City Year's
Research &
Learning Agenda

Spring 2022

Introduction

City Year strives to advance educational equity and prepare young adults to work across lines of difference. To do this, City Year recruits and trains AmeriCorps members who serve in schools as Student Success Coaches. They partner with teachers to support student academic, social and emotional growth. City Year also seeks to nurture the next generation who will serve and co-create change in and with their communities.

As an organization committed to continuous learning and improvement, we are pleased to share this research agenda.

In this document you will find more information about how we approach research projects, what we are learning from current projects to build upon existing evidence of impact, and what we hope to learn over the next few years.

City Year's commitment to equitable approaches to research

City Year seeks to engage in an equity-based approach to research that informs practice improvements, builds evidence of impact, and informs systems change. A key step in this work is learning from the communities we work with, as well as leaders at other organizations, such as Chicago Beyond, Child Trends, the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, We All Count and the many others who inspire us to continuously reflect on and improve our own practice.

We are making these shifts as we are aware of the problematic history of researchers using the authority of research to support the objectification of members of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, women, individuals from low-wealth backgrounds, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and other historically marginalized groups. Such approaches to research have resulted in the perception that research is about judgment and is a mechanism to uphold marginalization based on social and racial identities as opposed to being a tool to create conditions for liberation and learning.

Through an equitable approach to research, we hope to make explicit City Year's commitment to conducting research that decenters the researcher and restores communities as authors and owners of the work.

At the conclusion of each research project, we produce a guide or publication for practitioners and policymakers to aid in meaning-making and implementation of the results. We believe that equitable approaches to research and evaluation provide an opportunity for systemically disenfranchised communities to name how systems of oppression play out in their everyday lives and identify solutions that draw upon community assets.

As we strive to leverage equitable approaches in our own research, we are also engaging in dialogues about the definition of strong evidence for policy and funding purposes. We, along with other organizations, embrace the complexity of the work we seek to do and believe that our definition of evidence should as well.

Shifts in practice to more equitable approaches:

- Understanding the value of the work to community members most affected by the research prior to starting any project

- Partnering with practitioners to identify research questions that are relevant to community context and assets

- Conducting an RFP process that allows us to explore researcher positionality

- Selecting mixed methods approaches in partnership with practitioners that capture context, elevate community voice, honor community culture, assets and strengths, and explicitly name, for the purposes of reform, the systemic inequities affecting the results

Current research

City Year's commitment to learning and improvement requires continuous engagement in research projects. We are learning about the following alongside our school partners, AmeriCorps members and research partners:

- The impact of City Year AmeriCorps members serving as student success coaches on whole school outcomes (academic, attendance, culture and climate) and students' social, emotional and academic growth

- The key components of the student success coach approach

- The role of developmental relationships and equitable learning environments in supporting students' sense of belonging, engagement and social, emotional and academic skill development

- The value of integrated approaches to student learning that harness students' social, emotional and academic strengths

- The experiences of students, educators and youth practitioners during the COVID-19 global pandemic

- How to design the AmeriCorps member service experience to prepare them to be lifelong learners, leaders and changemakers who work across lines of difference

Our approach to the work

Research to practice to policy change

City Year seeks to model an equitable approach to research as part of a vibrant research, practice, policy system. The organization was an early adopter of this approach, engaging in qualitative research and quantitative analysis to understand our impact and leverage learnings to inform practice and systems change in the early 1990s.

As City Year's work and approach evolved and shifted, so did the focus of our research. In our early years, we sought to understand the impact of our youth development programming on the AmeriCorps member and alumni experiences. Insights from that work helped to shape the formation of AmeriCorps in 1993. When the organization shifted to more intentionally partnering with districts and schools to support student and school success in the 2000s, our research explored the impact of our Whole School, Whole Child® services on student and school outcomes. Research from this era informed the formation of School Turnaround AmeriCorps, an inter-agency partnership between USED and AmeriCorps.

As City Year looks to the future, we strive to advance educational equity and prepare community-engaged civic leaders who can work and relate across lines of difference.

Often, the very skills AmeriCorps members further develop through their time with City Year—growth mindset, communication, and collaboration, developing a sense of voice, agency and belonging—are the same skills they are working to nurture in students. We recognize that this holistic approach to learning benefits both the student and corps members and allows them to better achieve their goals.

Student success coaches partner with teachers and other adults to create a safe, welcoming, engaging, asset-based learning environment and simultaneously support the student's self-perception as an efficacious learner. To strengthen school and classroom conditions student success coaches use developmental relationship strategies as well as social, emotional and academic development tools, data, reports and practices to build and fortify student agency through social-emotional, math and ELA skill coaching taking place in tutoring sessions, whole class activities, and enrichment settings.

Through the whole school, whole child services provided by student success coaches we seek to create momentum for a continuously widening spiral of asset-based improvement in teacher, learner and AmeriCorps member practices. Upon graduation from City Year, AmeriCorps alumni have gained experience, knowledge and skills in whole child learning approaches, as well as increased their civic and community-engaged learning orientations and skills through participation in City Year's broader leadership learning and development program (which includes student success coach training). Many of the learnings from this work informed the National Partnership for Student Success.
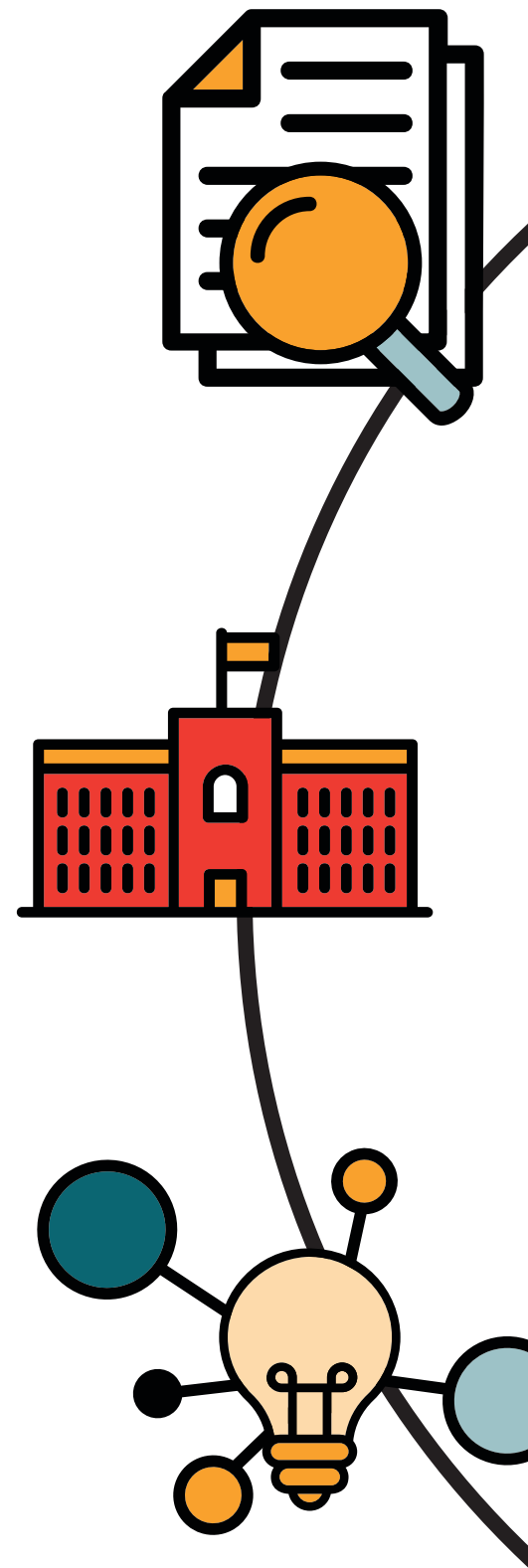
How we developed this agenda

In developing the questions included in this research agenda, City Year's Education Research and Strategy Team listened to AmeriCorps members, staff, partner teachers and other critical stakeholders. In future updates to this research agenda, we hope to engage students and families.

We conducted a literature review to understand what sector-wide questions City Year is best positioned to answer alongside the students, educators and school communities with whom we are privileged to partner. Finally, we applied our understanding of emerging trends in research, practice and policy to frame questions in a way that resonates with key leaders in each sector.

In the questions included here, you will notice an appreciation for the learning ecosystem, with learning occurring through relational processes among students, schools, mentors, peers, families and community members before, during and after school. You'll see questions that center the role that systems play in promoting or undermining thriving, and you will notice our commitment to taking an asset-based approach to the work and harnessing community strengths to identify solutions with community members.

As an organization, we recognize that we still have much to learn and approach every project with humility, inquiry and a deep commitment to centering the individuals most affected by the research as a means of challenging the inequities that permeate our education system.

Areas for exploration

How we will use this research agenda

This document will serve as a roadmap for future research as we strive to work alongside our partners to achieve greater educational equity and prepare the next generation of civic and community-engaged leaders.

The questions that follow serve as the starting point for new research projects. During each project, we collaborate with the community members and practitioners involved to identify context-specific questions that dig further into the nuance of equitable experiences for students and student success coaches of varying identities, including students and student success coaches with diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

We will update this research agenda as we learn from the extraordinary work of others, answer critical questions, and identify new lines of inquiry.

Thank you for embarking upon this journey with us.

What do we seek to learn?

Equitable learning environments[1]

- What educator (teacher, student success coach, counselor) mindsets, skills and practices must be present to create equitable learning environments that center student voice and agency, and foster identify formation, durable skill development and a sense of belonging among all students?

- How can schools best utilize the time and talent of multiple educators to create these equitable learning environments?

- What training, given the variability in exposure to equity work prior to service, is most effective in developing educators' skills in cultural competency and diversity, belonging, inclusivity and equity to inform their work with students and other practitioners to create equitable learning environments?

- What systemic factors accelerate or impede the creation of equitable learning environments?

Developmental relationships

- What practices foster the trust and belonging critical to relationship development?

- How does the relationship between student success coaches and teachers impact student outcomes and the AmeriCorps member experience?

- What practices strengthen the formation of developmental relationships among student success coaches, students, team members, and partner teachers?

- To what extent does access to developmental relationships support student belonging, engagement, and social, emotional and academic skill development?

Integrated social, emotional and academic supports[2]

- Social, emotional and cognitive capabilities are interconnected. What research-based practices implemented as part of a holistic, integrated approach, have the greatest impact on students' social, emotional and academic development and long-term outcomes, including high school graduation rates?

- What conditions need to be present in a school community to allow for innovative approaches to providing these supports?

- What are the skills, mindsets and conditions that position adults to effectively implement trauma sensitive, culturally responsive social, emotional and academic development practices?

- What training most effectively prepares student success coaches to provide integrated social, emotional and academic supports?

- What are the most effective ways to create opportunities for student voice recognizing that emotional well-being requires a sense that one's voice matters and one can affect change in the world individually and collectively?

Preparing civic and community-engaged leaders who can work across lines of difference

- How do educational background, life experience and diversity of a team of student success coaches affect their own service experience and their impact on students and schools?

- How does the service experience prepare AmeriCorps members for community engagement and workforce success, including careers as educators?

What do we seek to learn? (continued)

- In what ways are AmeriCorps members uniquely suited to support a more equitable future, including narrative development, for all young people in the face of systemic racism?

- What roles do team size, structure and manager play in preparing student success coaches to work across lines of difference throughout their careers?

Effective partnerships with students, schools, families, communities

- Given the critical role that adults play in buffering stress and fostering healthy child development, what do schools, districts, teachers, families and students value and look for in partner organizations?

- What conditions are critical to successful partnerships between City Year and school communities? How does the Impact Manager experience affect the strength of the school partnership?

- How do outcomes from multi-year versus single year partnerships with school communities differ?

- What are the most effective diversity, equity and inclusion practices that partner organizations can support in school communities?

Supporting continuous learning

- What are the most effective and equitable measures to leverage to understand the impact of a research-based, holistic approach designed to support student and school success?

- What are the most effective strategies when forming and facilitating networks of schools that utilize continuous improvement methods to improve student, school and students success coach outcomes?

1 Definition derived from BELE: environments where all students and educators – regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, religion – have the agency, opportunities, and tools they need to thrive (https://equitablelearning.org/about)

2 Osher, D., Pittman, K., Young, J., Smith, H., Moroney, D., & Irby, M. (2020). Thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning & development: A more powerful conceptualization of the contributors to youth success. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research and Forum for Youth Investment.; How the Science of Learning and Development Can Transform Education (2020) Retrieved from https://5bde8401-9b54-4c2c-8a0c-569fc1789664.filesusr.com/ugd/eb0b6a_24f761d8a4ec4d7db13084eb2290c588.pdf; Balfanz & Byrnes (2020) Connecting Social-Emotional Development, Academic Achievement, and On-Track Outcomes: A multi-district study of grades 3 to 10 students supported by City Year AmeriCorps members.; Noam. G. G., Malti, T. K., & Karcher, M. J. (2013). Mentoring in developmental perspective. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), Handbook of youth mentoring (2nd ed., pp. 99–116). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE; The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.; Consensus Statements of Evidence From the Council of Distinguished Scientists, National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD), The Aspen Institute (2017). https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/evidence-base-learn/

Conclusion

As part of its research, practice and policy system, City Year is committed to learning and innovating alongside our school, district and community partners. City Year strives to support a broader conversation about supporting students and ensuring equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities in the wake of the global pandemic while preparing the next generation of leaders who can work across lines of difference. We are also actively engaging in dialogues about new definitions of evidence and impact that honor the power of individual voices, insights and perspectives alongside quantitative data.

We thank the City Year AmeriCorps members, staff, and partners who shared their invaluable insights with us. These co-designers brought a depth of meaning to the work that would not have been possible otherwise.

We invite you to join us on our learning journey and hope you will share feedback and your experiences with us:

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