Cornell University

City Year Alumni Bridging Study

A City Year case study
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Executive Summary

This data report captures the goals, methods, findings, and recommendations from a two-year research partnership performed by researchers at Cornell University at City Year.

The partnership between Cornell University and City Year was incubated and supported by Einhorn Collaborative, a non-profit foundation working to foster social connection and cohesion in the U.S. The research seeks to understand how national service prepares young people to bridge divides, pursue active engagement in community life, and build relationships with people across lines of difference. The research plan includes graduates of Cornell University and City Year who participated in service programs. This report is focused on data findings from City Year's alumni with Cornell's report forthcoming.

Members of the City Year and Cornell teams met over the course of several years to conceptualize and implement this project. These teams worked in partnership with the goal of designing an equity-based approach to research based on inclusion of diverse teammates and centering the voices of City Year alumni and site staff. This team developed a theory of change that led to a set of research questions. A multi-method evaluation plan was established to explore these questions from both qualitative and quantitative lenses.

Findings illuminate the ways in which City Year shaped alumni civic engagement, intergroup competencies, and career satisfaction. Recommendations for City Year programming and further research are discussed.

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Project Aims

- To leverage qualitative and quantitative inquiry to better understand how the national service experience affects alumni success in key domains

- To identify programmatic features that support alumni success in these key domains.

- To identify how these processes differ for alumni with different identities

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Theory of Change

To address these aims, the Cornell and City Year teams created a Theory of Change to represent the ways in which participation in City Year affects target outcomes for young people.

This model views the Service Year as an intervention to increase civic and community engagement, intergroup competencies, and career satisfaction in the years after service for the young adults who participate in the program. Multiple features of the program, such as exposure to inequity, skill building, and setting climate affect the way the program influences outcomes.
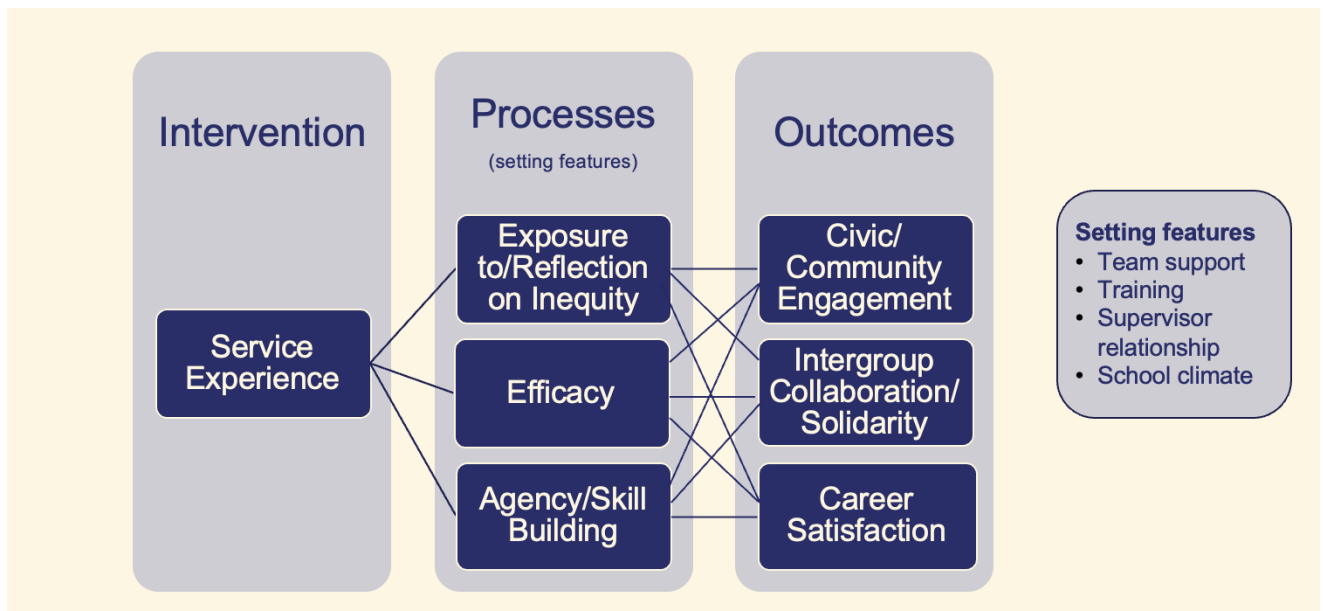
Research Questions

How does the City Year experience affect alumni civic and community engagement?

Increasing civic engagement was a founding goal of City Year. In today's diverse world, where not everyone is welcome or included in civic institutions, engagement in the community becomes increasingly relevant and important. We sought to measure alumni involvement in their community and civic institutions, and to explore how their City Year experience informs their current levels of involvement.

How does the City Year experience affect motivation and ability to work with diverse others?

City Year aims to train Corps Members to work across lines of difference. We sought to identify alumni comfort and ability to interact and collaborate with people from different backgrounds.

How does City Year experience affect career preparedness?

City Year aims to train Corps Members to succeed in their careers. We assessed alumni career satisfaction, and explored ways in which the City Year experience affected job skills, preparedness, and goals.

Methods

1. Collaborative Process

This partnership sought to create and implement an equity-based approach that centered the voices of those closest to the work. This project was conducted in close partnership between Cornell and City Year, with team members meeting every week (and often more frequently) for the two years of project duration. These meetings led to the development of a Theory of Change and research questions. These questions led us to a multi-methods research plan.

2. Quantitative Methods

Quantitative methods were employed to explore which aspects of the City Year experience were associated with civic and community engagement, intergroup competencies, and career satisfaction, and to identify associations between demographic categories and these processes.

City Year team members and Cornell researchers worked together to embed relevant questions about outcomes of interest in the FY 2023 City Year Alumni survey, which was sent to all CY alumni in February 2023 and had over 2,000 respondents.

The Cornell researchers then built a new database linking the 2019 Corps Member Surveys to the 2023 Alumni Survey. 2019 was chosen as the last full year of in person service before interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These two sets of surveys were merged in order to determine how experiences during the 2019 corps year predicted attitudes and behaviors among this cohort of alumni four years post CY, in 2023. Alumni from all CY sites were included in this analysis.

A dataset was built containing information on alumni (N=2166) graduating in the 2019 corps year. Linear regression models were run to assess the association between various aspects of the CY experience and outcomes of civic/community engagement, intergroup competencies, and career satisfaction among these alumni, adjusting for race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic background.

3. Qualitative Methods

Qualitative inquiry was selected to explore how alumni engaged in their communities, worked with diverse others, and pursued meaningful careers. This work sought to understand how the City Year experience informed alumni development in these areas.

Four sites were selected for this research based on reported levels of the outcomes of interest from the 2021 Alumni Survey. Columbia, SC, Columbus, OH, Denver, CO, and New York, NY were approached by the City Year Research Team to discuss the project. After meeting with a

member of the City Year Research Team and the Cornell Research Team, all sites agreed to participate.

Recent alumni (up to ten years post-service) from these sites received an email explaining the study and inviting them to join. Three different interviews were conducted with groups of alumni from each site. Each interview focused on one of the following topics: civic and community engagement, intergroup competencies, and career satisfaction.

Small group interviews were held on Zoom with 2-8 alumni present in each session. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. A total of 49 unique participants took part. Some alumni chose to participate in multiple sessions. Participants received $60 gift cards to GrubHub as thanks for participation.

Transcripts were transcribed and coded by the Cornell research team with help from undergraduate and graduate Research Assistants. Interviews were analyzed in multiple rounds. The first round followed a grounded theory approach that sought to build theory from our data. First, the lead researcher made analytic memos noting theoretical, methodological, and personal observations after each interview. Research assistants then listened to the recording of each interview and completed analytic memos and an assessment of the "5Rs" framework from Research Talk Inc/The Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, which seeks to identify routines, rituals, rules, relationships, and roles within the data. A second round of deductive coding was then conducted to build out answers to our research questions based on the previous round of coding.

Findings from each set of interviews were shared with the City Year Working Group on a monthly basis in order to incorporate feedback and questions. Site Directors were encouraged to participate in these meetings so that site voice was elevated and incorporated into our understanding of the data.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative analyses of 2019 Corps Member surveys and the FY 2023 Alumni Survey allowed us to explore which specific program features predicted outcomes of interest, and to identify how these associations differed by demographic factors.

Impact/Program Manager relationship, partner teacher relationship, team dynamics, site inclusivity, and work/life balance were examined as potential predictors of civic/community engagement, ability to work across lines of difference, and career satisfaction. Predictors and outcomes can be seen in the tables in the appendix.

1. Which program features predict outcomes?

Out of the program features we examined, three (partner teacher relationship, Site Inclusivity, and Work/Life Balance) were significantly associated with outcomes of interest. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of strong relationships with the partner teacher and an inclusive site climate 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.

Partner Teaching Relationship was significantly associated with efficacy (β=.19, p<.001), intergroup competencies (β=.19, p<.001), and career satisfaction (β=.10, p<.05). These findings suggest that every one-point increase in partner teacher relationship was associated with, on average, .19-point increases in efficacy and intergroup competencies and a .10-point increase in later career satisfaction.

Site Inclusivity was significantly associated with higher increases in reflection (β=.23, p<.001), higher intergroup competencies (β=.34, p<.001), and higher career satisfaction (β=.19, p<.005), and marginally significantly associated with higher efficacy (β= .13, p=.05). These findings suggest that a one-point increase in site inclusivity was associated with, on average, a .23-point increase in reflection, a .19-point increase in career satisfaction, and a .13-point increase in efficacy.

Work/Life Balance was significantly associated with higher career satisfaction, β =.19, p<.005, suggesting that every one-point increase in work/life balance during the corps experience was associated with a .19-point increase, on average, in later career satisfaction.

Program/Impact Manager Relationship and **Team Dynamics** were not statistically significantly associated with any outcomes.

Interestingly, none of these program features predicted any type of future civic/community action (as opposed to reflection and efficacy to be engaged) after the corps year. Future research should seek to identify program features that help corps members to be actively engaged in their communities after completing their service year.

2. For which groups of alumni?

We examined whether the associations between program features and outcomes differed based on participants' demographics. In particular, we examined how associations differed based on race/ethnicity (identifying as Black, Asian, or Latinx as opposed to monoracial White), gender, sexuality (identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer, as opposed to heterosexual), and socioeconomic background, as measured by parental educational attainment (less than college degree, BA/Associates, or graduate degree).

We found that **Black alumni** reported significantly less increased reflection as compared to their white peers, β=-27, p<.001. This finding could indicate that Black corps, more so than White corps members, had already seen issues of systemic inequity firsthand before beginning City Year.

LGBQ respondents on average reported significantly higher increases in reflection (β=.11, p<.016) and overall action (β=.10, p<.05) than their heterosexual peers, as well as significantly lower traditional action (β=-.17, p<.01). LGBQ corps members, on average, reported increased reflection on systemic inequity after City Year, as well as increased actions as a result of this reflection, and also lower rates of donating and volunteering.

Higher Socio-Economic Status (SES) was associated with significantly lower increases in efficacy, β=-.11, p<.05, such that participants from more affluent backgrounds did not report as much increase in efficacy to make change as a result of their service year. Perhaps participants from wealthier backgrounds entered City Year with higher senses of efficacy, or perhaps these participants were more pessimistic about the difficulty of making change.

Future research should seek to understand further how to continue to innovate the ACME platform to best serve a diverse ACM community.

Qualitative Findings

Cornell researchers spoke with recent City Year alumni (graduated in the past ten years) from Columbia, Columbus, Denver, and NYC. Interviews focused on civic and community engagement, intergroup skills, and career preparation and satisfaction.

Civic and Community Engagement Development

Several key points emerged from conversations with alumni around engagement and service.

1. City Year built skills and affirmed participants' values around service.

The City Year experience helped alumni develop skills around service.

> First, alumni gained knowledge about issues of inequality, which supported their involvement. As one young woman shared, *"I think being more educated on the issue makes for better activism, right? Like I'm able to come forward knowing this information and knowing a little bit more about what systematic changes may need to happen in order to bridge that gap to promote equality in a community that has historically not experienced that."*

> Alumni also developed concrete skills that were helpful for staying involved in service, including forming relationships. One Denver alumnus who went to Cornell reflected on how doing City Year encouraged him to be engaged in his community beyond his job as a consultant. He explains, *"now I have a standard job, but one thing that I really like to do is find ways to be engaged with the broader community outside of the bubbles where I am always in by my background: Cornell, data analysis in a bank…I know people and I have made a point to meet people in different spheres that I certainly would have not engaged with if I had hung out only with my consultant buddies. What I do now in terms of community engagement, I saw that it was possible in CY because it manufactured the circumstances for me to be in a new area. I am aware that people are more receptive to being friends that you'd anticipate."* City Year helped this young man learn to form and prioritize relationships in his community.

CY also affirmed graduates' commitment to service.

> For example, a Columbia alum reflected that *"[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."*

2. Alumni distinguished between civic and community engagement

Alumni differentiated between civic and community engagement and felt that City Year strengthened their understanding of both these forms of commitment. While they learned about both forms of involvement, alumni reported gaining more experience and efficacy around

community engagement, pointing out that AmeriCorps' non-partisan identity often limited the types of civic actions they could participate in.

> There was a general consensus that civic engagement refers to involvement with political and governmental institutions, while community engagement refers to relationships with peoples and organizations. Illustrating this distinction, an alum of NYC shared that to them, civic engagement *"screams government."* A Denver alum elaborated: *"Civic engagement makes me think of voting, going to a protest, engaging in systems and structures that exist in our society within your community. I think community engagement is definitely more relationship based, like, building relationships with neighbors or students at a school or teachers, you know, just getting to know the personalities in your neighborhood… getting to know the people and being a part of a bigger group, based on the area you live in."*

Alumni reported gaining more experience with community engagement than civic engagement during their service year. As a result, they also felt more equipped to continue community engagement efforts than civic engagement after their service year.

> A Columbus alum explained this process, saying: *"I think that, as an organization, [City Year] strive[s] to have a bigger impact in [the civic engagement] space, but during my time, in the school, in the classroom, I was definitely more involved in community engagement."*

> Corp members shared that they could not be civically involved in partisan or political issues during their service year due to AmeriCorps policy. Many felt that this restriction limited the ways they could engage with their students and their communities. For example, reflecting on the policy that they were not allowed to protest in uniform, one alum shared, *"I remember being frustrated by working in a government funded organization and some of the limitations that were put on us by that."*

> Alumni were frustrated that they didn't have more opportunities to develop civic/activist/advocacy skills. For example, an NYC alum shared: *"I found myself kind of frustrated with the red tape that we experience … I believed in the work we were doing, and I felt sometimes we were limited by how we had to do it."*

There was some frustration with these AmeriCorps policies. Alumni noted that the program is advertised as civic development, but AmeriCorps restrictions limited opportunities for civic engagement. Alumni did develop ample skills in community engagement, but 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 the systemic social change they thought was indicated.

3. Alumni wanted to continue to pursue service after their Corps year

Alumni expressed a commitment to continuing to remain involved. Many sought out careers with an emphasis on service or activism. Others expressed that they would like to be more involved, and suggested City Year events as a potential way to do this.

Many alumni stayed involved in direct service or education through their careers, going on to jobs in social workers or education. Some alumni described their careers as a form of service. In the words of a Denver alum: *"I'm now moving into grad school and have a job doing career counseling, so I think service has always been part of my work life, and that's how I have preferred to work. I think I've always found more meaning and purpose in my work when it's revolved around service."*

A Columbus alum echoed this idea of serving in their work, explaining: *"I think for me, deciding to work in the nonprofit sector right now, like working at City Year, that's kind of how I feel like I'm civically engaged. Knowing that in my day to day I'm part of the organization that's working towards helping students reach their potential, even if I'm not the one directly in the classroom with students."*

Some alumni also expressed a desire for opportunities to engage in service and volunteering with City Year post-service year, saying: *"I think that's just a missed opportunity. I think we have a really large and robust alumni network, and there's probably better ways to engage that group, share resources, share ways for people to be involved."*

4. Corps members grappled with the idea of direct service versus systemic change

For many participants, City Year exposed them to issues of systemic inequity in the education system for the first time. Alumni explained the difficult reality of wanting to make change and sometimes feeling like their work was not enough.

Participants learned about issues of poverty and access to education and understood the youth they worked with through this lens. This exposure to systemic inequity in the education system changed the way alumni thought about service/engagement and social change. As one Denver alumnus explained, *"[City Year] made me think a lot about the structures of the world and especially the US 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…A lot of these kids had all the potential in the world and it's tough, it was really tough, you know I hate to be cynical or upsetting but I remember sitting there thinking 'I don't know how the f*** these kids are going to get out of this situation,' because they just don't have the resources…so I see [systemic issues], like all the time, so I think about it all the time. You have people in situations where like they basically don't have anything, they're really up a creek."*

Participants expressed feeling both encouraged and discouraged about their perceived capacities to make change. They were discouraged by the systematic nature of so many issues, as seen above.

Participants were also encouraged by the relationships they formed and the change they did make for the individual students they worked with. As one Columbus graduate shared, *"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."*

While some participants were overwhelmed by the enormity of structural change needed, many remained committed, commenting, *"If we don't get involved, of course it's not going to get better" (Columbus).* Alumni also reflected on the need for many different types of work, with one NYC alum commenting, *"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."*

Working Across Difference

Conversations with alumni revealed that they gained experience, confidence, and skills working with others from a diverse range of backgrounds.

1. City Year gained experience working with people different from themselves

City Year alumni were exposed to individuals who were different from themselves and learned to work collaboratively despite these differences.

> A Columbia alum shared that teamwork was a central part of the program, saying, *"I was forced to do teamwork, problem solving, and interacting with others and negotiating and compromising. All the basic group skills that I felt that were lacking on my professional side I developed in City Year."*

> This teamwork was unavoidable and pushed corps members to grow from having to rely on each other. One Denver alum shared, *"[I learned] teamwork, because so much of what we did depended entirely on sharing ideas and collaborating…having zero resources and having to be resourceful, teamwork makes that so much easier. Because it's not just you and your ideas. And if you don't have a solution…there are other people around to bounce ideas off of."*

2. City Year alumni developed skills to work with others

Participants agreed that their experience had a major impact on their skills. They reported improvements in their ability to work effectively as a team and collaborate towards a common goal. They reported needing to be flexible, innovative, and open-minded to enhance their working relationships.

> Alumni learned to **respect differences and value** different working styles. A graduate of the Denver site shared that: "*I had a mindset of this is the way that it should be done, and everyone should do it that way… it took time but seeing people who didn't seem to know what they are doing, to learn that they do know they just do it differently and I learned to feel comfortable with that.*"

> Part of this respect involved learning to **identify and acknowledge others' strengths**, rather than expecting everything to be done a certain way. One Denver alum shared the following insight: *"[City Year] showed me how to utilize folks based on their strengths. Not everybody has to do the same things. We should lean on people's strengths. We all contribute differently, so the question then, is how do we maximize [those contributions] in our team?"*

> **Flexibility** was key to this process. A member of the Denver site shared the following observation about learning to work with colleagues successfully: "*It's about being open-minded, seeing things from different directions, people, upbringings, and circumstances than you are used to.*"

Alumni learned **strategies to address conflict** when it did arise. A Columbia alum reflected that, *"I learnt how to think cooperatively in conflictive intimate environments, and that is valuable. There were a lot of opportunities for professional development and learning how to resolve conflict."*

Alumni learned to **effectively communicate** with others from different backgrounds. One NYC alum shared, *"How to talk to people is one big skill …I [was working with] minorities. Typically, poor and demographically different than me. I was just surrounded by people who are different than me and so I was the minority, and that was really informative and educational. I learned a lot about how to talk to people who I didn't really necessarily have cultural connection with. That was huge, and so I use those skills now. Like I said, how to listen to people too."*

Alumni learned the importance of **relationship building** with kids, partner teachers, and team members, and got better at forming these relationships. An alumnus from Columbia reflected on how building relationships was necessary for his students to trust him enough for him to do his job. He reflected on how learning a few phrases of Spanish went a long way in forming a relationship with a shy student, saying: *"One of my Hispanic students, when I first began tutoring her, she would not talk at all, she just wouldn't. She was very uncomfortable and she could not work. It wasn't necessarily that she couldn't do her work, it was just that she just didn't know if it was okay to be herself. And being herself meant that she could speak Spanish. I ended up having to try and start putting things in Spanish just to make her a lot more comfortable... by the end, she not only saw me as a friend, but she saw me as somebody who could really help her and someone that she really respected, and for me that shift was major. I saw a change in her grades and she looked forward to the tutoring sessions."*

City Year members learned to **remain true to themselves** while also respecting others as they developed their interpersonal skills. A Denver alum explained: *"Having confidence in your belief and its merit and value was beneficial for me to dare to talk about different ways with different people and incorporate my own and be able to speak up. I probably wouldn't have had that exposure had I not had my CY experience."*

3. It is unclear if this experience affected social networks in lasting ways

Alumni shared that they met and worked with people from many different backgrounds during City Year. For some alumni, these relationships developed into lasting friendships. Others felt that after City Year, they returned to their previous social networks. Even if their social networks did not diversify, alumni did feel increased efficacy and ability to work with and talk to people from different backgrounds.

A Columbus alum explained that: *"City Year exposed me to people I would have never met."*

A Denver alum explained that after City Year, *"Given the nature of my job, I don't encounter as many diverse people anymore, but at least I have the comfort of knowing how to talk to very diverse people."*

Career Preparation and Satisfaction

The ACM experience and CY trainings helped alumni clarify their own strengths, values, and interests while building a host of transferable skills for workplace success. Alumni reflected on the desire for more professional development, career coaching, and networking in a range of industries.

1. City Year alumni gained clarity on their own strengths, values, and interests throughout their time at City Year

The City Year experience helped alumni articulate their values.

> For some alumni, the experience affirmed the commitment to service that brought them to City Year. For example, a Columbia graduate reflected that: *"Helping and serving people, whatever type of job or career that ended up being…[CY] showed me that that is what I wanted to do…. For me it's about service, and not necessarily about the paycheck. It's about having some type of lasting impact on somebody's life."*
>
> City Year core values also helped alumni develop and enact their own ideals throughout their careers. A Denver alum reflected on the significance of these values, saying, *"Thinking back, I find that a lot of these [10 core values of City Year] are central in everything that I do. Specifically, teamwork, empathy, and inclusivity...All of those are really important qualities for anyone that works in education or with people in general. But I think that they have a large role to play in what I do today. So, I hadn't thought about it before, but I think that being in the City Year framework really helped me develop a lot of those values."*

The City Year experience also helped alumni identify their own strengths, which in turn helped them decide what kind of job they were interested in.

> For example, some corps members realized their own potential for leadership through the program. A Columbia graduate shared, *"I was a team lead and it taught me that I am a natural leader, even when I don't exactly know what to do or what's happening. I can plan things out, be there for people with empathy, assess situations and see the best way to handle them. It showed me a different side of myself. It gave me clarity…It gave me a chance to know I'm a leader."*

Alumni also found that City Year helped them clarify their own interests.

> For some alumni, the experience affirmed their decision to remain in education, and gave insight on what type of role they wanted to pursue, for example switching what grade levels they wanted to teach or shifting from a classroom teacher to a counselor. For others, it clarified that their interest in education was not at the center of their career goals. For example, one alumnus in NYC explained that many of the kids he worked with had family members involved in the criminal legal system. Seeing how this system affected the kids in his classroom sparked an interest in law school. He pursued this degree out of an interest *"in something with education policy. Like bigger picture education, rather than a teacher on the ground."*

2. Alumni developed a host of skills through their City Year experience that prepared them for the workforce.

In addition to the interpersonal skills discussed above, alumni gained a range of workforce and personal skills.

Alumni developed workforce skills such as **time management, organization, and creativity**.

> An NYC alum explained that the corps experience taught her how to **manage her time**, saying, *"I guess another thing that comes out of it was time management, because there were so many responsibilities on us as core members."*

> Corps members also developed strong **organizational skills**. A Columbia alum reflected on what skills she developed, saying, *"Definitely planning and organizing. That's something I used a lot when I was in City Year because I had to be able to manage my time, I had to meet with my teammates, I had to coordinate other things with the staff."*

> Alumni also built up their own **creativity and resourcefulness**. A Denver alum shared how they grew these skills, saying: *"Being resourceful…We had like no funding and yet, they wanted us to put on all these programs and these activities…So we spent a lot of time in-kinding…it was really cool for me to learn how to just ask questions, ask for things, and you will receive most of the time. And also just using things that usually we overlook, like, oh, it's just construction paper, like, whatever. But just using what's at hand… So being resourceful, thinking outside of the box, being really creative, so that we could produce these things for the kids that was like fun and enjoyable."*

Alumni also developed personal skills such as **dedication** and **work ethic, patience, and boundary setting.**

> Alumni explained that they learned to be **dedicated** to their work and developed **strong work ethics**. An NYC alumnus explained that, *"You can't just call out sick because, like the days you didn't work--maybe I was out one or two days a year--you felt like you were missed. It was something the kids missed, you are missed, and work fell behind if you were just out a couple days. So you wanted to be in every day, and that was the big thing, that was the formative years of building a work ethic.*

> The experience also helped corps members become more **patient**. As one Columbus alum shared, *"Patience, I would say that's a top skill…when you're working with teachers, when you're working with parents, working with students."*

> Participants also learned the importance of caring for themselves and setting boundaries to protect themselves from burnout. A Columbia alumna explained the importance of "finding that balance now to be of service to others but also protecting myself, my mental health and, my boundaries," when the work requires a lot of time and effort.

In addition, alumni gained skills to **further equitable workforces**. They gained skills to advocate for students, and developed empathy and perspective taking.

A Columbia alum shared that her City Year experience "*helped me advocate for my minority students. So that I can stand in the space for them and dispel the stereotypes my counterparts place. CY gave me a chance to learn about other people and how to understand other people.*"

A Columbus alumna shared that this experience helped her "grow personal empathy," as she learned more about education and society.

3. Alumni desired more concrete support identifying potential career paths

While the City Year experience helped alumni clarify their own values, strengths, and interests, it did not help them set concrete career goals. Participants had positive impressions of career preparation programs but did not find them helpful in concrete ways for those outside the education field.

A member of the New York City site shared that *"It was pretty education-centric coming out, and if you weren't going to be an educator they didn't frown upon that, they just didn't really offer you anything that I can remember as being particularly helpful."*

Alumni felt there was support for pursuing a career in education, but less so for other careers. For example, a Denver alumna shared, *"My program manager said 'I will write you one letter of recommendation only and it will be for Teach for America…' I came to TFA after City Year in Baltimore and I've been here ever since."*

Participants found LACY days and professional development training interesting and engaging, but not helpful for building a concrete career plan. These training sessions were helpful for teambuilding and general goal setting. A Columbia alum explained this sentiment, saying, *"Leadership Development days were important. It was a time to get to know people at a personal level and I still call on that and those people for my ethical dilemmas." (Columbia)*

Alumni Feedback:

Throughout these qualitative conversations, alumni recounted multiple pain points and offered suggestions to create a safer environment to support corps members' thriving. These recommendations, drawn from our qualitative interviews, are summarized here. Many identify systemic features of AmeriCorps programming, identifying the need for broad structural changes in the field of young adult service programs. Corps members understood that some of these barriers are intrinsic to AmeriCorps, but wanted more help from City Year identifying and applying for benefits they were eligible for.

1. Need for more support

- **Financial support.** Alumni almost uniformly expressed the need for higher living stipends. Alumni struggled to cover the costs of housing and transportation. Participants remarked that the low stipend acts as a barrier preventing young people from poor backgrounds and/or with financial responsibilities from joining City Year. The corps as a whole is less diverse because, for example, young parents cannot afford to both serve and support their family. Additionally, corps members were aware that only those from more affluent backgrounds could afford "extras," such as a car to commute to school, meals out, or movie tickets, saying "*The few students who didn't have [financial] backing were feeling shame in not feeling like they were thriving like everyone else. They didn't have money at the end of the month.*" This disparity created a dynamic in which corps members from less wealthy backgrounds had fewer opportunities to socialize with their peers. As one Denver alum remarked, "*I don't think you're setting people up for success when you don't give them what they need or make them suffer while they're trying to serve.*"

- **Housing support.** Many alumni described living situations that felt unpleasant or even unsafe, and that required long commutes. They recounted struggling to obtain housing in unfamiliar cities. Alumni recounted needing to commit to housing before knowing where they would be placed, often leading to difficult commutes to their schools. They expressed the need for housing assistance from City Year to live somewhere safe and a reasonable commute to school. The AmeriCorps stipend does not cover housing in more expensive markets. As one NYC alim remarked, "*We should make sure that everyone is housed well. The NY real estate market can be very unstable. If corps members are not housed well, they cannot do well at work.*" Alumni remarked that learning their school assignments earlier would help them to find appropriate housing.

- **Transition support.** The transition both into and out of City Year felt disorienting. As one Columbia alumna recounted, "*It was such a huge experience to go through, and then it ended so abruptly, and it was a really hard transition.*" This difficulty manifested in multiple domains.
    - **Healthcare.** When concluding their service, alumni expressed the need to extend their health insurance coverage while searching for a job, as they were too busy during the corps year to search for work. As one Columbia alum

reflected, *"Keeping that insurance open for a couple additional months until corps members are able to find something else, I think, would have been helpful."*

- o **Career support.** As discussed above, participants expressed the need for more resources for corps members not planning to pursue careers in education. Participants liked the Idealist's Journey programming, and were generally favorable toward LACY programming, but expressed the need for high quality training and resources around the job search. Participants also expressed the need for more information and resources around University/Career partnerships, as they had trouble accessing this information.

- **Physical/Mental health resources.** Alumni recounted feeling burned out and overwhelmed by their workloads. Many alumni felt unable to take sick days because of pressure to support their teammates and the kids they worked with. Participants described long and stressful days that excluded the full participation of corps members with disabilities or chronic health issues. A better work-life balance with more reasonable workloads and access to time off is needed to build a more inclusive environment where corps members can thrive. Alumni also expressed the desire for talk therapy during their experience.

- **Support for Asian American corps members.** Multiple alumni, across both the qualitative interviews and write-in section of the Alumni Survey, recounted feeling excluded from spaces for corps members of color. Across years, alumni felt they were told that Asians aligned with whiteness and were not given space to express or explore their own lived experiences with discrimination and anti-Asian racism. These corps members experienced micro-aggressions, such as being called a "*China doll*" by students and did not have a space or support to process these experiences. City Year's future racial equity work should seek to make space for participants from all racial backgrounds, and to acknowledge both the differences and similarities in types of racism and oppression experienced by corps members from different backgrounds.

- **Support for LGBTQ corps members.** Alumni reported receiving little support for navigating their sexual orientation in the classroom. One participant commented that "*it was not a very gay friendly environment in certain ways, and a lot of our students would have been openly homophobic. So, I did initially make the choice to not disclose that information, because I wanted to have a good chance of creating connections with the students.*" This participant reported experiencing frequent homophobic taunts from his students and being unsure how best to respond. CY should offer training and support in this area.

2. Value of alumni networking opportunities

Most alumni expressed the desire to maintain their relationships after City Year to support both personal and professional growth. They shared their desire for more social and professional opportunities to connect with other CY alumni. One NYC alum summed up all three of these motivations, saying, "*I'd like some sort of annual networking event just to reconnect with alumni and see everyone. It could be a whole bunch of different people like educators, lawyers, business people. I haven't like really*

been involved, ever since my first year, so I would want to reconnect and see what I can help current members with and just see what I can do to further the mission."

Alumni mentioned several goals for these opportunities:
- **Social.** Alumni often fall out of touch with their cohort and want the opportunity to reconnect. Additionally, alumni pointed out that CY social events would be very helpful to meet people and make friends when relocating to a new city, due to the camaraderie that develops from the shared experience.
- **Professional.** Alumni thought that social events would be valuable professional development and networking events. They recounted that it would be especially helpful to meet with other young alumni in order to connect with people who were at a similar point in the career process or several steps ahead, as opposed to more formal networking events with alumni who were too far along in their careers to relate.
- **Service.** Many alumni wanted to be more involved in service. They envisioned CY alumni events as a potential opportunity to give back to their communities. One Columbus alum reflected on the observation that interview participants were sharing a desire to be more involved in service, saying, "*I think that's just like a missed opportunity. I think we have a really large and robust alumni network, and there's probably better ways to engage that group, share resources, share ways for people to be involved.*"

Increased alumni networking would enable City Year to support social capital building as a facet of Alumni and ACME programs. Social media can play an important role in leveraging team and corps relationships to add value to ACM's lives after they graduate.

Researcher Comments

In addition to recommendations drawn from participants' own suggestions in the qualitative interviews, others emerged from the research findings and discussions with the City Year working group around graduates' efforts to understand their roles in service and society after their corps year.

Corps members entered City Year with the desire to make positive change through service. Interviews with both alumni and staff revealed that often, corps members feel overwhelmed or helpless as they develop an understanding of the scope of systemic issues, such as poverty and racism, facing the communities where they serve. The idealism that drives corps members to serve also motivates a desire to make visible change quickly. As a result, many corps members become frustrated that they cannot do more for their students, and staff expressed feeling this frustration. Corps members desired more opportunities to make systemic change through involvement in activism and advocacy pursuits that are prohibited by City Year's need to remain apolitical. This process relates to our findings that alumni felt more aware of inequality through their City Year experience but did not feel more civic engagement or agency.

Increased support and meaning-making for corps members around recognizing inequity and understanding their own role in making positive change could help address these issues. The following would support this goal:

- **Provide clarity around City Year's scope and aims.** Based on qualitative interviews with alumni, it seems that clear messaging that City Year focuses on direct service, and is not an opportunity for advocacy, organizing, or systems change will better align corps' members expectations. Recruitment and training materials should emphasize City Year's strengths as 1) a direct service provider to students in under resourced schools and 2) a valuable opportunity for corps members to get educated about social issues, build skills, and form a network to support future change efforts.

- **Links to partner organizations.** Providing information on local advocacy and activist organizations corps members can join after the service year would also be helpful.

- **Discuss trajectories of social change efforts**. Social change takes time, effort, and organization. Many CY alumni grow frustrated with the systemic nature of educational inequity and feel discouraged about their ability to make change. Situating City Year's work within the broader ecosystem and timeline of organizations working for increased equity would help these corps members build perspective around the work they are doing. Some alumni we spoke to developed an understanding that change is a slow process, and often driven by organizations like City Year that continue to work on an issue over many years. Making this lesson explicit in trainings would support corps members who feel like their work is not meaningful, by teaching them that change is slow and the results are not always immediately visible.

- **Build in opportunities for action and advocacy.** Alumni and staff both commented that corps members often want to make big changes, and are frustrated at the smaller scale nature of their work. Building in opportunities for corps members to take on some action and advocacy work would deepen their reflection on critical issues and increase their efficacy to make change. For example, corps members could work together to research an issue they find upsetting, look into past change efforts, and brainstorm new solutions. They could then present these ideas to school board members or administrators once per year.

Limitations

Causality. It is important to note that none of our research assessed causality. Rather, we explored change over time and qualitative processes. Experimental work/randomized controlled trials would be needed to assess the causal impact of program features on outcomes of interest.

Civic engagement. Aspects of City Year that promoted later civic engagement remain unclear. In our quantitative work, we did not find any program features that predicted future civic/community engagement (as opposed to reflection and efficacy to be engaged) after the corps year. Our qualitative work suggested that corps members continued to be involved in their communities, but desired to be more engaged in civic issues and service. Future research should seek to identify program features that help corps members to be actively engaged in these issues after completing their service year.

Multiple contexts. City Year corps members are embedded in multiple contexts during their service year, including the classroom, the school, the team, and the site. This work did not capture the unique contributions of each of these contexts. For example, although Site Directors were involved in recruitment and the interpretation of findings, this project did not include site visits to understand the broader ecosystems in which corps members serve.

Next Steps

1. Identity and Belonging

Future research should seek to understand how to continue to innovate the ACME platform to best serve a diverse ACM community. In addition, future research should investigate how a sense of belonging in a diverse team may influence the development of skills and identity formation for ACMs.

2. Roles of multiple contexts

Future research should explore how multiple contexts (i.e., school, corps team, community, socio-political context, etc.) interact with ACM setting features (team support, training, supervisor relationship and school climate) to impact ACM outcomes (i.e., civic and community engagement, intergroup collaboration/solidarity, and career satisfaction).

3. Long-term capacity of alumni to work across lines of difference

Future research should examine alumni capacity to work across lines of difference long after their year of service, and identify factors that support their long-term capacity.

Glossary

This research project addresses complex ideas. Many of the topics we sought to explore have a range of different definitions. Here we provide definitions for commonly used terms, drawn from conversations among the researchers, City Year, City Year alumni, and Einhorn Collaborative. These definitions continue to evolve.

Bridging refers to the interest in, and ability to, bring together people from various backgrounds and with a range of opinions to collaborate in a respectful and welcoming manner.

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.

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.

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

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

Service did not have one clear definition among the alumni we spoke to. Participants spoke of their time in City Year as service, and also used this term to refer to later employment as a teacher. It was unclear how service overlapped with civic and community engagement, and how it related to ideas of volunteerism, giving back, or general prosocial behavior.

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

Working across difference is an important component of bridging, and refers to the ability to work respectfully and effectively with others who come from different backgrounds and hold different beliefs and priorities.

Appendix

Quantitative Variables

Table 1. Predictor Variables

SCALE	ITEMS
Manager Relationship	I feel supported by my Impact/Program Manager (Manager)
	My Manager creates an environment that fosters a sense of community
	My Manager creates an environment of open, honest two-way communication
	My Manager demonstrates a day-to-day commitment to what they communicated through their team
	My Manager keeps me informed about what is happening
	My Manager coaches me on managing conflict
	My Manager regularly checks in with how I am doing (not just work related)
	My Manager helps me make meaning of what I experience in my role
Partner Teacher Relationship	The Start of the Year meeting with my partner teacher helped me prepare for my role in the classroom
	How frequently do you meet with partner teachers?
	I have the skills to address challenges and concerns with my partner teacher
Team Dynamics	I feel I am part of a team
	There is open and honest two-way communication at City Year
	Most people here make a good effort to collaborate with others when appropriate
	Workloads are divided fairly among people on my team
	We hold ourselves and our team members accountable for results
Site Inclusivity	I can be my authentic self at work
	I feel like I belong at City Year
	I feel respected at City Year
	If I feel excluded or subject to micro-aggressions, I feel I can address it here
	When I speak up, my opinion is valued
	I can voice contrary opinion without fear of negative consequences
	City Year builds teams that are diverse and inclusive
	City Year shows through actions that diversity, equity, inclusivity and belonging are important
	City Year believes that people can always greatly improve their talents and abilities
	People from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to succeed at City Year
Work/Life Balance	Generally, I believe my workload is reasonable for my role
	I am able to arrange time off from service when I need to
	City Year gives me the flexibility to balance my work priorities and my personal life

Table 2. Outcome Variables

OUTCOME	SCALE	ITEMS
Civic/community engagement	Reflection	Through my City Year experience, I saw issues of systemic inequity firsthand
	Efficacy	Through my City Year experience, I saw my personal ability to influence change
	Overall Action	I have made choices or taken actions (or plan to do so) because of seeing these issues of systemic inequity during my City Year experience
		Service with City Year has increased the ways in which I am civically engaged
	Traditional involvement	Since your time with City Year, how likely have you been to volunteer for a cause or organization?
		Since your time with City Year, how likely have you been to donate money to a cause or organization?
	Critical involvement	Since your time with City Year, how likely have you been to advocate for a cause?
		Since your time with City Year, how likely have you been to use your platform to amplify a cause?
		Since your time with City Year, how likely have you been to get involved in activism?
		Since your time with City Year, how likely have you been to get found or take a leadership role in an organization?
Intergroup competencies		City Year helped me to effectively work with people who are from different backgrounds than my own
		City Year helped me to develop relationships with people who are from different backgrounds than my own
Career satisfaction		City Year helped prepare me for my career path
		Overall, I am happy with my chosen career path

Qualitative Interview Scripts

Civic/Community Engagement Protocol (75 min)
One of City Year's goals is to develop civic leaders by preparing corps members to actively engage in their communities. Today I'm going to ask you about your relationship to civic leadership and your community.

1. When you hear the term "civic engagement," and "community engagement," what actions do you think of? How are these terms similar or different?

As we've been discussing, people get involved in their communities in lots of different ways, including volunteering with local organizations, serving on boards, founding organizations, getting involved in local politics, protesting, or advocating for social change.

2. To what extent did an interest in these activities affect your decision to join City Year?

3. Can you describe your involvement in any of these kinds of activities during your service year?
   a. How did participating in these activities affect the way you think about civic or community engagement?
   b. How about your motivation to be involved?
   c. What about your confidence that you can make change?
   d. What about your attitudes toward interpersonal vs structural change?

4. How have you been involved in these activities after City Year? If you have not continued doing this work, why not?
   a. What challenges have you encountered in continuing this work after CY?

5. How did your CY experience affect this work you were just telling me about?
   a. What specific programmatic aspects of CY influenced your current civic/community engagement activities?
   b. What specific skills or competencies did you develop during CY that help you do this work?
   c. Are there resources or programming CY could have offered during your service year to support your continued community and civic engagement?
   d. How could the CY community support you now, as an alum, to continue contributing to your community?

6. Anything else you'd like to add that we have not covered?

Working across Difference (75 min)
One of City Year's core goals is to prepare young leaders to successfully work across lines of difference. We'd like to know how your City Year experience affected the ways you work with others and think about difference.

1. When I say that City Year values preparing corps members to work across lines of difference, what does this phrase mean to you?
    a. Why is this important?

2. How did CY change your attitude towards working with others who are different from you?
    a. Did it impact your confidence to do so productively?
    b. Your ability to do so effectively?
    c. The importance you place on doing so?

3. Tell me about a time in your CY experience you worked with someone from a different background or with a different perspective to achieve a goal or overcome a challenge.
    a. What was the goal? How did you work together to achieve it?
    b. What were the challenges? How did you overcome them?
    c. Can you give an example of how your ACM experience influenced your ability to work with those who are less privileged than you? More privileged?
        i. More progressive? More traditional?

4. What specific aspects of the CY experience affected the ways you work with others from diverse backgrounds?
    a. Examples could include CY trainings
    b. collaboration in work setting, experiences with ACM peers, teachers and school staff, students
    c. Are there resources or programming that CY could have offered around working across difference that would have been helpful to you?
    d. Are there resources that CY could offer you in this area today that would be helpful?

5. One thing CY is thinking about is how national service participation can shift and broaden our social networks to introduce us to people we might not have met through school or work. How has the CY experience influenced the social networks you belong to?
    a. Have your friendships become more diverse?
    b. Have you worked with people in a broader range of industries or from a broad range of backgrounds as a result of your time at CY?

6. Is there anything else you'd like to add that hasn't come up yet?

Career Readiness and Satisfaction (75 min)

City Year aims to support corps members' personal and professional development. We want to understand how your time with CY affected your career trajectory.

1. When you think about your time with CY, how did that experience affect your career choices?
    a. In terms of interests/ideals?
    b. Exposure to issues of inequity in education or other systems?
    c. Concrete factors like networking, loan forgiveness, etc

2. How did CY career development trainings lead you to your current career path?
    a. What influence did the PD sessions/LACY have?
    b. What about University/Career Partnerships?
    c. Are there any programming or resources around career development that would have been helpful to you that CY could offer?

3. How did you grow and change as a professional from the CY experience?
    a. Clarity in purpose and goals?
    b. Values?

4. What skills from your CY experience do you use to be successful in your job today?

5. How satisfied are you with your current career/educational pursuits?
    a. How does what you are doing now align with what you expected at the end of CY year?