



City Year Alumni Bridging Study



A 2024 study conducted by researchers at Cornell University and the Education Research and Strategy (ERS) team at City Year explores how the national service experience prepares young people to build bridges with others from different backgrounds, seek active engagement in civic and community life, and find satisfaction in the workplace.

The partnership between Cornell University and City Year was incubated and supported by Einhorn Collaborative, a nonprofit foundation working to foster social connection and cohesion in the U.S.. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to explore these topics.

The Cornell and ERS team developed a theory of change outlining how the service year experience influences intergroup competencies, civic and community engagement, and the development of workplace skills for alumni through the reflection on inequality, skill building, and sense of efficacy AmeriCorps members gain through their experience. Setting level features such as team dynamics, supervisor support, and school climate were hypothesized to play an important role in these processes.

Drawing from survey responses and interviews of over 2,000 City Year alums who served between 2012-2022,

the results of the study highlight the ways in which City Year shapes alumni civic engagement, skill development, and career satisfaction. Overall, the study findings suggest that a year of service as a City Year AmeriCorps member enhances a young person's commitment to service, builds capacity to navigate working with diverse and dynamic teams in the workplace, and expands key interpersonal and social-emotional skills, sometimes called soft skills or emotional intelligence, that are most in demand by employers. These include problem solving, empathy, creative thinking, teamwork and leadership..

Combined with findings from other research studies on City Year's holistic services, it is increasingly evident that the skill development of City Year AmeriCorps members may be uniquely valuable—not only to help shape the professional and civic futures of our alums, but also to empower them to build trusting, consistent, and positive relationships with others at a time when trust and cooperation are eroding in our institutions and public sphere. Interpersonal skills are important for young people's success, and employers project they will be among those most in demand between now and 2027.

Key Findings



Civic & Community Engagement

"There are many other ways to be engaged in the work of justice and creating space for equity, and I think that probably the biggest thing that I learned is that there are so many different avenues to engaging in community engagement and civic engagement."

"[City Year] certainly helped affirm my values as a human and helped me want to advocate more because I understand the implications of not helping."

- 1 City Year affirmed AmeriCorps members' commitment to service, and alumni reported learning about inequity in the education system at both the individual and structural levels.
- 2 Upon completing their year of service, alumni expressed a desire to pursue service after their corps year (preferably through City Year), and many alumni moved into service-oriented careers, such as teaching or social work.



Diversity, Belonging, Equity and Inclusion

"[City Year] made me think a lot about the structures of the world and especially the U.S. in a way that I'd never really been forced to. Especially coming from the background I was...just looking at the school and the situations and comparing it to my own..."

- 1 A year of service supported development of leadership skills to work across lines of difference.
- 2 Site inclusivity in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion predicted higher reflection, intergroup skills,¹ and career satisfaction for alums.
- 3 Black alumni when compared to white alumni reported significantly less increase in reflection.² It's important to note that much external research has shown that when compared to white students, Black students have more constant exposure to systemic inequities in education settings, which may lead to higher levels of reflection at the start of their year of service.
- 4 LGBTQ alums on average reported significantly higher increases in reflection and overall action such as protesting and volunteering, as well as significantly lower traditional action³ such as voting and giving donations. We need more research on why, as it may be that traditional mechanisms of action can be less inclusive of the LGBTQ community.
- 5 Higher socioeconomic status is associated with significantly lower efficacy⁴ (self-perception to make change based on their City Year experience) for alumni.

¹ Intergroup skills in this study relate to how people are able to develop relationships and work effectively with people from different backgrounds.

² Reflection in this study refers to what extent alumni saw issues of systemic inequity through the CY experience.

³ Traditional action refers to areas such as voting and running for office.

⁴ Efficacy in this study refers to the extent to which alumni saw their personal ability to make change through the CY experience.

Research questions:

- How does the City Year experience affect alumni civic and community engagement?
- How does the City Year experience affect motivation and ability to work with diverse others?
- How does the City Year experience affect career preparedness?

Key Findings, continued



Career Preparedness

"[I learned] teamwork, because so much of what we did depended entirely on sharing ideas and collaborating."

"All the basic group skills that I felt that were lacking on my professional side I developed in City Year."

- 1 Alumni gained experience working with people with different backgrounds, perspectives, work styles, and communication styles. Alums gained many career-relevant skills during their service experience that are in high demand by employers including:

- Teamwork & relationship building
- Problem-solving
- Compromise
- Respecting different perspectives
- Addressing conflict
- Communication
- Time management
- Organization
- Creativity
- Dedication/hard work
- Patience

- 2 Alumni reported wanting more hands-on support in choosing and pursuing a career, especially for those interested in careers outside of the education sector.



Career Satisfaction

"I was deeply impacted by all the relationships that I had with my students and staff in the school and I think that that alone is my sole motivation for doing what I'm going to do with my career. I think relationship building is kind of what I'm holding onto... like the difference, I can make. If I can be a trusted adult for a student, even just like one student in the school, I feel like that is worth it for me."

- 1 A positive relationship with the partner teacher during service predicted higher efficacy, intergroup skills, and career satisfaction for alumni.
- 2 Work-life balance predicted higher career satisfaction for alums.



Implications for the AmeriCorps Member Experience and Areas of Further Inquiry

OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH IN COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AS CIVIC AGENTS

Although alumni valued their experience as a process that contributed to their individual growth and interests, they did not express a collective sense of identity as a “civic agent.” Alumni did develop ample skills in community engagement,⁵ and whereas alumni felt less prepared in civic engagement⁶ than community engagement, many saw civic engagement and activism as crucial to making social change. Their experience with City Year increased their understanding of inequality, but they often felt they lacked the tools to advocate for systemic social change. There is an opportunity for City Year to more clearly articulate that community engagement is a form of civic engagement.

IMPORTANCE OF PARTNER-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

According to recent survey data, the AmeriCorps member relationship with their classroom teacher was an influential factor in their developmental outcomes. This finding highlights the importance of strong relationships with the partner teacher and an inclusive site climate, according to survey data, where corps members can show up as their full selves and feel comfortable with their workload. Supporting the relationship with the partner teacher and building supportive and inclusive site climates may be key to helping alumni gain a sense of efficacy, strong intergroup skills, and later career satisfaction.

DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES VARY ACCORDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP MEMBERSHIP

This research helps make the case for enhancing program strategy differentiation that would ensure equity for all AmeriCorps members. Future research should seek to understand further how to continue to innovate the service experience to best serve a diverse community of AmeriCorps members. Future research should also explore how belonging and corps members’ diverse backgrounds impact identity and skill development.

IMPORTANCE OF SETTING AND CONTEXT

Future research should identify how key features of service and programming differ across the many contexts that corps members inhabit, including their teams, their classrooms, and their schools. This research should consider how environmental context impacts identity and skill development for corps members.

RELATIONSHIP CAPACITY

Future research is needed to understand what baseline relationship capacity is necessary at the team and corps levels to facilitate healthy skill and identity development during a service experience. Additionally, this research should consider what institutional conditions enable that relationship capacity.

5 Community Engagement was more relational than civic engagement. Alumni saw community engagement as building relationships with individuals, families, and organizations in the community where they served.

6 Civic Engagement as conceptualized by interview participants, refers to involvement in political and governmental issues, often at the structural and systemic (rather than individual) level, as well as individual actions such as voting, or group actions such as protesting legal and governmental action. Some participants alluded to the fact many of these behaviors are open only to citizens with certain legal status.

City Year is committed to ongoing learning and development for AmeriCorps members as young professionals, future changemakers and the extraordinary, service-oriented citizens they are. Learn more about our alumni and the service experience!

What are student success coaches:

<https://www.cityyear.org/experience/what-to-expect/>

Student Success Coach Target Program Profile:

<https://www.cityyear.org/student-success-coach-target-program-profile/>

Meet our alumni:

<https://www.cityyear.org/alumni-life/meet-our-alums/>