

Experience Corps: Benefits of Volunteering

July 10, 2008

Experience Corps[®] (EC) is a program that brings older adults into public elementary schools to improve academic achievement of students, through one-to-one tutoring, small group academic help and assisting teachers. It has been in existence for over 13 years and currently operates in 20 cities across the country. The Atlantic Philanthropies provided funding to Washington University in St. Louis to conduct a national evaluation of EC.

Over 250 members of EC were asked about the benefits that they experienced from participating in the program, and they overwhelmingly reported positive effects on the students and themselves.

Benefits to Students and Teachers

- Over 80% of the EC members said it was “very true” that their work had a positive impact.
- Almost 100% believed that they helped the children they worked with.
- Nearly 99% felt that the teachers believed that they made a positive impact.

As seen below, about 67% report that student reading abilities improved a lot or a little; while 33% saw no change or deterioration. When the tutors saw little or no improvement, they attributed this to student absenteeism, student problem with concentrating, and student behavioral problems. For over 80% of the students, the tutors saw improvement in self-confidence.

Improvement in reading abilities

Improved a lot	29.2%
Improved a little	37.5%
Stayed the same	25.7%
Gotten a little worse	3.5%
Gotten a lot worse	4.2%

Benefits to Self

The following table shows that EC volunteers felt their work in the program benefited them personally. The single item that received the strongest endorsement about the positive effect of participation regarded self-esteem: 96% of the members agreed that they felt better about themselves since working with EC. More than 85% of volunteers felt that their lives had improved because of their involvement in EC. More than half of the members strongly agreed that their circle of friends increased because of involvement with EC.

	Not true	A little true	Somewhat true	Very true
Use time more productively	4%	7%	27%	62%
Feel better about self	1%	3%	23%	73%
Increased circle of friends	6%	10%	28%	56%
Increased social activities	19%	18%	36%	26%
Life has improved	4%	10%	41%	45%

“It was a revitalization of my first love -- teaching. It makes me feel young again... Back in the swing.”

Benefits to Family

Although many participants stated that they have not thought about the effects of their involvement with EC on family members, they noted numerous positive effects.

The top four benefits to family members include:

- Family members are less concerned about EC member and happy about her/his involvement; family members see positive change (27%)
- EC member brings resources, information, and new skills back to family (26%)
- EC member has better relationships and communication with family (23%)
- Family/friends are getting involved with volunteering (14%)

Negative Effects

A very small number of EC participants (6%) identified some negative effects of their participation in EC. These negative effects included:

- Disappointment with administration
- Distress to see social conditions and feeling unable to help
- Stress causing mental/physical problems
- Contraction of illnesses from children/teachers
- Interference with family time and activities

Variations in self-reported benefits

The benefits reported by EC members did not vary by gender, income or living arrangement. That is, both males and females, individuals of all income levels, and those living with others or alone reported the same levels of benefit. However, those EC members who were African American or Hispanic reported more benefits than Caucasians. Those with lower levels of education reported more benefits than those with higher education. Also, the older the EC member, the more benefit reported. These findings suggest that by targeting people of color, those with less education, and older people, the benefits of participation can be maximized.

When considering program factors, those EC members getting stipends, those who volunteered 14-16 hours, and those who volunteered for more months during the academic year reported more benefits. Further, those who believe that their work made a great impact on the students reported more benefits to themselves.

“I’m much happier. I have more ambition and I feel better about myself. That makes it easier on my family.”

Summary and Implications

These findings demonstrate that EC members perceive that volunteering benefits the students, teachers, their families, and themselves. Negative effects from their involvement with EC were very infrequently reported.

EC members reported stronger benefits to the students than to themselves, and this is consistent

with the enterprise of volunteering. The primary objective of volunteering is to serve others; but clearly there are secondary gains as volunteers experience personal benefit. Over 85% agreed that their lives are improved due to involvement with EC. These findings suggest that these positive changes might be associated with increased self esteem, socialization, and productive use of time.

It appears that there are “spill-over effects” to family members and that a full accounting of benefits to students, teachers, EC members, and their families is necessary to understand the full effects of this program.

These findings suggest that certain demographic and program features are related to the benefit experienced by the EC members. The program may produce more benefit among its membership by targeting members who are older, have lower levels of education, and are African-American or Hispanic. Also, ensuring participation throughout the academic year and providing a stipend may also maximize outcomes.

Previous research has established that a person’s perception of benefit from an activity is important. The positive effects experienced by a volunteer can affect satisfaction, retention, and well-being outcomes. This study demonstrates that EC members perceive positive effects to multiple beneficiaries, which potentially ensures other program and health outcomes.

Research team at Washington University in St. Louis: Nancy Morrow-Howell, Stacey McCrary, Ernest Gonzales, Amanda McBride, Song-Iee Hong, Wayne Blinne

Mathematica Policy Research provided data collection services

This work was funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies