

April, 2011

## Experience Corps: Pathway to New Engagements

Experience Corps<sup>®</sup> (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 15 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.

Research on outcomes of volunteering in later life largely focuses on the physical and mental health of volunteers. This research focus is in contrast to studies on youth, where attention is directed toward the effects of volunteering on life trajectories and subsequent productive and citizen behaviors. It is likely that participation in EC also influences subsequent behaviors and activities of its older participants. As EC members take part in program activities, including training, working with children and teachers, meeting other volunteers, and attending meetings/social events, their social and human capital may be increased and their motivation for new engagements may change.

We examined the effects of participation in EC on subsequent social and civic activity of its members. Further, we explored the extent to which attitudes/actions in the arena of public education are affected by this volunteer experience in public schools.

Data derived from a longitudinal study of older adults who were new EC volunteers in fall of 2006 and 2007. Telephone interviews were conducted with 338 volunteers in fall 2010 to capture work, education, civic, and community activities undertaken subsequent to joining EC. We included those who were still serving in the program as well as those who had terminated. Three to four years later, 26% of respondents were still serving in the program.

### Since joining EC....

Eighty-four percent of EC members reported that participation in the program changed their lives for the better. Of those, 45% said it changed their lives “a lot” and 39% said “some.”

Subsequent to joining EC:

- 16% started a new job
- 53% started another volunteer position
- 40% started a social/community activity
- 39% took a class/started educational program

Twenty-four percent of respondents reported no new involvement in working, volunteering, community, or educational activities since they joined EC.

The vast majority of EC members who began working after joining EC went into jobs associated with teaching and education. The second most common type of work was administrative/clerk. Regarding new volunteering, there was a wide range of types of engagement, but educational activities were most common, followed by activities with religious organizations, work with older adults, and food/shelter programs. New community activities included book clubs, neighborhood associations, choirs, sports/recreation activities, and advisory board memberships. Class types included computer, job/volunteer training, language/culture, and arts/crafts.

### Associative factors

Those EC members who were looking for work when joining EC were more likely to begin a new job. More educated members and those with more active volunteer histories were more likely to go on to subsequent engagements of all types. Females more frequently joined educational classes and community activities than their male counterparts.

## Nature of EC influences

Participation in the EC program influences subsequent activities in a variety of ways. Most respondents listed more than one way that EC participation played a role in their life trajectories. Below are mechanisms and the percent of respondents who endorsed them:

- Made a connection (40.9%)
- Increased motivation (53.6%)
- Increased skills/knowledge (70.3%)
- Increased confidence (71.5%)
- Increased realization regarding importance of organized activities/daily structure (75.6%)
- Increased desire to do things outside of the home (78.3%)

## Changes in attitudes and actions regarding public education

Eighty-six percent of EC members reported that involvement in public schools changed their views on public education.

	Not at all true/only a little true	Some-what true	Very true	No change
More likely to vote in favor of funding	14%	15%	66%	5%
More interested in public education	10%	21%	65%	4%
More likely to speak up/go to meeting	14%	28%	56%	2%
Better understanding of teacher's job	6%	18%	74%	2%
More awareness of the needs of the children	4%	12%	83%	1%
More knowledge about policies	13%	40%	46%	1%

For example, EC members said that involvement in public schools:

- “Made me an advocate of younger people in the public school system.”
- “Gave true perspective of challenges of educating kids in the inner city.”
- “Gave me insight on conditions of school; how in need the children really were.”
- “Made me realize how hard elementary school teachers with large classes have to work.”

## Summary and implications

Many EC members reported that they started new work, volunteer, community, and educational activities since joining the program. Although the study design does not allow a conclusion that participation in EC directly led to these activities, these findings suggest that participation in EC is a pathway to other productive and civic activities. EC members endorsed a variety of ways that the program facilitated subsequent engagement. Although making connections and increasing skills, motivation, and confidence were frequently reported, the positive experience of “getting out of the house” and having more structure in life appeared to be the most influential.

Findings indicate that when older adults serve in public schools, they change their attitudes about public education. EC members reported an increased likelihood of engaging in citizen behaviors, like voting and going to a meeting.

These findings suggest that participation in EC motivates and enables older adults to become more engaged in work and community activities. Further, program participation can raise awareness about public issues, like education, and activate older adults to be more civically involved.

Follow-up studies of AmeriCorps participants, 92% of whom are younger adults, conclude that the program “spurs individuals to be agents of positive change in the communities after their service is complete.”<sup>1</sup> This appears true of the Experience Corps program as well. These data suggest that civic service among this population can be viewed as a means as well as an end, just as it is for young people.

---

Research team at Washington University in St. Louis: Nancy Morrow-Howell, Stacey McCrary, Yung Soo Lee, Amanda McBride

Mathematica Policy Research provided data collection services for initial interviews.

This work was funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies

---

<sup>1</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service (2008). Still Serving: Measuring the 8-year impact of AmeriCorps on Alumni. Washington DC.