids as smart, capable and interested.

From the student perspective, gardening and cooking are times when struggling students can feel smart, hear themselves praised, and experience a sense of belonging. Particularly as schools more explicitly embrace socioemotional learning and “education of the whole child” as part of their mandate, the evidence gleaned during this study confirms Common Threads’ belief in the role our programs play in meeting these goals.

Concerns expressed by some teachers that some kids who are struggling at school struggle even more in a gardening and cooking environment warrants continued attention. The last thing we want is to be one more place where kids fail to meet expectations.

Possible Responses

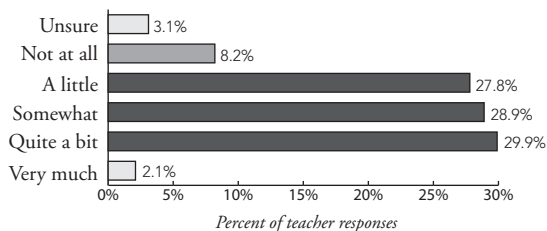
- Look for opportunities for Food Educators to plug into existing school programs that highlight student success in gardening and cooking lessons (for example, “catching kids doing something good”).
- Share a “Chef of the month” or “Garden Blossom” to recognize when kids demonstrate exemplary leadership.
- More explicitly celebrate student leadership development as a key program outcome.
- Continue exploring how to train Food Educators to support students who struggle with gardening and cooking classes.

Finding 4: How many kids does it take to grow a garden or cook a stew? (Answer: All of them!)

Key Insight: Kids practice and develop valuable cooperation and teamwork skills during both cooking and gardening lessons.

The teachers we interviewed consistently cited teamwork and cooperation as among the most important skills developed through Common Threads cooking and gardening programs. Our quantitative data was consistent with this finding: 88.7% of teachers responding believed that students' ability to work in a group improved (see Figure 3). When cooking with up to 30 peers, students are - out of necessity - learning to share tools, take turns, and divide up cooking jobs. One teacher said, "That social negotiation that they usually have to do about divvying up the jobs, I think it's good for [the kids] to practice!" One teacher shared a photograph of three kids working together in the garden, saying, "These three really struggle with each other in class, but not here."

Figure 3. My students' ability to work well in a group has improved. (n=97)



Alongside the previous findings about the value of fun and joy, as well as the value of kids getting the opportunity to shine, here again, teachers helped us to recognize teamwork as something they valued as a key outcome of our programming. Teachers yearn for authentic group work experiences with a tangible outcome and they appreciate Common Threads' capacity to facilitate these kinds of experiential team-building experiences.

While teamwork came up in conversations about both cooking and gardening, it was a more significant theme in response to cooking programs. Teachers noted that the immediate gratification of cooking was more of a catalyst for teamwork than was the longer-term patience required to tend a garden.

Interestingly, although teamwork consistently emerged as a very strong positive impact of Common Threads' programs during teacher interviews, responses to our online teacher survey were, though positive, more evenly spread across "a little", "somewhat" and "quite a bit." [See Chart above]. While most teachers seem to feel this is a positive aspect of Common Threads programming, we are curious why this emerged as so much of a stronger positive during our in-person conversations than it did in our survey.

Significance

The ability to work as a team and take turns are critical, transferable life skills. It matters that students learn to work with others - even with those with whom they may have conflict. During gardening and cooking, kids are able to reap the benefits of working together to create a vibrant garden or a delicious dish. These learning contexts offer kids both the opportunity and the motivation to build their teamwork muscles.

Possible Responses

- More proudly identify team-building as a key program outcome with stakeholders.
- Look for ways to more explicitly incorporate teamwork and cooperation into gardening components of our programs.
- Incorporate more dialogue with teachers regarding group work in our classes. For example, is it helpful for educators to change groups each class or maintain teams through cooking and gardening classes?

Finding 5: Real skills for real life

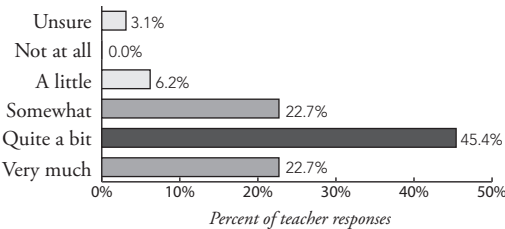
Key insight: Students learn valuable, concrete life skills - particularly in the cooking portion of our programming.

In addition to some of the “soft skills” that kids are learning in Common Threads lessons (teamwork, patience, respect for critters and plants in the garden), the data revealed that students are also learning “hard” skills through their cooking and gardening classes, such as knife techniques, food safety, and hygiene. One teacher shared, “Students now take care to wash their hands and use tongs to pass out their morning snack after practicing this in their winter cooking lessons.”

We heard in interviews that not all students have the opportunity to use tools at home. One teacher said, “I always thought you have wonderful lessons and you let them do the work, because I don’t know how many of them help cook at home.”

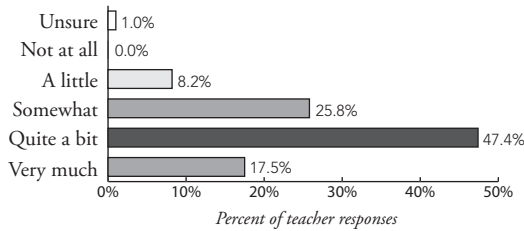
Teachers responding to our survey also noted that learning how to use knives and other cooking tools safely, as well as developing good hygiene habits while cooking, were among the most important skills learned in Common Threads classes. 97% of the teachers responding to our survey indicated that Common Threads’ programs had increased their students’ understanding of how to cook safely (see Figure 4). 99% indicated that Common Threads’ programs had increased students’ understanding of how to care for a garden (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. My students have a better understanding of how to cook safely. (n=97)



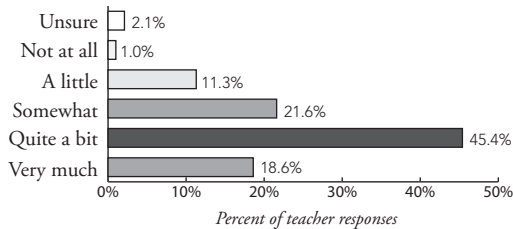
Although appreciation of the garden ecosystem came up less frequently or forcefully in our interviews, it’s notable that 97% of the teachers responding to our survey credited Common Threads

Figure 5. My students have a better understanding of how to care for a garden. (n=97)



with increasing students' appreciation for the garden ecosystem (see Figure 6). We speculate that the relative absence of conversation on this topic during our interviews may have had to do with the fact that we conducted our interviews during the winter when gardening was less front-of-mind for many of our interviewees.

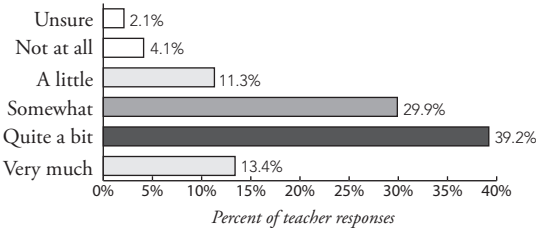
Figure 6. My students have an increased appreciation for the garden ecosystem. (n=97)



The important real-life skills of making healthy food choices and developing an awareness of how food choices affect an individual's health did not clearly emerge in our teacher interviews. Yet, 94% of the teachers responding to our online survey expressed that Common Threads programs did impact students' awareness of how their food choices affect personal health at least a little bit. An additional 53% credited Common Threads' programs with increasing student awareness of how their food choices affect personal health "quite a bit" or "a lot" (see Figure 7).

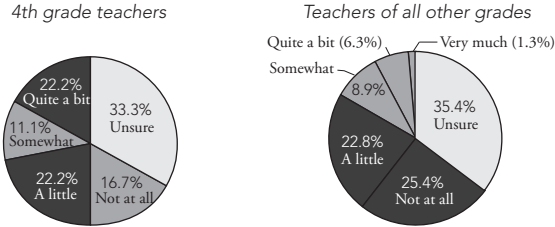
Our online survey revealed that only 41% of teachers responding felt that students' skills in reading labels to make good food

Figure 7. My students have an increased awareness of how their food choices affect personal health. (n=97)



choices had increased because of Common Threads programming. This stands out as an area for improvement. We partner with an organization called Pure Food Kids to facilitate a cooking lesson for 4th graders with a specific focus on reading labels. We became curious to see if 4th grade teachers responded any differently. We found that 17% of 4th grade teachers felt “quite a bit” or more that students’ skills in label reading to make good food choices had improved, compared to only 8% of teachers of all other grades (see Figure 8). This specific lesson likely had some impact on the way teachers responded.

Figure 8. My students’ skills in reading labels to make good food choices have increased. (n=97)



While teachers often commented on how much they appreciated kids learning to appropriately use kitchen tools (knives in particular), our program was not perceived as particularly effective in helping kids learn how to better use garden tools, even though several teachers specifically mentioned other organizations or experiences that had helped students learn to safely and appropriately use tools like shovels and loppers.

Significance

Too often, young people lack opportunities to develop and demonstrate real-world competence. Knowing how to grow a garden or prepare a meal is not only a practical skill, but also a tremendous source of pride for young people yearning to demonstrate their ability to contribute to the world in meaningful ways. Common Threads' choice to trust kids to use real tools, and also give them the clear instructions that set them up for success creates an important opportunity for kids to develop and demonstrate competence.

Possible Responses

Increase proper tool use and tool care lessons into cooking and gardening classes.

- More explicitly incorporate practical skills learning objectives into lesson plans, such as knife skills, hygiene, and ingredient measurement.
- Communicate with families what skills their students are learning and possibly incorporate these skills into our take-home recipes.
- Sell knife kits or basic kitchen kits with instructions for proper use.

Finding 6: AmeriCorps Food Educators Are the “Special Sauce”

Key Insight: The success of our program depends heavily on AmeriCorps Food Educators, who bring our mission to life with their passion, enthusiasm, and dedication.

We heard in multiple interviews that the AmeriCorps Food Educator plays a key role in the success of our program delivery. Teachers appreciate that our Food Educators are “cool” young adults that their students can look up to. While each Food Educator has

their own strengths and weaknesses, one teacher stated, “I just appreciate having AmeriCorps members. It’s so good for the kids. They’re cool. That’s just the human element that helps them grow. [The AmeriCorps members] all want to be there, they’ve all demonstrated a passion.”

When Food Educators cultivate strong relationships with students and staff, students are more prone to engage and be excited about cooking and gardening classes. One 2nd grade teacher at Alderwood Elementary said, “You could give these kids the greatest lesson in the world, and they would not engage in it if they didn’t have a connection to their Food Educator first. That has made all the difference.”

The flip side to the youthful passion of our AmeriCorps Food Educators is a relatively low level of experience with classroom management. Despite classroom management trainings offered by Common Threads, management skills vary greatly from educator to educator. In contrasting her experience with different educators, one teacher said, “I think in years past it (gardening and cooking) has been a stressful time for me, because I’ve felt like the cop, and I’m spending 45 minutes just telling kids to stop doing this. I’m enjoying things a lot more now that I’m able to really engage in a different way, so that’s been really nice.”

Significance

Our program model of using AmeriCorps service members as Food Educators is a double-edged sword. Service members hold high value because they are passionate, “cool” young people who connect well with kids. Kids’ relationships with these young adults are different from and complementary to other relationships they have with adults like teachers and caregivers. The AmeriCorps members, generally in their 20s, are seen as role models. Kids are willing to take risks and try new things simply because they’re eager to build relationships with a young adult. Particularly for kids without a lot of positive relationships in their lives, the addition

of an additional caring young adult at school can make a positive difference in their school experience.

Because AmeriCorps members are relatively inexperienced teachers, with limited classroom management skills, who stay for just one year, we rely on clear, consistent, timely, direct feedback from seasoned teachers to accelerate their learning curve as educators.

It's concerning that even after so many years of partnership with schools, some teachers still seem to be confused about how best to navigate the relationship with each new Food Educator. Our hope has been that teachers would see themselves as mentors to the Food Educators and would feel free to offer Food Educators direct and immediate feedback - particularly on classroom management skills. We heard a reluctance from some teachers who worried about "stepping on the educator's toes" as well as a lack of clarity on their role more generally in the partnership.

Although teachers did not say this outright, we perceived in our interviews that they didn't always feel a sense of agency or motivation to build a true partnership with Food Educators - either because they didn't see this as an appropriate role for them to take on, or because it felt like too much work to invest in a mentoring relationship. It was also interesting (but not necessarily surprising) for us to notice how vastly different the Food Educator's relationship can be from one teacher to another, even within the same building.

Possible Responses

- Endeavor to select members with stronger teaching background, offer more training opportunities, encourage members to observe master teachers frequently, and continuing to offer co-teaching opportunities, particularly in classes with challenging behavior.
- Prioritize making time for Food Educators to interact with teachers through staff meetings and other face-to-

face events to explicitly define the role of the educator and our expectations of teachers and the school (for instance, including Americorps member in staff meetings, including food educator photos on staff boards.)

- Continue to invest in relationships at the administrative level (between Common Threads' Executive Director and core staff and school principals.)

Finding 7: Trojan horses for social change

Key Insight: Students often bring their new-found knowledge and enthusiasm for healthy food home and inspire their families to have more conversations about healthy food and make healthier food choices at home.

Kids' enthusiasm for healthy food is contagious. Teachers offered an interesting range of experiences related to whether and how information about healthy eating was making it home to families. One teacher reported that gardening and cooking came up as a positive in parent/teacher conferences. Multiple teachers told stories of families happily tending the school garden over the summer, and of the school garden becoming a place of warm welcome within the school community. Others pointed to the number of times that kids (and parents) request recipes to take home and share their experiences of preparing the recipes at home. One teacher explained how a parent who had not typically engaged in her student's school experience got more invested because of the garden, stating, "I have a student who has huge issues. I think they're homeless, and the mom is really hard to engage with. But the big thing she wanted to talk about during conferences was, her daughter wants to write a letter to be sure the garden is saved when the new school is built. Her daughter loves the garden so much. And I also know from SeeSaw (a parent communication tool used

by many of our partner teachers) the parents really respond when I send pictures of them cooking and in the garden so I get a lot of positive feedback from the families about the time in the garden.”

In contrast, other teachers reported very little information flow or family engagement related to food education programs. One teacher mused, “Maybe I’m not doing enough to share with families. It’s the same people who take care of the garden every summer.” Another teacher attributed the lack of home/school connection to the demographics of her student population, saying, “School feels very separate from home.”

Significance

Common Threads has an opportunity to tease out “best practices” for engaging families across different school demographics and for dealing with teachers’ differing levels of engagement with and support of our programs, and then to amplify those best practices across our partner schools. While it is affirming to hear stories of families engaging in gardening or cooking, the wide range of reported family engagement serves as a good reminder of how uneven and inequitable families’ experiences of school programs can be. Some families have the luxury of engaging deeply in various aspects of their children’s school experiences (cooking and gardening being just one example), while others may not have the time or capacity due to their life circumstances. Some parents know and love Common Threads programs. Others may be largely unaware of their children’s experiences cooking and gardening at school. In our school-based programs, the opportunities to engage with and communicate with families can vary greatly depending on the culture of the school, and even classroom by classroom. Particularly given that kids often have limited agency in what foods are served at home, the more we are successful in reaching out to families, the more likely we are to support systemic changes in the foods that are available to kids at home as well as at school.

Possible Responses

- Encourage teachers to share cooking and gardening news with families and highlight teachers who we know already do this well.
- Continue to look for ways to invite families to engage directly with Common Threads via social media and face-to-face interactions that might include a Parents Night Out series or family cooking and eating events.
- Expand food education programs to better meet the needs of parents, particularly in high poverty communities. For instance, provide more information about container gardening for apartment living and send students home with very basic cooking tools.

Finding 8: We can prime the pump, but we can't provide the water

Key Insight: “Access” to healthy food is financial, geographic, and experiential. The data confirmed our belief that while Common Threads programs can play a significant role in helping open kids’ hearts and minds to healthy food, we will always depend on families and partners to complete the access puzzle.

As discussed in our other findings above, the data indicate that Common Threads’ programs have a significant, consistent, positive impact on kids’ willingness to try new foods and also on their happiness and engagement at school. The data were less clear, however, on whether Common Threads’ programs are meaningfully changing how and what kids eat. This could be because our interviewees (teachers) are not well positioned to speak to kids’ eating habits. As one teacher pointed out, “I see their lunch boxes, but not their lunches. We do have breakfast in the classroom, but they don’t really have much choice there.”

Another explanation could be that the healthy food values that are taught and modeled in Common Threads' cooking and gardening classes are not well matched by the foods that are available to kids at home or in the school cafeteria. As one 5th grade teacher from Alderwood explained, "There are many barriers... getting food from food banks, a lot of junk food available, or EBT families... For them, it's not 'I eat what I want,' it's 'I eat what I have.'"

Significance

Common Threads excels at getting kids excited about eating healthy food. This is our particular niche in the food access puzzle. However, in order to have the greatest possible positive impact on kids' attitudes and behaviors regarding food, we need to invest significant time and effort in teaming with other organizations (and with families) to shift the dial towards a reality in which the healthy choice is also the easy, affordable, and accessible choice for all kids. If we can support systems in which healthy eating becomes the norm for students of all backgrounds, we can help decrease food related challenges ranging from obesity and diabetes to poor behavior at school.

Possible Responses

- Invest more time organizationally in supporting the school food service program and families: create a "healthy food systems" position that supports school food service initiatives and healthy eating.
- Explore options for increasing accessibility to families by sending resources home, such as a "20 Buck Box" and information for being resourceful in the kitchen at home.
- More explicitly position ourselves organizationally as the "experience experts."

Finding 9: Sprinkle liberally with clear roles, goals, and expectations

Key Insight: Our interviews highlighted that when roles, goals and expectations between Common Threads and partner school staff are clearly defined, relationships are smoother and more successful.

A previous finding focused specifically on the relationship between teachers and Food Educators, and this finding explores further the relationship and connections between Common Threads as an organization and school communities more holistically. Some teachers expressed a clear sense of linkages between Common Threads programs and other classroom goals and activities. As one teacher said, “It’s helping me look for connections and make it seem like garden is not such an isolated thing. And we can kind of incorporate it into what we do every day. Like our number corner this month is all these garden beds, and it’s been really nice to just talk about our school garden and just kind of have a

A number of teachers expressed a wish for greater clarity around Common Threads’ program objectives as well as a general interest in finding ways to more effectively link garden and cooking lessons with their classroom curriculum. One teacher said, “I’m not sure if my class is allowed to use the garden on non-gardening days.” Another asked, “How can I extend the lessons we’re doing in the garden into the classroom?” Yet another observed, “I like the content you’re teaching during cooking/gardening, but it’s showing up too early/too late to introduce/reinforce [xyz] lesson.”

Significance

We were encouraged by teachers’ curiosity about the logistics of garden use and how they could more effectively leverage the garden as a curricular tool. Some of the comments, however, highlight the gap between what we believe we’ve communicated and what teachers have heard. It seems possible that teachers’ perceptions

of Common Threads as a resource may be outdated and point toward the importance of iterative communication about Common Threads' programs. As an organization, we have worked hard to stay succinct and unobtrusive in our communications, recognizing that messages from Common Threads can be just one more source of overwhelm in teachers' already over-full inboxes. Yet interview comments reveal that teachers either feel they haven't received enough information about Common Threads' curricular scope and sequence, or that the information that they have received has not been readily digestible.

Clear relationships between teachers and AmeriCorps members will yield the most meaningful learning experiences for kids. When teachers are clear about their role in behavior management, Food Educators can devote more of their energy to teaching content. When teachers understand the scope and sequence of lessons, they are better able to connect it with their classroom curriculum.

Possible Responses

- Strengthen our training for AmeriCorps members in community organizing and relationship building with stakeholder groups, including principals, parents, students, custodians, and food service staff.
- Continue thinking about how to best provide AmeriCorps members with tools, resources, and training needed to effectively articulate their role as educators as well as Common Threads' role as a community partner.
- Increase involvement in PTA and teacher staff meetings to strengthen relationships, improve transparency on Food Educator roles, and highlight transitions throughout the year from gardening to cooking in the winter, and then back to gardening in the spring.
- Make more lesson extensions and resources available to teachers.

- Offer more training and resources for teachers to use the garden as an extension of their classroom.
- Experiment: host a series of focused conversations with teachers to explore the potential of Common Threads' support specifically in the areas of curriculum alignment, socioemotional learning, nutrition education, and family engagement, potentially incentivized with snacks and a stipend for attendance.
- Experiment: offer a stipend to teachers who agree to serve as a school garden liason or serve on the school garden committee (but first consider the potential pitfalls and benefits of financial incentives to involvement with Common Threads and school gardens.)

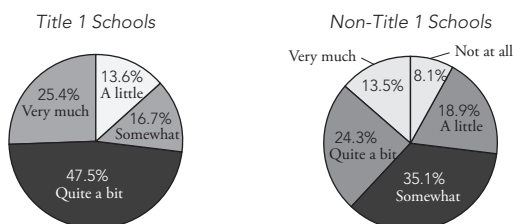
Finding 10: A “want” for some, a “need” for others

Key insight: The value that teachers place on Common Threads programs is greater at schools serving a higher poverty student population than at schools that serve a more affluent student population.

One teacher, in reflecting on her experiences at two schools with very different student demographics said, “At this school, my kids need this program. It would be devastating to lose it. At the other school, it would be a shame to lose it, but parents would find a way to fill in.” Teachers consistently spoke to the value they placed on “planting the seed” and “exposure” for their kids whose life experiences - both in school and out - involve a lot of struggle and strife. They spoke to how important it is for kids to have a place to shine and also to how kids at higher poverty schools “gobble up” the healthy snacks that are made available to them.

The results to our survey reflected that 72.9% of teachers at Title I schools reported that they saw students who struggle academically shine in the garden “quite a bit” or “very much” compared with only 37.8% at more affluent schools (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. My students who are typically less successful or engaged can shine when they are gardening or cooking. (n=97)



A teacher from one rural, high poverty school said, “I’ve loved that this introduces them to a wide variety of foods that the majority of them aren’t exposed to at home. Spinach, kale, spices, even curry... The majority of them don’t have exposure to healthy foods at home, so any exposure to that is great.”

Significance

This finding affirms our belief in the importance of filtering organizational decisions around where and how we direct organizational resources through the lens of equity and inclusion. Teachers place high value on Common Threads cooking and gardening programs regardless of the demographics of their student population, yet it was sobering to hear how emphatic teachers were about the importance of Common Threads programming in higher poverty communities. The question, “If Common Threads programs disappeared tomorrow, what difference would that make?” elicited the most emotional responses from teachers at high poverty schools.

Possible Responses

- Continue to work toward a transparent, sustainable and equitable program fee scale to reduce barriers to participation for high-poverty schools.
- Identify sustainable funding sources to cover program costs for high-poverty schools.

- Provide free, supplemental programs and services at high-poverty schools.
- Charge low-poverty schools for supplemental programs and services.
- Assign a full-time food educator to high poverty schools, so that the educator can more fully invest in that school's students and community.
- Continue to train Food Educators in best practices for working with kids living in high risk environments.

Conclusion

Insights Into Impact

Whereas the story we've been telling ourselves is that Common Threads "grows good eaters", the most significant learning that came from this study is that our stakeholders believe that we "grow good humans."

While it's true that we are helping kids fall in love with healthy food and that kids are becoming more adventurous, healthy and open-minded eaters because of Common Threads' cooking and gardening programs, it's also true that our programs positively impact kids' feelings about themselves as learners and their abilities to work well as a team. We're not just a "food education" program but also a program that fosters curiosity and joy that extend far beyond kids' relationships with food, and we have an opportunity to tell the story of our impact more holistically.

Another key insight is that our relationships with people and entities outside of Common Threads (teachers, families, food service staff) are key to maximizing our positive impact. For instance, while it's our role to get kids more excited and willing to try new foods, ultimately, it's the responsibility of caregivers and food service staff to make sure that healthy foods are available to kids. Similarly, while our responsibility is to bring clear and compelling gardening and cooking lessons to teachers and their students, we necessarily

count on teachers to help make connections to the curriculum, to give our educators clear and timely feedback, and to support behavior management during gardening and cooking lessons.

Steps Forward

More proudly, explicitly, and holistically claim and proclaim the benefits of Common Threads programming. Recognizing that the impacts we are having in improving student self-concept, happiness at school, and ability to work collaboratively with their classmates are as significant as our ability to get kids excited about eating healthier food.

1. Continue to focus on training for food educators and volunteers. Recognizing that the more training they receive, the more likely they are to facilitate positive growth experiences for kids in our community.
2. Continue to seek opportunities to improve communications with school staff and families. This will include putting out a call for a school or schools that would like to work with us toward building a “gold standard of food education.” This might include things like more explicit opportunities for family education, a more comprehensive “garden to cafeteria to garden” program that looks not only at how to get more school garden grown food into the cafeteria but also at how to get more cafeteria “waste” back into the garden as compost.
3. Continue to analyze our services and fee structures through the lens of equity. Looking particularly at opportunities to offer more services to high poverty schools where we notice our services are most highly valued.

Opportunities for Future Evaluation

We are excited to apply the methodologies learned through Project Impact to a variety of aspects of our programming and particularly

love the idea of scheduling “deep-dive sessions” throughout the year, during which we will commit to prioritizing time for program evaluation. Most immediately, we are excited to evaluate our Kids Cook Lunch summer meal program, which we are just preparing to launch. Future opportunities for evaluation also include looking at the role a year of service plays in the lives of our AmeriCorps members; looking to understand the impact Common Threads’ programs have on the lives of our donors; and looking to more deeply understand the impact Common Threads’ programs have on students attending high-poverty, Title I schools.



Life Works

Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network

David Hill, Executive Director

Troy Packard, Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network Coordinator

Angie Whitcraft, Program Director of Client Services

Shelly Turner, Program Director of Client Services

Organization and Program Overview

Life Works provides support to individuals with developmental disabilities to live successfully in their community. Supports include assisting individuals with housing, activities of daily living, community access, employment, medical and behavioral support. Life Works has been engaged with AmeriCorps since the year 2000, acting as the sponsor organization for the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network.

The Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network is an intermediary AmeriCorps program serving Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties. The program intends to impact the greatest needs in the community by providing member service to local host sites who apply annually for a member.

Our intended impacts for engaging host sites with an AmeriCorps member are:

1. Host sites will expand their capacity to deliver their mission. Simply put, host sites will be able to impact more people and/or provide more resources to their intended program recipients.

2. Host sites will mentor their member for future success. Host sites will address member barriers for success at their site in a manner that engages the member in a learning environment that translates to their personal development.
3. Host sites will instill an attitude of lifelong service in members. Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network members will experience a better understanding of community service opportunities and the intrinsic reward of providing community service.
4. Host sites will increase their capacity to engage others outside of their paid staff in the mission. Host sites experience with an AmeriCorps member will develop their capacity to mobilize their mission through volunteerism and engaging others in the community in times of expanded need.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network is having on the selected host sites. To understand this, we explored two broad evaluation questions:

1. What kind and quality of impact are we having during our engagement with host sites?
2. What aspects of our program are causing this impact?

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented a mixed methods outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, (c) identified themes and findings, and (d) considered the implications to those finding for program improvement and innovation.

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to gain data about the structural and

qualitative changes resulting from our engagement with host sites. We used a purposeful stratified sampling technique to select the host sites we should interview. The total population of 26 current host sites was manageable for our evaluation team; however, we did have two host sites in the total population of 26 that had not had a complete year of experience with the program, so they were eliminated from the process. In addition, one host site was unresponsive to our request for participation. We interviewed a total of 23 host sites.

Our interview team consisted of the entire team listed at the beginning of our document, plus Jennie Bergman and Roberta Mawae-Martin. Both of the added individuals had participated in a similar evaluation process in 2016.

We then analyzed the data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. Each interviewer implemented the first three phases of thematic analysis (becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes) for each interview. Together, we developed common themes from the entire data corpus identifying the overarching themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the collective insights and discoveries. We mapped these themes visually and examined the dynamics among the themes, causes and catalysts of the themes, new or surprising insights related to the themes, and relationships between the themes. The most significant and meaningful discoveries are described as findings in this report.

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We administered this instrument to 24 host sites and had a response from 20 host sites for a response rate of 83%. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency. We identified key insights, patterns and correlations with the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings. The most significant will be found within this report.

Findings

Finding #1: Investing a little time and effort builds confidence

Key Insight: Time and effort spent by both the AmeriCorps member and the host site supervisor leads to personal growth that will impact the member for years to come as well as equip the member to exceed performance expectations during their host site term of service.

Our interviews show that our members bring unique skills and talents to the host sites. Examples that were mentioned in our interviews were rationale problem solving, interpersonal relationship building and resiliency. Supervisors who are deliberate in spending the time and effort early on using effective delegation and providing honest and timely feedback share about how impressed they are with the growth in the member from the start to finish in the program. Development is witnessed in the member through improved job performance and more independent handling of their workload. One of the interviewed host sites said, “My inspiration is being able to mentor and experience their knowledge.” Another said, “You can often be surprised by what they can do and the enthusiasm that they bring to their work every day. You can see members who have really strived to be as good as their mentor.”

Our quantitative data also show that this early investment in member development, coupled with utilizing the partnership available with the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network support staff, is benefitting the host site supervisor as well. 100% of host site supervisors responding to the survey reported that they had an increase in member supervision ability, with 55% reporting that they had a considerable or great increase in their supervision ability (see Figure 1). This leads to a direct correlation with supervisors reporting that they were increasingly more confident in giving AmeriCorps members more responsibility throughout their term, with 45% reporting that they had a considerable increase in confidence (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Increase in member supervision ability as a result of Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network

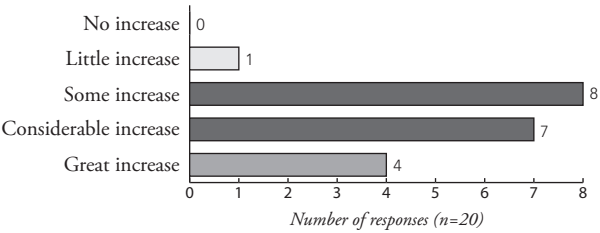
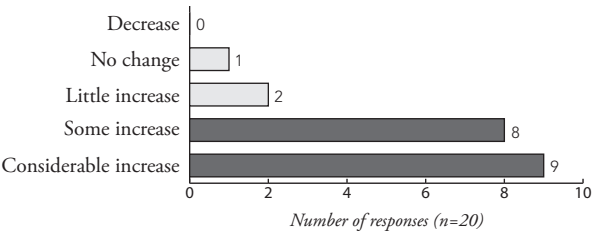


Figure 2. Increase in confidence in giving AmeriCorps members more responsibility throughout their term



Significance

Members are able to use their skills to support the mission of the host site and expand their ability to do more and serve more. The experiences gained not only benefit the host site, but it also has long lasting benefit for the member. This can be the first step in the leadership development journey for members as they experience increased confidence with new responsibilities, a greater understanding of the importance of working in a team environment towards a common mission and, for many, it is an opportunity to take their acquired knowledge and educational concepts and put them into action that produce outcomes.

The significance of the host site supervisor investing in their member really cannot be downplayed. The host site was so emphatically and positively impacted that supervisors almost cannot miss the mark when the member and supervisor are working together in this development. The interview team all agreed that there was a notable positive shift in the energy of the interview

process when host site supervisors reported on the correlation between taking advantage of development opportunities and the improved outcomes produced by the member during their term. Members make a significant commitment in their lives to this service; their development is undeniable when the host site invests for the good of the both the member and the mission.

It was enlightening to understand that even those supervisors who recognized the benefits of this investment into their member were challenged to make the time for this to happen. It's no mystery that time is a precious commodity for all supervisors and encouraging to note that numerous supervisors recognized this challenge, faced it head on and were willing to take interest in member development even at times when the member may be struggling. Mistakes and learning opportunities do not always happen at the most opportune time. Often, you cannot simply stop, ask for reflection, give effective feedback and try again. These opportunities are often right in the middle of service delivery points where the consumer should not be subject to this development; but supervisors who really invested found the right opportunity before it slipped away to take advantage of the teachable moment in a respectful to all manner.

Possible Responses

- Provide additional host site training during the two-week member orientation period
- Implement an exercise during recruitment to identify potential member interest and skills
- Add more focus around mentorship during host site visits and evaluation
- Provide member training on how to be a good mentee during the two-week member orientation period
- Add emphasis to the mentor/mentee relationships during the Friday team meetings

- Facilitate relationship building and goal setting early on between the member and the host site
- Gather further information, from host sites that have developed strong relationships, around mentorship, recruitment and placement

Finding #2: Solid beginnings create a better path and a stronger finish

Key Insight: There is a cause and effect that exists between recruitment and placement that can result in difficult member relationships.

Our data show that quality recruitment and member placement can reduce turnover, attendance issues and poor performance. Host sites who actively participate in the recruitment process have more buy-in from the member and less performance deficiencies.

It became clear through this process that host sites that are willing to invest into their own recruitment process have significantly fewer member performance issues around attendance, early mission engagement and disruptive behavior. When host sites participate in their own recruitment, they generally are referring individuals who already have a connection with their organization mission and culture, making early engagement and feedback more effective for the host site supervisor. In addition, another point of clarity was that the recruitment window for a team of 25-30 members is often as short as one month; the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network needs to continually evaluate our it's member screening process under the pressure of filling an entire team, avoiding any shortcuts with the application process. When host sites are actively involved in this process, it's an additional screening tool that generally yields very positive outcomes towards member selection.

Significance

Given the cause and effect that was uncovered, we felt that it is questionable whether we know enough about the host site need and our program's capacity to effectively match the right member. The key to members completing a successful term, let alone experiencing the type of development that is desired, is not just about matching technical skills with technical need. It lies somewhere between matching the technical skills needed to fulfill the need and matching the "softer" qualities to the supervisors so that a true connection can form between the member and supervisor. Issues such as communication styles and effective listening ability often serve to make or break the effectiveness of the member term.

Also significant to the cause and effect is whether we know the host site direct supervisor well enough to know their personal capacity and the resources that they will require to make the proper member selection for their program. During our interviews, it was uncovered that interviewing and selecting employees is often not a significant part of the assigned host supervisor's regular duties. If they are not well versed in interviewing techniques such as reading non-verbal communication or probing to ensure you understand the respondent's answer thoroughly, the interview and selection process can yield ineffective selections. Experience is often the best teacher in this area and without the opportunity to exercise these skills, some host site supervisors are at a real disadvantage in the selection process.

Possible Responses

- Develop a tool to identify the gaps that host site supervisors may have in interviewing and selection and tailor any of our supports that may be necessary
- Develop a protocol with roles defined for host sites to follow when they experience member difficulty so that we can make sure that there are not issues going unaddressed

- Implement that Life Works Performance Log (P-Log) as an optional tool for host sites
- Evaluate the hiring event that Cowlitz AmeriCorps Networks hosts for effectiveness of recruiting
- Create a host site incentive to increase participation in their member recruitment process
- Some host site supervisors find it hard to say “no” during the selection process because it is not their traditional duty

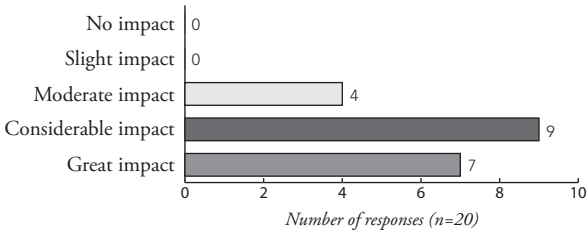
Finding #3: How can I make it without you?

Key Insight: The data show that a significant number of host sites are reporting that they are dependent upon an AmeriCorps member year after year to achieve program outcomes that they have come to rely upon.

One of the intended impacts of the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network is that host sites will expand their mission capacity. But what happens when after multiple years of engagement, host sites actually become dependent upon the AmeriCorps member to completely deliver the outcome of the program, or worse yet, the mission of the entire organization? We discovered through our interviews that multiple host sites reported that their mission, or the particular program their member is engaged with, would not exist if their AmeriCorps member was gone.

Our quantitative data also show that members add significant value to the host site’s program capacity to achieve its mission. When asked how much impact the AmeriCorps member had on the host site’s program capacity to meet community needs, 80% of respondents reported that AmeriCorps members have a considerable or great impact and that none of the respondents reported any impact below moderate (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Impact of AmeriCorps member on host site program capacity to meet community needs centered on mission



In a sense, this is a very positive indicator of the effectiveness of the program; however, it does raise another concern about dependence on a resource that has some variables to the host site. One host site went as far as to say, “With the limited funding that we have, we are reliant on this position to deliver our mission.” It was a revelation to hear the prevalence of these types of statements from so many host sites who are clearly communicating that they do depend on this program for their impacts.

Multiple school district host sites reported that AmeriCorps members have been involved in establishing new systems at the school that have resulted in “real data indicating success around fewer student suspensions.” The challenge for each of these schools is the inconsistency for the student at times when the member is not available to deliver on the outcomes of the newly established systems. This creates not only an inconsistency for students around the positive experience of continued engagement but brings back to the forefront the challenge in the classroom for the teachers when this resource is unavailable to their class.

Significance

Discovering that host sites have integrated members into their mission, vision and culture so deeply sets the standard very high for our leadership to ensure that Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network continues to deliver upon this intended impact. This discovery also brings to light the significance of addressing the concerns that host

sites have with affordability of the program, member recruitment and selection for the host site, member readiness upon engaging with the host site, as well as the negative impact they experience when the member is not present at their site delivering their mission efforts. Although not all of these concerns are directly within the control of the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network, we feel strongly that the outcomes for our community are so vitally impacted that we must take every opportunity to focus on these concerns moving forward. Even slight changes to the operating practice could have a significantly positive impact on the host site.

Possible Responses

- Several hosts sites have sited a small budget without many revenue streams as an obstacle; work with the Kelso/Longview Chamber of Commerce to bring training or expertise around “diversifying funding” for small nonprofits
- Work with host sites early on to identify when outcomes will be impacted in member absence and develop a “backup” plan

Finding #4: Invest in your member as if your programs success depends on it

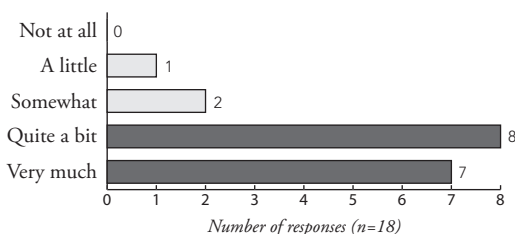
Key Insight: Supervisors who buy into their members have the opportunity for greater organizational growth and impact.

Our interviews revealed that when supervisors at the host sites buy into the member from the beginning it produces several outcomes. First, it allows for the host site to embrace the individuality of the member within their existing workforce, which can often bring positive attitudinal changes to teams that may have become stagnant. During several of the interviews it showed that if the member is valued by the supervisor it allows for them to grow and develop as

an individual which in return gives more value to the program as a whole. One respondent stated, “I feel like she is already a colleague and a team member. There is a lot of mutual respect.”

The data show that when a member is thought of as a part of the team and is treated as such then the member oftentimes feels more confident in their role and is able to increase their productivity. Host sites see an increase in what the member was capable of doing and increase in taking on new tasks without being prompted to do so. For example, one participant stated, “She has taken the initiative to put together a guidebook for the next member that comes in.”

Figure 4. Categorize how much more able your member is to impact your mission now compared to the start of their term



The data also revealed that when they invest in the member the host sites are able to increase the impact that the program is having. During the interviews it was stated several times that when you have a member who is invested, the confidence around growing the program increases and the excitement of reaching more people is heightened. One participant stated, “Every week that she is there the more she becomes confident and grows more in her role.” Our quantitative data supports this finding by showing that this investment from host sites is paying off with 75% of host sites reporting that members are quite a bit or very much more able to impact the mission at the time they were surveyed as compared to the start of their term (see Figure 4).

The data demonstrated that there was some fear of losing a valued member and that there was some apprehension about a new member coming in to take their place as well. One participant

stated, “You are never sure what kind of member you are going to get year to year.” The data also show that if the supervisor was not on top of the development needs of the member it caused a disruption from completing their assigned task. One respondent stated, “As the supervisor I need to find how to utilize her skills more effectively across all parts, especially the day to day operations and in the moment situations.”

Significance

It was striking to hear the number of host sites who stated that the member they have invested in would be hired into a position if financially possible. Although the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network has been in the community for just under 20 years now, it was still insightful to hear current host sites mention the upward mobility of past members who have been hired as employees.

Of further significance was the number of host sites that have used their AmeriCorps member to develop grassroots services. This is definitely a preferred outcome that is completely in alignment with our desire for capacity building.

One barrier that was uncovered is that several host site supervisors reported to have never been supervisors before. This is their first experience and they are learning as they go; not surprisingly, on some occasions opportunities for development are being missed.

Possible Responses

- Implement training tools for new host site supervisors to develop their own skills
- Invite host site supervisors to an existing quarterly leadership training or supervisor improvement training offered by Life Works for their existing supervisors
- “Market” some stories around past members who have developed into strong community leaders to inspire host site supervisors

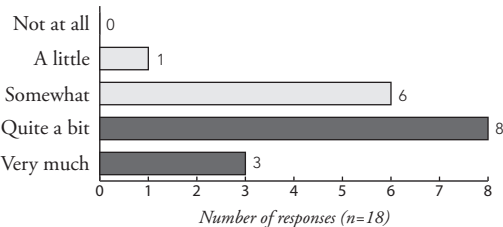
- Create a tool that would allow members to give the host site feedback about their program, both mid-term and upon exit

Finding #5: I chose to invest in me in order to be a better member for you

Key Insight: Member’ personal buy-in and engagement in their new roles allows for individual growth and has a positive impact on the host site

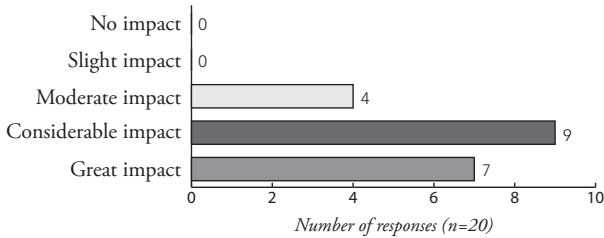
When members bring a positive attitude and an eagerness to learn to their host site it has shown through the data that this is infectious to those around them. One respondent stated, “She came in from the beginning with good energy and she was outgoing and open.” The interviews revealed the importance of recruiting a member who has a connection to the host site mission or at least an openness to learn and engage in the program. Multiple host sites reported that members who built close trusting relationships with the audience they were working with provided a renewed sense of impact to the individuals they were connected to; this relationship was at times deeper than the ones that were formed with the regular staff members. One interviewee stated, “The member builds relationships and makes a difference for the student in many different ways.”

Figure 5. How much growth have you witnessed in your AmeriCorps member throughout their term?



Our quantitative data show respondents reporting member growth (see Figure 5) while simultaneously reporting increased capacity to

Figure 6. Impact of AmeriCorps member on host site program capacity to meet community needs centered on mission



meet their mission (see Figure 6). Although this may seem intuitive, the evaluating team believes that this moderate to great impact on capacity is not just represented in numbers; our qualitative data show that it is represented in new and innovative methods that members use to reach consumers at host site programs.

Numerous host sites were surprised and thrilled to find members that came with hidden talents that if given the right supervision and opportunity could open up new doors for the member to explore and expand on. The data also revealed that members that were allowed to grow and develop became an essential part of the day to day operations and when they were not there it left a huge hole in the program. One participant stated, “If she was not there, a lot of the little day to day things would be missed.” Members who proved to be resilient, confident, and had a drive to be a successful team member were consistently seen as a valuable teammate and someone the host site would hire as a full-time staff if that opportunity came open.

If the member and the host site put in the time, effort, and are engaged then the effects for all involved can be invaluable. The member has the opportunity for tremendous personal development that they can carry forward into their future careers. Hosts experience an increase in the impact of their mission on the community they are serving and a long-lasting impact on their permanent team that can result in increased resiliency and innovative ways to reach consumers.

Significance

Of significance is the fact that the data support that the majority of programs are creating substantial outcomes and are having a positive impact that can be correlated to a strong member experience. It's intrinsic that when a member connects with the host site mission, their mission impact is very natural.

The significance of the host site supervisor and member relationship cannot be overstated. In order for the member to bring great impact to a host site mission, the initial engagement is essential. New supervisors, often due to turnover at repeat host sites, may not recognize the importance of this early or even the continual engagement points with the member during their term of service. It can reasonably be assumed that you could anticipate a decrease in the impact a member can provide on mission delivery if a lack of supervisor engagement is recognized.

Possible Responses

- Emphasize the importance of the right host site culture to new host site supervisors
- During the first 2 weeks of a member's host site experience, facilitate an opportunity for the host site supervisor and their new member create a culture statement for their experience; taking into consideration personality differences, communication styles and personal expectations
- Re-evaluate the two-week member orientation period curriculum and include some emotional intelligence and other trainings to prepare the member for their host site experience
- Create a reflection tool for the member so that monthly meetings include a self-evaluation

Finding #6 - It begins with a word

Key Insight: Open communication is a key element in building a successful working relationship to meet a common goal.

The data reveal that communication is important in being able to foster a relationship between individuals/entities when working towards a common goal. It is mentioned throughout the interviews that communication is how we learn from each other and are able to build on the strengths that each person can bring to the table. It is also a way to problem-solve situations before they become irreparable (i.e. member performance/relationships). When communication is not being utilized it has consequences of people feeling unheard or that they are not important to the process of the bigger picture. Empowering AmeriCorps members to have open communication helps them feel valued and part of the organization.

Open communication between the host site and the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network serves to be an equally important factor in fostering a healthy/productive relationship. As stated by one of our interviewed host site supervisors, “We have worked with Troy (Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network Coordinator) and been successful at adjusting the member description to set the member up for better success.”

Significance

We found the importance of open communication to be a fairly common theme in our interviews and felt it was a significant factor that allowed host sites to walk away satisfied with the AmeriCorps experience even when there may have been difficult member relationship issues to navigate. One host site reported, “Although this is a challenge, the success of this process generally has been what has inspired us to return as a host site.”

Possible Responses

- Integrate tools that have been created to facilitate communication between host sites, members and Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership
- Increase focus and training to members around effective communication
- Include in each member notebook assignments pre-arranged so that the member returns on Fridays with it already completed for use with their host site supervisor or Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership

Finding #7: Don't box me in

Key Insight: It is important to build on an individual's strengths and adapt their role because confidence is built on accomplishments.

It was revealed throughout the data that building upon AmeriCorps members strengths and interests has helped with building up their confidence and buy-in to their role as a team member at their host site. This seems to empower the member to have confidence to take on additional challenges and tasks when they are presented to them. One respondent stated, "Self-confidence, that it is important for the member to own the space that they are in, share ideas and concerns." Through building self-confidence, the member tends to feel more valued, willing to bring ideas to the team, integrate as part of the organization and play important part of the process with meeting the agencies' goals.

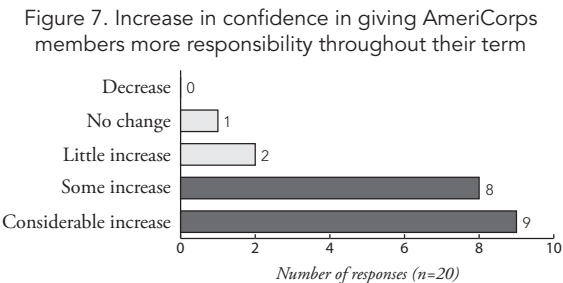
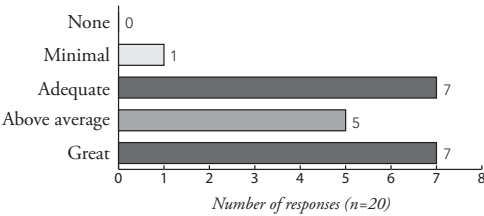


Figure 8. Categorize the development of your AmeriCorps member throughout their term



Our quantitative data show that 85% of host site supervisors experienced an increase in their confidence in giving members more responsibility (see Figure 7). Simultaneously, 60% of host site supervisors reported witnessing above average or greater development throughout the member term (see Figure 8). One could use the “which came first” argument in analyzing this data but the correlation is relevant. Whether the growth occurs because of the increased confidence of supervisor or whether the confidence increases because of the growth of the member, it must start with recognizing and taking advantage of the strengths that the members bring from the beginning.

Our evaluation did reveal the challenges and frustrations that the host sites faced when it came to onboarding an AmeriCorps member. In a few of the interviews, it was revealed that the host site did not realize how much time they would need to invest into the member, helping with identifying their strengths/interests and mentoring them for their position. Although this investment of time can be intensive, when both sides are invested it can build a great working relationship.

Significance

It was empowering for us to discover that there is a wealth of member talent that can emerge and that host sites are making efforts to identify, utilize and capitalize on the unknown talents of their members. This is a significant factor for many host sites that are reporting really impactful outcomes. As we have stated

before, it continues to surface that this exposure to utilizing talent of the member really is a conduit to member development and confidence. The majority of host site supervisors who responded around transitioning from member to employee had confidence as a main factor. For many members, this is their first opportunity to take their knowledge and acquired talent into an environment of impacting a community of need. Walking away from this experience knowing that they can fit into a team making a difference and that they are valuable contributors is the foundation they can build upon for their future endeavors of impact.

Possible Responses

- Ensure that Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership has the appropriate time and resources during the recruitment process to tie the applicant's talent identification to the host site selection process
- Utilize any Life Works agency talent or tools during this time frame
- Implement tools that will help members to dictate how their growth process is best driven
- Unify the development effort between Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network, host sites and members

Finding #8: We are just two peas in the same pod.

Key Insight: The data show that multiple host sites return to the program year after year and experience positive member outcomes because of the strong support in the relationship with the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership.

Throughout our interviews, we heard that the relationship between successful host sites and Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership is fundamental to the success of the relationship between the host site and its member. Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network has always taken

pride in adding value to the local area organizations who are working hard to address community issues. Respondents were consistent in reporting that working through member performance issues side by side with the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership was very valuable. They also reported that working with the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership to develop member descriptions that could maximize their impact on mission was a key factor in staying consistent with the program year after year. Developing future leaders out of members is a joint outcome of both the host site and the program leadership. It is a natural connection that when a member is developing at their host site, the host site is reaping the greatest reward of the member relationship that is possible.

When evaluating the intended impact that host sites will mentor members for future success, we discovered that a common thread of a strong relationship with Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership is vital to ensuring this occurs. One host site who has been engaged with the program for numerous years stated, “There have been times when members have come in and their strengths may not match the current member description that was originally envisioned. We have worked with Troy and been successful at adjusting the member description to maximize the member for success. Although this can be challenging, the success of this process inspires us to want to come back again next year.”

Significance

The discovery that multiple host sites report facing a myriad of issues with multiple member relationships in itself was not surprising. What is surprising is the discovery that host sites will stay resilient through the process of addressing these issues with the support of Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership. This gives us very key insight to “how” this program can remain successful. It is both affirming to the program and indicates the importance of evaluating the program consistently around this outcome.

The significance of this partnership between host sites and the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership is evident in ways beyond just the immediate impact of the host site mission. Throughout the 20 years of the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network in the community, numerous AmeriCorps members have used this partnership and development that they experience from it to catapult themselves into community leaders who go on to have further positive impact in multiple avenues of Cowlitz County.

Possible Responses

- Evaluate and continue to improve the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership around this outcome
- Conduct an annual evaluation of the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network leadership from host sites supervisors
- Solicit quarterly direct feedback from host sites around the strength of this relationship to identify if different needs are emerging
- Develop a protocol to onboard a new host site supervisor mid-term

Conclusion

Using this process to evaluate our intentions for engaging host sites with an AmeriCorps member has given valuable insight into our impact. We are clearly hitting the mark with our first two intentions:

1. Expand the host sites capacity to deliver their mission. Simply put, host sites will be able to impact more people and/or provide more resources to their intended program recipients.
2. Engage host sites in mentoring of their member for future success. Host sites will address member barriers for success at their site in a manner that engages the member in a learning environment that translates to their personal development.

We discovered some minor adjustments (see steps moving forward) that can be made in administration of the program that may further our intended impacts, but overall the evaluation tells us that we must stay the course for the most part and we are meeting the mark in these areas.

The evaluation process was slightly inconclusive in helping us to determine our impact in the area of instilling a lifelong service attitude. The true measurement of this impact may lead us to an opportunity for future evaluation; reaching into a mixed audience of host sites and current Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network members as well as past Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network members.

The evaluation process really shed light on the fact that we have a very limited impact on our fourth intended outcome listed. We can certainly do everything within our control to engage host sites in a valuable member experience but Increasing their capacity to engage others outside of their paid staff in their mission comes with multiple external factors that the program simply cannot impact. We will need to revisit our intended impact in this area.

Steps Forward

Moving forward, the evaluation team is recommending that the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network take the following steps forward to solidify the intended impacts:

- Create and train host site supervisors to new tools that will facilitate a strong host site supervisor / member relationship during the first couple of weeks of their engagement. Subsequently, encourage a monthly meeting with the member to ensure that the tools are facilitating a strong mentor / mentee relationship throughout the member's term.
- Implement strategies that help the host sites to connect to their member candidate; using current tools to identify member candidate talents and working with host sites to match those talents to the best fit.

- Develop a mid-year and end of year member evaluation on their host site program. The evaluation will include member feedback on their training at the host site, any barriers that they have experienced in fulfilling their member term and any positive or negative differences that they have observed during their term with respect to the development of the program in which they are participating.
- Provide multiple new training opportunities (such as emotional intelligence, leadership development, etc.) during the two-week member training period and offer quarterly opportunities for host sites supervisors to participate alongside already developed Life Works staff trainings.
- Update the member training notebook to include some self-reflection assignments to review with the Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network supervisor and/or host site supervisor. Subsequently ask that host site supervisors commit to a weekly meeting with their AmeriCorps member.



Port Angeles School District

PASD AmeriCorps Program

Michell Gentry

Carrie Sanford

Organization and Program Overview

The Port Angeles School District AmeriCorps program serves students in grades K-12 with mentoring and tutoring support throughout the school day and homework support and a “supper” after school. In our 4th year of programming, we are beginning to settle into our most useful roles within the school district’s structure. Our program identifies 3 ways we intend to impact the students and schools we serve. We intend to support students as they make a positive contribution to the school atmosphere. We intend to help students learn life skills needed to overcome the cycle of generational poverty. Most importantly, we intend to provide the help and support students need to reach vital education benchmarks.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact the Port Angeles School District AmeriCorps Program is having on the K-6 elementary students and classrooms in the Port

Angeles School District's five elementary schools. To understand this, we explored two broad evaluation questions:

1. What kind and quality of impact are we having on the students we are engaged with?
2. What aspects of our program are causing this impact?

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented a mixed methods outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, (c) identified themes and findings, and (d) considered the implications to those findings for program improvement and innovation.

This project began by identifying and clarifying the intended impact of Port Angeles School District AmeriCorps. Once the ideas of impact had been developed, we used the Heart Triangle™ model to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact on the mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in our students. We used these indicators to design a qualitative interview protocol and a quantitative questionnaire to evaluate progress toward achieving our intended impact.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to gain data about the structural, qualitative changes resulting from our program. We used a purposeful stratified sampling technique to select a representative sample from the population we serve. The number of program participants was 128 students being served in 41 classrooms throughout the district. We delimited the population for this research by focusing on classrooms where more than 4 students were being served through AmeriCorps support. Our sample size was 9 interviews drawn from the following strata of our population:

- Teachers who have AmeriCorps serving in their classroom daily.
- Teachers who have students who work with AmeriCorps outside of their classroom.

Our interview team consisted of Carrie Sanford and Michell Gentry. We convened one-on-one interviews lasting from between 45 minutes and one hour in length and collected interview data.

We then analyzed the data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. Each interviewer implemented the first three phases of thematic analysis (becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes) for each interview. Together, we developed common themes from the entire data corpus identifying the overarching and inter-interview themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the collective insights and discoveries. We mapped these themes visually and examined the dynamics among the themes, causes and catalysts of the themes, new or surprising insights related to the themes, and relationships between the themes that were revealed in the data. We then determined the most significant and meaningful discoveries and brought them forward as findings to be described in the final phase of thematic analysis, this report.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We administered this instrument to 143 individuals and had a response of 39, a 27% response rate. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency. We identified key insights, patterns, and gaps within the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings. The most significant insights from the quantitative data are described in the following narrative.

Findings

Finding 1. The AmeriCorps Effect

Key Insight: Classroom successes improve student self-concept.

Across the board, teachers reported to us that students who are supported by AmeriCorps members find that small instances of success build to a better self-concept. Success begets success. In multiple interviews, we heard that students with AmeriCorps support were increasingly proud of their ability to “make it through the day.” They had gained self-confidence, saw themselves as capable of accomplishing what they attempted and believed in themselves. When students made small gains, the teachers gained confidence in them as well. One teacher shared, “I feel more confident when calling on the student that he will be on topic.”

In our interviews, teachers reported that students were also better able to show empathy and concern for classmates and interact with peers positively. One student became so adept at using the skills learned in the calming center at the school that she not only implements them in her classroom, she helps other students use them too. These tangible successes leave the students proud of their accomplishments and hopeful about the future. AmeriCorps members contribute to these small steps to success by their constant example of patience and problem solving. In the quantitative survey, distributed to all elementary staff, the most common response to the question of how AmeriCorps members teach was through modeling calm behaviors and self-control. One comment stated,

Our AmeriCorps members help our students see their own value as individuals. They help them persevere and not give up when the going gets tough. Our AmeriCorps team model compassion and care for our students. We would be lost without them.

Significance

Students who have a strong self-concept and the ability to show self-compassion coming out of elementary school have a much higher chance at success in secondary learning, as well as in life beyond school. While this finding is great positive feedback for the PASD AmeriCorps programs, the real significance is in the questions it leads to:

- Is this a really nice by-product or an important factor in reaching graduation?
- How do we bridge elementary learnings to middle and high school for greater student success?
- How do we provide tiered support since AmeriCorps members serve at all grade levels?

As our program works to answer these questions our support of students will improve and the lasting impact of our interventions will be increased.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- Train AmeriCorps members in all grades to use similar language regarding self-confidence and improved behaviors.
- Provide members with an understanding of how their daily work effects students in the long term.

Experiments

- We will provide a series of 3 day seminars for middle school students that will build on the concept of small successes that lead to improved self-efficacy.

Finding 2: We thought they were teaching math.

Key Insight: Members need training in behavior management earlier in the year to help them more effectively support student learning.

The title for our team members is mentor/tutor, and our training is focused on how to help with math and reading. However, the data collected show that members in our elementary schools spend much of their time supporting behavior management. While this is not wrong as we know that better behaviors lead to better academic outcomes, it is not what we have trained our members to do. Early in the year our AmeriCorps training prioritized ways to support math and reading skills rather than methods to help students improve learning behaviors. This disparity has led to some initial false starts as members try to carry out tasks they are trained to do, such as practice reading skills, and teachers are looking for more general classroom support and specific behavior support for struggling students. In cases where the initial discrepancy was overcome, the teachers report that the calm, quiet reiteration of the tasks and rules provided by members have helped students find success in the classroom.

Properly prepared students are the foundation for a functional and progressing classroom. General readiness to learn must be addressed before academic progress can be made. In the classroom setting one child can strongly influence the way all the children in the classroom experience their education. Basic learning skills like sitting quietly, transitioning from task to task and prioritizing their efforts create opportunities for individual student success as well as create a more positive learning atmosphere for all the students. Properly prepared AmeriCorps members are vital to the progress of both individual students and the class. Our members reported that mid-year training in trauma-informed practices proved to be valuable in their daily work and there was a general agreement that initial trainings should focus on that aspect of their work, with the

tutoring training coming later in the year. When basic educational skills are a focus for elementary students and the adults that work with them, the gains for the child can be transformational.

An adult in the classroom who is focused primarily on supporting students while they practice the basic learning skills will bring a sense of freedom to the students, the teacher and the classroom. One teacher described it as “calming one child so the others feel safe to learn.” AmeriCorps members must be taught methods for calming and directing behaviors early on in their term of service in order to be the most effective during the course of the year.

Significance

This finding is important to us because it gives guidance as we write future grants and strongly influences the training protocol that will be used with future AmeriCorps teams. We were encouraged to know that members are effective and valued in the work they do. Most significant was the reported “ripple effect” that AmeriCorps presence has in the classroom. We set out to work with one student, but the change in the one student had a greater effect on the entire classroom. More behavior-focused preparation and training for AmeriCorps members is needed in order to build the foundations necessary for success with individual students and to avoid missteps during the early days as members join classrooms throughout the district.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- The training schedule will be adjusted in order to provide more social/emotional training early on, allowing members to focus on classroom behaviors before addressing the academics.
- Academic trainings will occur later in the school year

Experiments

- Place AmeriCorps members in grades k-2 more frequently in order to establish better practices with students earlier in their academic careers.

Finding 3. Fluidity of AmeriCorps

Key Insight: AmeriCorps Members are uniquely able to support students at a variety of times throughout the day that might be troubling to them.

Unlike a paraeducator, who is likely to be assigned to one specific child or one specific classroom, the AmeriCorps are able to be fluid in their duties. They are able to help John during the early part of the day when he struggles, then move to another classroom to help Sue during math when she often becomes frustrated and angry, then over to Jane because recess makes her anxious. During interviews, teachers expressed gratitude for this fluidity.

AmeriCorps members in our elementary schools are particularly focused on students who have difficulty with social and emotional skills. They are typically placed in schools several weeks after the start of the year. This allows for better scheduling as the trouble spots have already been identified and members can be placed where they will be most effective throughout the day. Schedules will frequently change based on student needs and growth. Often students who need a daily check in at the beginning of a school year will make progress and no longer need the daily support.

A common theme in our interviews was the importance of self-regulation and “good behavior” in helping students access their education. Our data indicate clearly that students who can keep their behavior in check well enough to stay in the classroom are able to open up to the learning process. This makes sense. Of course, a child who cannot keep their hands to themselves, or stay quiet enough to hear instructions or stay focused is unable to have the capacity for academic efforts.

AmeriCorps members are often at the forefront of helping students gain self-control and composure. Most students have times of calm and times of struggle throughout the day, because AmeriCorps have the freedom to move between classrooms, they are able to be available for a greater number of students who need support at varying times. This could be as simple as having a clear desk and as complex as finding a positive way to combat anxiety caused by classroom transitions. In many instances, we were told that AmeriCorps members showed students how to be prepared: Do you have the materials you need? What page are we on in the book? What does it look like to be paying attention to your teacher? Should you have that distracting toy on your desk? Are you sitting next to someone who will keep you from focusing?

Improvements in one or two key students can free the other children from distraction allowing them to concentrate on the learning concepts that are so important for their growth. Knowing that the behavior of an individual student can change the behavior of the whole class, AmeriCorps members should be trained to focus on the few outlying students to help them be calm and ready to learn. The teacher is then able to concentrate on the lesson and the progress of the entire class.

Significance

AmeriCorps members have been particularly helpful in breaking through to students that other staff do not have the flexibility to work with. This has allowed students to experience individual success and given the teachers a greater capacity for reaching the whole class. As a program this is significant because it gives guidance regarding how to utilize members and schedule their days. When they are properly trained and scheduled, members can have a greater impact.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- Include these findings in the annual training meeting with Principals
- Provide guidance to principals regarding effective scheduling of members
- Solicit training ideas from principals and teachers in order to build on needed skills for individual members

Experiments

- Include the teachers in the training meeting with the Principals early in the year.

Finding 4. Understanding the path of progress matters.

Key Insight: Better behaviors lead to better grades in the long run, but it is a process.

Throughout our interviews we heard that the process of developing better behaviors is built on small attainable goals like “I will not throw my pencil today” and reaches for goals like, “I will be able to write all the numbers myself.” One teacher talked about this progression with pride and shared that, “Getting a handle on those behaviors let her get her educational work done. Her reading has blossomed and her writing has taken off.” When students begin to experience the rewards of positive behaviors rather than the punishments of poor behaviors, their confidence and pride in their abilities begins to grow and they are more willing to take academic risks.

Helping students achieve these important small goals has occurred by chance and by instinct rather than by design. Early in the year AmeriCorps training has prioritized ways to support math and reading skills. For many students who need support this focus on academics was premature. Members received little training in how to help the students’ progress through the educational arc that

begins with behaviors, builds executive function and results in academic gains. Providing training and support for the AmeriCorps members as they work with children who are progressing through this learning arc must be a higher priority for our program.

In many situations, members were not prepared for the emotional toll that working daily with high impact students would take on their own mental health. There must be a comprehensive understanding of the path of progress for students and how student-AmeriCorps member interaction can be maximized to accelerate the progression. A directed understanding of the full cycle of progress will provide perspective for members and help them have patience with the progress they are making, even when academic outcomes are not yet obvious.

Significance

Academic progress IS being made, just not in the way we thought it would. This finding relates to the relationship between the member, the student and their ultimate progress. It informs expectations and timing of interventions throughout the year and most importantly shows a need for the program to support members as they support the students.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- Provide improved self-care training for AmeriCorps members
- Increase the communication with teachers who have AmeriCorps members working in their classrooms in order to gain the best possible outcome.

Experiments

- This year we will provide members with group building opportunities early in the year so they will have some

trusted individuals who are in a similar situation to talk with as they experience struggles, frustrations and achievements.

Conclusion

Insights Into Impact

As we consider the results of this study, we can see clearly that AmeriCorps members are having a positive effect on students and classrooms in our elementary school settings. The calm and consistent intervention and role modeling provided by AmeriCorps members gives the students a stronger opportunity for growth than if they were left to their own efforts and minimizes time spent out of the classroom due to disruptive behavior. One strong positive effect is in the way that improved behaviors for one or two individual students improves the educational opportunities for the entire classroom. As students gain control of disruptive behaviors, they are able to settle into the academics and take control of their own education. When disruptions in the classroom are minimized, the whole class, including the teacher, is able to relax and maximize their learning time.

Steps Forward

Moving forward we will be able to provide focused and more appropriately timed training for the AmeriCorps members who are providing the service. In addition, this information will be shared with the Principals and teachers who are responsible for assigning tasks to members. With this information and training, members can be strategically scheduled to have the greatest impact, with the students who can benefit the most from their efforts and example.

Opportunities for Future Evaluation

The Port Angeles School District AmeriCorps program serves K-12 classrooms. This study focused only on the impact in

elementary schools. Further study will look at the impact at both middle and high schools. Given what was learned about our work at the elementary level, we will especially concentrate on the impact of social/emotional support at those levels. In education, vertically aligned education is important. Each concept must be a building block for future learning. Our program will explore how AmeriCorps members can support, encourage and build upon social/emotional learning throughout a child's education.



Community Youth Services

Youth in Service

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Organization and Program Overview

Community Youth Services (CYS) offers a continuum of care to help youth, ages 12-24, find their way toward safety, stability and success. CYC has a variety of programs ranging but not limited to behavioral health services, independent living skills, education, workforce readiness and programs serving youth experiencing homelessness. CYC is a private, non-profit agency governed by a Board of Directors, serving the South Puget Sound area of western Washington State since 1970. It is CYC policy that no services will be denied to individuals on the basis of race, creed, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual preference, marital status, age, disability or any other characteristic protected by law. CYC uses a strength base model called Positive Youth Development (PYD) to meet young people where they are at. CYC's mission statement is: "We believe in strengthening our communities by empowering youth and families to create their own success".

The Youth in Service Program started at Community Youth Services in 1994. It is an experiential service program that provides

AmeriCorps members opportunities for personal development through community service and leadership. The program is committed to supporting the positive development of children, youth and the community. AmeriCorps members are responsible for providing intensive services to youth who have experienced trauma in their lives and the goal is for the youth to demonstrate improvement in their developmental assets, which builds their resiliency to overcome barriers and meet future challenges.

The intended impacts evaluated for this project included:

1. Members have beneficial connections within various communities. Members will develop skills to connect and engage with people across different communities in building empathy.
2. Members make and honor commitments. Members will demonstrate the ability to complete tasks and projects while gaining more knowledge, experience and confidence and overcome challenges. They will recognize the importance of this AC experience and keep commitments.
3. Members cultivate their intrapersonal skills. Members will have the confidence to take the next steps in their lives. This includes open mindedness, self-awareness and self-motivation.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact Youth in Service is having on the AmeriCorps members. To understand this, we explored two broad evaluation questions:

1. What kind and quality of impact are we having on the Youth in Service AmeriCorps members?
2. What aspects of our program are causing this impact?

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and

implemented a mixed methods outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, (c) identified themes and findings, and (d) considered the implications to those findings for program improvement and innovation.

This project began by identifying and clarifying the intended impact of Youth in Service. Once the ideas of impact had been developed, we used the Heart Triangle™ model to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact on the mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in our AmeriCorps members. We used these indicators to design a qualitative interview protocol and a quantitative questionnaire to evaluate progress toward achieving our intended impact.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to gain data about the structural, qualitative changes resulting from our program. We sought to interview all our current Youth in Service AmeriCorps members for the 2018-2019 service year. We ended up interviewing 12 of our 14 members; two were not interviewed due to scheduling conflicts.

Our interview team consisted of Krista Koller and Nikki Brown. We convened one-on-one interviews lasting from between 45 minutes and one hour in length and collected interview data.

We then analyzed the data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. Each interviewer implemented the first three phases of thematic analysis (becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes) for each interview. Together, we developed common themes from the entire data corpus identifying the overarching and inter-interview themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the collective insights and discoveries. We mapped these themes visually and examined the dynamics among the themes, causes and catalysts of the themes, new or surprising insights related to the

themes, and relationships between the themes that were revealed in the data. We then determined the most significant and meaningful discoveries and brought them forward as findings to be described in the final phase of thematic analysis, this report.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We administered this instrument to 14 Youth in Service Members and 18 Youth in Service site supervisors and had a response of 13 Youth in Service Members and 14 Youth in Service site supervisors, an 84% response rate. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency. We identified key insights, patterns, and gaps within the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings. The most significant insights from the quantitative data are described in the following narrative.

Limitations

The limitations of the evaluation include not being able to get responses from the AmeriCorps members who left our program early; not being able to interview site supervisors; and the transferability to other AmeriCorps programs because program size and population of members could be different.

Findings

Finding 1. Confidence: Building blocks of achievement

Key Insight: Youth in Service members demonstrated that the process of gaining confidence is a journey that is unique and personal to each person. Throughout our interviews, members shared a wide collection of descriptions of how confidence development has evolved for them throughout the service year. It was in the process of self-reflection that the time and space was provided for each member to articulate their experience. One member stated that

their confidence “allowed (them) to be vulnerable with the youth I served and the Youth In Service team.” Members acknowledged the connection between taking calculated risks and gaining confidence. A member described how their confidence allowed them to “accept the challenge, regardless of the fear.”

Our quantitative data also revealed that members are demonstrating an increase in self-motivation along with confidence. Members were asked to rate their level of self-motivation before and as a result of being a part of the program. At the start of the program, members rated themselves a 3.54 on average. As a result of the program, members rated themselves a 4.31 on average. This raise of self-motivation and confidence indicates to us that members are better able to take on more aspects of their position independently.

Significance

Building strong mentors is a core value of the Youth In Service program. When youth provide mentorship from a strong foundation of self-respect and confidence, the possibility for authentic connection grows. With confidence, members share of themselves, tell their stories, share their experiences and articulate their struggles and frustrations. The more that members offer personal insight, the more opportunity they have for discovering common ground with others. Confidence is a significant factor driving fulfilment and satisfaction in the program, while reducing burnout.

Members’ awareness of gaining confidence results from self-reflection and self-awareness, which are added skillsets. Growth in member self-confidence has significant impact within the AmeriCorps community but extends beyond classrooms and the service year.

Possible Responses

- Quarterly check-ins with members around accomplishments to recognize growth in confidence.

This gives members time for self-reflection and acknowledgement.

- Check-in/reflect with members on how their gain in confidence has changed the impact on the youth and families. This means have more reflection opportunities.
- Create an atmosphere where team can do these things (reflect growth) with one another.

Finding 2. Acknowledge cultural and historical context:

Learn from the past to prepare for the future

Key Insight: Members who take the time to learn historical and cultural context at their sites connect deeper with their site community.

There was strong evidence in the data that in order for members to be able to connect with the community they were serving in, they needed to glean some historical context. Throughout our interviews, we appreciated the amount of time and energy that members described spending to get to know the youth and families they served. Members reported that they valued learning about the surrounding areas from their sites, understanding the demographic make-up of the populations their sites served. Members also reported how helpful it was to come to site already prepared with some working knowledge of the resources that were available within Olympia.

For members who serve within cultural contexts that are different than their own, they reported the various ways they came into learning about new cultures. Sometimes these stories were a bit challenging to articulate, but what was important was what the members learned from those moments. Members reported that their success, their validation and their trust level was dependent upon their cultural competency. Whether a member was serving at a Native elementary school, a fast-paced high school or an emergency family shelter, each site has its own cultural norms and history.

Along with the cultural awareness that members developed, we were impressed with the level of self-awareness that members developed through getting more connected to their site culture and history. A few members commented on observations they had made around how student interactions often stemmed from class status and bias. Members also reported recognition when biases were coming from positions of power.

The quantitative survey data also support this growth in self-awareness. 12 out of 13 members (92%) indicated that they have gained “quite a bit” or “very much” more self-awareness through their service year. This was supported by site supervisors too as 9 out of 12 (75%) indicated that the member working with them has gained “quite a bit” or “very much” more self-awareness. The remaining 3 site supervisors indicated that their member’s self-awareness had grown “somewhat.”

Significance

Hearing AmeriCorps members identify the importance of historical context within various communities and sites was a significant victory. By bringing self-awareness and a willingness to learn, members who are serving in communities that are new to them are less likely to cause harm. This recognition and practice will also create a more trusting and safer environment for all people involved, allowing for vulnerability and growth.

Youth In Service members who took time and energy to learn about their site’s unique history and culture demonstrated a deep connection to the its mission and participants. The practice of taking time to learn about history and culture to provide context is a life long skill set that is crucial, especially for those interested in education and social services. Members will be able to take this practice and apply it to their personal and professional lives, adding empathy and awareness to their communities.

Possible Responses

- Do more work preparing for what to expect from the sites – during trainings, school culture, non-profit culture trainings.
- Do more bias training and power and privilege trainings.
- Do half-training day with members at schools. Do half-training day with members at non-profits.
- Set up resource up differently to include doing resource hunting around the site that they are serving. Be more intentional about learning about their site culture.
- Have interview with members at end of year about the cultural context at site. This way information can be transferred to members the following year. The sustainability binder could be utilized with this too.

Finding 3. To be with: Patience is powerful

Key Insight: A more effective mentor is one who is empathetic, which allows them to support and build connection more fully.

The theme of “patience is powerful” is a phrase that many members reported within their interviews, referring to differing situations. While some members referred to a physical act of solidarity with a student through a moment of managing conflict, others referred to the term to describe the ability of listening to understand. We found it powerful that so many members on the team felt compelled by this statement, using it to encompass such a variety of meanings. For some members this phrase was paired with the idea of transforming into the mentor they were hoping to become. There was a strong recognition that oftentimes the most substantial area of growth comes from a place of quiet and stillness.

It was significant for members to articulate that they were often in situations that they had never been in before. Be it an overzealous classroom, working with a parent who is upset, or

sitting with a child crying, members were faced with a barrage of new experiences. The most powerful piece of information we heard was the recognition that “sometimes, there is no right answer and there is no magic cure, but what is possible is to show up, to listen and to be with.” Our survey revealed that 12 out of 13 members (92%) indicated that they have gained “quite a bit” or “very much” new understanding of others’ experiences at their site. This was supported by site supervisors too, as 13 out of 14 (93%) indicated that the member has gained “quite a bit” or “very much” new understanding of others’ experiences.

Significance

Patience is the ultimate tool that members can use with youth, families and their site. It allows for connection that strengthens their ability to support and help youth with challenges. As mentors, showing up and being consistent are valuable and this theme should be a mantra for mentors.

Possible Responses

- Look to have this training earlier in the year. A training around this resonated with the members.
- Implement further training to check reality situations when site is not supportive of this approach. Use team as a resource and a sounding board.
- Individualized coaching for members, such as what happens at site visits.

Finding 4. Boundaries: they’re there for your protection.

Key Insight: Members who learned to build and maintain boundaries had more lasting impacts at their sites.

A major theme that we concluded after our member interviews was around the practice of setting and maintaining boundaries. While

the word “boundaries” wasn’t always explicitly used, we dare to make the connection that many members have in fact developed this skillset. The themes that members described by acknowledging that in order to develop confidence, in order to practice the art of “being with,” to trust the “power of presence,” to show up as your authentic self and to trust your gut all require the creation and maintenance of boundaries. Some members explicitly named boundary enforcement while working with youth with big behaviors, while others covertly described ways they communicated their needs with their site supervisors. Members indicated their use of boundaries by trusting their gut. A few members shared experiences of respectfully going against initial protocols or site rules, in order to stand up for a vulnerable youth or to respectfully remind a staff member when a potential responsibility was outside their position description.

Significance

Connecting the establishment and maintenance of boundaries to so many themes is significant to reflect back to the members how much subtle growth can occur in such a short period of time. Sometimes the aspects of growth are outward, loud and in your face. And sometimes the growth comes in the form of a subtle ache, reminding you of something that is wrong. The task becomes not only to identify what is causing the pain, but how to fix it.

Every member is utilizing boundaries at each of their unique sites that helps them through their service. It’s a universal truth around boundaries: everyone utilizes them in their own way. This goes with learning professional boundaries at the site, along with setting their own boundaries.

Possible Responses

- Spending more time to talk with team about boundaries, code of conduct, personal boundaries, etc. at beginning of the year.

- Ask earlier about what challenges around boundary creation and retention are, so staff can support. Go over the type of boundaries that they will be facing (with youth/families, personal, with site staff, etc.)
- Set up situations where members can help with one another – separate by schools, non-profits, etc. Peer sharing.

Finding 5. Theory into Practice: From the classroom to the real world

Key Insight: Youth In Service members are provided an array of training opportunities throughout their service year, but struggle to put this learning into practice in their service.

The program provides bi-monthly trainings, which seek to increase professional development, by exposing the team to a diverse array of professionals within the community. Youth In Service members articulated that while much of the training material was helpful and directly applicable to their service, some struggled to take the theoretical concepts and ideas and apply them to their day to day service at their site. While members acknowledged appreciation for the exposure to diverse behavior management interventions, positive communication strategies and outside-the-box teaching methods, they described the struggle in appropriate application.

It became clear through our interviews that it's important for members to practice what they've learned to implement the concepts fully or meaningfully. Staff need to give members the opportunity to practice things learned to be comfortable and confident with the ideas before they can take them back to their sites. Practice time with material from training is valued and helpful for part of trainings. Members indicated that it is important to connect their authentic self to how they can put theory into practice.

Significance

The trainings work when members are gleaning information and use what they can. They felt supported in their professional growth because of these trainings. By practicing and becoming comfortable with theory, members are better able to utilize material most effectively.

As staff, we need to make sure to include practicing time beyond fluffy content and acknowledge the reality of implementation at their sites. Moving forward, it will be important to have a training or conversation with members on how to best interact with theory/trainings and then how to implement practices.

Possible Responses

- Make sure to be more transparent about trainings and what is happening with site supervisors. Give site more context.
- Make sure to be transparent that this is theory and need to work in the constraints of the site.
- At next meeting, be intentional about how members did with this training at their site. Did people try? How did it go?
- Get individualized support from outside coaches.
- Using each other as resources to talk through theory into practice.

Finding 6. Financial Struggles: No Money, More Problems

Key Insight: Lack of financial compensation for time and energy is a significant barrier for retention and recruitment.

Before the 2018-2019 service year began, our program had engaged with several prospective applicants who ultimately chose not to continue with the program due to the limited financial compensation. Interviews with current team members solidified the understanding of the stress that comes with such limited

resources. During the interview process, two members explained that they would have loved to continue to serve another year with AmeriCorps, but financially couldn't afford to make it work.

Throughout the year, our team continued to lose 3 additional members due to financial strain.

Significance

Members of Youth In Service all experience varying degrees of stress. The very nature of the program is to provide direct service to youth and families experiencing adversity, which can add another layer of stress and pressure to a member who may be experiencing a higher level of adversity themselves. Members who experience financial stress and hardship may struggle to fully engage in their service, due to outside threats to survival. The loss of Youth In Service members within the service year had negative impacts, not only for the youth and families the member served, but for the program sites and our team suffered as well.

While it is widely understood that the purpose of the AmeriCorps program is the promotion of community service and the value of volunteering, the fact remains that as the cost of living raises and the living stipend remains the same, the prospective applicant pool will likely continue to decrease.

Possible Responses

Find more financial resources. Site fee increases.

- Secure more money from sources beyond CNCS.
- Trying to partner more with Intercity for bus passes, YWCA for gym memberships, etc.
- Conduct financial literacy trainings.
- Locate resources to help financially. Find banks with no cost checking, etc.
- For out of area members, locate housing that would make the AC year possible.

Conclusion

The Youth In Service team developed meaningful and powerful insights from our data. Where some areas surprised us, we were affirmed by the results of other data points. It was powerful to hear members describe in their own words how their confidence developed. This insight has informed our team on what trainings and experiences to maintain and even expand upon. We were also impressed with the level of sensitivity towards cultural and historical awareness. While community and resource awareness is a topic we develop throughout the service year, it was profound to discover just how important development of cultural context is for our members. While this exists as a personal value, it validated to our program the importance of connecting this theme to every training we offer.

A significant theme collected from our findings, was the power of making time and space for reflection. Many of our intended impacts develop silently for members throughout the fast-paced program. Our research team now understands the value and importance of creating more opportunities for our members to slow down and self-reflect and to allow them to discover the changes that have occurred within themselves.

Steps Forward

Only within a safe space to articulate, acknowledge and celebrate the transformations that members experience will they also offer perspective back to the program that facilitated the experience. Because our members have offered us valuable insight to their experience, it is our job to use the information in an effective and responsible way. It is also our job to ensure that their thoughts and ideas are not to be taken for granted or minimized. There are numerous ways that our program can ensure the insight gained from this evaluation will enhance future member experience and promote our community's health and wellbeing.

- Our program will make time each service year to take inventory of our members' experiences, and not simply with a satisfaction survey. We will take time with each member and create an opportunity for self-reflection and engage in meaningful dialogue to explore successes, struggles and hopes.
- Taking time will be a priority because our program, this community, its families and children depend on the health and wellbeing of members who are willing to be of service.

Opportunities for Future Evaluation

There are endless themes that the Youth In Service program can evaluate. We believe there is a lot to unpack in regards the program impacts as the applicant pool continues to decline. Evaluating the impact of societal cost of living, compared to the living stipend could provide valuable insight into the future success of AmeriCorps programs nationwide.



Washington Department of Veterans Affairs

Vet Corps Program

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Organization & Program Overview

The Vet Corps Program is an AmeriCorps program through the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) that places 50 Members at different college campuses throughout Washington State. These Members are veterans, or veteran family members, that serve on host sites often college campuses across the state. Because of the how the members are spread out throughout the entire state, the Vet Corps Program is broken up into five different regions. These regions are managed by Regional Coordinators, independent contractors with the WDVA, all who are former Vet Corps members, living in those regions. Vet Corps members serve as peer mentors to the student veterans and family members. They mentor student veterans in an effort to help them be successful both on and off campus. This often requires the Vet Corps Member to go out into their community and connect with local, state, and federal resources to be able to refer any student veterans as needed.

Vet Corps members are full time AmeriCorps Members, who serve 1700 hours in a 10-month period, going from September

1st to June 30th. One of the things that makes the Vet Corps Program unique in comparison to other AmeriCorps Programs is that the Vet Corps members do not spend all of their time at their site. Oftentimes, the Members spend time out in the community attending local veteran events, meetings, and more. Another unique component of the Vet Corps program is that each site is so different than the others, the Vet Corps Members are able to go onto their sites and find their niches on how to best serve the student veteran population. Both of these unique components are believed to help the members have a positive experience in the program.

Evaluation Methodology

The intention of the Project Impact study on the Vet Corps Program is look at member's experience. Through their service, we see impact on the veterans they serve, their sites, and their communities. The primary evaluation question for this project was focused to see what change the members see in themselves through this program.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

We decided to utilize a survey instead of personal interviews to better reach our members. As a statewide program, with members spread far and wide, the evaluation team sought to make sure that we got as equal of representation as we could from across the state.

The number of participants in the Vet Corps program during the time of evaluation was 44. The sample size was 20, with the following strata of our population:

- Years served in Vet Corps (75% were 1st-year members, 5% 2nd-year members, 15% 3rd-year members)
- Region (15% from Region 1, 5% from Region 2, 20% from region 3, 20% for region 4, 30% from region 5)
- Type of site (25% from public 4-year college, 30% from private 4-year college, 35% from 2-year community college, 10% from a non-college setting)

Findings

Finding 1: Patience, Understanding & Empathy

One of the biggest things revealed by the data is that 75% of our members reported an increase patience, understanding, and empathy. The evaluation team is working with the assumption that a specialized population can be very difficult, especially when the members are the population that they serve (veterans). Developing greater empathy, understanding, and patience is critical to serving this population well. The Vet Corps is developed these attributes in its members. For example, one said, “I’ve learned to be more patient, and it has taught me a greater understanding for the processes involved in the VA.”

Understanding the VA can be difficult at best and intimidating at most. For a lot of veterans, the VA is so daunting that they don’t utilize any of the services that it offers. The Vet Corps Members work with service providers to better understand how the VA works, sometimes filing a claim for disability, medical benefits, or mental health services. The impact of Vet Corps is evidenced in their ability to engage with greater sensitivity to the population they serve. With a better understanding of the VA systems, Vet Corps Members are able to encourage the veterans and family members to only utilize their benefits but can help walk them through the process. One member reflected that the Vet Corps was “developing empathy, and that [empathy] greatly enhances serving the veteran population.”

Significance

No one really knows what another person is struggling with. For veterans, who are taught that the mission always comes before anything else, it is not uncommon for them to lock up their emotions and not deal with them. This can lead to untimely outbursts. Vet Corps Members have a growing understanding of being empathic listeners so their veterans can really open up and have an honest, judgement-free, conversation.

Finding 2: The Journey of Transition from Present to Future after Military Service

The data from the evaluation show that Vet Corps builds the capacity of members to help veterans navigate the transition from their current experience to the future. The study revealed that many members started the program on day one thinking that this was a journey to help themselves in their personal transition, but instead came away with a commitment to serve others. That was what they reported directly impacted their personal journey the most in their own transition and overall understanding of their new mission to serve. One said, “I learned that I have a commitment to serving veterans, I actually like working with them in an educational environment and seeing them during their transition to civilian life.” Another said, “I need to be able to be more open minded of others future and journey. I need to be more detailed in a more concise and not ramble it is not my journey it is theirs.”

Significance

We often start this journey to help ourselves and our family. That is why many identify and want to serve. In the end, however, they walk away wanting to do something with our lives for the same reason that most chose military service in the first place. Our military service tends to get very muddy over the years and when we have the opportunity to reflect on the “Why” we served to begin with. In Vet Corps, we have an opportunity to reflect and realize the reason we chose to join and find our next mission. For example, one said, “I missed the structured environment while I enjoyed the flexible schedule [after my service]. I found myself very anxious to ensure I got all my hours done. I would have preferred a more set schedule.”

Finding 3: Members are gaining new skills and abilities through the Vet Corps

We anticipated that we would discover differences between the

impact of the sites, recognizing that all of the sites vary in their culture. Not all sites are the same, just like no veteran is like every other veteran. Our members come to us from all different walks of life. Our members range from their early 20's fresh out of the military, to military retirees, and even to members in their 60's looking to give back after they have retired. That is a lot of different perspectives all coming together and finding a way to come together and work towards the common goal of serving veterans.

Through all of the differences, however, there are strong and common themes from the data about the changes that Vet Corps achieves in the awareness, learning, skills, and capability of the members. The following represent some of the sentiments of the members:

I had no knowledge of this program, now I walk away familiar with multiple resources for veterans and their families. I am much more aware of the struggles and issues that plague our veteran population to include myself when we transition out of military service.

I had no idea in regard to the program until I meet my Vet Corps Coordinator. Learning to network outside of military service has been the most helpful. This skill has taught me how important the skill in the civilian population for our veteran community.

I have learned about a ton of different resources that is out there for our veteran community that I was completely oblivious as well for even myself. I have gained many valuable skills such as the ability to key into situations with veterans that might be struggling and aid them in their journey to overcome challenges. I have learned how to communicate effectively with this very unique population that can be very rigid and lack of flexibility in their views and overall belief system that kept them alive in very stressful overwhelming situation. I learned how to actively listen to respond rather than

react. I was also able to show a population that asking and even receiving help does not mean you are weak it makes us human.

I actually knew very little about the AmeriCorps/Vet Corps program when I chose to serve. I kind of knew that I would be assisting establish a veteran program at my University that I graduated from. Some new skills that I gained by being in the program was in regard to event planning and as how to collaborate with the staff and faculty to better serve you population at my designated location of higher learning to meet the needs of the veteran population. This has changed my personal views of working with this unique population, because not I see myself not only as a peer but also an advocate, a voice and a mentor for the veterans I see on a regular basis.

Significance

It was exciting to see evidence of how Vet Corps has driven members to become advocates for those who have served and their families. Seeing data about this impact drives us as a staff to continue with the mission of serving veterans in Washington State. It is also important to note that for some of our veterans serving in Vet Corps, this is their first time working in a professional environment outside of the military.

Finding 4: Empowerment

The data from this evaluation also show that being involved in Vet Corps develops a sense of empowerment and agency. Members develop the ability to seek solutions. For example, one said that Vet Corps helped them be “resourceful when the situation that is not clearly defined to gain a favorable overall outcome.” This member said, “It is better to say that I don’t know the answer but work together to find the best solution.” Another spoke of gaining the ability to speak to others, saying, “I can now better communicate with the population on and off campus.”

For many of the members, this study shows evidence of significant personal development. One said,

The hardest part of this journey to deal with is retaining the knowledge and difficulty retaining it once I master it when writing everything down seems like seems necessary. I am struggling with filing al this knowledge in a place that makes so much easier and retrievable. I feel like it is most difficult to do this when the knowledge increases.

Another said, “Working with veterans that might resort to self-harm. I have learned to seek help sooner than later so that you are not picking up the pieces in the heat of a very bad situation.” Still another said, “By looking in the mirror daily and learning from those that are in need. To see myself in those that have or currently suffering its tough, they come in very raw and many are broken. I have a feeling of awakening.”

Significance

Vet Corps Members seek to learn or increase their strong leadership skills. We have found that empowering our members and putting them in positions to affect change on their sites brings out skills that will give them the ability to be strong leaders in new and complex environments. Our members represent the population they serve. It is vital for them to be able to take the resources, skills, and tools that they are showing their veterans and apply them to themselves. As we have stated previously, the mission comes before the individual for veterans. It’s important for our veterans to understand that they need to make sure they are utilizing their own self-care tools.

Conclusion

When doing Project Impact, the evaluation team was looking to track the experience of the Vet Corps members. In past evaluations,

we have examined the impact that the members have on college campuses in terms of graduation rates, student retention, and amount of credits taken. It was important for us to be able to see what the members thought of their service in Vet Corps. While we had always thought that members enjoyed their time in Vet Corps, being able to get the type of feedback that we received was a great feeling.

Member responses were positive overall. Our members are using Vet Corps service as a way of finding a second way to serve, or a second mission. Finding a second mission is imperative for transitioning veterans. It's a way of finding a new purpose and meaning after military life is over. A second mission can often lead to new purpose and new beliefs. One said, "My beliefs have changed dramatically to reflect a kinder and gentler approach." Many of our alumni have gone on to do bigger and greater things to serve veterans. We have alumni continuing to work in higher education as deans, run veteran resource centers, work with senators, work for both the federal and state VA, start their own nonprofits, and more. Our members come to the program not because of money, but because of a desire to serve and give back.

Steps Forward

Moving forward from Project Impact, we need to continue to recognize the members and the positive impacts that they are making for themselves throughout their lives. Continuing to make Vet Corps a member-driven program will make recruiting and retaining our members for multiple years less challenging than other AmeriCorps Programs.

1. Continue to Focus on Member Development: We spent a lot of time on training and developing our members. Our conference at the beginning of the year is an intense 3-day training where we focus on strength building, military transition planning, invisible wounds, suicide prevention,

and team building. We need to continue to provide this while also finding new and innovative ways to deliver the training.

2. Continue to be a Member-Driven Program: A major strength of Vet Corps is our flexibility as a program. We let the member use their strengths to find ways to best serve the veterans on their sites. This is especially relevant when members do their service projects. Seeing the members create projects based on things that they are passionate about is very fulfilling for us. Former members have turned their service projects into full on nonprofit organizations like the Seattle Stand Down.

Opportunity for Future Evaluation

Based on what we've learned from Project Impact, we plan to continue to utilize our methods that have proven to have lasting, positive impacts on our members. In our next service year, we are bringing in an independent evaluation team to look at the effectiveness of Vet Corps. We are excited to share with them the results of this evaluation with that team.



Serve Tri-Cities AmeriCorps

Organization and Program Overview

Serve Tri-Cities - AmeriCorps is an AmeriCorps program in Washington state. All AmeriCorps Members serve as tutors in the Pasco School District. We envision a community where every child we serve is equipped with the basic skills they need to succeed as prosperous, independent, and successful members of our society. Our mission: Meet community needs today. Advance community leadership for tomorrow.

Serve Tri-Cities (formerly known as Regional Service Corps) was founded in October 1992. From humble beginnings and just six Corps Members, the program has grown to serve more than a dozen schools and even more community organizations. Since 1992, nearly a thousand people from all walks of life have served as AmeriCorps members and brightened the lives of others. They also improved themselves through our unique Leadership Enhancement Program that's widely recognized as a best practice in the national service field.

AmeriCorps members are the linchpin in our program and

enable us to achieve our mission. As such, we chose to focus on our evaluation on the impact we are having on our AmeriCorps members. To guide our evaluation, we identified three intended impacts that we have for AmeriCorps members:

1. **Members are deeply engaged in the cause.** This means that alums volunteer, come and share experiences, members & alums lead team builders, and generally stay in contact with STC-AmeriCorps. This also means Corps Members use skills and experiences after their term of service.
2. **Members lean into their own growth and development.** What we mean here is that Members are able to be self-reliant, better community members, greater teachers, involved family members, and generally more effective members of society. Events, service, and leadership curriculum cultivate networking and development opportunities for our Members. Members are committed to learning about themselves and others, getting things done, and having fun.
3. **Members become change agents.** This means Members can leave with the ability to read the room, identify resources, plan projects, cast visions, be patient yet persistent, challenge the status quo, lead by example, and develop strong relationships.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact we are having on our Corps Members that are serving. Over the course of eight months, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, and (c) identified findings and considered the implications to those findings for program adjustments and experiments.

This project began with a focus on the work of identifying and clarifying the intended impact of each of one of our signature

programs. Once the ideas had been developed, and indicators had been identified, we then designed a questionnaire to collect data about quantitative measures and a qualitative interview protocol to collect qualitative data. These data were analyzed. Themes were identified and then translated into findings. From the findings, we developed program responses and communiqués.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

Our qualitative approach followed these steps:

1. Protocol Design.

We designed an in-depth interview protocol using the Heart Triangle method of question construction. This produced a protocol consisting of 9 sequences of questions (30 questions in total). The protocol was our guide to collect data about the subjects' awareness and reflection of structural shifts and developments of growth and progress.

2. Sample.

We identified a sample of subjects using a purposeful stratified technique to select a representation of the population we served. Our population size was 9. Our sample size was 9 and we drew our sample from the following strata of our population: Corps Members, 3 male, 6 female, 5 with less than 1 year of experience, 1 with 2 years of experience, 1 with 3 years of experience, and 2 with 4 years experience. 4 were 65 & older, 1 was between 35 & 54 years old, and 4 were between 18 & 34 years old.

3. Data Collection.

We convened one-on-one Interviews lasting from between 45 minutes and one hour in length. Data were collected via notes during the interview, and then augmented immediately following the interview to provide a substantive rendering of the interview.

4. Data Analysis.

We applied a four-step model of textual analysis to each of the interviews. This process allowed us to interpret the meaning and significance of the interview data.

5. Themes.

We then examined the overarching themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the primary insights and discoveries.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

We also designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. Since we have over 500 alums, we randomly selected from the population. We administered this instrument to 54 Serve Tri-Cities alums and received 17 responses, for a response rate of 31%. Since these projects are not intended to provide data from a quasi-experimental inquiry, the attribution of effect is built into the questionnaire items. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency.

Our evaluation produced findings, which capture the primary discoveries from the data. The most salient of the findings are described in the following narrative.

Findings

Finding #1: The Art of Patience

Key Insight: This key skill affects all aspects of Corps Member development.

Patience is a skill that arcs through the entirety of Corps Member development. It doesn't matter if the Member is experienced or inexperienced, young or old, rich, poor, you name it. This key skill affects everything. But patience is more than just a skill; it is an art form.

The data collected pointed to a correlation that patience grew and increased while handling problems in the moment. 78% of the Corps Members who responded to our quantitative survey indicated that handling a difficult situation when it occurred, ranging from a problematic child, working on reporting, or connecting with people of different backgrounds, helped them learn new patience-related skills. Of the Corps Members interviewed, most said they would use these new skills in various aspects of their lives after their term of service. As one Member said, “I plan to use my newfound skills with patience with my own children at home. After seeing how it worked with [teacher]’s kids, I am eager to use them at home.”

Three common skills in relation to developing patience presented themselves when combing the data: becoming more serious, gaining new knowledge about technology, and learning original tutoring techniques. All of the Members we interviewed indicated that they learned two or more of these skills during their term or terms of service. As members gained proficiency in these areas, they morphed from just skills into more of an art form.

To begin with, a majority of Corps Members said they learned how to be more serious. Working in national service can be both vexing and stressful, so humor becomes a common bond amongst teammates. The problem that can arise is that some Members don’t know when it is appropriate to joke around or whom they can share a humorous moment with. Being patient and waiting to “read the room” helped those Members learn when it was okay to indulge in a mirthful moment. The most common time and place that Members tested and formed these skills was during Team Days with their fellow Corps Members. This a carefully constructed training and resource sharing time where Members meet with their peers at least twice a month.

The next skill reported by several Corps Members was gaining new knowledge about technology. All of the Members that indicated learning patience from technology centered their experience on

required reporting like timesheets and monthly reports. They all learned a variety of skills from Word and Excel-based functions, as well as some basic technology skills like checking email on a phone or etiquette on how (and what) a carbon copy email was for. The data showed that age was not a factor, either. Half of the newly minted techno gurus were 25 and under while the other half were 65 and older.

Finally, the most common shared skill we heard about in our interviews related to being patient was learning original tutoring techniques. All of the Corps Members we interviewed indicated learning new tutoring techniques that were not covered during Pre-Service Training, Host Site training, mid-year training, or during bi-monthly Team Day training. The new skills ran the gamut of soft and hard skills. They included matching the energy of children and slowly bringing the energy down; how to quickly repurpose a lesson into something that hit the same key ideas but in a different way; how to come up with games that reinforce the main lesson on the fly; and where to find and make word searches. Most of these skills were unique to the Member and not readily found in common training tools.

Significance

The implication was being able to see how patience affects everyone. Patience is key for Corps Members because it helps them handle difficult and challenging moments of service. This includes working with other teammates as well as with the clients they are serving. It is also important in family life and other social settings because patience helps dissolve stressful situations. Members noticed that when they were not patient the desired results were often not achieved. It didn't matter if it was with a child, adult, teammate, or someone else; without patience the desired end result was rarely attained. Members interviewed stated that they are more patient with family now as a result of being in the program. Members

said they are more patient with other adults like teachers. Also, Members indicated that while they themselves might not have struggled with technology they were more sensitive to others that struggled. This matters to currently serving Members because they understand what their fellow Corps Members are going through, as they all have a shared experience of serving. In the future, it helps people have the skills and experience needed to find common ground when in a challenging situation.

Possible Responses

- A retool of our pre/post survey now includes questions on patience and how it affects Corps Members. This will be implemented during Service Year 2019-20.

Finding #2: Finding Who You Are

Key Insight: Confidence reveals who you are and sharpens who you become.

Throughout our interviews, Corps Members reported that their confidence grew during their program year. This includes doing activities they normally avoided such as calling people on the phone, trying new things, and being more outgoing. The data suggest that this was due to being present in the moment, as a majority of Members reported growth in confidence came from paying attention to and being present in the moment.

As confidence grew, it helped reveal and sharpen whom the Corps Members really were. The two most common ways that members described developing confidence were gaining the ability to face one's fears (in all of the Members that reported confidence boosts) and be able to own up to mistakes (in half of the Members that reported confidence boosts). Those Members also all reported that the confidence they gained in the program helped them both personally and professionally.

Significance

This was fairly important because Members stated they felt comfortable enough to face their fears here in the program. It was encouraging to see that as confidence grew, people would get more experience and be more present because they were trying new things that they never would have before. Members felt safe enough to own their mistakes and face the music, the consequences, in order to grow. Building confidence also built members up in order to ask for feedback to promote self-improvement. Facing fears and seeking feedback is a normal part of the working world. The confidence boost helps them do better while they are serving. In the long run, it will serve them well because they will have experienced this kind of trial before and be able to draw from it.

Possible Responses

It is clear that more opportunities for self-improvement projects that are Member-led will help. Project ideas range from Member-led Family Involvement Nights, Leadership Connection Projects in the community, and safety events. This will help focus on increasing self-confidence.

Finding #3: I Matter.

Key Insight: Being valued creates self-worth, fosters recognition, and leads to having a place in life.

Another key finding was that Members discovered that they matter. When a Member was valued, it created self-worth, nurtured recognition inside the Member, and helped them figure out what they really wanted to do. This was reported by a vast majority of Corps Members on our interviews.

In Corps Member interviews, they stated that people are nice to them with simple acts like saying hello or asking how they are doing. Corps Members stated that people treat them differently

in good ways such as giving them challenging students or tasks to complete, help when asked, or are patient when they need help. A majority of Corps Member also stated that children trust them. They reported children confiding difficult home life situations to them, kids talking to them about popular topics they liked, and coming to the Member over other adults when trouble arose.

The most common method that grew a Member's self-worth was via recognition. All Corps Members stated that they felt valued when they received an award or reward from their Host Site, heard feedback or compliments from teammates or Program Staff, and when people noticed something they were doing. This generally led to improvement in Members, whether that was the goal of the recognition effort or not.

Significance

The data collected suggest that being recognized was important in growing self-worth. Whether it was for tasks Members completed or actually being noticed for improving kids, Members thought they mattered. One member said when they executed a lesson plan, the teacher liked it so much they asked if they could use that plan in the future. This wove the Member deeper into the fabric of their school and grew their self-worth. We were encouraged that all Corps Members said they want to work in places where the work is worthwhile. They don't want to flip burgers or go into retail but would rather be in a work environment where the output is for the improvement of others because it helps them grow as a human being.

Possible Responses

Be more intentional when it comes to recognizing Corps Members. Recognize Members more often and encourage Host Sites to find new ways to recognize Members for their hard work and improvement.

Finding #4: Modality of Relationships

Key Insight: Strong bonds with others are a fabric of teamwork and lead to networking.

Relationships that are results of strong bonds led to increased networking, the data suggest. 89% of Corps Members surveyed indicated that having strong relationships with Host Site staff, Program staff, and/or staff from partnering community agencies led to future job or volunteer opportunities. Between June 2009 and April 2019, 100% of our Host Sites had at least one alum on as staff, 86% of Host Sites had at least 2 alum, and 28% had 3 or more alum on as staff. The bonds of networking bore amazing fruit.

The data had an interesting surprise in store for the program. It was anticipated that the two common traits of Members being flexible and adaptable would show up at some point. What actually happened was that flexibility and adaptability showed up in networking and relationships as opposed to other, expected areas. It was projected that flexibility would probably show up as a precursor to patience and adaptability as a part of finding who you are. Hence the surprise when flexibility and adaptability presented themselves here with relationships and networking. All Corps Members stated that they learned how to be flexible and adaptable because of their strong bonds with others. 78% surveyed said they learned adaptability and flexibility strategies while serving with teammates in contrast to 22% that learned those at their Host Sites. However, 89% of all Members said they learned and developed new flexibility and adaptability strategies while working on community-based projects.

Another interesting piece of information was that a third of Members created fun nicknames to help remember people's names. Two thirds of Members reported being called by a nickname improved their connection to the team. One older Member shared that they finally felt like "one of the team" when they were

christened with a fun nickname. Nicknames being created as a device to remember names challenged our assumptions of why and how they improve teams. They helped drive the familial aspect of team development to a positive end road.

Significance

It is encouraging that members had stronger connections with staff, kids, and their family as the service year went on. It was surprising that the program influenced these relationships at home, not just at work. It was also surprising that the traits of flexibility and adaptability showed up here as opposed to other areas in the evaluation. As mentioned earlier, it was anticipated that these two traits would show up in either how members found who they are or when they learned the art of patience. Clearly, being flexible and adaptable are essential to developing strong bonds and networking. They are traits others value in the education field and are likely correlated with the large percentage of alums being hired on as Host Site staff. Even in other fields, those traits serve Members well in order to help them stand out from other potential hires.

Possible Responses

Being more intentional about seating during Team Day training sessions so that the same people aren't always together. Also, being cognizant about having different pairings all through the year for team projects.

Finding #5: Fostering Life Long Learners or LLLs

Key Insight: Commitment to learning and continuing to learn about yourself and others is a life skill that members are developing.

A common thread that tied all Corps Members together was the commitment to becoming a Life Long Learner or LLL. This life skill includes going to places to gain experience, finding more

acceptance, and a drive to learn even more. This guided Members to specific learning strategies.

First, all Members indicated that they either already were an LLL coming into the program or became an LLL during their time in the program. The first indicator of an LLL was the constant desire to gain experience. The most common manifestations were trying new activities, doing stressful tasks to gain resilience, and trying out various leadership roles.

Second, a majority of Corps Members indicated that they found acceptance with who they are. These Members reported a higher desire to try out leadership roles or do new tasks because they felt comfortable. People accepted them for who they are.

Third, many Members indicated that they had a need to learn more. These desires varied. Whether it was clarity in communication strategies, learning how to become a translator, or learning what is needed to get into grad school, Members had a thirst for more knowledge.

Last, Corps Members indicated that they acquired specific learning strategies. These strategies were specific to each Member, but all were compelled to seek them out. This included using multiple intelligences in presentations or tutoring sessions, new communication methods, and basic technology skills.

Regardless of age or station in life, everyone wanted to learn. Some members were saying they wanted to help people outside their community so that they could learn even more from those cultures and communities. The most voracious, most ravenous LLLs were older members. All of the Members over the age of 65 wanted to learn even more and were eager to pass on their knowledge.

Significance

Being a Life Long Learner is a deliberate choice and lifelong commitment. It is important because being an LLL can enhance the Member's understanding of the world around them by providing

them with more, enhanced opportunities to improve their quality of life. Most understand the professional development aspects of being an LLL. This could be as simple as attending training to get a promotion or as complex as getting an advanced degree to attain a leadership position. It appears in our study that the personal development of being an LLL is a strong driver, too. This sometimes materializes as trying new things or talking to new people from a different background as yours. The reasons may not necessarily be as distinct as professional development since that can improve your employment opportunities. LLLs seem to find that personal development can enable individual growth. LLLs surround themselves with like-minded individuals and try to always take something valuable away from their daily interactions. This is important for our society as it saves us from being apathetic. It's significant to the LLL because it challenges them to take action and improve the world around them.

Possible Responses

Add a pre/post service survey question about what Members want to learn and what Members have learned. This will be implemented during Service Year 2019-20.

Finding #6: Service is Vexing

Key Insight: Not being in control, having the wrong resources, and a lack of training breeds frustration.

Being an AmeriCorps Member is hard work. Being in education is challenging. Combining the 2 can be flat out vexing. When Members were stressed, it led to exasperation. The 3 most common indicators discovered were not being in control, having the wrong resources, and a lack of training.

Every Corps Member starts out with lofty goals. Most achieve them. Some come close. A few don't even finish. There were 3

common feelings that members described in their interviews: happiness, frustration, and contentment. Much of the frustration members experienced came from stress. Half of Corps Members said change caused them stress. Even though the Members that indicated change as a stressor said change is mostly good, they said the speed of changes was too fast. The Program was onboarding a new director, teachers were getting mid-year test results to change tutoring groups around, and a new Corps Member was brought on all in the same 3-week time period. While these were mostly good changes, they were too fast and led to frustration amongst the team.

Corps Members said inconsistent planning methods led to increased stress. Some reported frustration with Member Project Leads, some reported frustration with fellow teammates, and others reported frustration with host site or program staff in regard to planning methods. Members also indicated their stress was due to a lack of clarity or lack of follow through. Others revealed that it was due to items being done differently than they expected. When the wrong players are in the wrong places or the incorrect resources are deployed, it led to stress and increased frustration.

The final cause of frustration was from a lack of training. While not necessarily being used incorrectly or improperly, many Corps Members responded that they experienced frustration when they were not being used in the best ways. Host Site Supervisors were trained in proper use. They also participated in the first phase of Project Impact, a study about our program, which helped us identify indicators of success, growth, and improvement. However, teachers were given little to no training on how to properly use AmeriCorps Members. All Members of the program reported this.

Significance

This was noteworthy to the program because even after previous training and research, some sites still failed to utilize members correctly. When Members are in the wrong place or being used

ineffectively, it bred frustration. This can impact Member productivity, success in our clients, and lead to Members leaving the program. Conversely, it was encouraging that members felt comfortable enough to share what frustrated them. This ability to vent with Program or Host Site Staff led to realignment of Member Goals in 100% of the Members that took advantage of it. It is important to have Members focused on their tutoring goals of improving the attitudes, behaviors, skills, and confidence of the clients they are serving. This leads to the children improving in math and reading as well as the Host Site wanting more Corps Members in the future.

Possible Responses

Improve training in the area of organization. Add training about handling change. Also, we could be more intentional about walking members through change as it is happening. Finally, bring back our Teacher Packets. These packets contained a program overview, Member duties, prohibited activities, and other pertinent information a teacher would need.

Finding #7: The (Dis)Comfort Zone Nodes

Key Insight: Seemingly unrelated nodes of the comfort zone lead to being able to pop your own bubble to try new things.

Fascinatingly, the data present a series of nodes all related to being comfortable. They blipped in and out of all Members' terms in some capacity. The curious part was when the entire group of Members reported they got to those nodes by being uncomfortable. Whether it was from trying new things, getting affirmation of career choices, or being more open, the new nodes of comfort came from discomfort.

For example, every single Corps Member reported trying out new things. Members said that trying new roles such as a special

project lead (internally known as the Single Point Of Accountability or SPOA), facilitator, having to lead special events like MLK Day, or legacy projects, got them out of their comfort zone. Additionally, all Members reported that this helped them find a role or task they enjoy doing now.

Another example was affirmation of career choices. Members reported a confirmation of their previous career leaning or discovering their career path during their term or terms of service. A vast majority of members stated that working in the education field was their desired path. Three Members reported wanting to be teachers, two reported that they discovered that they really do enjoy working with children, and two wanted to become paraeducators. One Member, in particular, started out not seeing themselves as a teacher. After two terms of service, they discovered they want to be one because of those little moments with a child when the lights go off and they get a hard concept. It made all the hard moments melt away.

The last example is that Members reported being more open to new and different types of people, situations, team roles, and other avenues of interaction. By interacting with new and different people from various backgrounds and cultures, Members reported being more open to different values. When trying new things by putting themselves in new or different situations, Members reported being more open to new stations in life. Members also reported that volunteering for various leadership roles on team projects led them to be more open to different ways of doing tasks.

Significance

Again, Members stated trying new roles such as SPOA, facilitator, having to lead events, or legacy projects got them out of their comfort zone. This is substantial to the Corps Member's experience. It often refined and sharpened them like a welding hammer to an iron tool. Also, not really having choice and being required to get

out of their comfort zone made it easier knowing that everyone will have to at some point. It was encouraging that Members use their service year to affirm whether they want to work in education or not. Knowing where you are going in the next phase of your journey is important for two reasons. First, it can be very expensive if you pay for school and training only to find out you are not cut out for it. That is time and money you're not getting back. Second, having a goal and the experience of doing something you like helps most people focus on the task at hand. Having a set career path often motivates.

Possible Responses

Focus on creating pathways to education for Members by creating a handbook for future Para educators and teachers that were in the program. This could be incorporated into Life After AmeriCorps as a new, required presentation subject.

Finding #8: The Path of a Choice Theorist

Key Insight: Glasser's Choice Theory is unpacked and unloaded with the power of Love & Logic.

Glasser's Choice Theory is generally described as five genetically driven needs: survival, love and belonging, freedom, fun, and power. It is a teaching methodology our program has used for over 25 years. While it sounds simple, it is a challenging concept to unpack even for the best psychology students. It was hard to get Members to understand and utilize Choice Theory in their lives and classes.

About 15 years into our existence, we started a transition to Love & Logic, a more concise version of Choice Theory. The formula is a teaching and parenting model that help adults learn how to reel in their emotions when disciplining children, and instead use love and empathy to teach consequences, establish boundaries and build healthy adult-child relationships. We believed it was a

concise and clear way of presenting the power of Choice Theory to our Members. We never imagined we would be creating and sending out Choice Theorists into the world to make it a more vibrant place.

Every single Corps Member reported, some lovingly and a few begrudgingly, that Love & Logic works. Choices are powerful. When power is shared between the adult and a child, you are creating deposits into a bank account to use later. When children get to choose between two things you want them to do (i.e. sit by the adult and read quietly or sit by your friend and read quietly), they feel in control. They feel loved. They get some power and freedom. The child ultimately learns how to survive in the world. All of that are basic tenants of Choice Theory.

When choices were not given, the kids don't listen or do what's expected. Members reported this challenge. When choices were not employed, kids talked back or were generally disrespectful. This challenge was experienced by all Members. When Members reverted back to using Love & Logic, a majority reported better-behaved children within 1-2 sessions and all Members reported that their children re-aligned within 3-5 sessions. The act of giving little choices balanced the power dynamic between the child and adult.

Significance

The significance of the data collected was that Members were using Love & Logic both in school and at home. Every single Member eventually used it in some capacity despite many reporting initial resistance or hesitation in using it. At home, Members reported happier households and calmer nerves when they began using it. Some Members even used it with their spouses. They all reported happier relationships because of this! It was encouraging that members were experimenting with more elements of Choice Theory via Love & Logic. Never in a million years would we have thought to use it in this manner.

Possible Responses

This could be an area we use to provide more actual, hands-on learning. More hands-on training in the form of roleplays could be implemented. Perhaps using real children who are not coached. This would help address classroom management issues that arise during the course of a service year.

Conclusion

Insights Into Impact

Our 8 initial findings suggest that we are having the impact we intend to have on our Corps Members. While both in the program and after graduating, Members are deeply engaged in the cause. This surfaced in Finding #2 (Finding Who You Are) and Finding #3 (I Matter). Members are finding or refining who they are in order to make our community a more vibrant place. In fact, our data suggest that being an AmeriCorps member helps galvanize a lifelong commitment to serving others. This is important in growing a deep engagement and spirit of service in our community.

The second impact we looked at was that Members lean into their own growth and development. This is clearly happening as referenced in Finding #1 (The Art of Patience), Finding #4 (Modality of Relationships), Finding #6 (Service is Vexing), and Finding #7 (The [Dis]Comfort Zone Nodes). Members are recognizing they have the ability to positively influence others, creating opportunities for future jobs, engaged in civic life and participate in various facets of personal and professional life. This leads them to developing a personal and professional network, developing empathy for the community, and help them transition to being able to do things on their own.

Finally, Members become change agents. This impact might be the biggest of all three. Data found in Finding #5 (Fostering Life Long Learners or LLLs) and Finding #8 (The Path of a Choice Theorist) suggest this. The goal of the program is that when Members

are aware of resources for personal and project development and they increase appreciation of leadership developmental stages and adapting to the situation, they lead by example. The hope is that when Members calmly persevere, improve, and develop strong relationships that they believe in their ability to effect change to become visionary leaders.

Steps Forward

Most of our path onward into the future will be set around strengthening our pre and post survey in order to better reflect the impact our Members have had during their service year. This will also help them reflect and analyze how they can use what they just learned. We want them to leave with a plan.

It would be prudent, however, to address and better recognize when our Members do something amazing. There are truly fantastic stories that get lost in the busy service year. This needs to be rectified.

Lastly, it will be important help create an easier path for our Members to work in the Pasco School District. It should be paramount that when they graduate, those that are interested and driven find jobs in the district. They gave so much during their service year and have a connection with the community; it would be a shame to squander that opportunity. They are our future educators.

Opportunities for Future Evaluation

This was part 2 of 3 in regard to our evaluation goal. Our first project was designed to analyze the creators of our environment (the Host Sites) impact on our Corps Members. This segment was designed to analyze the impact on our Corps Members in the world of tutoring children. The final stage of this study will be evaluating our clients, the children, via teachers about how Corps Members affect and influence their lives. We are looking forward to seeing the fruit of our Corps Members' wonderful labor in our next evaluation report.



Kitsap Community Resources

KCR-AmeriCorps

Clay Blackwood

Catherine Joyce

Georgene Lenon

Organization and Program Overview

Kitsap Community Resources was established in 1965 as Kitsap Community Action Program (KCAP). It was authorized through passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, in conjunction with President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" legislation.

As a result of Johnson's directive to end poverty, community action agencies were formed and charged with the task of ending poverty through strategies designed by local communities.

KCR was born of this bold, creative movement where for the first time in history a nation seriously attempted to end poverty. Our mission, vision and core values form the foundation of the work KCR does to impact poverty in Kitsap County.

KCR-AmeriCorps serves as one of many of the divisions within Kitsap Community Resources. Utilizing a 20 fulltime member AmeriCorps program, we use an intermediary model for members who will tutor/mentor youth, facilitate life and job readiness skills classes, provide homeless and housing assistance, and provide

conservation education and service to increase knowledge and see growth of environmentally-conscious practices within the communities in Kitsap County.

To achieve these goals for our community, we focus on developing our AmeriCorps members. As a result of our program, we intend to achieve these impacts for AmeriCorps members:

- **Impact #1: AmeriCorps Members make and honor the commitment necessary to be a successful AmeriCorps member.** Members learn how to value the commitments they make and the importance of living up to that commitment, to fully finish the requirements and gain professional experiences, confidence, a network of professionals, and financial stability to assist them in further growth
- **Impact #2: AmeriCorps Members cultivate stability through the development of life skills.** Members learn planning and transition successfully into the workforce and see the potential for success.
- **Impact #3: AmeriCorps Members develop resiliency and emotional stability.** AmeriCorps Members learn to manage stress and do self-care; build inner strength, stability, and be resilient; understand how to self-regulate their emotions.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact the KCR-AmeriCorps program and its leadership is having on the AmeriCorps Members entering and serving for an 11-month service term. To understand this, we explored two broad evaluation questions:

1. What kind and quality of impact are we having on our AmeriCorps Members who in turn serve in the community to help others with needs?

2. What aspects of our program are causing this impact?

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented a mixed methods outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, (c) identified themes and findings, and (d) considered the implications to those findings for program improvement and innovation.

This project began by identifying and clarifying the intended impact of KCR-AmeriCorps on its AmeriCorps Members, their service and success in their service. Once the ideas of impact had been developed, we used the Heart Triangle™ model to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact on the mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in our AmeriCorps Members. We used these indicators to design a qualitative interview protocol and a quantitative questionnaire to evaluate progress toward achieving our intended impact.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to gain data about the structural, qualitative changes resulting from our program. We used a purposeful stratified sampling technique to select a representative sample from the population we serve. The number of current program participants was 18. We delimited the population for this research by focusing on current AmeriCorps members, recent alumni, as well as AmeriCorps alumni members still connect to our community that served as much as 10 years ago. Our sample size was 12, drawn from the following strata of our population:

- Current AmeriCorps Members
- Recent Alumni that have completed at least a year of service. Some with great transitions into careers, and others still trying to find their way.

- Past Alumni that are still working in the community and connect to the KCR-AmeriCorps Program, as host sites, parents of current members and community leaders.

Our interview team consisted of Clay Blackwood, the AmeriCorps Manager, Catherine Joyce, and Georgene Lenon. We convened one-on-one interviews lasting from between 45 minutes and one hour in length and collected interview data.

We then analyzed the data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. Each interviewer implemented the first three phases of thematic analysis (becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes) for each interview. Together, we developed common themes from the entire data corpus identifying the overarching and inter-interview themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the collective insights and discoveries. We mapped these themes visually and examined the dynamics among the themes, causes and catalysts of the themes, new or surprising insights related to the themes, and relationships between the themes that were revealed in the data. We then determined the most significant and meaningful discoveries and brought them forward as findings to be described in the final phase of thematic analysis, this report.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We administered this instrument to 48 current AmeriCorps members, recent alumni, as well as AmeriCorps alumni members still connected to our community that served as much as 10 years ago and had a response of 25, a 52% response rate. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency. We identified key insights, patterns, and gaps within the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings. The most

significant insights from the quantitative data are described in the following narrative.

Findings

Finding 1: I Can

Key Insight: Confidence has been increased through the members' service experience in AmeriCorps.

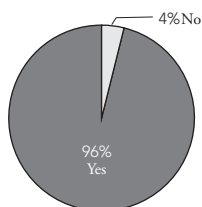
Increased confidence was one of our top findings for our AmeriCorps Members. We heard throughout our interviews that as the members gain confidence in themselves, their ability to help others and serve in a capacity that they had never encountered before also increases. This helps to keep the members focusing on the positive outcomes and the changes they are making in their community and, ultimately, within themselves. One participant said about AmeriCorps that it “helped to gain confidence in me for life challenges.” By developing confidence, members not only serve with a great passion but deliver the needed service with that same passion.

When looking at some of the definitions of confidence like “being certain of your abilities,” “or having trust in,” our interviews helped us with identifying that many Members have lacked confidence in their own abilities. Our data show that the AmeriCorps program has allowed for that confidence to grow. For example, one participant said they were “becoming more empowered (outspoken),” and “developed better confidence focusing on getting the job done.” Another said, “I am stronger than I thought possible, emotionally, mentally, and physically.” While the data revealed confidence to be an area of major growth for members, it also is apparent that this needs to be an ongoing focus for AmeriCorps Member development to help members be the best they can be, personally and professionally.

Our quantitative data also confirm that AmeriCorps Member confidence has increased through service in the KCR-AmeriCorps program. 96% of members responded “yes” to the question “Have

your experiences through your AmeriCorps program, training and service projects boosted your confidence in being able to handle adversity?” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Have your experiences through your AmeriCorps program, training and service projects boosted your confidence in being able to handle adversity?



Significance

This finding is important because we now know that we need to continue to have a focused effort on building confidence in our members, so they are prepared to go out and provide the service for their position and beyond. We need to provide training in the areas where they may lack the knowledge, which will help to increase confidence in those areas rather than frustration about not having the knowledge that may undermine their confidence. We need to ensure that we find the gaps in the training to help us minimize member retention issues, which could be due to lack of confidence. This can possibly help to mitigate when members are considering leaving the program and help them to push through the challenges they may be having.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- Need to collect information from members who did not complete the program to better
- understand why they may have left
- Better educate members and program staff on self-care and how it can relate to confidence

Experiments

- Create way to give interventions for challenges to lack of confidence, so it creates change
- Allow for more peer to peer mentoring with returning members helping the new members

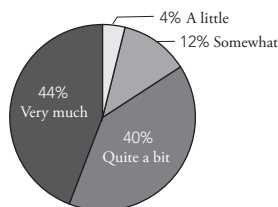
Finding 2: Reaching for the Sun

Key Insight: AmeriCorps members seek to cultivate themselves as they cultivate the world around them.

Throughout our interviews we heard that a member's ability to serve and maintain a high level of confidence and resiliency can lead them to reach high and succeed with no major hurdles. In some cases though, members struggle to reach their goals and sometimes fall without the ability to get back up. We heard that many AmeriCorps members become a part of the program while in the middle of life transitions. These life transitions can be highly challenging for some members, but not for others. Our interviews revealed that no matter what challenges they face, their participation in AmeriCorps leads them on a path of self-discovery. Ultimately, their participation can lead and/or breed the development of resiliency and emotional stability as their experiences help build their confidence.

The quantitative data show that when asked how much more resilient members are from their service, 84% of members reported that they are "quite a bit" or "very much" more resilient (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. How much more resilient are you from your service?



Members looked at the opportunity to serve in AmeriCorps very differently. The data revealed that one member was just “wanting a new experience” while another was “looking to get into social work,” which this opportunity allowed them to gain some practical experience with. They all had compelling reasons to seek out new opportunities. Whether the reason to serve was for gaining employable skills, finding a passion, helping to pay off a student loan or earning money to go to school, many found a path through their service in the program and became better able to adapt to changes in their lives along the way.

There has been proven personal growth in confidence, resiliency and adaptability to change. The data revealed that most felt that service is rewarding and no matter their reason for serving, they felt they made a difference.

Significance

Overwhelmingly there has been a lot of positive feedback on the AmeriCorps experience and very little negative feedback. This challenged our assumption because there is a feeling that if we had a larger data set, that we would have seen more negative feedback. It is important to understand why members are serving so we can help cultivate their motivations and growth as a member. With a better understanding of the “Why?” members serve, we can help to tailor training to members to allow for better prosperity for members in their service year. This will also help members move through the challenging moments by increasing their resiliency and ability to handle change to reach their goals, personally and professionally.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- Additional ways to allow for more check-ins or shared time (Group sessions)

- There is a general self-defeating attitude at times, (a culture undertone that needs addressing)

Experiments

- Peer to peer support/mentoring
- Create a raw journal and publish it, no edits
- Diversify guest speakers beyond the program
- Develop an environment of honest and raw feedback

Finding 3: The Sleeping Giant

Key Insight: Although members described significant personal and professional growth in their interviews, they did not attribute this growth to the program.

There is a slight lack of awareness of the personal growth the members experience in the program causing distortion in their perception of the value of the program. For example in our interviews, one participant said, “I already had most of these skills, so the training was not that useful.” While another said, “These are things I already know.” Statements like these came up frequently, but interestingly enough, most program participants and alumni also expressed, that through their AmeriCorps service experiences and perceptions, that they did in fact have ample amounts of personal growth and built confidence. There is a lukewarm perception and undertone that the program is not a real catalyst of change for some members. This has brought to our attention the major need to address this perception, by potentially implementing self-awareness practices or new cutting-edge ways of training to help enhance the “emotional” value of the program to its members.

The data from our quantitative survey also show that members are growing in significant ways. In response to the question “Please list the three most significant ways you’ve grown through your AmeriCorps experience,” members stated the following areas of growth from their service:

“I have grown in creating boundaries, self-respect, dignity.”

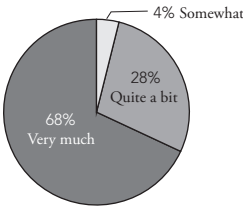
“Able to handle stress, able to communicate with staff and peers.”

“Volunteering, more caring, stronger work ethic.”

“I have become more patient, I learned that I’m capable of more than I thought I was, I realized I had skills that I never knew I had before.”

Increasing someone’s self-awareness is challenging and takes a member that is willing to learn and grow. Fortunately, members revealed that they value growth and that their service has increased the value that they place on it. Responses to the question, “How much has your service through AmeriCorps increased how much you value personal growth?” show that 96% of members had “quite a bit” or “very much” increase in the degree to which they value personal growth as a result of their service (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. How much has your service through AmeriCorps increased how much you value personal growth?



Significance

It was extremely important that we became aware of this factor so that we can work to build strategies to assist members with getting the most out of their service. The most surprising aspect of this is the contradictory nature of each interview; even though a member expressed several points of growth they personally experienced, they may have had a sour taste at times from their service that overshadowed this growth.

Our interview process made it clear that one conversation is just not enough to ensure that potential members have an understanding of the big picture what AmeriCorps is and how it can affect a person's growth. Understanding that growth comes in many ways, members can learn to look beyond what they might assume are the growth areas or "what they already know" and look to the unknown areas for growth they hadn't thought of before. It is important to ensure members know that every moment is a learning moment, even when they feel that they already know something. It is what you learn after you know it all that is important.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- Allow the team to lead more in of service projects/ meetings to create a vested interest
- Utilize current members more in the recruiting process to better engage potential members

Experiments

- Alumni make videos for each other for the new potential members to see prior to service
- Incremental Intervention (potentially based on research)
- More media based interfaces
- Peer system of support

Finding 4: Partners in Progress

Key Insight: Building a community of relationships during the service year can have a lasting impact on the success of a member in the program as well as creating opportunity or employability outside of AmeriCorps.

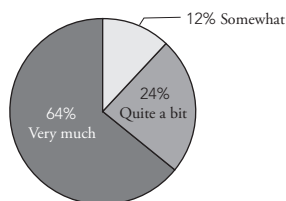
Members can build relationships with external and internal partners that not only help them grow professionally but also help them

become supported personally. It is vital that members learn about the networks that can be created within a service term and build upon them as much as they can. In our interviews, we discovered that when members build strong relationships, doors open up for them. One member stated she “was just looking for a job and found one in tutoring.” Another found a job when she “was looking for somewhere to serve my community while working my passion.”

Creating a large support network also allows for greater feedback and guidance for completing things properly. Data did also reveal that for others networking was vital to their success. One participant said, “Building relationships during service helped me to be employable and allowed for direct move into workforce development and into my current job.” Another stated, “I liked seeing what other organizations are doing in the community. Great seeing where I can get involved.”

In our quantitative survey, when asked the question “How much has your AmeriCorps service helped to increase your professional networks?” 100% of members reported that their network had increased (see Figure 4). This shows that members felt strongly that the growth in their network and relationships built were created because they served in AmeriCorps.

Figure 4. How much has your AmeriCorps service helped to increase your professional networks?



Our data also revealed that some members do not fully understand how to network or create networks during their service. Some did not even perceive the AmeriCorps program manager as a resource. How members define resources also varies. This shows an area for improvement in the program.

Significance

For members to truly grow and move from the AmeriCorps program and into being gainfully employed, it is in their best interest to create a network. To do this, members need to understand the full importance of cultivating their network and how each and every person they may come across helps to build their network. If a network is not cultivated or that network is met with possible distrust or negativity, then it can be possibly damaging on the members for future endeavors. Being able to lay out and train members on how to use their connections, new and old, will help members develop meaningful, supportive networks and solidify the value that the program has to them and their colleagues.

With utilizing those around us, we can strengthen everything that is trying to be accomplished for all parties and that creates lasting impact.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- Ensure that training goes into the full importance of networking to rid false perceptions
- Make a great effort to point out all networking opportunities throughout a service year
- Create a culture of connection and sharing by allowing more sharing in team meetings

Experiments

- Exhibit individuals who experience success with strong networks
- Run networking events to practice the habit of creating partners in progress
- Research networking topics; see if we can bring a new and fresh innovative approach
- Start exercise in team meetings on what is “good to know and what is need to know”

Finding 5: Getting Things Done

Key Insight: Members are energized by service that has tangible and meaningful impact in the community.

AmeriCorps members expressed personal satisfaction in having a positive impact on the community and themselves through their work at their host sites, network of community partners and service projects. One alumnus described AmeriCorps as the “Urgent Care of the community.” Even though a perception of “nothing new” was prevalent there was a deep commitment to the work and a real pride in the positive results the service had on the community.

Members are seeing the value of community service whether they want to stay in the field they serve in or not. There was an overwhelming positive response towards the ability to help others and the rewards that type of service brings. One member stated, “The three things I have accomplished in my AmeriCorps service that I am most proud of are helping students pass their classes, meeting new people and helping my community overall.” While another stated, “I am helping people move forward in life, filling needs in our community.”

When asked the question, “What three things have you accomplished in your AmeriCorps service that you are most proud of?” the members and alums shared,

“Making a difference in children’s lives and improve dedication to my commitments”.

“Overcoming barriers, giving back to the community and building resilience.”

“Committing and following with service, helping others find resources they need, and helping those in my community through my host site.

Significance

The impact of giving back and getting things done is a critical piece to the service model. Not only is it what we are supposed to be doing while serving, but it is a major motivator for the members that helps them get through their service year. Without the feeling of accomplishing something or making an impact on people's lives, the service can be hard on many members and can result in retention challenges. Keeping engaged in the members experience is at the top of the priority list for our AmeriCorps program.

Getting things done is also one of the most impactful gifts we can give our community and the members see the impact that they are making, small and large. The challenging component of giving back is trying to keep people engaged to want to give their best effort when giving back. Making service appealing in our current economy and social environment creates some challenges, particularly for recruiting. Keeping the beauty and necessity of service alive by showing the meaningful nature of impact is what we hope to continue to build with in the KCR-AmeriCorps experience.

Possible Responses

Adjustments

- Need for better before and after progress data through member feedback, pictures, etc...
- Follow up with host sites, give more positive encouragement, host sites send positive feedback
- Get more community feedback on the impact taking place
- Enhance the information shared for what impacts are being made so members can be proud

Experiments

- Creating an impact form for projects served at to gather how it has helped their program.

- Create feedback online form for host sites and community to give feedback about service or members impacting our community

Conclusion

Insights Into Impact

Overwhelmingly, even with the positive experiences, members and alumni expressed some disconnect between the research data recorded changes and their own perceived personal change. Interestingly the increases in confidence, growth in resilience, new skills and learning how to make connections or making new connections was not always perceived as personal growth or change. Members did learn how to value the commitments they make and the importance of living up to that commitment, to fully finish the requirements and gain professional experiences, confidence, a network of professionals, and financial stability to assist them in further growth. Impact 1 encompasses all of our findings in one way or another. We did not feel that members would have made the same types of meaningful connections and changes outside of the program. The most encouraging thing about this impact and our findings is that we are now aware of the most detrimental attitude towards the program.

Being able to identify this problem was a beautiful thing to see in the testimony of members interviewed. The assumption was that members were more self-aware than they are. We realize we need to create a culture of mindfulness and bring self-awareness more to the forefront. Being accepted into the AmeriCorps program has ingrained requirements of service at the particular site hired for, as well as the overall program needs. These requirements may push the member outside of their comfort zone, and requirements will still need to be addressed by the member. In the program currently we often talk about learning to comfortable being uncomfortable. If we can do this then it can lead to a quick mentality switch for a member because of the required responsibilities and being

forced to quickly develop resiliency and emotional stability. In a forced situation AmeriCorps Members can develop resiliency and emotional stability with the proper training, support and networks to help them along.

As a program we need to get rid of the assumption of people understanding what they are getting into when signing up for AmeriCorps. In the findings we have found that members can be successful with the added support and if that support is positive, confidence will be gained. Gained confidence leads to better relationship building or networking and allow for further growth. As a program we have to utilize some new strategies for fostering member's growth, confidence, resiliency, and having a positive AmeriCorps experience. We can do these things like members taking more lead on trainings or organizing service projects. By being strategic in our trainings we can ensure full understanding of what an AmeriCorps service year can look like. By helping and teaching members how to create their network. By showing the impacts of their service and how those impacts also are changing them.

All of the learned skills and training for a members during a service year helps to create members that can be stable because they have development or enhanced their life skills. I CAN, is where is needs to start, and from there you can keep moving forward to Get Thing Done for our community.

Currently we have some great trainings in place to help members be successful, but as we continue to move forward it will take effort to implement some of the new ideas and possible solutions to our challenges. Member will need to be engaged to foster that change as well, as they will be a big part of taking on some of those roles as leaders.

Steps Forward

As we look at our steps forward we find that many of the items that we are looking at have some pieces that already are in the works

or just need some enhancing. Our priority is to enhance our overall structure from the recruiting members to how we train member at the beginning of the service year, also includes monthly trainings throughout the service year. All other trainings or member assistance outside of planned training schedule/orientations will be determined by the program and member needs. When it comes to recruiting, utilizing the current members as well as host sites to assist in recruiting will add a greater level of understanding of what AmeriCorps is and what it is not. Increasing the knowledge base of potential members will increase the potential of a member that doesn't come into the program with no idea on how AmeriCorps operates.

Other areas that we have been working on but want to continue to enhance in the member experience is their ability to help drive the training and meetings to add a greater buy in to the program, which can also create a culture of inclusiveness. Creating a culture of inclusiveness, and connection by allowing more sharing in team meetings. This will allow each member to give some insight into their service or share the great things their site is doing. I may also allow for resource sharing that might be beneficial to all of our members of clients they serve.

Networking is another area that increased training is needed. This training would be included in the orientation as well as throughout the year, to help members understand what networking looks like as well as what it can do for them. Possibly setting up networking events so members can learn what networking looks like and how creating those connections can impact not only their service, but the their after AmeriCorps experience as well.

The area of self-care also came up in our needs to have continued trainings and opportunities for members to practice self-care skills, as well as reminders to focus on their own self-care. Self-care relates to confidence and this would be an important element for members to have to enhance their AmeriCorps member experience. Offering additional check-in options or other training opportunities may be helpful.

Increased focus on recognition of members or the team for the service they do is another area that needs enhancing. Whether it is encouraging their host sites to make us aware of the awesome things they are accomplishing, or community organization giving the program more feedback of what our effort have done to better their organization. This added feedback can help maintain a positive vibe and help sustain members through challenging times.

Even though we have training and general conversation about most of these things fairly consistently, we believe a more structured method may be more appropriate to increase the positive culture of the program. This will in turn increase the member experience resulting in better retention rates of members.

Appendix

Qualitative Interview Protocols

Common Threads Farm

What have your students learned through their experience with Common Threads' gardening and cooking lessons? How have Common Threads' programs changed conversations in your classroom (about food or anything else)? → How have you noticed this changing what kids believe about their abilities?

We're really interested in understanding how Common Threads gardening and cooking programs are impacting kids' socioemotional and academic learning experiences – can you talk to us a little about anything you're noticing? What connections do you see students making that they might not have made before cooking and gardening with Common Threads? → How do you see your students' attitudes about health and/or learning shifting as a result? How are yours shifting?

What changes in food choices are you observing because of your students' experience with Common Threads? What are the barriers

that are keeping your students from making healthy food choices? → How have you seen your students approaching food/food choices differently? What evidence do you see that your students are loving healthy food? How is this affecting your food choices?

What new skills have your students been practicing or using as a result of their classes with Common Threads? → How are you seeing their habits (as eaters or as learners) changing?

What are you noticing about how Common Threads programs are affecting the way students are feeling about learning? (Joyfulness, cooperation, fun, enthusiasm for learning, etc.) → How is this affecting the way you're feeling about teaching and learning? How is this impacting the culture of your classroom?

Are you hearing or observing anything about how gardening and cooking are having an impact on families and within the greater school community? → How has this affected the way families are involved in your classroom?

Have you seen kids showing up/sharing themselves differently during cooking/gardening? → How have you seen your students' sense of agency and self-efficacy change as a result of Common Threads classes? In what other ways have you seen them growing as a result of their experience with Common Threads? How is that affecting your teaching practice (or you, as a teacher)?

What emotions have you seen students experiencing most commonly in your classroom since they've been a part of Common Threads classes? → How have you seen them becoming more passionate or curious? How have you become more passionate and curious?

What would you and your kids most miss if Common Threads' cooking and gardening programs went away?

Is there anything else you want to tell us about how your students or you have been affected by gardening and cooking? Is there anything else that would be helpful for us to know (or that you wish we would have asked.)

Cowlitz AmeriCorps Network

What do you consider to be the greatest achievement by the AmeriCorps member this Year? → What changes do you see in your organization as a result of their achievements?

What is the biggest take away from your effort to integrate the AmeriCorps member into your mission? → How has this changed your perspective on your mission delivery?

What has been the most exciting part of hosting an AmeriCorps member? What has inspired you about the member throughout their term? → How has this excitement/inspiration made you more connected to the mission of your organization? How has that same excitement influenced your commitment to providing ongoing service experiences for you personally, your organization, and the community?

What tasks have you struggled with most as an AmeriCorps supervisor? → What needs to grow and develop in your member in order to thrive in your organization? What needs to grow and develop in you in order to thrive as a supervisor?

As a supervisor, what makes you feel most frustrated about supervising and mentoring a member throughout their entire term? → How have you stayed focused and engaged through these challenges of supervisor and mentorship?

What would the AmeriCorps member need to exhibit to be a successful employee of your organization? → How would your member have to transform to be a candidate for employment? How would you as a supervisor need to transform to support the member in this?

For this last question, I'd like you to think ahead a few years... What does your ideal organization look like? What evolution will your organization need to go through to get there? How has having an AmeriCorps member contributed to this evolution?

KCR-AmeriCorps

What essential elements of AmeriCorps service are you more aware of now than you were at the start of your service? → How has this changed how you perceive your prior and future professional commitments?

What steps have you been taking to setting goals and what practices have you implemented in following through with your goals → What changes do you see in yourself as a result of these efforts? What changes do you still want to see that you haven't yet?

What about service feels like something new and fresh to you consistently? What seems to be sucking the life out of you? → How do those affect your passion for the service and time commitment?

What new opportunities have you learned about through your participation in the AmeriCorps Program? What new interests have you discovered? → How has that changed the way you are thinking about your future?

What types of professional relationships have you built during your service? → How has this helped you establish or discover

specialized qualities within you? What important qualities do you still want or need to develop to be highly employable at the end of your service?

What makes you feel most successful and excited in your AmeriCorps service? → How has this formed or influenced what you want your life to be about personally and professionally?

What have you found out about yourself through your AmeriCorps service that has been most meaningful to you? → How is that developing your personal values? How is this influencing who you want to be at this phase of your life?

What are the toughest parts of this service for you to do? → How has this been broadening (or pushing) you to develop in areas of your life that you've needed to overhaul?

What makes you feel prepared for handling random changes and difficult circumstances with confidence? → How has this program helped shape your conviction to navigating through adversity? How has that improved your resiliency? How has that affected your service in a positive or negative way?

Port Angeles School District AmeriCorps

What are the behavior tools that you've noticed the student has learned from working with AmeriCorps? → In what ways has that changed what the student believes about how they contribute to the classroom? How has that changed what you believe?

What has the student learned about setting goals for themselves from working with the AmeriCorps member? What has been confusing or difficult to understand for them? → What have you noticed about how the student is thinking differently about their

ability to meet the goals they have set? How has this changed the way they think about their future?

What have you noticed about changes in the student's understanding of classroom culture since they've been working with AmeriCorps? → How has this influenced their mindset about their academics? How has this influenced your mindset?

What positive changes have you seen in student behavior since they began working with the AmeriCorps member? → How has that change effected the way they approach their education?

What are the classroom behaviors the student is focused on improving with AmeriCorps? What steps have you noticed them taking to improve them? What steps do they still need to take? → How has this focus changed their ability (or helped them) to make positive decisions for themselves? In what ways do they still need to grow to keep making positive choices?

What organizational skills have you seen the student putting into practice since they've been working with AmeriCorps? → How has this shaped the kind of student and person they're becoming?

What have you noticed about the student's emotional responses when they experience roadblocks to progress? How has their response changed since they've been working with AmeriCorps? How does this still need to change? → How is this helping them develop resilience?

What have you observed that makes the student feel comfortable in their classroom? When have you seen the student connected with others in their learning environment? → How has that affected their commitment to better behaviors?

What accomplishments have you seen that the student proud of?
What accomplishments are you proud of? → How has this given them hope for their future? How has this given you hope?

Serve Tri-Cities - AmeriCorps

What are some of the most important lessons you've learned being in the program? → How has this changed the way you see yourself? How has this changed the way you think others view you?

What skills have you needed to learn or improve upon to do this work well? → How has that made you grow as a leader, a person, a family member? How do you still need to grow to be the kind of leader, person and family member you want to be?

What have you learned about yourself while doing this work? In what ways have you been thinking differently than when you started? How has this affected the way you think about approaching difficult situations?

When do you feel excited about your work? When do you feel frustrated? How are you growing your ability to persevere even when you're frustrated? → How have your passions and commitments changed over your term of service?

What do you still struggle with? What do you think will be the most challenging to do when you graduate? How do you see yourself giving back to the program and community? → What has grown in you as a result of being in the program that you think will serve you well in the future?

As a result of your work with STC, what have been some of the most useful resources you have used to accomplish your goals? What are some resources you wish you had used or had access

to? → How has that changed your perspective on how to achieve success?

What have been your most noteworthy accomplishments as a member? → How has that changed your life outside of work?

What have been your fondest moments of serving? → How has that helped you become more committed to developing strong relationships? How has that helped you develop a strong bond with the community?

What have you discovered to be the most common emotions you experience when you are serving? What is discouraging about service to you? Are you patient with others to meet you where you are? Why or why not? → How has your commitment to your own success gotten stronger?

VetCorps

What is the biggest takeaway as a result of being here? What about the second biggest takeaway? → How has that shifted your perspective on your beliefs?

Since being in this program, what have you about yourself that is different from where you started? → How is that evolving the way you think about your future?

What was your knowledge of the program coming in? What new knowledge have you gained that's been most helpful to you? → How has that changed your views on working with veterans?

Since being in the program, what skills have you needed to acquire or improve in yourself to do this work well? → In what ways has that required you to grow as a leader? In what ways to you still need to grow to be the kind of leader you want to be?

While being in this program, what are the toughest parts of this work for you to do? → How has this been stretching you to develop areas in your life that you've needed to work on?

What are the skills that you have incorporated as a result of this program? → How has that impacted the population that you serve? What skills have you learned from this program that have you have applied that have made the most significant impact? → How have these skills affected your personal growth? How have these been applied to in other areas of your life and work?

What has been the most rewarding part of being in this program? → How do those pieces make you feel more connected to your mission and what you do?

Since being in this program, what is most encouraging for frustrating to you that gets in the way of doing what you do? → How do you stay engaged and still embrace your role through those difficult times?

What emotions do you experience the most in this position? → How has that affected your heart for serving veterans over time?

Youth In Service

What have you learned about the communities you're serving with since you've been a part of this program? → How have your views of those communities changed as a result of this?

In what ways are you engaging with these communities? → How has engaging with these communities helping you grow as a leader? As a community member? How do you still want to grow into the community member you want to be?

What has been most inspiring through your service experience?
→ How will this help you stay connected to communities in the future?

What have been the biggest lessons that you learned about yourself this service year? → How has this impacted your self-image and awareness? In what ways does that have meaning for you as you think about your future life beyond AmeriCorps?

What new skills have you acquired or improved upon to keep your service commitments? What are the most challenging aspects of keeping your commitments? → How will you use these new skills beyond AmeriCorps?

What is rewarding about your service commitment? What is discouraging through this experience? → How is this commitment allowed you to be more connected to following your passions in your life? How are you able to keep committed even when you are feeling discouraged?

What have been the biggest lessons that you learned through your service about how you relate to others? → How has this impacted the way you think about your relationships with others, personally and professionally?

Inevitably people make missteps, what have you done when you've experienced this during your service? → How are you applying this insight in other aspects of your life and with others?

What emotions do you experience that hinder your ability to show up fully to service each day? What emotions do you experience that motivate you? → How do you continue to stay inspired for the long run?

Teams from nine AmeriCorps programs from across Washington State came together in 2019 to define their impact, evaluate their impact and use what they discover through evaluation to expand and deepen their impact. These reports represent some of their most compelling insights.

