

No Greater Mission. No Greater Means.

How National Service Can
Advance Bridgebuilding

A Working Paper By
David Eisner and John Gomperts

CONVERGENCE



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About the Authors

David Eisner joined Convergence as CEO in 2020 with three decades of experience as a senior executive in the business, government, and nonprofit arenas. In the 1990's Eisner served as Sr. Vice President at America Online, where he launched and led the AOL Foundation. In the 2000's, as CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service under then-President George W. Bush, Eisner grew bipartisan support, increased funding, and oversaw the agency response to Hurricane Katrina. David then briefly led All for Good, creating the open-source backbone for President Obama's signature service initiative, Serve.gov. In 2009, former President Bill Clinton, who was chair, appointed David to lead the National Constitution Center. Immediately prior to Convergence, Eisner led the leading Jewish volunteering organization, Repair the World.

John Gomperts is a long-time leader in nonprofits and government organizations devoted to civic engagement and to creating greater opportunity for children and youth. From 2012 - 2020, John served as President & CEO of America's Promise Alliance, the nation's largest coalition of organizations and communities working on issues related to young people. Prior to that, John served as the Director of AmeriCorps in the Obama Administration. Earlier, John led nonprofits that work to enlist individuals and communities to provide young people with the resources and support they need to thrive. Earlier in his career, John worked in the US Senate (Sens. Wofford, Kerry, Daschle), practiced law and served as a judicial clerk.



Convergence Center for Policy Resolution

Convergence is the leading U.S. bridgebuilding organization addressing critical gridlocked issues through collaborative problem-solving. For a decade and a half, Convergence has brought together leaders and experts from across political, ideological, cultural and other divides to build trust, find consensus solutions and form unlikely alliances for change. Through its Learning Lab, Convergence also inspires and equips other leaders to learn and incorporate the mindsets, skills and processes that Convergence leverages to support meaningful collaboration across differences.

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No Greater Mission. No Greater Means

How National Service Can Advance Bridgebuilding

Foreword and Summary

Thank you for reading this working paper. We hope you are doing so because of your interest in and questions about the possibilities for national service to embrace a bridgebuilding agenda in helping our communities resolve our national crisis of civic distrust and dysfunction. This is new ground for most of us – even those of us with deep experience in the service and bridgebuilding worlds are unused to bringing them together with intentionality. So, while we approach this work with optimism, we also lean into humility and are eager for the ideas advanced in this working paper to be examined, debated, refined, and tested.

We share an enthusiasm for the power and potential of national service,¹ and we passionately believe that national service makes its best, most consequential contribution, and best meets its purpose, when it takes on the nation's greatest challenges. We also share grave concern about Americans' waning ability to live peaceably together and to successfully tackle our common challenges in our increasingly polarized communities and nation. All of which sparked for us the question:

How can national service help build bridges across polarized lines of difference, increasing trust and collaboration across our divides, and expanding successful pilot projects already underway?

With support from Einhorn Collaborative and Schmidt Futures, we have taken a deep dive into answering this question. Among the most exciting parts of this exploration was learning more about some of the very early-stage, promising partnerships, state-level pilots, and local programs through which national service participants (Corps members) are – or will soon be – building connections across divisions marked by distrust and disdain.

From this exploration we emerge with the conviction that national service has a crucial role to play in helping America and Americans get better at the mindsets, skills, and practice of connecting and working together across our differences. In fact, we believe that national service explicitly taking up the challenges of divisiveness and polarization in our communities represents not just an opportunity but an imperative. Embracing bridgebuilding as a more intentional goal of national service is not only vital for the health of our communities and the

¹ In this paper, as discussed elsewhere, the term "national service" refers to programs including but not limited to AmeriCorps, by far the largest of these programs. Other federal agencies run programs like Peace Corps, FEMA Corps, YouthBuild, US Parks Service Corps, which would also qualify as national service. Meanwhile, still other programs offer national service-style experiences (focused and sustained service over time) without federal support for all or some of their Corps members. These programs include some faith-oriented programs, some programs that are attached to educational organizations, some state-funded programs, like CA College Corps, and others. We believe that all of these programs can meaningfully contribute to overcoming polarization in our communities and hope that leaders and Corps members in other programs will find many of the recommendation in this paper adaptable for their use – even recommendations explicitly directed to AmeriCorps.

nation – it’s also vital for national service to flourish, and vital for the bridgebuilding movement to grow and scale.

We’ve organized this working paper around five proposals that we believe will advance and accelerate national service’s contribution to building connection, trust, and understanding among people from different backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and values.

Specifically, we recommend:

1. **Certify all Corps members in “Civic CPR” – that is, equip them to connect across conflict, collaborate, and become lifelong bridgebuilders.**
2. **Increase viewpoint diversity across the national service ecosystem, including among programs and Corps members.**
3. **Build strong, two-way bridges between the national service and bridgebuilding communities.**
4. **Equip AmeriCorps alums to help build civic bridges all across America.**
5. **Accelerate research on bridgebuilding through service.**

We elaborate on each of these recommendations in the following pages. We also propose menus of specific activities that could move these recommendations toward fruition, tailored to key players in the national service and bridgebuilding ecosystems.

As America’s civic crisis continues to simmer and become normalized, there is little time to waste in helping the national service and bridgebuilding communities work together in equipping our communities to connect and collaborate across our polarized differences. Through **No Greater Mission**, we seek to add another turn of the crank: calling attention to good work already underway; making specific and actionable recommendations to advance and accelerate the thinking, planning and practice around this work; and catalyzing additional conversations, connections, innovations, and action across the national service and bridgebuilding ecosystems.

Please let us know how the ideas in this working paper strike you. We encourage you to engage in and contribute to an ongoing conversation on a dedicated [site about national service and bridging](#) hosted on Convergence’s website. We look forward to highlighting responses and the conversations they generate. We are curious to receive and share your thoughts and suggestions, your extensions and improvements to the ideas presented here, and any experiences or lessons you’re holding that can add to our collective knowledge.

It will take strong engagement – and some difficult conversations – within and across the national service and bridgebuilding communities, but, together, we can help AmeriCorps prioritize and succeed with incorporating bridgebuilding within the purpose, activity, and outcome of national service.

Introduction

Connecting Two Ecosystems: Who Are They?

- NATIONAL SERVICE -

AmeriCorps provides many hundreds of millions of dollars of federal funding to nonprofits to recruit Corps members for focused and sustained service. Although not nearly as large, other federal agencies also run national service programs like FEMA Corps, teacher corps, YouthBuild, and US Parks Service Corps, while still other programs run by faith-based organizations, education institutions, individual states and others offer very similar experiences without federal support for all or some of their Corps members.

This paper commonly refers to AmeriCorps because it is the largest actor in this space by far, and its mandate is to support American service and volunteering even beyond the programs it funds. We believe that the recommendations in this paper can apply to national service programs outside the ambit of AmeriCorps.

Both the national service and bridgebuilding ecosystems include a wide range of practitioners, volunteers/service participants, public and private funding, specialized research, and policymaking. National service' ecosystem also includes the federal agencies, governors' service commissions and Corps members and alums. The bridgebuilding ecosystem extends to a rapidly growing number of public, private, and nonprofit initiatives that use evidence-based bridging and collaborative approaches to connect people across their divides where they work, worship, study, play, serve, and socialize.

- BRIDGEBUILDING -

Bridgebuilding programs help people divided by conflict or viewpoint differences increase their mutual trust and understanding by bringing them together in safe environments, often in service of solving common problems. Effective bridging is evidence-based and requires no compromise of one's own or validation of other's beliefs—only a willingness to listen with curiosity.

The Bridging Movement Alignment Council (BMAC), a collective of bridging leaders focused on accelerating growth of the movement, summarizes the work:

“We bring Americans together across divides to listen and understand each other, to find common ground, and to normalize bridgebuilding behavior in society.”

From Agreement to Opportunity to Imperative

We come from different sides of the aisle. David is a Republican; John a Democrat. Friends for over 25 years, we have each served in senior positions for Members of Congress and served Presidents of our parties at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). Not surprisingly, we have big disagreements about politics and policies. But we also have multiple areas of passionate agreement, including two that animate this working paper.

First, we believe that helping Americans connect across divisions couldn't be more urgent as we struggle with toxic polarization. Far beyond normal political disagreements, polarization has brought America new and rising levels of disdain, distrust, dysfunction, and violence. Among the many frightening statistics that reinforce our conclusion, here are some perspectives Americans across the political spectrum are expressing:

87% Toxic polarization is a threat to America

70% Polarization is preventing America from solving its problems

70% The country is at risk of failing

66% The opposite party is “a serious threat” to the US and its people

20% People from the other party lack characteristics to be “human”

All of that makes it harder and harder for us to solve big problems, erodes confidence in our political system, severs attachment to our country, and worsens our individual and collective mental health.

Second, we believe national service is perfectly positioned to make a substantial contribution to tackling toxic polarization and bringing our communities together if it retools to embrace this charge with focus and intentionality. At its 30th anniversary, AmeriCorps has much to celebrate in terms of work accomplished, challenges met, lives improved, America's service ethos advanced, and the fact that well over one million people have served. It's a remarkable record for one of America's most remarkable civic experiments.²

Yet, to us, even these impressive accomplishments don't live up to the full potential of national service to strengthen and invigorate our communities and nation. National service was created to take on the country's biggest challenges, and right now that means national service programs (including AmeriCorps) must intentionally incorporate efforts to reduce toxic polarization as a key part of their work.

Domestic and international experts emphasize that Americans can't meaningfully confront polarization until we connect across difference where we work, study, worship, play, and serve. National service — especially the mission, reach, and infrastructure of AmeriCorps — offers the most immediately deployable and most economical capacity to accomplish that.

At the same time, by supporting bridgebuilding, national service can help turn back the tides of divisiveness and distrust in our communities, offering the scope of benefit to the country that the program was built to deliver.

² For a list of sources referenced throughout the paper, see *Appendix 3: Selected Sources*.

Katrina Response as Inspiration

We've seen vivid demonstrations of AmeriCorps' unique capability to support civic bridgebuilding in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters. Katrina was AmeriCorps's most challenging and finest moment. AmeriCorps programs around the country sent tens of thousands of volunteers to Louisiana and Mississippi to help devastated, traumatized communities rebuild. Across the liberal city of New Orleans and conservative rural towns, AmeriCorps members engaged, by necessity and with great results, in serving with individuals and groups bringing wildly disparate backgrounds and perspectives to achieve the common goal of restoring normal life in the Gulf.

If AmeriCorps can respond effectively to our current Category 5 civic hurricane, we believe that will also help address many issues that have vexed AmeriCorps for decades. Rising to this urgent national challenge would:

- Drive demand and appreciation for the power, effectiveness and relevance of national service at the community level.
- Improve the appearance and experience of the program by Corps members: Enable AmeriCorps to meaningfully address its tough challenges around recruitment by:
 - Delivering training, experiences and credentials that will make Corps members more marketable and increase their professional and life success; and,
 - Offering Corps members more varied and fulfilling opportunities to serve in a much broader array of communities, especially rural communities that have not fully participated in the national service movement.
- Improve the trust and enthusiasm of policymakers who worry that AmeriCorps, intentionally or not, leans toward strong alignment with progressive perspectives.

No surprise, then, that we've arrived at this conclusion: **Fully engaging our national service capacity to meet our communities' civic bridgebuilding needs represents an imperative for the country, for national service and for bridgebuilders.** Not an opportunity... Not a promising-but-optional pathway... An imperative. Now is the time to bring all of AmeriCorps's reach, infrastructure, and promise to bear on helping to reduce harmful divisiveness in our communities, building civic pathways for healing, and igniting a sense of common purpose.

Discovering Innovation, Optimism, and Enthusiasm

To produce this Working Paper, we interviewed 70 leaders and practitioners in national service, military service, civic bridgebuilding, democracy, international peacebuilding and violence prevention, psychology, and brain science. We spoke with experts with esteemed degrees; practitioners with a lifetime of frontline experience; and leaders and youth (not always different!) who are not currently part of national service but hope to engage. For a list of interviewees, please see *Appendix 2: Interviewees*.

From all these conversations, we emerged with some key takeaways:

- Affirmation for the various ways that bridging across difference is already embedded organically within Corps members' experiences, even if that work is less intentional and purposeful than required to maximize the benefit to communities wrestling with toxic polarization;
- Excitement about a number of new and innovative programs, pilots, and capacity-building initiatives that are framing a civic bridgebuilding purpose across virtually all elements of the national service ecosystem: the federal agency, state commissions, grantees, groups of Corps members, and alums – all supported by Service Year Alliance and growing cohorts of private funders and researchers.
- Appreciation for the significantly increased attention by supporters and funders of both national service and bridgebuilding to the role national service can play in tackling polarization; leadership collectives and/ funder-driven groups and initiatives like New Pluralists, More Perfect, Our Common Purpose, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), and others signal the growth of this interest.
- The conviction that national service has, within reach, the ability to contribute meaningfully to the difficult work our communities must undertake to help Americans connect across our differences and reduce tensions, polarization, and trends of violence.
- Clarity about important next steps the national service and civic bridgebuilding fields can take to build on present innovation and prepare and support Corps members in helping combat toxic polarization in communities across the country.

Throughout this work, we stayed grounded in the AmeriCorps' purpose, "We Are Uniting People through Service," and the Agency's assertion of this priority: "We bridge divides by bringing people together; connecting individuals and organizations to help communities tackle their toughest challenges. Many leaders in the bridgebuilding field see AmeriCorps as a powerful natural ally in building civic bridge because of these commitments and because of important characteristics of the program:

- the prevalence of AmeriCorps members in communities across the country;
- the role Corps members already play in strengthening civic infrastructure; and
- the natural affinity of service leaders and participants for strengthening cohesion and solving problems in communities.

Over and over again, we heard about the benefits of Corps members bridging divides not only to America, and not only to the Corps members, but to the national service and bridgebuilding fields themselves. We also spent a good deal of time asking questions about the nuanced but important shifts that leaders in both communities believe they must make in order to maximize the results of this work in both building civic bridges and strengthening service impacts.

We hope that actors across the bridging and service ecosystems will see a good number of these recommendations as sufficiently specific and actionable that they will choose to adopt or adapt them to increase AmeriCorps' and other national service programs' contribution to building bridges across lines of difference.

Our interviews strongly reinforced something we already knew: that these recommendations are only one part of a larger conversation among policymakers, leaders in the service and bridgebuilding movements at the national, state, and local levels, researchers, private funders,

and members of communities across the country – all seeking ways to reduce tensions and foster the conditions for collaborative problem-solving. We look forward to the further discussions and debates that will advance this work.

Before presenting the detailed recommendations and action steps, the paper does some level-setting, reviewing key assumptions about [the roots and distortions of toxic polarization](#), as well as [the theory and practice](#) driving the fast-growing bridgebuilding field. With that backdrop, we present and explain our core proposals, building out the actor-specific action steps to advance them. Finally, we share why we believe that national service has [a big role to play](#) and [can succeed](#) as well as some caveats that emerged through our exploration and that need to be kept in mind in order for this work to succeed.



Photo credit: California Volunteers Social Media

#CaliforniansForAll College Corps members from California State University, Monterey Bay, pictured here, are part of the first-of-its-kind initiative launched in partnership with California colleges and universities to create debt-free pathways to college while engaging students across the state in solving problems in their communities. College Corps engaged over 3,000 students in its first year, and, notably, is being intentional and explicit in helping participants develop and practice bridging skills as a core part of their service experience.

Background on Polarization and Bridgebuilding

The Roots of Polarization

America's growing polarization is a result of our human responses to two incitements. First, many people are experiencing fear, uncertainty, and powerlessness in the face of rapid and tectonic shifts in technology, our economy, our demographic makeup, our cultural mores, and more. Second, "conflict entrepreneurs," especially from the worlds of politics and the media, are exploiting our fear and sense of powerlessness; they are funneling billions of dollars into products, communications, platforms, and campaigns that exacerbate our divides, distrust, and anger in order to generate eyeballs, clicks, and votes.

Fears that our families and our sacred values are under threat, that our needs are going unheard, and that those with power don't care about us trigger our bodies and brains to seek the comfort and protection of insular groups and social and information bubbles. This behavior is predictable and well-documented in psychology, brain science, and international peace- and democracy-building. Charged by feelings of threat and fear — and goaded by feeling disrespected by other groups that are also acting out their fears — we shout-down and demonize people in those other groups. Polarization normalizes the attitudes and behaviors that emerge from the resulting loop of mutual enmity and disparagement.

In this context, it can be particularly risky for the person who violates their group's norms by reaching out with curiosity, generosity, or respect to someone in an "opposing" group. We often reserve our most hurtful and polarized attacks for the members of our own groups who try to moderate conflicts with others. And fear of attack by our own can be even more destabilizing than fear of being attacked by outsiders.

Whether we come from the left or the right, when we retreat to our self-protective information and social bubbles, self-sorting by geography, media consumption habits, and cultural markers. As a result of this sorting, we often stop seeing the complexities and nuances in issues we care about. We engage in binary thinking. Everything becomes black and white and has sharp edges. It's simply us and them, all right or all wrong.

Key Distortions of Polarization

Research highlights the ways in which our brains fall prey to multiple highly consequential distortions:

- **We dramatically overestimate differences.** We incorrectly assume that those from other groups hold views far more antithetical to our own than they actually are. Multiple studies confirm that our positions are much closer than we very firmly believe.
- **We misattribute motives.** We become certain that our group acts out of positive motives like love, insight or wisdom, while those with opposing positions act out of hate, vengeance, or malice.
- **We moralize.** We believe intensely that our opponents are acting immorally — even illegally — and are destroying sacred values.

- **We feel disdain.** We experience the visceral feeling that our opponents are unfathomably, disgustingly alien, and “less than,” which undermines our capacity for humility, generosity, and curiosity.
- **We disbelieve facts that contradict our polarized perceptions.** Although people on all sides of our divides believe that the other side would understand their error “if only” someone would present them with this or that fact, research demonstrates how confirmation bias makes virtually all of us immune to facts supporting the position of those we disdain.

Together, these distortions make empathy and trust exceptionally difficult. The insidious distortions of polarization obscure the fundamental reality that we are all striving to achieve the same basic elements of living with dignity: physical safety and economic security; a sense of belonging and purpose; success and fulfillment for ourselves and our families; fair treatment from individuals and institutions.

The scientific evidence makes clear that none of us can easily see or feel these distortions in our own perceptions unless we slow down and interrogate the underlying assumptions in our thinking. Like the pressure of our atmosphere or the weight of gravity, polarization acts on each of us invisibly and consequentially. Ironically, the more education we have, the more certain we may be of these distortions, and the more difficult it can be to reexamine our perceptions. We mention this here because we recognize that those of us *fighting against polarization* are just as likely as anyone else to fall prey to its distortions.

Bridging – Connecting Across Difference Defeats Divisiveness

Even in the face of these strong polarizing headwinds, evidence suggests that we are indeed capable of equipping ourselves and others to break down these distortions. Seventy years of research affirms that we can reduce prejudices, distortions, and provocative behavior simply by being, as the researchers say, “in proximity,” with others – in safe settings where we get to know and understand each other as individuals, often working together toward a shared goal. We can find common ground even if none of us change any belief or position.

This research, in combination with recent partisan gridlock and the latent demand from America’s frustrated majority, has spurred the rapid growth of a new field devoted to bringing Americans together across our differences. Thousands of young bridgebuilding organizations and initiatives are working hard today to lower the heat, strengthen cohesion and foster resilience in our communities and society wide.



Photo credit: AmeriCorps

CoGenerate brings together older and younger generations to work on shared challenges that are felt by both generations, e.g., like food insecurity, isolation, and loneliness. Pictured here an AmeriCorps Senior and AmeriCorps Member work side-by-side in the kitchen on a project supported by a CoGenerate Generations Serving Together grant. This photo of Generations Serving Together, an initiative of CoGenerate, showcases new and powerful models of older and younger AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers working side by side to serve the community.

The rapid growth of this bridgebuilding field and its evidence base creates new capacity and infrastructure for equipping national service to bring Americans together and collaboratively solve common problems at a scale that is, so far, unprecedented in America. In hundreds of communities across the country, bridging organizations can offer the tools, resources and expertise that service organizations need if they seek to engage their Corps members in connecting across differences.

Bridgebuilding organizations bring people together to accomplish different goals, work among different groups and communities, and using different models. This work includes:

- Bringing groups or individuals together across their divides at the community level to increase understanding and strengthen social cohesion.
- Connecting grassroots groups and leaders together to build trust across multiple divides to forge consensus on gridlocked issues.
- Increasing trust and common cause among specific populations and crossing specific divides, such as: political/partisan; ideological; generational geographic; cross- and interfaith; among youth and students; race, ethnicity, wealth, and divisions driven by other social determinants; sectoral (E.g., workers and employers).
- Confronting specific areas of controversial community actions and decisions, for example, confederate statues and names; community/police areas of conflict; parents' role in local schools.
- Fostering support for common causes and consensus solutions by “unlikely allies” that are visible opponents in other spaces.
- Supporting Members of Congress to connect meaningfully, strengthen trust and understanding, and build cross-partisan collaboration among those who bring different perspectives, both colleagues and constituents.
- Creating venues and campaigns to stimulate public discussion about, participation in, and demand for more bridgebuilding and collaboration activities.
- Fostering and growing support infrastructure for bridging work, like training, resource development, research, data collection, convenings of communities of practice and learning, etc.

Even though these models and interventions can be quite different, most of these diverse programs nevertheless share several core premises about effective, best-practice and evidence-based bridgebuilding. First, bridgers believe – based on scientific evidence – that people have as much innate capacity to join together as to become polarized: yes, people are hardwired to retreat to their corners in the face of fear and uncertainty, but we are also hardwired to crave connection. Bridgebuilding interventions create multiple opportunities and onramps to fulfill that craving without triggering the fear or alienation that drives polarization.

In addition, bridgers lean on decades of research and international experience that predict high levels of success for bridgebuilding experiences that equip all participants to:

- Listen (use both of what the experts call “active” and “responsive” listening)
- Lead with curiosity and generosity (rather than with judgment or a desire to change minds)

- Be self-aware (willing to see and confront one's emotions and biases)
- Self-regulate emotional reactions, especially restraining anger- and fear-reactions to real or perceived slights by the other, and also avoiding being provoked by the other's opposing position on an emotionally fraught issue or policy

That research and international experience in bridging differences, democracy-building, and violence prevention has also taught bridgebuilders what does NOT work. For example, we know that if the venue does not feel safe for all participants to share their viewpoints the intervention can't work. Likewise, the needs or preferences of select participants can't take precedence over the needs of other participants. Care must also be taken to level power imbalances between participants within the context of efforts to collaborate.

Finally, bridgebuilders believe that their work is not fundamentally about increasing civility, as critics will sometimes misstate. Civility is performative and only loosely connected to transforming relationships; sometimes a focus on civility can even be counter-productive, because it can take the unhelpful form of papering over difficult conversations or of telling people who are injured that they can't be angry. Building bridges across difference, on the other hand, is about the kind of relational transformation that acknowledges difficulty and emotions and that drives ongoing change, community resilience and problem-solving capacity by allowing opposing groups to come together in an environment of increased trust, understanding, and sense of belonging. Bridgebuilding is not about asking people to "be nice."

BRIDGEBUILDING GOALS IN THREE TIERS

The Bridging Movement Alignment Council (BMAC) has established evidence and data-driven goals, measures, and many best practices in the work of building civic bridges across polarized differences in perspectives and beliefs. BMAC sees bridgebuilding work as having three tiers of goals:

1. Grow Capacity of Field: Grow the scale & impact of this new field
2. Mobilize Others: Inspire & equip others to utilize bridgebuilding where people live, work, worship, play, study, socialize, serve, engage civically, etc.
3. Drive Societal Benefits: Catalyze & measure cultural changes in attitudes and behaviors, violence, institutional trust, and more

MEASUREMENT TOOL: THE SOCIAL COHESION IMPACT MEASURE (SCIM)

BMAC, with support from Civic Health Project and New Pluralists, released the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM), a before-and-after survey instrument that any organization implementing a bridging program can use and adapt. Dozens of organizations are currently using it. Using validated questions, the tool scientifically measures the impact of bridgebuilding programs in loosening polarization's grip on individuals, including impact on, among other things:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| → Affective Polarization | → Pluralistic Norms | → Respect / |
| → Intellectual Humility | → Humanization | Understanding |
| → Intergroup Empathy | → Moral Outrage | → Perceived Threat |
| | → Value Listening | → Anger |
| | | → Identity |

Who are we Bridging? “Long Bridges” and “Short Bridges”

Because bridgebuilding can bring many different types of people and groups together across a variety of differences, one of the first questions to arise for any program will be: across what kinds of differences are we bridgebuilding?

We find it useful to imagine a continuum along which the difficulty of bridging increases in direct correlation with increasing levels of divisiveness and disdain between groups. On one end of the continuum are “short bridges,” efforts to build bridges among people with different experiences and backgrounds, different socio-economic backgrounds, and life experience – yet, who nevertheless see themselves as allies, mostly share a worldview, and are eager to connect more meaningfully and build greater understanding of each other. Participants in “short bridging” are separated by distance but not disdain, difference but not distrust – in other words they do not experience fear of imminent threat from other’s positions or beliefs and won’t dehumanize or villainize each other.

On the other end of the continuum are “long bridges,” where participants are divided by disdain, dehumanization and the other most toxic and insidious distortions of polarization. “Long bridges” are essential to resolving the very strong political polarization we’re currently experiencing. As practitioners work to connect people and groups across increasingly “long bridges,” they will be required to navigate increasingly challenging hurdles – especially responding to polarized participants’ expectations around preconditions, venue and psychological safety, respect by other participants, power imbalances, fears that one’s needs won’t be considered, and more.

And, by the way, when we say “long bridges,” we do not mean all the way to the end of the continuum. Although a very small number of bridgebuilding programs effectively connect with groups that are the most extreme, hate-based, and-or anti-democratic (E.g., KKK, neo-Nazis, Antifa, etc.), this difficult work would not be appropriate for national service participants. National service programs are well advised to stop far short of this intense and high-stakes and potentially dangerous form of bridgebuilding.

Almost all AmeriCorps grantee organizations and Corps members are equipped to and enthusiastic about traversing “short bridges” across non-polarized differences. And, when done right, equipping Corps members to achieve increased connections and understanding across “short bridges” will help develop mindsets and skills that are transferable to and supportive of “long bridge” work.

Programs building “short bridges” should, however, keep in mind that strengthening “short bridges” can often spur greater polarization as connections and relationships between people of similar viewpoints can inspire or even become founded on common disdain for others who are different or disagree with them. This counterproductive outcome will require active and intentional efforts to avoid.

CAN WE PURSUE JUSTICE AND BUILD CIVIC BRIDGES – AT THE SAME TIME?

Do we need to make a binary choice between pursuing justice, especially racial equity, and building civic bridges? In the justice community, there are those who see bridgebuilding across political or ideological lines either as a naïve distraction from a more important agenda or, worse, as an invitation to defenders of the status quo to slow down progress. On the other hand, some in the bridgebuilding community believe America can't make effective and sustainable strides to undo injustice – or succeed with any important problem-solving – until we first succeed in building greater social cohesion.

We note that distrust between those fighting toxic polarization and those focusing on fighting injustice has perpetuated and, ironically, polarized what should serve as a productive tension.

- Yes, it's true that in the past, the argument, "We need to bring all Americans along on this change," has been used to protect the status quo from that change.
- It's also true that many ideas that might have addressed areas of justice have languished for failure to build bridges to the "other side of the aisle."

Nevertheless, we are skeptical of binary viewpoints and believe a binary framework is particularly counterproductive at this moment, facing our current crop of challenges. It will not work for America to slow or pause in either improving and saving lives by pursuing justice or in backing America away from the brink of catastrophic conflict.

For AmeriCorps, these tensions will add complexity as the agency, states, grantee networks, funders and bridgebuilder organizations discuss and act around: training corps members to reach across differences; increasing viewpoint diversity among grantees and corps members; incorporating civic bridgebuilding into competitive grantmaking; prioritizing research and evaluation required to increase the effectiveness and scalability of AmeriCorps' bridgebuilding.



Photo credit: Interfaith America

AmeriCorps CEO Michael Smith (center) has made bridging divides a high priority for AmeriCorps in the current Administration. Here Smith joins representatives from Team Up, a partnership among Interfaith America (initiative leader), Habitat for Humanity, YMCA, and Catholic Charities to pilot bridgebuilding training and programming as part of their service delivery.

5 Recommendations

As a small number of important but early-stage experiments move forward at the national, state, and local levels, many are asking the question: **How can we expand and accelerate this work, catalyze stronger partnerships between the national service and bridgebuilding communities, and maximize the beneficial impact in our communities?**

This working paper offers five actionable recommendations and opens a generative conversation to refine these ideas and develop new answers.

After the recommendations, we put forward suggestions about what specific actors in the national service and bridging ecosystems can do. Finally, we forward our reasons for optimism, and to counterbalance that optimism we provide a set of caveats about why acting on these recommendations might be difficult. Even with these cautionary notes, our hope is that all interested parties across the national service and bridgebuilding ecosystems can find resonant and relevant entry points for further engagement and action.

1 **Certify all Corps members in “Civic CPR” – that is, equip them to connect across conflict, collaborate, and become lifelong bridgebuilders.**

In the same way that all lifeguards learn how to perform CPR, all Corps members should learn “Civic CPR”— the basic mindsets and skills necessary for connecting across difference — and earn a certification for doing so.

As a result, all Corps members would emerge from their service experience with greater listening and collaboration skills; the self-awareness to recognize bias; sufficient emotional self-regulation to engage with people with whom they disagree; and a mindset that seeks opportunities for building trust, even in unlikely circumstances.

The skills that are vital for building civic bridges are the same skills required for effective collaboration, teamwork, and conflict management in many other settings, from the workplace to community to family life. We believe this Civic CPR will help equip Corps members to achieve success and happiness as well as to become mainstays of local civic infrastructure. Likewise, we are hopeful that the Civic CPR certification would meaningfully boost Corps members’ post-service job qualifications and opportunities.

We know that most AmeriCorps programs currently offer some opportunities for Corps members to experience and practice bridgebuilding. Some programs might be able to offer nothing more than *basic* Civic CPR. These would be programs with Corps-member cohorts that are mostly homogenous and where Corps members serve within communities and groups whose backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives are similar to the Corps members’.

Other programs, such as those whose teams hold a diversity of viewpoints and/or those who serve in communities with different perspectives than Corps members, have an opportunity to go deeper on bridgebuilding. Where connecting across differences is more central to success, programs might offer Corps members more advanced versions of Civic CPR as well as more extensive opportunities to practice those skills experientially.

We also recommend investing in opportunities for Corps members to participate in supplemental activities through which they might bridge across longer divides, with an emphasis on experiencing and practicing bridgebuilding across polarized perspectives. We see this idea of supplemental activities as particularly promising and an area ripe for accelerated innovation, experimentation, and learning.

How to put this recommendation into action *within the service experience*:

- Provide all Corps members with high-quality Civic CPR training.
- Establish a certification program, determining eligibility, required activity, required level of performance, and pathways for nomination and approval as well as program model, funding and branding.
- Even programs with little natural viewpoint diversity across Corps members and community should find or create simple, local opportunities for Corps members to experience viewpoint diversity.
- When connecting across difference is more central to the service assignment and to successful service outcomes, programs should go beyond basic Civic CPR and offer Corps members deeper bridgebuilding training and experiences:
- Test program innovations in which Corps members help divided groups work together, build trust, and find common ground.
- Integrate and prioritize bridgebuilding programming and training in all national service grant competitions.
- Offer relief from the so-called “80/20 rule,” which limits training and professional development to 20 percent of service hours. This relief could be accomplished by changing the 80/20 rule generally, by exempting bridgebuilding training and activities from the rule, or by normalizing the use of waiver authority to expand bridgebuilding capacity.
- Provide program staff training in Civic CPR and bridgebuilding mindsets and skills in order for them to successfully support Corps members.
- Augment Civic CPR training with Corps members and/or program staff training in facilitation and conflict management.
- Expand the number of “days of service” to include large, intensive, and ongoing multi-program service projects with bridgebuilding components.
- Expand age-integrated service. This could include joint service projects involving AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors, and also age-integrated AmeriCorps programs such as Generations Serving Together.
- Expand service that builds meaningful connections across ideological divides, including age-integrated service, service across urban-rural divides, and service connecting Corps members with active military or veterans.

- Do no harm.
 - Guide staff and Corps members away from demeaning or villainizing groups of Americans whose beliefs are different than those they share.
 - When educating members about the issues and policies connected to their service, include diverse perspectives and avoid demonizing other positions.

We see big opportunities for supplemental activities – bridging *beyond the core service experience*:

- Initiate service exchanges that would allow Corps members to switch places with peers serving in communities with vastly different demographic or ideological makeups. See the [American Exchange Project](#) for a model of what “service exchanges” might look like.
- Encourage Corps members to participate in local bridgebuilding events and programs.
- Encourage Corps members to volunteer, outside of service hours, to support local bridgebuilding organizations.
- Give or award scholarships for Corps members to participate in special bridgebuilding training or experiences, including in different locations.
- Pilot opportunities for the agency-run National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) to include other groups of Corps members in service deployments and/or host them at NCCC campuses.

2 Increase viewpoint diversity across the national service ecosystem, including among programs and Corps members.

About 15 years ago, national service participants were disproportionately wealthy and privileged. Since then, both AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps have instituted recruiting efforts focused on engaging people from a broad range of different backgrounds and circumstances, with a special emphasis on recruiting people of color and “opportunity youth.” Individual national service programs have made similar efforts to good effect. This success in expanding the profile of national service participants demonstrates that, with real and sustained focus, AmeriCorps and other national service programs can significantly influence the make-up of the Corps.

With that success in mind, we note that to date, AmeriCorps has struggled to engage participants and programs that represent the full range of political or ideological viewpoints. The fact that viewpoint diversity has been limited has contributed to shrinking the pool of prospective Corps members and grantees as well as AmeriCorps’ roster of champions and supporters. Even if America’s polarization crisis makes it more difficult, we must find ways to engage more applicants, programs, and funders from across the political spectrum.

We’ve always experienced the challenge of viewpoint diversity to be a chicken-or-egg dilemma. Without viewpoint diversity, it’s difficult to be welcoming to all the prospective programs and Corps members we wish would apply. And without those people and programs connecting with the programs, it’s difficult to build enough viewpoint diversity to be welcoming.

Now is the moment to break the cycle. The crisis of polarization is broadly recognized as a top-level concern by leaders in all sectors, civic organizations and young people of all stripes and beliefs. We see a timely and unique opportunity for added emphasis and intentionality around bridgebuilding to attract and welcome grantees and Corps members who span a broader spectrum of viewpoints than national service has ever enjoyed.

How to put this recommendation into action:

- Identify and address areas of ongoing underrepresentation in the AmeriCorps community (e.g., rural and ex-urban communities, faith-based organizations and programs, age-based).
- Lower the application burden for new applicants, provide more support during the application process, and engage civil society champions to recruit unlikely prospective grantees.
- Prioritize planning grants and program funding for intermediary organizations equipped to handle AmeriCorps administrative and training responsibilities so that more small nonprofits can participate in AmeriCorps.
- Intermediary bridgebuilding organizations can deploy well-trained Corps members to serve bridgebuilding efforts run by local community and faith-based organizations that are too small or inexperienced to otherwise manage the federal grant.
- Test a fellowship/voucher approach that makes it possible for individuals to find their own AmeriCorps placement at an organization of their choosing.
- Revive the goal of Corps members recruiting (and sometimes training and supervising) community volunteers, which will put Corps members in touch with a broader and more diverse group of people.
- Support existing and recruit prospective grantees who focus on service objectives that are likely to attract groups, people and communities with different perspectives, such as programs working on opioid addiction, rural job skilling, food insecurity, veteran support, and adoption.
- Explore joint recruiting with the military, so that more people with divergent viewpoints discover AmeriCorps opportunities.

3 Build strong, two-way bridges between the national service and bridgebuilding communities.

The national service and bridgebuilding ecosystems would each benefit from collaborating with the other at the national, state, and local levels. New connections between these worlds would generate a wide range of opportunities for both platforms. Some of these are easy to imagine and others will emerge more organically. Certainly, these connections will increase participation in and the quality of both service and bridgebuilding and will accelerate shared learning.

How to put this recommendation into action:

- The burgeoning bridgebuilding field should help national service programs develop best-practice bridgebuilding programming, measurement tools, and advisory capacity at the national and local levels.
- AmeriCorps should issue a special notice of funds availability (NOFA) for bridgebuilding organizations. This could take multiple forms, including planning grants, full AmeriCorps grants, and the development of training materials to be used in AmeriCorps programming.
- Bridgebuilding organizations should consider applying for AmeriCorps grants, leveraging AmeriCorps members and resources to strengthen and scale their bridgebuilding work.
- Bridgebuilding coalitions should help service organizations identify relevant bridgebuilding outcomes.
- The national service ecosystem should seek help from bridgebuilding practitioners, funders, and researchers to speed up the learning curve (and avoid rookie mistakes). This can include creating formal advisory groups or less-formal collaboration.
- Bridgebuilding coalitions and funders should support bridgebuilding organizations to become national service grantees.
- Bridgebuilding organizations should regard Corps members and AmeriCorps alums as potential allies and invite them to participate in local bridgebuilding activities.
- Bridgebuilding organizations should consider incorporating service programming as a vehicle for engaging more people across differences.

4 Equip AmeriCorps alums to help build civic bridges all across America.

While some notable AmeriCorps grantees do a terrific job engaging their alumni, the broader AmeriCorps ecosystem has historically underinvested in its alumni. With greater investment, former AmeriCorps members could become powerful civic assets, just like military veterans and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. Investing in the ongoing development, support, and engagement of AmeriCorps alums will not only strengthen the program itself; it can make AmeriCorps alums an especially valuable resource for strengthening and scaling the work of bridgebuilding and resilience-building in communities across the country.

How to put this recommendation into action:

- Establish an Office of Alumni Engagement inside CNCS.
- Plan, resource, and execute AmeriCorps alums–based activities that engage people and groups together across their divides.
- Create special recognition for AmeriCorps alums who have leveraged their service experience to strengthen social cohesion, lower threats of violence, and/or enhance the sense of belonging in their communities.
- Establish an AmeriCorps Alumni Reserve Corps, a civilian analog to the National Guard, which can be called up and deployed in times of need.

- Develop a new grant program and/or modify applications and competition frameworks to engage AmeriCorps alums, military veterans, Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, and retired civil servants in working together to solve community challenges.
- AmeriCorps Alums chapters should consider adopting local bridgebuilding organizations, programs, and/or campaigns to bolster its mission and impact.

5 Accelerate research on bridgebuilding through service.

We could not be more confident in the profound opportunity that exists for national service participants to combat divisiveness, distrust, and disdain at the community level. And yet we also know that we are still in the early stages of demonstrating what we all think is obvious. We need more research, data, and understanding to refine this work for maximum impact in the long run.

Effective research will be the key to improving and scaling different interventions. We hope that over the course of a few years the ideas associated with national service and bridgebuilding can climb the ladder from evidence-informed to evidence-based to proven.

How to put this recommendation into action:

- Assemble a research consortium of experts across various domains to establish an ambitious learning agenda for service and bridging. Include research leaders in a national service community of practice on bridgebuilding.
- Collaborate with similar research efforts in the military, Peace Corps, nonprofit service programs, and the private sector.
- Coordinate with the bridgebuilding field's existing research efforts, including the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM) survey.
- Incentivize grantees to use a standard pre-post measurement instrument to assess the effectiveness of multiple forms of bridgebuilding training, experiences, and interventions. Incentives could include:
 - Relief from elements of annual reporting;
 - Additional grant funds to support adoption of common evaluation processes;
 - Commitments of technical assistance;
 - Opportunities to receive data that would allow them to benchmark against other programs;
 - Participation in communities of learning and practice;
 - Eligibility for, or preferential treatment, in other grant competitions.

Next Steps for Actors Across the Ecosystem

The purpose of this **No Greater Mission** venture is to catalyze further conversation and action around a big commitment by national service to prioritize connecting across difference as a central objective, activity, and outcome of national service. Of course, change like this is not linear, and we obviously cannot map out exactly how this change will occur. We do know that it

will take contributions from various actors and angles. Accordingly, we offer a few suggestions about who can do what to accelerate the action that is already beginning to happen in this space.

Legislators, governors, and other policymakers can:

- Prioritize crucial initiatives like the Building Civic Bridges Act and the Trust for Civic Infrastructure to generate support for service-based bridgebuilding and for bolstering community cohesion and resilience.
- Give AmeriCorps the resources and flexibility to meaningfully engage in this endeavor.
- Support AmeriCorps to create an office of AmeriCorps Alumni.
- Bolster support for the non-AmeriCorps national service programming that will contribute meaningfully to efforts to reduce polarization.

CNCS / AmeriCorps can:

- Reaffirm in clear and explicit terms that connecting across difference is a priority objective and intended service outcome of AmeriCorps.
- Embrace Corps member skill development, especially the mindsets and skills related to connecting across difference, as a core focus and intended outcome of national service. Have this expectation reflected in grant competitions and program review and evaluations.
- Make a clear commitment to a sustained effort to increase viewpoint diversity in the ranks of AmeriCorps members and grantees.
- Fund innovative efforts by states and grantees to advance Corps member development and prioritize connecting across difference or take other actions like the use of waivers to make this kind of innovative activity more possible.
- Develop and disseminate a Civic CPR curriculum that all AmeriCorps programs can use to help Corps members develop bridgebuilding mindsets and skills.
- Launch an office of Alumni Affairs to supercharge the idea of AmeriCorps alums as a crucial civic asset.

Private funders can:

- Support experimentation and innovation in bridgebuilding efforts outside the core service experience, such as days of service and service exchange.
- Encourage community foundations to invest in connecting local service and bridging opportunities.
- Support programs and Corps member convenings at a state, regional, or national level for bridgebuilding training and experiences.
- Support partnership development and planning between bridgebuilding and national service programs.
- Support efforts that engage AmeriCorps alums in bridgebuilding activities, especially
- Peace Corps Volunteers.

- Support efforts of bridgebuilding and democracy-supporting organizations to make initial forays into engaging national service members.
- Support rigorous research to better understand and document the most effective ways to incorporate bridgebuilding into national service.

Bridgebuilding organizations can:

- Identify AmeriCorps grantees in communities served by the bridgebuilding organization and discuss opportunities to strengthen service outcomes, while strengthening connections across difference for Corps members and/or the community.
- Apply for grants to bring national service members to serve in their organizations.
- Prepare curricula, training, and exercises that support AmeriCorps programs and members in developing and practicing bridgebuilding mindset and skills.
- Engage AmeriCorps alums in their programming.
- Engage bridgebuilding participants in serving together as a pathway toward strengthening the outcomes from bridgebuilding experiences.

Researchers can:

- Conduct research to more clearly establish the point that national service does in fact bring people together across lines of difference.
- Design and help implement studies to answer critical questions:
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of different program interventions?
 - What bridgebuilding activities do the most to improve and strengthen the outcomes of national service programs?
 - Which best practices from the bridgebuilding community translate well to service-based models and which do not?
 - Which service objectives are most helpful in recruiting diverse participants?
 - How durable are the bridging mindsets that Corps members gain during their service year?
 - How can alumni most effectively support bridgebuilding?
- Create a research consortium to ensure sustained interest.
- Publish a special issue of a journal on this specific topic.

Reasons AmeriCorps-based Bridgebuilding Can Succeed

Our optimism about national service and bridgebuilding is driven by two key factors: our shared beliefs that bridgebuilding fits into national service's mission and that success in connecting our communities across divides is within reach.

Bridgebuilding fits within, supports, and advances the national service mission.

National service already has a considerable track record of success in connecting people across difference and a legacy of public commitment to increasing social and civic cohesion. AmeriCorps members have connected with fellow Corps members and community members across lines of race, ethnicity, religion, education, and economic status. Making this

bridging and the associated skill-building a much more explicit focus and purpose of national service would build on and expand that success. And we want to build on past success to expand that bridgebuilding capacity to include many more opportunities for bridging across people with different viewpoints.

Leveraging the ethic and skills of bridgebuilding will improve service outcomes. National service already has a deep programmatic portfolio devoted to helping communities become healthier, more resilient, and better able to address their common challenges. And we know that service conducted *for*—rather than *with*—communities falls short on impact and is often counterproductive. Service *with* requires Corps members trained and experienced in exactly the same mindsets and skills that are required for effective bridgebuilding. In other words, equipping Corps members to accomplish civic bridgebuilding also equips them to improve the outcomes of their service.

Bridgebuilding can boost recruitment and retention. Just like the military, police departments, and schools, national service is facing big challenges with recruiting and retaining participants. This challenge won't be easy to meet, but we believe embracing the bridgebuilding mission could contribute to meeting those recruiting challenges. That's in part because the skills of navigating conflict and difference — the essential elements of building civic bridges — are also the keys to unlocking success in all parts of life. Employers across all sectors of our economy are seeking to hire people who have these critical skills. These employers, whose American workforces grow more diverse by the day, understand that when people from different walks of life work together, “they make better decisions and solve problems more creatively than homogenous groups do,” in the words of researchers at the University of California at Berkeley.

Success is within reach for national service in building civic bridges.

Wide majorities support bridgebuilding. Two-thirds of Americans say they are frustrated and even disgusted with ideological food fights — and hungry for people to come together to solve our common problems. The nonpartisan organization [More In Common](#) says that members of this “exhausted majority” are likely to see the “unifying story of ‘us’ [as] more powerful than the ‘us-versus them’ narratives that divide us as Americans from each other.” More than three-quarters of Americans say they would be willing to connect with people with different political perspectives if the conversation is safe and respectful.

Bridgebuilding is grounded in evidence. Decades of randomized controlled trials of Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport's [Contact Theory](#), bolstered by the more modern work of Linda Tropp and Thomas Pettigrew, definitively show that bringing people together in safe well-controlled settings can dramatically reduce disdain, prejudice, feelings of threat, perceptions of negative intentions, and beliefs that differences are broader than they are. This is true even in societies emerging from civil war and genocide. The effects are particularly strong when people come together over extended periods of time to engage together in accomplishing a shared mission — exactly what national service does very well.

National service can tap into military experience, which has long been celebrated for its effectiveness in creating strong bonds across difference. Though military bridgebuilding is sometimes mythologized to an extreme, there is no denying the long-lasting connections that many members of the military forge. Contact theory might assert that some of that is simple proximity, of course, but there is intentional design and discipline too.

National service engages the ideal age group. As is the case with the military, the vast majority of national service programs engage young people – the perfect age and stage for developing the “will and skill” for bridgebuilding across difference. Young people are typically more idealistic than members of other groups, and research also shows that they are also at a stage of development at which they are especially open to new information, perspectives, and experiences.

Participation is not pre-conditioned on compromise. Making progress does not require participants to alter their political views, surrender dearly held values, or forgive transgressions. Forget images of singing “Kumbaya” or forcing people to change their minds or compromise. Reducing polarization requires only that people open their minds — with more curiosity and less certainty; more active listening and less judgment; and more appreciation of our common humanity and less defaulting to stereotypes.

We already have good tools for measuring outcomes. Dozens of bridge-building organizations are now using a shared measurement platform, the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM), which focuses on four outcomes from bridgebuilding programming – affective polarization, intellectual humility, intergroup empathy, and pluralistic norms – using research validated questions.

Caveats and Reasons for Caution

The above recommendations and action items must be considered in light of several important caveats.

Caveat 1: Tough but Necessary National Service Conversations

We hold the current leadership of AmeriCorps and the state commissions that administer AmeriCorps in high regard; and we know they face intense pressures every day. Given that we’re no longer in those hot seats, we have license to provoke conversations that we could not have generated when our official roles required us to reflect Congress’ and the White House’s perspectives on AmeriCorps and national service.

The recommendations and perspectives we’re promoting through this **No Greater Mission** initiative are meant to help spur useful conversation, innovation, and collaboration between and among leaders, experts, funders, and practitioners across the national service landscape as well as the bridgebuilding field and the movements for democratic renewal and pluralism.

We don’t, however, believe that connecting people and groups across their differences will be easy, much less likely, without hard work. All key parts of the national service ecosystem — not only the federal agency, but the states, grantees, alumni, and private partners and funders — will need to work collaboratively, and in partnership with the bridgebuilding field, in retooling the programs to make forcefully and explicitly tackling the crisis of polarization a top-level priority.

Several conversations about that retooling may be especially bracing, particularly these, which are addressed within the section on recommendations:

- More intentionally centering the Corps member experience;
- Rebalancing the service outcomes that incentivized and measured to emphasize Corps members developing the mindsets and skills associated with making connections across lines of difference;

- Building new approaches to recruitment, retention, and benefits of Corps members;
- Establishing elements of training and experiences that should become universal across all of national service;
- Reimagining the role and engagement of Corps member alums; and,
- Reframing how national service articulates its societal relevance and ROI.

SERVICE MEASURES: FROM TRANSACTIONAL TO TRANSFORMATIONAL

The AmeriCorps mission is, “To improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.” However, those inspiring aspirations have been undermined by an overreliance on transactional “point of service” measures — the numbers of tutored children, pounds of food distributed, miles of beaches cleaned, acres of planted trees, and so on.

These transactional data points will always be important for assessing service results. However, the pendulum has swung too far, resulting in programs that have become organized around transactional and siloed measures rather than the transformation of Corps members into community leaders and pillars of local civic infrastructure.

Framing programs to maximize the transformative nature of the training and experience is an area in which AmeriCorps has much to learn from the military, the Peace Corps, service learning, and teacher professional corps.

Caveat 2: Tough but Necessary Bridgebuilding Conversations

The bridgebuilding field is a “cottage industry” made up of thousands of mostly disconnected, young organizations on steep learning curves. Key leadership initiatives like Bridging Movement Alignment Council (BMAC) are making good headway supporting greater collaboration and alignment across the field, as well as moving important collective initiatives forward. Successful work has included establishing goals and measures, developing and socializing best practices, executing national events and campaigns, shaping field-wide narratives, building rapid response capabilities, creating and testing common evaluation vehicles, raising funds for collective priorities, engaging policymakers and more.

The bridging community has mostly internalized the fact that the vast majority of Americans will not line up to be “bridged” by organizations with which they are not familiar. This is why BMAC has clarified that an essential goal of the bridgebuilding field is to partner with new sectors to build civic bridges where people live, work, study, worship, play and, yes, serve.

Partnering with the national service field is not only entirely consistent with this emerging strategy of the bridgebuilding field, but critical for bridgebuilding’s success. However, for these partnerships to be the most effective, bridgebuilders must take stock of several challenges endemic to the field:

- Most organizations in the bridgebuilding field, but by no means all, are led and staffed by people who lean progressive, which requires significant attention to make bridging spaces welcoming and safe for conservatives and to ensure that programs don't in fact or in appearance have a purpose of changing conservative's minds. This will be especially important in partnering with national service programs, which also tend to lean left.
- Some bridging organizations focus their programs entirely on spurring conversations between people from different backgrounds or perspectives that lead to greater understanding and trust. However, significant research suggests that the effects of bridgebuilding become stronger and more sustainable when programs bring people together across their divides to accomplish something that all value – what the researchers call having “superordinate” goals. Because most forms of service already target outcomes that make excellent superordinate goals, engaging national service organizations and Corps members offers bridgebuilding organizations important pathways to strengthen their impact.
- Nobody wakes up in the morning saying, “I’m going to bridgebuild or connect across difference today!” Although goals of connecting and collaborating for their own sake can excite bridgebuilding enthusiasts, research shows that people are much more excited to collaborate across difference to improve our local schools, strengthen community-police relationships, help local immigrants succeed, ensure trustworthy information about local elections or otherwise address stuck issues or challenges they care about. Allyships between bridgebuilders and service-based organizations will generate stories that illuminate how effective bridgebuilding helps communities achieve solutions people have long wanted and needed.

Caveat 3: The Work is Complex and Difficult

Even as our enthusiasm and optimism continued to grow through our exploration, we also heard (and agree with) three additional “watch-outs” reflecting the complexity and difficulty of this work.

- **Be Realistic:** Asking whether national service can fully resolve our differences and reduce our divisiveness is the wrong question. No single strategy will resolve our toxic polarization challenge, which is a complex phenomenon and the product of many ongoing and even some worsening factors. The better question is: How might national service make a useful contribution to lowering the heat, building resilience, reducing violence, and strengthening civic infrastructure in our communities?
- **Change is Hard:** Changes to AmeriCorps’s program goals, expectations, practices, and demographics have only happened in conjunction with significant and coordinated internal and external effort. We know this from long personal experience.
- **No One Size Fits All:** The national service ecosystem including AmeriCorps brings uneven capacity to address our communities’ multiple divides. Only a small number of programs are currently positioned to bridge the longest divides — that is, across the chasm of political and ideological difference. Still many of these recommendations will work even within programs where Corps members experience little viewpoint diversity.

Conclusion

Thirty years ago this year, President Bill Clinton signed the bill creating AmeriCorps. He spoke about AmeriCorps's potential to “help us rebuild our troubled but wonderful land” and strengthen “the cords that bind us together as a people.” He was flanked by idealistic young recruits and veterans of some of the other national service programs launched by previous presidents, including members of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps.

More than a million Americans have served their country through AmeriCorps, which has become the flagship manifestation of domestic national service in America. AmeriCorps members have mentored young people who need more caring adults in their life; planted millions of trees; provided support to families and communities reeling from natural disasters; augmented badly overstretched health care systems during the COVID pandemic; built thousands of homes, and much more. AmeriCorps members have worked shoulder to shoulder with millions of community members, and forged relationships that have shaped millions of lives. Alums have become a mainstay of nonprofit staffing and civil society infrastructure in the communities where they live. It’s a remarkable record of achievement.

Today, America needs even more from AmeriCorps. As America wrestles with crises of distrust and civic toxicity, we see an imperative for the national service and bridgebuilding communities to help respond to these crises by expanding connections and collaboration in communities. The partnership is compelling: the bridgebuilding field offers the best practice mindsets, knowledge, skills, and resources for bringing citizens together to collaborate across our divides, while national service brings tens of thousands of current and future civic leaders to learn, experience and practice bridgebuilding work in our communities.

Now is the moment to help America’s national service and bridgebuilding communities join together in equipping our communities to connect and collaborate across our polarized differences. Through this initiative, No Greater Mission, we aim to call attention to the good work already underway as well as catalyze additional conversations, innovations and action that will be useful to help AmeriCorps prioritize bridgebuilding as a central objective, activity, and outcome of national service. Together, we can reduce the harmful divisiveness in our communities, build civic pathways for healing, and reignite a sense of common purpose.



Photo credit: Emily Firman Pieper, American Exchange Project

American Exchange Project participants prepare for a summer powwow with the Santee Sioux tribe in Flandreau, South Dakota. Potentially a model for Corps member exchanges across programs, the free domestic program offers high school seniors nationwide a chance to “see red and blue in a whole new light” by enabling them to spend a week in an American community very different from their own.

Appendix 1: Definitions

Affective polarization describes the growing divide in emotional attitudes and feelings between individuals based on their political affiliations. It refers to the phenomenon where individuals' emotions, and sentiments towards members of their own group become more positive, while their emotions towards members of the opposing group become more negative and distorted, with their differences exaggerated. Affective polarization often shows up as extreme distrust, disgust, hostility, and unwillingness even to speak with people who hold different perspectives, positions or beliefs.

Bridgebuilding brings people together across conflict or lines of difference to help them increase their mutual trust and understanding, often in service of solving common problems, and always with an eye toward lessening toxic polarization (see definition below). Effective bridging requires no compromise or validation of other's beliefs—only a willingness to listen with curiosity. In the words of researchers at the Greater Good Science Center, “The true goal of bridging differences isn't to convince the other person of your viewpoint or even necessarily to build consensus.... You may disagree with another person, sometimes vehemently. But the key is that you don't dehumanize them in the process.”

Bridgebuilding field is the rapidly growing network of nonprofit organizations working to build connections across lines of difference, especially ideology and politics. Some of these organizations focus on specific local communities, while some are national or international in scope. All of them are “rooted in highlighting shared humanity, helping people find common ground, creating spaces for people to listen to those with differing views, and encouraging people to reflect on the roots of their own worldviews,” in the words of the Aspen Institute.

Moralization is a distortion of polarization through which we believe the people we disagree with are acting immorally, even illegally and out to destroy sacred values. This non-factual belief can justify a sense of obligation and passion for attacking and demeaning those we disagree with.

Motive misattribution refers to the polarization-driven distortion or cognitive bias by which individuals incorrectly attribute negative motives like hate or vindictiveness to the positions and actions of groups we oppose, while we believe our own group operates out of only the most positive motives, like love.

National service represents multiple forms of civilian volunteering service that are supported by the federal government. National service has played an important part in our national psyche since Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps, in 1933. National service programs promote an ethos of service; provide young people valuable experiences, skills, and networks; offer elders pathways for contributing their skills and wisdom; and make direct contributions to solving important community and national challenges. AmeriCorps, launched in 1993, provides funding to thousands of different national service organizations and initiatives around the country. It also manages AmeriCorps VISTA (formerly known simply as VISTA) and the National Civilian Conservation Corps (NCCC).

National service ecosystem includes the full set of actors that play important roles in the shaping and deployment of AmeriCorps include: the federal agency AmeriCorps, state service commissions, grantee programs, Corps members, host communities, private funders, alums, and policymakers.

Pluralism is an ethos that celebrates the differences within a society and respects groups' desire to maintain distinctive cultural identities and practices. It stands in stark contrast to tolerating, ignoring, erasing, or excluding difference. In bridgebuilding work, it is often invoked in the context of safeguarding our "pluralistic democracy."

State Service Commissions appointed by the Governor of each state, administer several elements of AmeriCorps programming, including supporting significant numbers of Corps-member centered program grantees." Some Commissions, such as those in California and Maryland, operate as cabinet-level agencies.

Toxic Polarization refers to an extreme form of political polarization characterized by intense hostility, animosity, and a toxic atmosphere between individuals or groups with differing political beliefs. It involves the deepening of divisions, often fueled by strong negative emotions, such as anger, hatred, and contempt, towards those who hold opposing political views. Toxic polarization is marked by a lack of constructive dialogue, a tendency to dehumanize or demonize the other side, and a disregard for seeking common ground or understanding. It can have detrimental effects on civil discourse, social cohesion, and the ability to find solutions to societal challenges.

Appendix 2: Interviewees

Kristen Bennett: Chief Executive Officer, Service Year Alliance

John Bridgeland: Executive Chairman, Office of American Possibilities & Executive Chair and Chief Executive Officer, More Perfect

Allison Briscoe-Smith: Project Lead of Connecting Californians through Service Project, The Greater Good Science Center; Diversity Lead, University of Washington

Michael Brown: Co-Founder, City Year; Principal, Public Purpose Strategies LLC

Rachel Brown: Executive Director, Over Zero

Neil Bush: Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Neil Bush Global Advisers; Chair, Points of Light Board of Directors

Kyle Caldwell: President & Chief Executive Officer, Council of Michigan Foundations

Kristen Cambell: Chief Executive Officer, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)

Dan Cardinali: Senior Fellow, PolicyLink; Former President & Chief Executive Officer, Independent Sector

Peter T. Coleman: Professor of Psychology & Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

AnnMaura Connolly: President, Voices for National Service

Itai Dinour: Executive Director, Carmel Hill Fund

Kaira Esgate: Chief Executive Officer, America's Service Commission (ASC)

David Fairman: Senior Mediator, Consensus Building Institute (CBI)

Marc Freedman: Founder/Co-Chief Executive Officer, CoGenerate (Formerly Encore.org)

Linda Frey: Director, #CaliforniansForAll College Corps, California Volunteers, Office of the Governor

Josh Fryday: Chief Service Officer, California Volunteers, Office of the Governor

Archon Fung: Ford Foundation Professor of Democracy & Citizenship, Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Bishop Garrison: Vice President of Policy, Intelligence & National Security Alliance

Mark Gearan: President Emeritus, Hobart & William Smith Colleges; Former Director, Peace Corps; Vice Chair for National & Public Service, National Commission on Military, National & Public Service

Robert Godfried: Policy Entrepreneur, Next100

Stephen Goldsmith: Derek Bok Professor of the Practice of Urban Policy, Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Robert Gordon: Head of Business Development, Growth, & Community, Searchlight.ai

Nick Greer: Former Executive Vice President of Interconnection, Thread Inc.

Lilliana Hall Mason: SNF Agora Institute Associate Professor of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University

Kristin Hansen: Executive Director, Civic Health Project

Joe Heck: Brigadier General, U.S. Army Reserve; Former Member of Congress

Sarah Hemminger: Co-Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Thread Inc.

Jennifer Hoos Rothberg: Executive Director, Einhorn Collaborative

Liz Joyner: Founder & Chief Executive Officer, The Village Square

Brandyn Keating: Founder & Chief Executive Officer, YOUNify

Alan Khazei: Co-Founder CityYear, Alan Khazei Consulting

Whitney Kimball Coe: Vice President of National Programs & Director of the Rural Assembly, Center for Rural Strategies

Max Klau: Chief Program Officer, New Politics Leadership Academy

Kyle Kline: Director, Minnesota Alliance with Youth; Co-Chair, AmeriCorps NCCC Alumni Collaborative

Koby Langley: Senior Vice President, The American Red Cross

Peter Levine: Associate Dean of Academic Affairs & Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship & Public Affairs, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University

Eunice Lin Nichols: Co-Chief Executive Officer, CoGenerate (formerly Encore.org)

Eric Liu: Co-Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Citizen University

Eean Logan: M.P.H. candidate, Johns Hopkins University; Member, AmeriCorps Alumni Board

Anne Mahle: Senior Vice President of Public Partnerships, Teach for America

Mamar Marshall: Alumnus, YouthBuild; Grantee, NASA Communities of Practice

Zach Maurin: Member, NewPolitics.org Board of Directors; Co-Founder, Storied Hats

Heather McGhee: Author, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone & How We Can Prosper Together*

Liz McNally: Executive Vice President, Schmidt Futures

Manu Meel: Chief Executive Officer, BridgeUSA

Frank Mirabal: Senior Advisor, The Aspen Institute; Co-Founder & Partner, Levado

Debilyn Molineaux: President & Chief Executive Officer, Bridge Alliance US; Co-Publisher, The Fulcrum.US

Nova Morales: Natural Resource Specialist, Houston Arboretum & Nature Center

Peter Nelson: Vice President of Impact & Innovation, ServeMinnesota

Sonali Nijhawan: Director of AmeriCorps State and National, Corporation for National & Community Service

Michelle Nunn: President & Chief Executive Officer, CARE USA

Nealin Parker: Executive Director, Common Ground USA

Eboo Patel: Founder & President, Interfaith America

Tim Phillips: Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Beyond Conflict

Sandy Pulles: Vice President of Equity & Inclusion, ServeMinnesota

Shirley Sagawa: Board of Directors, Corporation for National and Community Service

Yasmeen Shaheen-McConnell: Senior Advisor, Strategic Partnerships, Corporation for National & Community Service

Alero Simon: National Service Operations Coordinator, NYC Service

Michael Smith: Chief Executive Officer, Corporation for National & Community Service

Capri St. Vil: Board Member, Center for Watershed Protection; Principal Consultant, Kiskeiano Consulting

Daniel Stid: Executive Director, Lyceum Labs

Audrey Suker: Former Chief Executive Officer, ServeMinnesota

Eric Tanenblatt: Global Chair, Public Policy & Regulation, Dentons

Lemi Tilahun: Community Organizer, Leaders, Believers, & Achievers Foundation

Linda Tropp: Professor of Social Psychology, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Elisa Villanueva Beard: Chief Executive Officer, Teach for America

Uma Viswanathan: Executive Director, New Pluralists Collaborative

Steve Waldman: Chief Executive Officer & Founder, Rebuild Local News; Co-Founder, Report for America

Melissa Weintraub: Founder & Co-Executive Director, Resetting the Table

Rachel Wheeler: Appalachian Farmacy Program Director, Appalachian Resource Conservation & Development Council

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Contact

Convergence Center for Policy Resolution

1775 Eye Street NW, Suite 1150-287

Washington, DC 20006

(202) 830-2310

ConvergencePolicy.org

[@ConvergenceCtr](https://twitter.com/ConvergenceCtr)

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