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Can AmeriCorps Build Communities?

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One of the most ambitious and simultaneously most controversial programs of Bill Clinton’s presidency is AmeriCorps, the national service program authorized in 1993 by the National and Community Service Trust Act. This article presents findings from an examination of the community-building effects of the AmeriCorps program in five communities. We focus our attention on AmeriCorps’ impact on local community-based organizations by examining change in the capacity of the organizations in which AmeriCorps members work and in the degree to which AmeriCorps has fostered interorganizational cooperation to achieve community goals. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and ways to enhance AmeriCorps’ community-building potential.

On September 21, 1993, President Clinton signed into law the National and Community Service Trust Act, whose centerpiece was a new national service initiative: AmeriCorps. Both the scope of this program’s ambitions and the ideologies underpinning them create controversy at the national, state, and local levels. Critics see AmeriCorps as a perversion of volunteerism and an extension of big government into realms previously reserved for private nonprofits. Supporters tend to agree with President Clinton’s vision that national service represents “one of the few remaining remedies for the fragmentation and polarization that threaten our country” (Waldman, 1995, p. 11). This vision finds its rationale in the belief that community building occurs best when “people and their government work at the grass roots in genuine partnership” (Corporation for National Service, 1994, p. 1).

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The design of the AmeriCorps program matches this vision by funneling grant monies through State Community Service Commissions that, in turn, award grants to community-based nonprofit organizations through an annual competitive request for proposal (RFP) process. Local AmeriCorps agencies agree to administer the program by recruiting, selecting, training, and managing young people who commit to work in community service for a small stipend for a period of 1 to 2 years. Implementation of AmeriCorps programs usually occurs through the placement of corps members in local nonprofit organizations scattered throughout local communities. Corps members' daily activities generally follow the objectives and activities of the nonprofits to which they are assigned.

In its Final Rule, the Corporation for National and Community Service (1994) identifies three goals national service programs such as AmeriCorps should achieve:

1. getting things done through direct and demonstrable service,
2. developing the leadership and skills of national service participants, and
3. strengthening communities.

Of the three goals, strengthening communities presents the greatest challenge for evaluation and measurement. Neither the enabling legislation nor the corporation's Final Rule provide clear guidelines to AmeriCorps programs on how they are to go about accomplishing this goal except that it must be through direct acts of service. The remainder of the task has been left to state community service commissions and local AmeriCorps programs to define for themselves.

The national service literature and our field research suggest that AmeriCorps can build communities in three different ways:

1. through the personal and professional development of individual corps members who learn to model a service ethic over time as a result of their personal involvement in direct acts of service;
2. through building the capacity of community-based organizations and fostering partnerships among these organizations to better meet community needs; and
3. through concrete focused service activities within targeted communities such as low-income neighborhoods, inner-city schools, or in communities of people such as children, youth, or the elderly.

We call these approaches to community building the corps approach, the institutional approach, and the community development approach. The findings presented in this article focus primarily on AmeriCorps' potential to build local communities through an institutional approach—one that emphasizes building organizational capacity and interorganizational cooperation to achieve broader community goals.
In the following pages, we review the concepts and theory that underlie an institutional approach to community building. After a brief description of the methodology and data sources used, we present findings from our examination of five AmeriCorps programs conducted between October 1995 and May 1997. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and recommendations of ways to enhance AmeriCorps’ community-building potential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We conceive community building as a collective-action problem. From this perspective, two contending ways to conceive an institutional approach to community building emerge. One approach assumes that strengthening the individual parts of a community strengthens the whole community, whereas the alternative assumes that strengthening the whole strengthens individual parts. From this latter perspective, the behavior of the system as a whole is viewed as the product of the interaction of the parts and not simply the sum of individual organizational actions (Metcalfe, 1978).

STRENGTHENING THE PARTS STRENGTHENS THE WHOLE

Proponents of the first perspective assume that community building occurs through the sum of activities of the value added to each of the existing organizations as a result of AmeriCorps. Increased intraorganizational capacity, according to this view, will eventually add up to a strengthened community. As one partner organization director put it, “If you believe that what [my] organization does makes a difference in the community, then [corps members’ activities in my organization] make a difference too” (personal communication, January 7, 1997).

From this perspective, AmeriCorps program administrators view corps members as added resources for individual organizations to meet their own missions without concern for meeting the needs of the whole community in a comprehensive manner. This approach, with its focus on enhancing intraorganizational capacity, relies more on marketlike arrangements to solve collective-action problems (e.g., contracting, negotiation) than it does on relational arrangements such as face-to-face communication or social norms such as trust and reciprocity (Powell, 1990). The primary inducement for collective action among partner organizations lies in the desire of participating organizations to receive (in return for their cooperation) benefits other than those articulated at the national level, such as added resources to enhance the prospects of their own survival (O’Toole & Montjoy, 1984).

Alter and Hage (1993) characterize collective action of this sort as competitive cooperation among same-sector organizations that cooperate primarily to pool and exchange information. Gray (1996) classifies this type of loose collaboration as appreciative planning. Organizations collaborate to exchange
information primarily to advance a shared vision—in this case, a vision to maintain organizational autonomy. They do not take the next step, however, which requires collaboration to implement that vision or what Gray calls a “collective strategy design” (p. 59). Alter and Hage (1993) assert that this kind of collaboration represents a less sophisticated and potentially less effective means of organizing than collaboratives that deliberately engage in symbiotic cooperation to jointly produce a shared outcome.

Granovetter’s (1973) work on the strength of weak ties, however, suggests that ties of this sort among community members and institutions integrate communities by serving as bridges across different groups of people. Strong ties, he argues, fragment communities because they tend to bring similar types of people together in cliques to the exclusion of other members of a community. This similarity leads to redundant information that only reduces the likelihood of innovation to organize and solve local community problems (Krackhardt, 1992). The key to his argument rests in the degree to which weak ties serve as bridges across different types of community groups. The more local bridges in a community, he writes, the more capable the community is of acting together (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1376). Jacobs (1993) describes this bridging function as the development of “hop-and-skip links” (p. 175) among different types of small groups that enlarge the scope of local public life. These links, she suggests, tend to be haphazard and informal at first, rooted in the ordinary life of local communities. From this perspective, AmeriCorps programs that link organizations together through weak ties have the potential to act as local bridges by bringing together a diverse group of organizations around the shared resources of AmeriCorps members.

STRENGTHENING THE WHOLE STRENGTHENS THE PARTS

An alternative perspective assumes that community building occurs best through the creation of networks of individuals and community-based organizations held together by a vision that accepts but extends beyond individual organizational goals. It assumes collective action occurs specifically through the shared ethos of a community service ethic that acts as the glue holding community-based organizations together in the development of new and innovative partnerships.

From this perspective, collaboration represents a deliberate policy strategy to enhance AmeriCorps’ community-building potential under the assumption that the synergistic benefits of interorganizational cooperation outweigh the costs of that cooperation in terms of loss of autonomy, time spent in planning and coordinating, and threats to individual organizational priorities and missions (Alter & Hage, 1993; Bardach, 1996). Chris Huxham’s (1996) work on the creation of collaborative advantage captures the essence of this approach to community building. Collaboration results in collaborative advantage when “something unusually creative is produced [that] no organization could have
produced on its own and when each organization, through the collaboration, is able to achieve its own objectives better than it could alone" (p. 14).

A growing body of multidisciplinary literature suggests that in an increasingly networked world, forms of organizing that result in collaborative advantage hold a comparative advantage to other forms of organizing (such as markets and hierarchies) in innovation, flexibility, responsiveness, and adaptive capacity in turbulent environments (Alter & Hage, 1993; Hanf & Scharpf, 1978; Kettl, 1996; Milward, 1996; O'Toole, 1997; Radin et al., 1996). Huxham (1996) is quick to assert, however, that because collaboration is by nature voluntary, achieving collaborative advantage requires sufficient levels of trust and commitment among organizational players to overcome the inherent tendency of most collaborative endeavors to succumb to "collaborative inertia" (p. 4).

Collaborative inertia results from the challenges AmeriCorps programs face in their attempts to solve three primary collective action problems. Organizational partners must be able to build credible commitment among themselves, supply themselves with new rules for self-governance, and devise ways to monitor each other's compliance to the new institutional rules (Ostrom, 1990, pp. 42-45). Solving these problems requires close attention to process and is often dependent on a facilitator (convener) capable of guiding organizations toward collaboration (Gray, 1996; Huxham, 1996; Schuman, 1996). Gray (1996) identifies four different types of influence conveners have depending on whether that influence is formal or informal and whether intervention is requested by stakeholders or initiated by the convener. State community service commissions have the potential to play this facilitator role, but as Gray points out, convener influence varies depending on whether stakeholders perceive them as legitimate, trustworthy, credible, or powerful (p. 64). It also depends on the organizational maturity and capacity of state commissions to play such an important role.

Empirical evidence supports the assertion that attention to process is critical for the successful creation of collaborative advantage (Radin et al., 1996; Wechsler & Sanderson, 1995). Analysis of the National Rural Development Partnership Initiative suggests that to solve the three dilemmas posed by Ostrom (1990), stakeholders need to spend adequate time developing personal relationships among themselves, actively build a community of shared interests (by deliberately identifying mutual benefits to cooperation), seek shared values and create a common purpose, develop a strategic plan for collaboration, and regularly reevaluate shared purposes by reflecting on their experiences, achievements, and failures (Wechsler & Sanderson, 1995, pp. 4-10).

These findings suggest that AmeriCorps programs that take an institutional approach to community building may find greater success if they self-consciously seek to identify the mutual interests they gain by having AmeriCorps members working in their individual organizations. A mature, vision-led state community service commission staff capable of facilitating collaboration among the
diverse organizations in AmeriCorps collaboratives increases the likelihood that collaborative advantage may result from the process.

COLLABORATIVE ADVANTAGE AS A FORM OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

AmeriCorps program stakeholders that try to create working collaboratives view the program's community-building potential in terms of its ability to engender new forms of social capital in the communities in which these programs reside. Ostrom (1990) found that individuals who had lived together in a local setting, who regularly communicated with one another, and who had developed shared norms and patterns of reciprocity possessed enough social capital to resolve their collective action problems. The stronger the ties among organizations and the more social capital, the greater the likelihood of collective action. This hypothesis stands in contrast to Granovetter's (1973) strength-of-weak-ties hypothesis. It may be, however, that once the bridging function of weak ties is successfully completed, strong ties are required to keep different groups together.

Smith's (1995b) research on the potential of community coalitions to create social capital suggests that other factors besides strong ties also affect social capital formation in local communities, such as preexisting levels of social capital, adequate resources, and responsive local political institutions. Unresponsive political institutions can easily undermine any collaborative advantage created by coalitions, especially when that advantage results in innovative ideas that require policy change at the local level (Smith, 1995a, 1995b). He also found, however, that in the case of antidrug coalitions, government involvement can, in some cases, actually impede social capital formation (Smith, 1995b, p. 25). In an atmosphere of decreased government spending, increased competition for scarce resources among local community-based organizations, and inconsistent or misguided advice from program officers monitoring coalitions, coalition members may lose faith in the value of collective action for institutional change (Smith, 1995b, p. 25).

AmeriCorps programs that take a community-building approach based on the assumption that strengthening the whole strengthens the parts do so against enormous odds. Such an assumption relies more on what Huxham (1996, p. 4) calls a moral imperative rationale for collaboration that asserts that a multiorganizational response is the only viable way to address the intractable and complex problems societies face today. Because collaboration is voluntary, however, most organizations approach collaboration through instrumental motives, seeking to identify ways in which collaboration first enhances their own aims (Huxham, 1996). The challenge for AmeriCorps program stakeholders that take this approach lies either in designing an incentive system that induces interorganizational cooperation or in defining for themselves a common interest that will hold them together beyond the calculation of individual organizational costs and benefits.
SUMMARY

As a theoretical construct, an institutional approach to community building suggests two different perspectives on how AmeriCorps can build local communities. Both perspectives, although different in logic, still face the problems inherent in solving collective-action dilemmas. One perspective postulates that enhancing individual organizational capacity will ultimately enhance the strength of the community as a whole. The other perspective postulates that AmeriCorps programs that build working collaboratives of partner organizations around shared community interests have a greater likelihood of building communities than those that focus only on building intraorganizational capacity. Our current data cannot answer the question of which approach has a greater likelihood of building local communities. The increasingly networked nature of society and increased complexity of local community problems suggest, however, that attempts to strengthen the bonds that hold organizations together may prove a more effective long-term community-building strategy than one that merely focuses on strengthening individual organizational capacity.

METHODOLOGY

To assess AmeriCorps' community-building effects through an institutional approach, we examined change in the capacity of individual community-based organizations within the AmeriCorps partnership to meet their own missions and in the level of cooperation among partner organizations in and outside the immediate AmeriCorps partnership. We also examined the degree of institutionalization of positive community-building effects in local organizations as a result of AmeriCorps.

We rely primarily on qualitative research methods to evaluate these impacts. Our primary data sources are AmeriCorps program documents; face-to-face interviews with AmeriCorps program directors, partner organization administrators, directors of organizations outside the immediate AmeriCorps collaborative, AmeriCorps members, community residents, and community leaders; a key informant phone survey (using a snowball sampling technique) conducted at two time periods (N = 104); and participant observation during field visits conducted in early spring of 1996 and 1997.

FINDINGS

We present findings from an organizational-level analysis of AmeriCorps' impacts on local communities by examining the extent to which local community-based organizations have changed as a result of AmeriCorps. We organize this section of the article according to the three areas of change listed above.
BUILDING INTRAORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Program quarterly reports and state application forms from all five programs cite multiple examples of ways corps member activities have increased the capacity of the organizations in which they work. These impacts are primarily at the program level as indicated by the examples below.

- At the end of a local AmeriCorps program's first year of service, one community-based organization reported a 25% increase in membership with an additional 70 youth participating in the organization on a consistent basis partly as a result of corps member activities.
- Principals and teachers reported their students' attendance had improved at all six schools in which Corps members worked, and teachers perceived better attitudes and eagerness to learn among students.
- One partner organization was able to fund two part-time assistants because corps members freed up the administrator's time enough for him to write additional grant proposals.
- Corps member enthusiasm at one AmeriCorps site resulted in board members becoming more active in promoting the programs of the organization.
- One program reported plans to significantly expand services due to increased community awareness and demand as a direct result of corps member outreach. Activities and services at this site increased overall by 53% (more than double the annual goal of 25%).

Results from the key informant phone survey \((N = 104)\) largely support program document claims. Of the interviewees familiar enough with AmeriCorps to comment (a small number), the vast majority of them indicated that whereas AmeriCorps had made a negligible impact on the community as a whole, it had positively affected the individual organizations in which corps members worked. They tended to rate that effect as either moderate or large. One interviewee put it this way:

They have definitely made a change in their own little spheres. We were just in a meeting where the individual organizations said they couldn't have done what they've done this year without AmeriCorps. Has it made a global difference? Not much, but things don't work that way. You do things one step at a time. (personal communication, January 28, 1997)

In contrast to AmeriCorps' program expansion effects, however, we found only limited evidence for other types of organizational capacity building, such as improved internal evaluation systems, strategic planning, or increased fund-raising skills. Furthermore, unlike results from the key informant phone survey, face-to-face interviews with partner organization directors, program staff, and site supervisors provide mixed support for quarterly report claims. According to some partner organization directors, poor planning and man-
agement greatly hampered their ability to meet their own missions. The amount of time required to manage corps member activities and meet reporting requirements led to the pullout of several partner organizations across the five programs from their original commitment. Our findings suggest that internal constraints, such as limits on time and the emotional, physical, and psychological energy necessary to manage interpersonal relationships and monitor corps member activities, required levels of commitment that many partner organizations found difficult and, in some cases, impossible to meet.

Poor matching of corps members with partner organizations accounted for some of the problems particular organizations faced. According to one partner organization director, the poor matching that occurred between the members assigned to his organization and the skills required to fulfill the organization’s mission undermined AmeriCorps’ overall capacity-building potential. He blamed poor planning and corps member selection policies as the reason. “The selection process,” he complained, “had zero input from the project sites who would have liked to have had a partner role or at least veto opportunity. [Instead] the selection process was flawed and corps members assigned to this site had significant skill limitations” (personal communication, May 9, 1996). Other partner organization directors agreed with him. Overall, AmeriCorps programs that actively sought to include partner organizations in the recruitment, selection, and training of corps members for their organizations reported increased satisfaction with their on-the-job activities.

Several partner organization directors attributed the success of AmeriCorps’ capacity-building impacts to corps member “rootedness” in the neighborhoods in which they worked. One partner organization director (whose organization had a nearly ideal “corps member-organizational-fit”) attributed the success of corps member activities in her organization to the fact that “her” corps members lived in the communities in which they worked. Conversations with the corps members at this site support her claims. “[For me,] living in the community,” one corps member indicated, “has made all the difference. We already know the people, they know us. We have the ability to get stuff done [because] we already know the politics of the community” (personal communication, January 7, 1997).

Even with an ideal corps member-organization fit, however, the vast majority of partner organization directors and staff with whom we spoke acknowledged that corps members brought with them unexpected and significant management and administrative demands. Some partner organizations demonstrated greater capacity to handle the added requirements than did others. Our findings suggest that partner organizations with directors willing to commit the added time required to manage, mentor, and serve as role models to corps members also demonstrated greater satisfaction with corps member impacts on their organizations’ ability to meet their own missions. In at least two cases, directors indicated they had worked with the corps members assigned to their organizations in neighborhood activities before AmeriCorps.
In both cases, directors showed an active commitment to serve as mentors to these young people.

Commitment by AmeriCorps program staff to nurture relationships between corps members and the community-based organizations in which they work also emerged as paramount to successful community building through institutional change. AmeriCorps' capacity-building potential tended to be greater in partner organizations where lead agency staff made regular site visits to partner organizations, assisted partner organization directors with corps member management, and fostered open lines of communication among all stakeholders.

In another program, one partner organization director suggested that length of time and experience at the work site made a significant difference in corps members' ability to positively affect activities at his site. "Having the same AmeriCorps member from last year back this year [has been] very helpful," he commented. "[Continuity] in corps members between the 1st and 2nd year [has] permitted learning over the [course of these] 2 years" (personal communication, January 13, 1997).

On average, our findings suggest that corps members helped build organizational capacity primarily through increased programming at partner organization sites and that the immediate capacity-building benefits to partner organizations of this increased programming outweigh the costs to those organizations in terms of management and administrative constraints. Factors that emerge as most important for successful capacity building to occur are as follows:

- adequate partner-organization-corps member fit;
- commitment of partner organization directors/site supervisors to mentor corps members;
- commitment of lead agency staff to nurture positive relationships among corps members and partner organization staff by making regular site visits and keeping open lines of communication across stakeholders;
- length of time and on-the-job experience of corps members;
- level of corps member maturity and rootedness in the community; and
- active involvement of all partner organization staff in the recruitment, selection, and training of corps members assigned to their organizations.

Unfortunately, we found little evidence to suggest that the capacity-building benefits of corps members in these organizations will last without continued AmeriCorps funding. It is difficult to know whether these changes might have occurred without AmeriCorps. Had these organizations received similar human and financial resources from another source, they would most likely have achieved similar outcomes.
BUILDING INTERORGANIZATIONAL COOPERATION

Three of the five AmeriCorps programs we studied tried to build a collaborative among partner organizations. Of the three, one tended to view collaboration only in terms of enhancing individual organizations’ missions, another tried more deliberately to build commitment between partner organizations, and a third used corps members to recruit local organizations in the formation of coalitions outside the immediate AmeriCorps collaborative.

Lessons learned from these programs suggest that AmeriCorps programs most successful in building communities are those that effectively screen participants for entry into the collaborative by requiring them to bring something of their own to the table that demonstrates specific operational examples of commitment. Requiring partner organizations to pay a certain percentage cash match for each corps member assigned to them, to attend a majority of collaborative meetings, and to demonstrate willingness to sanction behavior of individual stakeholders who renge on their agreements (by setting rules together and enforcing them consistently) may serve as effective screening techniques.

Requiring partners to meet entry costs, however, although helpful in building commitment, cannot assure that commitment. As Ostrom (1990) points out, if self-governing bodies (such as AmeriCorps collaboratives) are to successfully govern themselves, they must find a way to motivate individual members to monitor each other’s compliance to the set of new institutional rules. Ostrom identifies the importance of establishing trust and a sense of community as key mechanisms for solving the monitoring problem (p. 43). Unfortunately, we found few operational examples among partner organizations in the AmeriCorps collaboratives we studied of this level of commitment. Several partner organization directors indicated that, in one program, if entry costs were any higher, they would not be willing to commit to the AmeriCorps collaborative at all (personal communication, January 13, 1997).

Overall, AmeriCorps program stakeholders that have tried to build collaboration among individual community-based organizations have been unable to sufficiently formulate for themselves the kind of shared interests necessary to sustain a collaborative effort or an incentive system adequate enough to induce cooperation to meet community-wide needs. Our findings suggest that these collaboratives face multiple obstacles that undermine an institutional approach to community building. As one key informant commented, “Creating collaborative groups is costly. [It] implies commitment [and not just] involvement. In collaborative groups, you’d better be [prepared] to be co-opted” (personal communication, January 27, 1997).

A partner organization director put it more vividly when she commented, “Collaboration is like cottage cheese. It occasionally smells bad and separates
easily" (personal communication, May 15, 1996). She described the Ameri-Corps collaborative to which she belonged in this way: Partner organizations were not universally cooperative, organizations with similar missions "probably got to know one another better and cooperate more," but in general, no sustaining links emerged to offset the time-consuming demands of the collaborative (personal communication, May 15, 1996). For her, building commitment was contingent on partner organizations recognizing and respecting each other's unique organizational strengths and not in developing together some overriding shared vision for the community as a whole.

Another program director from this same collaborative agreed. She described monthly collaborative meetings as addressing "mostly procedural issues, not community building or problem solving. [We do not] have time to problem solve" (personal communication, January 7, 1997). Monthly collaborative meeting minutes partly support her perception. Most of the meetings in the 1st year were spent "getting to know each other," working out meeting guidelines, sharing problems "within the family," determining ways to enforce attendance at meetings, and merely reporting organizational activities. Minutes from the 2nd year demonstrate an increase in membership attendance but still very little long-term planning for sustainability and little if any discussion about community building.

Most partner organization directors with whom we spoke indicated a greater knowledge of other community-based organizations (knowledge they would otherwise not have), and many of them expressed appreciation for the similarity in daily administrative and management problems they all shared, but when pushed, almost all of them agreed that if AmeriCorps were to leave tomorrow, the collaborative would disband. This was not the case in one of the programs we studied that had its origin in a vision inspired within the community itself about ways to help a particular population and a recognized need. Unlike the other programs, the primary impetus for this program had the benefit of being connected to a national coalition model based on interfaith collaboration. Partner organizations shared a common vision from the outset to respond to a perceived community need. Even with this origin, however, the program experienced similar difficulties (although with less intensity) with building commitment among stakeholders. Pressures such as the tendency of individuals and organizations to seek their own goals at the expense of community goals pose enormous constraints on AmeriCorps' community-building potential.

Analysis of community-wide perceptions of changes in organizational and individual level cooperation supports these findings. Overall, interviewees' responses suggest no significant change in levels of community-wide interorganizational or individual cooperation between 1996 and 1997 as indicated by only minor changes in the mean, median, mode, and range of ratings across the five programs. Reasons given for the lack of change range from apathy and feelings of frustration at the inability of organizations and individuals to get
anything done to the predominance of turf mentalities and the reality that “fiefdoms are part of human nature.”

Of the 104 interviewees in our sample, only 1 identified AmeriCorps as being instrumental in changing the level of cooperation among both organizations and individuals in her community. Cooperation “happens in spurts,” she commented.

If people are organized by someone and have a common goal, then [they] come together [the way they did here when] AmeriCorps built a playground for a local elementary school. There were tons and tons of people [who came] together for this event. Everybody in the community got involved. They had really good publicity [and] a lot of people showed up for the kids’ sakes. It’s the best playground I’ve ever seen. (personal communication, February 27, 1997)

As most of these programs have discovered, however, commitment to the collaborative initiated through AmeriCorps required more of them than they had expected. Although we found some evidence for the sharing of resources (e.g., joint grant proposal writing, sharing of expertise and corps members) across partner organizations, we found few operational examples of commitment to a collaborative whose vision for the community extended beyond the individual missions of each partner organization.

Most partner organization staff viewed this as a positive and deliberate choice. As one partner organization director put it, “[Deliberately choosing] not to have an overall community vision [for the AmeriCorps program] was, for this community, the best way to go” (personal communication, January 7, 1997). When asked to elaborate on this, she commented, “By helping us meet our goals, [corps members are] helping the broader community.”

Another partner organization director’s comments summarize the general view we found among the five AmeriCorps programs we studied. When asked about the shared resource value of AmeriCorps members as a way to build commitment to the collaborative, she indicated that most partner organizations view AmeriCorps members as being there to meet their own organizational goals. “We hope our goals are part of the [community’s] goals, but we’re [mostly] taken up with our [own] objectives” (personal communication, September 19, 1996).

INSTITUTIONALIZING POSITIVE CHANGES

Program documents cite multiple ways AmeriCorps has had an impact on both intraorganizational capacity and interorganizational cooperation, but face-to-face interviews and field visits suggest that these impacts, although mostly positive, are only short-lived. When asked whether the expansion of programs resulting from corps member activities would continue without AmeriCorps, nearly all partner organization directors indicated it would be difficult to keep the programs going without corps member help. According to the board member of one partner organization, “programs like this are
totally dependent on federal dollars. You make use of it while you can, but you
know it's only temporary. If you look at AmeriCorps from [this perspective],
I can't say what the benefit is" (personal communication, January 27, 1997).

A potentially negative effect of AmeriCorps funding on the institutionaliza-
tion of positive organizational change is the possible displacement of local
funds from existing fiscal effort. Monies that would have gone to support local
initiatives, for example, may be displaced by federal monies (at least for a time)
without any consideration about how to sustain that local initiative once
federal funding lapses. One program in particular started out with strong
financial support from the community, but program documents indicate this
support was gradually displaced so that fund-raising became increasingly
more difficult to accomplish. The program's director put it this way: "When
you have federal funding as the prime source, the community tends not to
own that project and see it as just another government program" (personal
communication, March 15, 1996).

In his analysis of intergovernmental fiscal relations, George Break (1980)
identifies the complex economic, political, and indirect effects of intergovern-
mental grants. "When this multiple round of effects has settled in a new
equilibrium," he writes, "the final impact of the grants on 'donee' budgets may
differ significantly from the initial impact" (p. 10). Although the initial impact
may appear to be an expansion of local capacity, the displacement of local
funds may, in the end, undermine the long-term community-building effects
of AmeriCorps programs by minimizing local philanthropic giving, volun-
teerism, and community responsibility and ownership of local initiatives.
Examination of fund development activities in quarterly reports suggests that
all of these programs faced difficulty obtaining local funds to continue the
program beyond federal assistance.

One of the factors identified by several people we interviewed as the key
to sustainability of positive AmeriCorps impacts was community resident
involvement and ownership. Our findings suggest that among most of these
five programs, no significant systematic attempts were made to create a sense
of ownership of the program among community residents. It is not clear the
extent to which collaboration might have been enhanced had community
residents taken a greater part in the process. Both the collaboration and
implementation literature suggest that the greater the number of players and
the greater the variety of perspectives, the greater the likelihood of failure to
achieve intended results (Huxham, 1996; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). The
one message that most clearly emanates from quarterly reports is that partner
organizations were just trying to survive the day-to-day demands on their
time and energy with little time left over for consideration about long-term
sustainability of the AmeriCorps program or strategies to increase community
resident involvement.

This immediate task orientation provides one explanation for our finding
that AmeriCorps' community-building impacts on local institutions were
primarily additive in nature. In a few cases, however, we did find evidence to
suggest that partner organizations with similar missions and cultures were able to move beyond their immediate task concerns to focus on creating new and sustained linkages. Because of corps member activities in one community, for example, the local Habitat for Humanity program not only expanded its program to 2 days a week, but this expansion allowed them to form an ongoing partnership with a local job training organization, Jobs Central. The new linkage has expanded so that Habitat for Humanity is now the primary community service host site for Job Central’s trainees to learn on-the-job skills.

In another community, corps members at one partner organization site deliberately nurtured a relationship with the local newspaper staff, resulting in unexpected and frequent coverage of all local AmeriCorps activities. They were also instrumental in linking the clientele of the organization in which they were placed (low-income seniors) with the local police department and a well-established local organization that targeted a similar population. One corps member described her role in terms of matchmaking. At a recent volunteer appreciation dinner, she told us, “We knew representatives from Focus Hope and from the sixth precinct were going to be at the luncheon so we played matchmaker” (personal communication, January 8, 1997). The result was an ongoing linkage (that had not previously existed) between the local police department, Focus Hope, and the seniors living in a high-rise building for elderly adults.

Another way to institutionalize the positive community-building effects of AmeriCorps on local communities lies in the generation of volunteers. Although it is difficult to obtain accurate volunteer statistics due to notoriously inaccurate recording, the numbers we calculated from quarterly reports indicate that over the past 2 years, together the five AmeriCorps programs generated a substantial number of non-AmeriCorps volunteers involved in AmeriCorps service projects. In 1994 to 1995, the total number of non-AmeriCorps member volunteers recruited across the five programs was 731. In 1995 to 1996, that number had grown substantially to a total of 5,257 (2,786 of which were new volunteers). This large jump in volunteers may be mostly attributable to better reporting by local program staff, but because these numbers represent direct involvement in AmeriCorps activities, the increase is still important to recognize.

Of the five programs we studied, only one had a deliberate strategy for generating volunteers: building board membership of local organizations. The remaining programs tended to view this objective in terms of volunteer generation around concrete service projects with a beginning and an end. One key informant interviewee referred to this kind of volunteering as “project volunteerism,” another one as “white-bread volunteerism”—that is, well-meaning volunteers from churches, colleges, and other organizations that come and go without really being “in tune with the local neighborhoods in which they volunteer” (personal communications, February 11, 1997).

It is difficult to obtain any objective data on the numbers of long-term committed volunteers generated by the AmeriCorps programs in these five
communities. Of the 104 interviewees in the key informant phone survey, only 1 person mentioned the AmeriCorps program specifically as having made a difference in trends in local volunteerism. Nonetheless, we may assume that of those 5,257 non-AmeriCorps volunteers, at least some will remain committed over time. Substantial increases in Girl Scout membership at one partner organization site, increases in board membership generated by corps members' coalition-building activities, and direct corps member involvement in the development of local voluntary action centers illustrate ways in which AmeriCorps may have enhanced the development of long-term volunteers.

From a community-building perspective, if a goal of AmeriCorps is to institutionalize a service ethic through the generation of volunteers in local communities, then "project volunteerism" (although it may produce positive short-term effects) may not prove successful over a long period of time. As one partner organization director put it, "You [have to] raise volunteers, [not] recruit them" (personal communication, January 9, 1997). Raising volunteers implies a much more sophisticated and potentially far more successful approach to community building than simple recruitment.

The current focus of AmeriCorps programs on placing corps members in voluntary action centers needs to be reevaluated from this perspective. Corps members and program and partner organization staff need to consider what are their own goals. Reflecting on the distinction between recruitment and the longer term commitment of raising volunteers is one place to start. Programs that foster a long-term committed cadre of volunteers are more likely to build local communities through the potential synergistic effects of these volunteers than are those that rely solely on the additive effects of short-term project volunteerism. This implies the need for AmeriCorps programs to intentionally incorporate a volunteer generation strategy into the design of their programs. Otherwise, programs that rely solely on signature projects to generate volunteers rest only on the tentative hope that relationships will form to ensure future volunteerism.

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings indicate that these five AmeriCorps programs have not successfully institutionalized the immediate positive effects of increased intraorganizational capacity building. We did find some evidence for the creation of new linkages among like-minded organizations, but most partner organizations in the AmeriCorps' collaboratives we studied were unable to build sufficient credible commitment for self-governance. We also found little systematic evidence for the creation of collaborative advantage that Huxham (1996) identifies as so necessary for successful collaboration.

The design of most of the programs at the state commission and local program levels may provide one explanation for these findings. The design was such that individual organizations faced few incentives to lead them to
achieve a collective goal, such as strengthening communities, in any coordinated manner. Even the programs that deliberately tried to build a working collaborative among partner organizations tended to see corps members as added resources to meet their own goals rather than the broader goals implicit in a mandate such as community building. "We hope our goals are part of the [community's] goals," one director said, "but everyone tends to see the world from their own place" (personal communication, September 19, 1996).

Furthermore, an inherent tension may exist between the programmatic goal of getting things done in local communities and the global goal of strengthening communities. The getting-things-done goal implies the need to strengthen individual organizations to accomplish a wide variety of services that could divert attention away from the goal of community building through the creation of systemic networks of organizations working together on behalf of the whole community. This tension may explain the additive nature of AmeriCorps' impact on the local community-based organizations in the five communities we studied. Although the rhetoric of community building implies the moral imperative of strengthening the whole, the reality of community building suggests that unless individual organizations can see the value of collaboration in terms of their own goals, they will tend to take the perspective that strengthening the parts strengthens the whole.

But strengthening the parts (enhancing individual organizational capacity) may require more than providing monies to help organizations meet their own missions. Bardach (1996) suggests, for example, that building intraorganizational capacity also means that organizations need to develop a capacity to engage in "collective self-evaluation" (p. 180) to determine when turf mentalities limit ability to address community problems and when moving beyond turf to engage in interorganizational cooperation is needed. This capacity does not generally emerge spontaneously. It usually requires deliberately designing collective self-evaluation incentives into AmeriCorps programs that seek to build communities through local institutions using the grant process in a more strategic manner as a capacity-building instrument (Elmore, 1987).

Instead, our findings suggest that the primary impetus for individual organizational cooperation lay in the availability of AmeriCorps funding for local community-based organizations with few incentives for local programs to engage in strategic planning about how that money should be used to strengthen communities. As one partner organization director put it, "AmeriCorps was structured [from the beginning] to be an extra. The whole public perception is that it was nice while we had it" (personal communication, March 3, 1997). We did not find evidence to suggest that individual partner organizations developed the kind of collective self-evaluation capacity of which Bardach (1996) speaks.

Approaching AmeriCorps' community-building potential from the perspective of strengthening the whole to strengthen the parts may prove to be a more effective way to bring about long-term institutional change to meet local community problems. Alter and Hage (1993) suggest that creating systemic
networks of organizations could prove to be a more viable way to deliver community-based services in the future than relying on the limited cooperation of "obligational networks" (p. 74) in which interorganizational activities are either ad hoc or almost none. For Alter and Hage, interorganizational cooperation represents more a process than an outcome, one that, to be successful, must occur at all levels of the categorical grant system (p. 90). AmeriCorps programs that seek to build local communities through institutional change may have greater success in doing so if they design incentives for local community-based organizations to coordinate their activities in a more strategic manner to meet community-wide needs identified through a community-needs assessment, for example.

Limits to the ability of federal and state institutions to mandate interorganizational cooperation abound, however, such as conflicting local, state, and national perceptions of the costs and benefits of that cooperation. One key informant suggested that federally mandated collaboration does not result in long-term local collaboration because it is "unnatural." His comment refers to the empowerment zone proposal process but may be equally applicable to AmeriCorps program funding. Another key informant disagreed, however, arguing that factors determining the relative "natural/unnatural-ness" of collaboration lies in the type of project around which organizations cooperate. According to her, "politically-focused collaboration" will fail, but if organizations serve the same population and meet similar needs, then "we have a real incentive to continue collaborating" (personal communication, March 3, 1997).

In either case, however, Milward (1995, p. 643) may be right that coordination efforts will tend to produce positive effects only up to a point, at which time they will be subject to diminishing marginal returns. We found evidence for this in one program where a corps member’s community organizing skills not only increased community demand for services but enabled organization staff to engage in community development activities such as networking, strategic planning, and coalition building at the expense of their original mission. Because of AmeriCorps, the organization director commented, "We have expanded our own perceptions to problems and come up with alternative ways [to solve them], but in terms of our capacity to meet our own mission to build houses, we haven’t expanded our capacity" (personal communication, January 13, 1997).

Evidence from research on the National Rural Development Partnership Initiative (Radin et al., 1996; Wechsler & Sanderson, 1995) provides some support for the possibility of successful attempts to build interorganizational collaboration to solve community problems. Radin et al. (1996) identify several variables that could serve as potential predictors of successful collaborative efforts, such as past cooperation to address other community needs, consciously designed inclusive membership strategies, shared decision making, leadership in the form of neutral brokering, and some early victories. AmeriCorps programs that seek to build communities through institutional change can benefit from lessons learned in the partnerships initiative.
Enhancing this capacity for organizational learning may prove to be an important next step for AmeriCorps programs that seek to build local communities through institutional change. As Alter and Hage (1993) point out, perceptions of the costs and benefits of interorganizational cooperation do not remain static but change over time. The AmeriCorps program has been in existence now for nearly 5 years. One way state commissions can build on the learning these programs have experienced over the past 5 years is to create more formal community-building learning networks (that extend beyond monthly program directors’ meetings) through which stakeholders can learn from each other’s shared knowledge and expertise.

The foundation for these learning networks and for the shift of thinking required to place community building at the center of the AmeriCorps program ultimately lies in the realization that local institutions and communities belong to a wider group of institutions and communities. Although we found little systematic evidence of long-term community building through institutional change among the five programs we studied, our findings do suggest that each of these programs has achieved small “wins” in its attempt to strengthen the communities in which each resides. These wins can be leveraged through learning networks to enhance AmeriCorps’ community-building potential. Lessons learned over the past 5 years represent an important reservoir from which to draw.

Time may represent one of AmeriCorps’ more important assets. Game theory suggests that repetition is an important inducement for cooperation because it allows players to recognize the mutual benefits they achieve through cooperation and to coordinate their activities to further those benefits (Axelrod, 1984; Lynn, 1993). The continued interaction partner organizations have experienced may prove to be a key factor in institutionalizing the positive learning that has occurred through the development of AmeriCorps collaboratives over time.

CONCLUSION

We began this article by asserting that AmeriCorps programs can build communities in three ways:

1. through the personal and professional development of a cadre of individual corps members who learn to model a service ethic over time as a result of their personal involvement in direct acts of service;
2. through building the capacity of community-based organizations and fostering partnerships among these organizations to better meet community needs; and
3. through concrete focused service activities within targeted communities such as in low-income neighborhoods, inner-city schools, or communities of people such as children, youth, or seniors.
This analysis has focused on the community-building effects of AmeriCorps programs that take an institutional approach to community building. We identified two contending ways to conceive of AmeriCorps' potential to create institutional change: strengthening the parts to strengthen the whole and strengthening the whole through the formation of collaborative advantage (Huxham, 1996).

Our findings suggest that AmeriCorps programs that take an institutional approach to community building (either by increasing intraorganizational capacity or by developing interorganizational cooperative relationships) face significant collective-action problems that undermine their long-term community-building potential. All five of the AmeriCorps programs we studied tended to view AmeriCorps' community-building potential from a strengthening-the-parts perspective. This is not surprising given the design of the program. We see hope, however, in the potential of these programs to benefit from lessons learned over the past 5 years of program implementation. Such a learning process will require a deliberate attempt by the Corporation for National Service, state commissions, and local AmeriCorps programs to provide opportunities for AmeriCorps stakeholders to come together at local, state, and national forums to learn from each other's experiences.

These forums may yield information that allows greater flexibility at the local level for AmeriCorps program to choose a community-building model that more adequately fits local environmental factors. An institutional approach to community building, given its inherent difficulties, may not be the most appropriate approach for most AmeriCorps programs. It may be, for example, that taking a corps approach to community building in a community particularly committed to keeping its youth in the area is a more viable model for community building than one that focuses primarily on changing local institutions. In communities that face urban blight and the need to rehabilitate local neighborhoods, a community development approach may prove more effective than one that focuses on building local intraorganizational capacity or interorganizational cooperation.

Choice of a community-building model for local AmeriCorps programs assumes a commitment to reevaluate the relationship between program design and program goals. It assumes the potential for learning over time and the ability of individuals at all program levels to engage in collective self-reflection. If a program such as AmeriCorps is to have any hope of meeting so ambitious a goal as strengthening local communities, then its proponents should consider, in a more strategic manner, how they might build on and maximize the lessons learned by stakeholders of countless local AmeriCorps programs across America.
References


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