

Rewards of Giving

AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF
OLDER ADULTS'
VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES
IN URBAN
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS



Becca Raley

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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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Introduction



From a very young age, Florence Day yearned to teach children, to help them read and understand the confusion often surrounding their lives. Her personal life was rewarding—she and her loving husband raised a son and frequently volunteered through their church. But her 39 years doing factory work left her unfulfilled professionally.

At 76, her husband of more than 50 years gone, she received an invitation to realize her lifelong dream. A letter from AARP said Experience Corps needed adults over the age of 55 to serve as tutors, mentors and in-class volunteers in schools nationwide. Mrs. Day and her neighbor, Opal Waverly, signed on to volunteer three days a week and took turns driving to an elementary school in a long-neglected pocket of West Philadelphia. There, they joined a lively group of roughly a dozen other volunteers who drew deep satisfaction from helping children learn and grow. Mrs. Day felt invigorated by the knowledge she gained about teaching and the meaningful friendships she forged with other volunteers.

Experience Corps is valuable—and appreciated by school principals and teachers—because it provides children with sorely needed one-on-one help in financially struggling urban districts.² But as Mrs. Day's experience shows, the program also offers Experience Corps members rich rewards.

Launched in 1995, Experience Corps places teams of adults, age 55 and older, in urban elementary schools to help strengthen students' academic skills. Operated by a national office in Washington, DC, Experience Corps engages more than 1,800 volunteers in 14 cities and 160 schools coast to coast.

It's like a dream, the final phase of my life, something I wanted to do years and years and years ago. To walk into (that school) and be a part of the class, it was a fulfillment.

—Florence Day¹

Research Goals

In 2003, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation commissioned Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to conduct both an in-depth interview study examining the experiences of older volunteers and a three-year evaluation of the Experience Corps sites' expansion efforts in five cities.³ This report represents findings and lessons from the interview study—a second report on the expansion study is forthcoming.

Mrs. Day was one of 43 individuals who participated in the interviews, which were designed to elucidate what motivates adults to volunteer, how volunteering fits into the tapestries of their lives, which program components best support volunteers in their roles and what makes a volunteer experience a rewarding one. Volunteers' stories proved to be compelling and nuanced. For many older adults, Experience Corps became an integral part of their lives, assisting some through significant life transitions, providing valued monthly stipends and offering a supportive environment in which they enjoyed forging relationships with children, other volunteers and school staff.

The Program Model

Originally proposed by social entrepreneur and long-time civic leader John Gardner, Experience Corps was launched in 1995. P/PV served as a managing partner for the first pilot, closely collaborating with the National Senior Service Corps of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and researchers from Johns Hopkins University.⁴

Today a signature program of Civic Ventures and operated by a national office in Washington, DC, Experience Corps engages more than 1,800 volunteers in 14 cities and 160 schools coast to coast. The program's administrators plan to expand its operations within these cities and to new ones.

The Experience Corps model involves several key components. Teams of typically 5 to 15 older adults are placed in urban elementary schools to help strengthen children's academic skills. These Experience Corps members provide individual tutoring, mentoring and in-class support. They are asked to make a substantial commitment to the program, working each week throughout the school year. Volunteers who serve 15 or more hours a week are considered "full time" and are typically eligible for a stipend provided by AmeriCorps or other funds.⁵ The stipend, which ranges from \$180 to \$300 per month depending on each individual program's funding structure, is intended to defray the costs of volunteering, mainly transportation and lunch.

The Policy Context

Experience Corps was designed to address several serious social problems, beginning with childhood illiteracy, while enhancing the well-being of older adults in the process.

Why Older Adults?

At Experience Corps' roots lies fervent optimism about an aging nation's future. The retirement of the largest generation in our history—75 million baby boomers—will provide the country with a significant pool of skilled people with the time and talent to volunteer. Dramatic increases in life expectancy rates mean boomers will live an average of 10 years longer than their parents,⁶ many thriving into their 80s and 90s. Yet boomers, only now on the brink of retirement, are a largely untapped resource. According to a 2003 AARP survey, more than 50 percent of those older than 55 already volunteer annually, but many more would join their ranks if only asked.⁷

Experience Corps recognizes both the needs of older adults and the skills and talents they possess that could help younger generations. While research has long identified a nutritious diet, regular exercise and access to quality health care as essential building blocks for lifelong health, more recent studies tout the merits of continued social and mental engagement and purposeful life roles.⁸ Experience Corps combines four of these factors—daily physical activity, mental challenge, social engagement and meaningful roles—as part of a strategy for successful aging.

Why Schools?

The program's long-term vision is to place teams of volunteers in a wide variety of settings, from environmental agencies to hospitals, anti-poverty organizations to nursing homes. But the manifest need for additional educational supports in urban public schools made them a choice setting for the program's initial implementation.

Children in urban settings are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as their suburban counterparts,⁹ and persistent disparities in the achievement of white and nonwhite youth are most prevalent in urban districts, where approximately 76 percent of students are African American or Latino.¹⁰ An estimated 32 percent of fourth-graders perform below basic national standards in math, and 51 percent perform below basic levels in reading, in large urban districts.¹¹ The long-term effects of poor performance have deleterious consequences: In 2001, graduation rates in New York, Houston, Los Angeles, Denver, Baltimore, Cleveland and Chicago fell below 55 percent.¹²

Urban school districts have begun to receive considerable national attention. Top foundations have made sizable investments in school reform initiatives, and most large urban districts have pursued broad reform efforts in response to the nation's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which mandates high-stakes, standardized tests. Staff in the nation's most beleaguered schools report feeling tremendous

stress from trying to raise schoolwide performance in the absence of increased resources.

In this context, Experience Corps' focus on literacy and its target of urban elementary schools are welcome attributes. Recognizing that children who read well by the end of third grade have established a critical foundation for future successes, the program focuses on children in kindergarten through third grade.¹³

Why Intergenerational Relationships?

By pairing older volunteers with children in educational settings, Experience Corps embodies a third key element: intergenerational relationships. These relationships foster valuable learning and understanding.¹⁴ From their years of experience, older adults have much to share about living life well, caring for others and setting priorities. In turn, children's relatively unimpeded take on life—their curiosity, impulsiveness and sensitivity—offers older adults a fresh lens through which to view the world.

Important social and fiscal policies may also be at stake. Engagement with children better ensures adults' support of schools and public policies that address children's needs. In turn, children's understanding and appreciation of older adults may heighten their long-term respect and care for their elders.

Research Methods

The interview study was designed to provide a rich understanding of how volunteering fits into the lives of retirees and what skills and services they bring to schools. Through the voices of Experience Corps members, important lessons are revealed about the circumstances surrounding individuals' decisions to volunteer, how participation affected their daily lives, why they stayed with the program and what personal meaning the program held for them. The findings offer insights to practitioners and funders about designing successful recruitment efforts and crafting programs rewarding enough to keep volunteers coming back.

We used open-ended interview questions covering a range of key topics and designed to explore individuals' unique experiences. This approach has several

strengths: It facilitates rich and nuanced responses; it readily captures experiences not always anticipated by researchers; and it avoids heavy use of probes that sometimes risk "leading" individuals to place greater emphasis on certain issues than they might otherwise. When using this method, researchers' capacity to generalize across an entire sample is sometimes more limited because individuals inherently respond in different ways to the same questions—what first comes to mind as important to one person may go unmentioned by another, even though perhaps they have had a similar experience. For this reason, it is important to keep in mind that while positive findings in the report firmly account for some individuals' experiences, they may under-represent similar experiences in the remainder of the sample. For example, six Experience Corps members said they joined the program to help them move on after the death of a loved one. But this number may not take into account every member who was motivated by loss to volunteer, because volunteers were not asked directly about such losses.

The Interview Sample

From April 2003 to December 2004, P/PV conducted 90-minute interviews with a total of 43 volunteers in Philadelphia, Boston and Washington, DC. In December 2004, we followed up with seven of the original 43 by conducting 20-minute phone interviews.¹⁵

Program directors in each city were asked to help P/PV select volunteers who varied in age, gender, ethnicity, number of hours per week they volunteered and socioeconomic background as gauged by their career histories. Staff members also matched us with volunteers who had been with the program for at least a year to ensure fairly full experiences. This method of relying on program staff to help identify respondents had the benefit of drawing a demographically representative sample, but it also risked skewing the sample toward a greater balance of volunteers with more positive program experiences. The sample's bias is important to note, particularly when considering the report's examination of program benefits. Our findings best represent the experiences of generally successful volunteers at relatively strong sites.

Table 1:
Respondents' Demographics, and Differences Between Full- and Part-Time Volunteers^a

| Characteristics of Volunteer Sample of 43 | Percentage of Total ^b N= 43 | Percentage of Part-Timers 33% (14) | Percentage of Full-Timers 67% (29) |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Gender | | | |
| Female | 77% | 71% | 79% |
| Male | 23% | 29% | 21% |
| Race | | | |
| African American | 67% | 36% | 83% |
| White | 23% | 50% | 10% |
| Other | 9% | 14% | 7% |
| Age | | | |
| Under 60 | 14% | 36% | 3% |
| 60-69 | 56% | 43% | 62% |
| 70-79 | 21% | 21% | 21% |
| 80-85 | 9% | ---- | 14% |
| Professional Experiences^c | | | |
| Professional degree/experience | 33% | 50% | 24% |
| Unspecialized job | 67% | 50% | 76% |
| Employment Status | | | |
| Still working full- or part-time | 12% | 29% | 3% |
| Retired/left workforce | 88% | 71% | 97% |
| Received EC stipend | 74% | 29% | 97% |

^a Full-time volunteers served 15 or more hours per week. Part-time volunteers served 2 to 12 hours per week.

^b Percentages have been rounded and do not always total 100 percent.

^c Professional experiences were categorized based on individuals' voluntary accounts.

Of the 43 interview respondents, 21 were Philadelphians, 11 were Bostonians and 11 were from Washington, DC. They served programs in 16 elementary schools. Volunteers ranged in age from 55 to 86 and broadly represented the gender and racial diversity in the initiative's five expansion cities.¹⁶ As shown in Table 1, 77 percent of the sample was female; 67 percent was African American, and 23 percent was white. Almost a third were married; the remaining two thirds described themselves as widowed, divorced, separated or single. Nearly 80 percent of the volunteers had raised children of their own, and many in the sample mentioned spending time with grandchildren and even great-grandchildren.

The participants' educational backgrounds ranged from never having completed high school to (one) having a doctorate. Based on individuals' voluntary accounts of their careers, we estimated that 33 percent held a professional degree or carried high levels of managerial responsibility and expertise. This group included teachers, nurses, lawyers, a social worker and two computer specialists. The remaining 67 percent held more traditional white- and blue-collar positions, such as bus driver; seamstress; tradesman; nursing-home aide; day-care provider; or factory, office, retail or restaurant worker. Roughly a quarter had three or more careers during their lifetimes.

Table 2:
Volunteer Recruitment Mechanisms

| Recruitment Mechanism | Percentage of Volunteers (N=43) ^a |
|---|--|
| Advertisement | 44% |
| AARP letter | 28% |
| Newspaper ad or program flyer | 16% |
| Word of Mouth | 44% |
| Family member | 5% |
| Friend | 28% |
| School principal | 5% |
| Medical professional | 5% |
| Presentation at a Senior Center or Residence | 12% |

^a Recruitment data are missing for one volunteer who could not recall how she initially learned about the program. Percentages have been rounded.

Approximately one third of respondents volunteered part time, putting in an average of six hours a week; the remaining two thirds volunteered full time, meaning 15 or more hours a week. Table 1 highlights five important differences between these two groups. Ninety-seven percent of full-time volunteers received a program stipend, compared with just 29 percent of part-time volunteers.¹⁷ Part-time volunteers were five times more likely to be white, 12 times more likely to be younger than 60, twice as likely to have earned a professional degree or have held high levels of managerial responsibility, and almost 10 times more likely to still be in the workforce part or full time.¹⁸ The differences between part- and full-time volunteers tend to reflect the greater importance of the stipend to full-time volunteers, who experienced less financial security during their lifetimes, particularly in retirement.

Individuals came to the program via different routes. Table 2 shows that the majority of the sample learned about Experience Corps through word of mouth (44%) or from an AARP mailing (28%). Four individuals were in their first year with the program, 30 were in their second or third year, and the remaining nine had been with Experience Corps for four to eight years.

The volunteers served in a variety of ways. Thirty-eight of the 43 spent at least part of their time as individual tutors helping struggling readers. Nine volunteers served simultaneously as tutors and in-class volunteers, offering guidance to individual children and small groups in a classroom while a teacher provided larger group instruction. Five volunteers served as part-time mentors, meeting individually with children to provide both academic and social/emotional supports. The six individuals who served as lead volunteers held diverse roles: Three were volunteer team coordinators, two helped develop curricula and train volunteers, and one specialized in recruiting new volunteers. Because these leadership and mentoring roles were relatively few in number and diverse both within our sample and within the three programs we studied, the more mainstream roles of tutor and in-class volunteer constitute the prevailing focus of this report.

The Report's Contents

By taking an in-depth look at Experience Corps through the eyes of volunteers, this report assesses the program's impact on volunteers' lives and further considers how Experience Corps and programs like it may best attract and retain older volunteers. The second chapter explores the motivation behind older adults' decision to join Experience Corps by looking at the roots of their volunteerism, the life circumstances that led to their community engagement and the specific program components that attracted them. The third chapter examines the challenges volunteers faced and the rewards they experienced in overcoming them. The fourth chapter profiles the program supports Experience Corps provided to help ensure that volunteers' experiences proved rewarding. The concluding chapter draws together the report's collective findings to summarize which program practices contribute to the model's success in fostering rewarding experiences for older volunteers.

Main Findings

The Experience Corps interview study was designed to provide a rich understanding of what motivates Americans over 55 to volunteer, the challenges and rewards they experience through civic engagement and key program supports that contribute to meaningful service work. Through interviews with 43 Experience Corps members, serving elementary schools in Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, DC, the study offers insights to practitioners and funders about creating and investing in program models that attract and retain older adult volunteers.

Motivation to Volunteer

Experience Corps members offered three main reasons for volunteering:

- *A deep belief in the importance of helping others.* Individuals' belief in the importance of helping others had deep roots. Many people in the sample linked the desire to volunteer with religious and moral convictions, while others said examples set early in life by family members were a source of inspiration. Still others were motivated by early educational and career experiences linked to service.
- *The chance to improve the quality of their own lives.* Many adults were looking for meaningful things to do in retirement. Program stipends, received by three quarters of the sample, were appreciated by participants, and for some, were an important source of financial support. For adults faced with loss, loneliness or the stresses of caring for ailing loved ones, Experience Corps was a welcome reprieve.
- *A good fit with volunteers' interests and availability.* Experience Corps members were drawn to the program's mission of helping children learn and found the flexible volunteer hours and service locations attractive. They also appreciated the fact that individuals need only the interest and basic literacy skills to apply—the program promises to impart the rest.

Challenges and Rewards

Experience Corps members were challenged and invigorated by the demands of teaching young children to read. They experienced three broad rewards in meeting this challenge:

- *A sense of meaning and purpose* was gained primarily through seeing children progress, experiencing children's thoughtfulness and believing that they were contributing to the well-being of future generations.
- *Mental engagement* stemmed from the rewards of learning about new things, such as the mechanics of teaching reading and the art of forging relationships with youngsters.
- *Social engagement* came from developing new friendships and tapping the social networks of other volunteers.

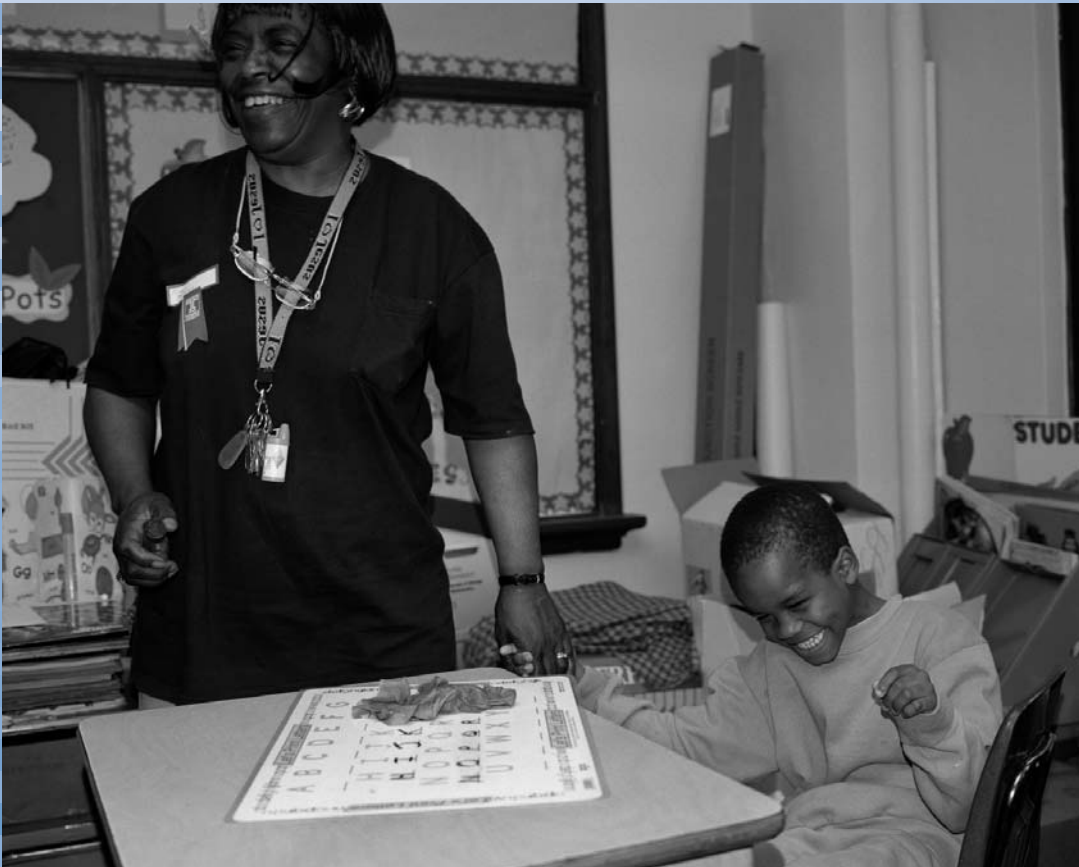
In light of recent research highlighting the importance of continued physical, mental and social activity as people age, the way volunteers are involved in Experience Corps suggests a powerful strategy for successful aging.

Key Program Supports

Volunteers noted three types of support as central to rewarding experiences:

- Programmatic supports, especially initial and ongoing training, and day-to-day support and guidance from a site coordinator.
- Team environments of 5 to 15 volunteers, which enabled volunteers to forge collegial relationships and support one another throughout the school day.
- Supportive school communities—60 percent of volunteers said teachers gave them advice about instructional strategies, and 42 percent said principals played central roles in making them feel welcomed and appreciated.

The Motivation to Volunteer



According to a recent AARP study, people over the age of 45 most often volunteer out of a sense of personal responsibility to help others (65%) and to make their own lives more satisfying (58%).¹⁹ Experience Corps volunteers shared these sentiments. As one volunteer put it, “you get satisfaction from thinking you helped someone else—people help you in your life, and you help them.” Another said, “I’ve had a wonderful life thus far, and I just want to give something to someone in need—now it’s the children.” However, when considering the origins of such beliefs and under what circumstances people seek out volunteering to enrich their day-to-day life, these statements prove to be deceptively simplistic.

Each Experience Corps member had a story to tell about how she or he came to volunteer, and a simple, single answer never sufficed. Among the layers of motivating factors, three elements stood out:

- Volunteers believed in the importance of helping others. For some, the belief sprang from their family upbringing and religious or moral convictions. For others, it grew out of career or educational experiences. And for still others, it came from a more generalized awareness of the needs of children in their cities. Individuals’ accounts revealed strong social and cultural forces at play encouraging Americans to give of themselves for the benefit of others.
- Current life circumstances provided people with the time and impetus to volunteer.
- The program presented a good fit with individuals’ interests and availability, and with their limitations as well—particularly those associated with aging and disability.

The three factors overlapped and adjoined, shaping individuals’ decisions to volunteer. For the most part, the reasons people decided to volunteer did not vary based on their racial/ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds, suggesting that prevailing cross-cultural forces and common life experiences linked to retirement and aging had a strong influence. (The one

I just figure I’ll do this little drop in the ocean, which is my obligation. And I’m going to continue, and I hope I make a difference in the lives of the children I’m interacting with.

—Frank Martino

exception was that African American volunteers were more likely to mention the stipend as a reason for joining the program.)

Believing in the Importance of Helping Others

Florence Day’s volunteerism had deep roots. Born in rural Georgia to a lumberman and a laundress, her life was hard. An aunt stepped in to raise her when, at the age of 8, she and her two siblings were orphaned. The aunt, a church pastor and committed public servant, first inspired Mrs. Day to help others. Like Mrs. Day, other volunteers often cited family upbringing and faith as their motivation to volunteer.²⁰ Early career and educational experiences often played vital roles as well. Of the 43 individuals in our sample, only seven had never formally volunteered before. Others tended to have long and committed track records of service.

Family Upbringing

Thirty percent of those interviewed said their childhood environment and the examples and expectations set by family members lay the foundation for a lifetime of service. Mothers, grandmothers and aunts surfaced as powerful role models for the predominantly female corps.

Carol Hunt admired her mother’s lifelong service to their community, noting how she “was always involved in something” and had progressed from a Cub Scouts mom and Sunday school teacher to AARP representative in her later years. Ms. Hunt proudly followed in her mother’s footsteps. For Lucile Hawkins, the willingness to help others

ran deeper than just her parents' generation. She attested, "Like my grandmother said, 'You can always share: If you have one potato you can cut it up and share.'"

Roughly three quarters of the sample were children during the Great Depression. Although not all would have been old enough to comprehend the scale of the economic decline, they observed both hardship and charity. Mabel Woolf was just 10 in 1935 when she saw her mother regularly open their door to "hobos," even though the family of 12 often struggled to get by on donations of stale bread from a local church.

Religious and Moral Convictions

The influences of family upbringing and faith were sometimes closely intertwined, with 40 percent of volunteers saying they were taught very early on that helping others was a fundamental rule of life. One volunteer said, "I grew up in a Christian home, and part of that is helping your neighbor." A Jewish volunteer attested, "The Hebrew culture is about loving thy neighbor as thyself—I was raised to always help people."

The idea that in giving to others one reaps great rewards surfaced many times. Edie Hicks firmly believed that the more good she put out, the more good she received. She, like 18 other volunteers in the sample, attended church regularly and volunteered both within and outside of her religious institution.

A melding of life experiences and spiritual beliefs aptly characterized how a quarter of those we interviewed came to volunteer. Vivian Strand reflected on the role religious education played in her volunteerism:

I've studied religion a lot, I had a guru when I was young... and I've studied the Eastern

religions. And I went to roots of African religion and I've come out with me and my life, and I'm the building. My willingness to volunteer comes from everything I've read and everything I am.

Career and Educational Experiences

Early educational and career experiences led others to appreciate volunteering. Elizabeth Dorian, a 68-year-old mother of three, described both a religious basis for service (in her own schooling) and a more secular type of involvement in her daughters' early education:

I went to a Quaker school when I was young, and there was a theme about service there. [Then later] my kids all started in the Montessori school. It was a cooperative Montessori school where parents were required to be involved, and I was on their board and involved in lots of ways, and it grew from there.

Mike Rasso, a fairly recent retiree from a career that meandered through various white-collar jobs, felt his first job as a naval officer spawned his volunteerism:

As a young navy officer... I felt a responsibility to take care of my people, to look out for my people... [There was] the notion that you had to look after other people, help them with their promotions, with their problems; this was part of your job.

Rewarding work-based opportunities to serve proved the genesis of volunteering for at least four in our sample. Velma Bainbridge, a computer technician for a large governmental agency, first enjoyed tutoring children through a work-sponsored school partnership. Evette Owens found leading her company's United Way drive the most invigorating aspect of her career; after she retired, serving as a site coordinator for Experience Corps allowed her to glean the same satisfaction from leading others in service.

The idea that in giving to others one reaps great rewards surfaced many times.

Encouragement from Friends and Family

Family members and friends exerted important influence, reinforcing volunteerism as a worthwhile endeavor and conveying cultural values for staying active.

Vivian Strand, a single mother who forged a successful law career in her 40s, got an extra push from her family's expectations: "When I retired, my family said: 'You can't retire; you've got to go on.'" A husband whose wife recommended the program to him said, "My wife is very persuasive—maybe she sees I need to get out of the house and stop watching TV and reading so much." Another man exclaimed, "My girlfriend is proud of me." When asked what close family members or friends thought about their volunteering, the majority of volunteers described ways in which their efforts met strong approval.

Life Circumstances

Across all demographic groups, life circumstances played a crucial role in people's decisions to volunteer. Having the time and occasionally the need to volunteer proved just as important as a willing disposition and belief in the goals of Experience Corps. In some cases, dramatic life events, such as the death of a loved one, prompted people to serve. Other times, the demands of day-to-day caregiving for an aging parent or spouse caused individuals to look to volunteering as a temporary escape. Most typically, the gradual life changes that occurred with retirement, aging and the growing independence of children and grandchildren afforded people with free time and promoted an interest in engaging in community life.

Retirement

With baby boomers beginning to hit retirement, demographers expect the population of people over age 65 to increase by 75 percent, to more than 69 million people, from 2010 to 2030.²¹ These Americans will live longer and enjoy better health than ever before. In this context, marshalling retirees' time and talent for community service presents tremendous opportunity. But existing ideologies about retirement as a boundless vacation foster questions about why people would choose to volunteer once their working years have ended. The volunteers offered much insight on the issue.

People arrive at retirement in different ways, at different times, with varying ideas about what they will do. Those with the means to retire when and how they choose often look forward to it. The idea of more time for travel, hobbies and being with family can hold great appeal. Evette Owens was delighted by the choices she faced in early retirement:

At 56, I probably have more options with how to spend my time than someone who's older. I can spend it volunteering or working or being at home. And that's a big difference. The fact that we have early retirement options means that a lot of people in their 50s are choosing what they want to do. It's just a matter of having a choice and knowing that I can do what I want to do.

Mrs. Owens' many assets—a strong professional track record, outgoing personality, good health and financial security—afforded her the luxury to choose among several options. Not all retirees are as fortunate or optimistic.

A third of retired persons in the sample expressed strong misgivings about their retirement transitions: "Retirement is so traumatic; it really wasn't fun for me," or "There's that feeling of not having anything to do anymore." Going from full-time work—in which deadlines, tasks and the company of co-workers abound—to what may be unstructured days with relatively limited social interaction presents major change, and can be challenging. Mary Louise Fine, whose career spanned 37 years as a labor coordinator for a leading manufacturing firm, recounted:

When I first retired, I said I'm not going to do anything. But you find after three to four years, there has to be more to life than this—I'm not doing anything constructive.... The wisdom and knowledge you have eventually becomes stale.

Others approached retirement with service firmly in mind. Opal Waverly said she went immediately to her senior community center to sign up for community service activities.²² Cynthia Lane tucked an early article about Experience Corps away in a suitcase of important papers until the right time.

Volunteers reported that striking the right balance among engaging activities in retirement takes planning and effort. Henry Wooding welcomed

retiring from what he described as a “physically, morally and mentally” tough career in construction. But once home, he found it difficult to fill his days with purpose.

It got a little lonesome. You miss some of the things out there and the activity. I engaged myself in doing whatever I could in my neighborhood. Someone calls me and says we need to go help this group here for a couple hours, I involved myself. I cut my fraternity brothers' grass to keep me active, anything.

Despite Mr. Wooding's keen willingness to help with anything in his community, fulfillment came only after he'd committed to a routine of volunteering three days a week with Experience Corps.

Medical setbacks prompted at least six in our sample to leave the workforce. A spinal injury at age 50 forced Lynn McDevitt to retire well before she had planned. With most of her peers still employed, she bemoaned the social isolation of life outside the workforce.

I have to feel I am contributing to society. It was a huge blow to me to not be working. I was a super mom and working for so long—I needed to get back into doing something.

Additional Income

Program stipends, received by three quarters of the sample, are intended to defray the day-to-day costs of volunteering. But for some full-time volunteers, stipends stretched further. At least six volunteers viewed Experience Corps as a part-time job because it provided needed income. Reflecting the socioeconomic distinctions between full- and part-time volunteers, these individuals were consistently more likely to come from blue-collar or lower-level white-collar occupations and to be over age 60.²³

An unexpected layoff from retail work gradually transitioned into early retirement for Cynthia Lane. While searching for work, she sensed that her age and limited skills caused employers to pass her over

for younger applicants. She questioned whether public computer and job training courses would impart the concrete skills needed to be more competitive, so she broadened her view of what part-time work might look like. A fondness for children, an interest in teaching and the availability of a stipend made Experience Corps a pleasing choice. She said: “I realized this was suitable for me because I liked it, but I also needed some kind of income. If I weren't getting paid, I couldn't do it.”

The fact that some volunteers viewed Experience Corps as a part-time job showed through in the simple ways they talked about the program. Edie Hicks preferred to call herself semiretired, explaining:

I tell my friends I enjoy my job, and the people that I've got jobs [recruited into Experience Corps], they like it... I'll work as long as my health holds up—I enjoy it.

...the stipend attracts and secures an exceptionally stable corps and appears to be a linchpin to the program's success.

More than a fifth of the volunteers—all full time but one—made comments suggesting that they faced financial hardships. Three or more lived in federally subsidized senior residences. Two visited local food pantries. One volunteer was visibly distraught because she could not afford postage to send out her annual slate of more than 50 holiday cards.

Even those with greater resources appreciated the stipend. Mike Rasso recognized his good fortune: Social Security and a modest government pension served as a steady source of income. Yet because he did not have the additional cushion of personal savings, he appreciated the stipend “because everything helps.”

For those not dependent on the stipend as a source of income, it simply served to defray the personal costs of volunteering, its main purpose. Vivian Strand attested:

The \$200 stipend was an incentive to pay for your lunch and pay for your carfare, and I know that's an incentive. It helps to have that. When you have your pension and Social Security, it certainly does help a lot.

Five volunteers confirmed that without the stipend, they would leave the program in search of other paid part-time work. Several others admitted that if not for the financial incentive, they would simply volunteer fewer hours—participating perhaps once a week, rather than two or three days. In this capacity, the stipend attracts and secures an exceptionally stable corps and appears to be a linchpin to the program's success.

Loss

For six people in our sample, volunteering helped fill a void in their lives that resulted from the death of a loved one. Although Frank Martino had volunteered in many capacities throughout his life, he first began reading with children in schools with his wife. He fondly reminisced, "It was very good for our life together because it was something that we did together and we talked about it—we talked about the kids. It was heartwarming." As a way to cope after she died, Mr. Martino created a weekly regimen of exercising at the gym, meeting with his seniors' group, volunteering for Experience Corps and reserving a day for errands and a day to relax. His reasoning:

When my wife died almost three years ago, my sister sent me a note and said, "Don't spend too much time alone with your memories—plan every day ahead of time." I was lost then, and I took that advice and started structuring things.

Margaret Scott saw her time spent serving children in Experience Corps as a way to come to terms with the loss of an adult daughter.

It helps me try to put a closure to my daughter's death.... It helps me get through the day.... And I hope in my little way I'm trying to build better children.

Respite from Caregiving

Three Experience Corps members shared intimate insights into how community service functioned

as a respite from being a caregiver for an aging parent, spouse or extended family member. For them, being a volunteer added levity to their lives.

Ruby Langston, a 33-year veteran of elementary school teaching and a longtime community leader, was no stranger to service work. But this time around she looked to it as an outlet from her own daily stresses. As the primary caregiver for a homebound mother and sole guardian to a teenage nephew, she looked forward to the days she volunteered. Janie Newbold experienced similar strains in her personal life. Within the past two years, her only son had died of diabetes,

she had contracted shingles and her husband had been placed in a nursing home. She visited her husband twice weekly to deliver home-cooked meals and fresh laundry. On her off days, she joined Experience Corps. Mrs.

Newbold exclaimed, "That's my salvation!"

Many appreciated Experience Corps for its simple capacity to alleviate loneliness and enrich daily life.

Loneliness

Many appreciated Experience Corps for its simple capacity to alleviate loneliness and enrich daily life. Mrs. Waverly, a widow living by herself, attested to the program's appeal:

It makes life interesting when you have something on the outside to do. I don't watch a lot of television, and coming to the school keeps me busy.... I think my life would be a lot more boring [without it].

Barbara Zubansky, a longtime widow without extended family, described her life's greatest pleasures as volunteering at the school and participating in holiday parties at her senior residence. When contemplating life without Experience Corps, she confessed, "I'd be devastated."

Social Obligations and Professional Interests

Five individuals were drawn to Experience Corps at least in part because it helped them meet a specific social obligation or professional interest. One woman sought out volunteer work because it

met the community service hours required by her sorority. Another, the pastor of a neighborhood church, became involved with her local elementary school as a part of the church's community outreach mission. A career educational researcher came to the program in her retirement with a keen interest in better understanding how children learn in practice, rather than theory. Three men were recruited by fellow Masons—community service is part of the Masonic creed.

A Good Fit

In most cases, our interviewees found Experience Corps appealing because it proved the right fit with their interests, availability and limitations, especially those associated with aging and, in one case, disability. In this regard, the program's overall goals and flexibility and the provision of training and support were central tenets of effective recruitment.

Children and Literacy

More than half the volunteers viewed the opportunity to work with children as one of the program's main attractions. Those who lamented that grandchildren and even great-grandchildren had become independent or lived far away appreciated the program as an opportunity to connect with younger generations. Mabel Woolf explained, "I got a grandson in Atlanta working to be a doctor, but I can't be calling and talking to him all the time." Others who continued to play involved roles as grandparents sometimes mused that Experience Corps allowed them to enjoy children during the day and still go home in peace. Two volunteers confided that they had long yearned for children of their own but were never able to conceive.

Six of those interviewed said they held strong interests in teaching. Some were simply extending long careers in education, while others, like Monty Snyder, never taught before. Mr. Snyder stated, "I always said if I came back in another life, I'd be a schoolteacher." Herman Miller, whose career history ranged from manual labor to a panoply of business endeavors, felt that Experience Corps made teaching an integral part of his life:

I think of it [teaching] as part of my calling, and what I was born to do. We all have talents when we're born, and some people don't do what they were born to do.

For Florence Day, teaching was a long-deferred dream. In high school, she set her heart on a teaching career. But when the aunt who raised her became terminally ill, she postponed college to care for her. As her own family's life unfolded, the hopes of college and a teaching career were eclipsed by the needs of earning a steady income and caring for her young son. Experience Corps was a late-blooming opportunity.

Program Flexibility

Experience Corps proved attractive to volunteers because it offered a range of commitment levels, accommodating those like Mr. Wooding, who wanted to fill a sizable portion of his week with volunteer work, and those like Ms. Bainbridge, who wanted to volunteer just four hours a week to reserve time for other responsibilities. Four volunteers who remained in the workforce found they could fit several hours of volunteering into their weeks.

Volunteers also could select their schools based on their needs and interests. For example, they could choose schools close to their homes or on readily accessible transit routes. One volunteer selected the school his children had attended years before, even though he did not live nearby. Another volunteer returned to serve in her old neighborhood. When volunteering in their own neighborhood was an option, many individuals chose to do so. Madeline Bloom said: "I'm community oriented, so it doesn't get any better than this. I really would not want to go out of my community to volunteer at this stage in my life."

Feeling safe in the surrounding neighborhood played a central role in three volunteers' school selection. A 68-year-old volunteer said:

I live in the beginning of the South East, and as you go deeper, it gets worse. The living conditions—I'd rather not say. I'd rather stay at the beginning of the South East where I live and feel comfortable.

In contrast, five volunteers purposely selected schools in rougher neighborhoods. A former social worker chose a school in a community where she once worked, explaining, "I didn't want to lose touch with this part of town, and I like children and

I think there's a need." Another volunteer said, "It's a tough school in a tough neighborhood, but I like coming here because the kids here need help."

Specific building amenities proved important as well. For example, one volunteer visited the two schools closest to her home and picked the one with a parking lot. Another selected a school with air conditioning units in the classrooms.

Open to All

Experience Corps accepts people from all walks of life. Volunteers need only the desire to work with children and fundamental literacy skills—the program promises to teach the rest. Cynthia Lane, the volunteer laid off from retail work, was elated by the opportunity to essentially begin a new vocation without prior knowledge of teaching.

I never thought that I could do what I'm doing without some kind of extra training in the field. [Here] they tell you... how to approach the children and what books to choose, so I like that. The fact that I didn't have to take time to study and know about it [made it right for me].

Only 6 of the 43 volunteers had experience in early childhood education or teaching. And while more than 80 percent had helped raise children of their own or those of a close family member, many had not spent regular time with young children over the last decade.

Volunteers also commented that the program accommodated special needs, including physical disabilities and the impairments that often accompany aging. A wheelchair-bound volunteer explained:

I needed to find something that fit my limitations, like I couldn't stand for long periods of time. No matter what, I knew that this was something I could do.

Volunteers with physical disabilities were placed—whenever possible—in more modern schools with elevators and classrooms where fellow volunteers and staff could offer assistance.

Overlapping Sources of Motivation

In each case, Experience Corps members offered at least two main reasons for joining the program. They all believed, broadly, in the importance of volunteer work or, more specifically, in the need to help children in low-income neighborhoods learn to read. In this way, they came to Experience Corps believing they would be participating in a worthy cause. However, no volunteer proved entirely altruistic—each sought some element of personal benefit. Some saw Experience Corps as a way to invigorate their retirement years. Others hoped to gain a modest supplement to their fixed incomes. A smaller number wanted to fulfill a social obligation or professional interest, and some hoped for a reprieve from loneliness, the stresses of caregiving or the sadness of loss.

As the following chapter reveals, Experience Corps met many of the volunteers' expectations, fulfilling both philosophical and personal interests.

The Challenges and Rewards of Volunteer Service

Chapter III



Experience Corps provided volunteers with enjoyable and purposeful experiences, and for many, offered valuable new skills and knowledge and meaningful social engagement with co-volunteers. These benefits were achieved not only via the opportunities the program offered, but also as a result of volunteers' hard work. Challenged by the children's academic and social needs, the volunteers became fully engaged.

When asked how they benefited from Experience Corps, volunteers were quickest to mention the strong sense of personal satisfaction and enjoyment gleaned from their relationships with children. Their comments

were so plentiful in this regard that children appear the program's most potent source of reward. The humor, generosity and vulnerabilities of the children brought volunteers joy, made them feel appreciated and fulfilled deep-seated desires to make a difference in others' lives.

What might be the ultimate worth of this vaguely defined good feeling? Neva Baker shared her theory: "When you are happy, the energy force around you changes and contributes to your being healthier." Her assertions are grounded by a growing body of research linking psychological well-being to physical health and longevity.²⁴

A Sense of Meaning and Purpose

Working with children often proved challenging for volunteers but also gave them a deep sense of meaning and purpose. Before volunteers could even begin to teach children to read, they had to use creativity, kindness and patience to find the right key to building each child's trust and interest. Roughly a fifth of volunteers described a child who at first seemed doubtful, shy or in two cases downright resistant to participating. Germaine Night offered a balanced perspective:

Some days they love you; the next day they hate you. It's not easy because you have to insist that they do this [academic work] whether they want to or not. That's not easy all the time, because they think you don't like them because you make them do it.

Guiding children to adopt good behavior proved the most challenging aspect of the work. Volunteers offered accounts of encouraging children

...volunteers...had to use creativity, kindness and patience to find the right key to building each child's trust and interest.

to use appropriate language, remain in their seats—rather than roam the classroom—and show respect when talking about their teachers or peers. Children, who in some cases were reminded by school staff that participation in the

program was a privilege, were typically responsive to volunteers' directives. However, there were some volunteers who felt ill-prepared to work with especially demanding children. In these cases, site coordinators or teachers were available to intervene, and in three incidents, children were reassigned to a new volunteer who might take a different approach. In four cases, a child's continually challenging behavior resulted in the child being pulled from the program.

Along with the challenges that children's behavior presented, volunteers regularly reported that children required emotional support. Carol Hunt thought she sometimes accomplished more good in "just sitting there listening" to children than through a day's literacy instruction. Germaine Night made a practice of spending a few minutes before each session checking in with students about how they were doing: "I get better results when I listen to them 'cause they bring to school a heavy baggage." Volunteers found accounts of children's home lives compelling. Eight believed that at least some if not all of their children lacked sufficient attention at home. Male volunteers tended to believe their roles were particularly important for

the boys they tutored and mentored, as those boys sometimes lacked father figures and positive male role models.

Volunteers were equally sympathetic to children's health and nutritional needs. One volunteer, concerned about a child's hygiene, discreetly brought in a supply of clean socks for him to wear. Six volunteers recognized the difficulty of getting a hungry child to focus on learning. When permitted by programs and schools, volunteers took to crafting an immediate solution: providing snacks.

Greatest Thanks Came from Children

Volunteers experienced great satisfaction in meeting these challenges. They were honored by the children's acceptance, particularly when it took time for a child's trust to grow. When volunteers were asked how they believed the children perceived them, the words friend, mentor, big brother and even parent often came to mind. A handful of volunteers in each city unfailingly mentioned informal grandparent titles. Though some programs discourage volunteers from taking on familial labels because it risks trivializing volunteers' formal roles as educators, children and volunteers occasionally slipped into habits of their own:

One of my little boys said to me, "Ms. Vivian, do you mind if I call you Grandmom?" And I said, "No, you can call me Grandmom." And I walked by his class, and he said, "Hi, Grandmom." And two girls heard it and they wanted to call me Grandmom, too!"

Volunteers took equal pride in their roles as educators, especially those who had always wanted to teach. Mike Rasso recounted, "I was telling one student that you have to be thankful to your teachers, and the student responded, 'You're my teacher, too.'"

Expressions of gratitude from children deepened volunteers' commitment. Such messages could be simple. One volunteer said she felt appreciated

when children recognized her in the hall and said they wanted to come to the program. Another volunteer felt rewarded by children's smiles and requests for her to return the next day. Volunteers who returned to the same school year after year often enjoyed contact with former tutees who waved hello in the hall or dropped by Experience Corps rooms for a visit.

At times, children's gratitude could be almost overwhelming. Roxanne Fisher recalled that during her last day of the school year, "I had 26 kids there hugging me and saying, 'Don't leave, don't leave.'" Another volunteer described a child's thank-you letter:

She had a letter for me telling me how much it means to her that I'm reading to her, what a good friend I am to her, how much she loves me—I almost started crying.

Children could be equally thoughtful in expressing concern for a volunteer's well-being. One volunteer chuckled when recalling the promise made to her by two students: "They said, 'If you get sick, we'll come over and take care of you.' And I said, 'OK, well, I'll hold you to that.'"

Mrs. Day recalled how children sent her "I Miss You" cards when she was absent because of her sister's death. David Jackson beamed when reminiscing about the get-well cards children sent him after he suffered a stroke midway through the school year: "There were so many of the cards—our whole living-room door was covered." Even when teachers spearheaded these special outreach efforts, the volunteers accepted children's sympathies as sincere.

Generativity

Time spent helping children learn and grow surfaced as volunteers' strongest source of reward. Lucile Hawkins surmised, "The appreciation you feel is that you're helping a child." Mr. Wooding linked numerous rewards to service. "When I give,

it just comes on back, and I'm not speaking monetarily," he said. "The response I get from the kids enlightens and lifts me so much."

These sentiments embody the concept of "generativity," an individual's ability to express care and concern for future generations. Scholars consider generativity an important aspect of aging, going so far as to suggest that, for some, success in life may hinge on the good they impart to others.²⁵

Vivian Strand expressed a basic tenet of generativity—"I am what survives me":

I don't know that any of these children will ever remember me, but I believe some of them will. And who knows what they'll contribute to life—and maybe I'll have had something to do with it.

Twila Coleman saw herself as a future benefactor of a child's largesse and knowledge:

It's not just the here and now, but it's the future. One of these kids will have to take care of me. And I say to the kids, "You never know—some of you will be lawyers and policymakers and make decisions for me some day."

Rayford King's *raison d'être* seemed integral to his ability to support children's advancement:

I can't begin to tell you what that means to me—knowing I'm doing something for a child and how much I need it.... I keep telling myself, "Did I convince some children to understand how much they need this education?" And I always tell myself there's somebody out there that I need to reach, even if it's just one kid out of all these children that I've tutored.

As described in Chapter 2, more than half the volunteers came to Experience Corps because they wanted to work with children, and all were motivated by the idea that they might make a meaningful difference in children's lives. This section reveals volunteers' considerable satisfaction with having accomplished that goal. Yet the story of Experience Corps' success in fulfilling volunteers' expectations has another layer. For at least 10 volunteers, the insights they gained about the needs of both

children and schools fostered an even stronger motivation to advocate for and meet those needs. Evette Owens reflected, "Before I started volunteering, I didn't think there was a lot of potential for the kids I saw in my neighborhood, and now I see there's so much untapped talent in them." For Mrs. Owens and others like her, time in the program generated a growing appreciation for children and teachers.

New Tricks

The health benefits attributed to regular mental exercise are considerable. Regular cognitive engagement slows the progression of two leading mental illnesses: Alzheimer's disease and dementia.²⁶ Half the Experience Corps volunteers attested to gaining knowledge about the nuances of pedagogical strategy; the mechanics of reading, writing and arithmetic; and the art of forging relationships with young people and motivating them to read. Pre-service and ongoing monthly or bi-monthly trainings throughout the school year constituted formal learning opportunities, while day-to-day tutoring presented opportunities for hands-on learning.

Learning to Teach

Figuring out ways to meet children's individual reading needs was an ongoing challenge. Three volunteers talked about the careful effort they made to ensure selected books matched children's abilities. In another case, a volunteer identified that vision problems could account for one child's reading difficulties; a vision test by the school nurse and a pair of glasses led to rapid improvement. Velma Bainbridge was one of at least three volunteers who helped determine that a tutee needed more specialized academic support than a tutor could provide.

Volunteers also met challenges in motivating reluctant readers. Barbara Zubansky, a former comedian, used humor to make sessions engaging: "I make them laugh—you've got to make learning fun because learning is fun!" Margaret Scott used explicit encouragement, telling children, "Without an education, you can't succeed in life." Henry Wooding adopted an indirect approach. After learning one of his students wanted to become a doctor, Mr. Wooding began habitually introducing the boy to people in the hallways as Dr. Tyron.

Evette Owens relished one-on-one tutoring because it pressed her to understand the individual needs, abilities and interests of each child. She recalled one of her most challenging tutees:

I had a young man last year, and I couldn't get through to him to learn those sight words. He couldn't learn how to read "who" and "how." So I put those words on the wall, and every day he came in we started with those words. But this one little boy didn't seem to get it. But then whenever I changed what we were doing, I started to see that he knew more than he let me know.

Mrs. Owens soon realized that the boy was merely feigning an inability to read simple words to avoid having to progress to harder ones. She proudly recounted her success at crafting a specific teaching strategy to engage him:

I learned this little guy was very competitive, and I started to make it a game that he had to win, and he started going crazy [learning] new words. So I brought out something in him that I didn't see at first. It takes that one-on-one focus to figure out their individual trigger and learn their abilities.

Even individuals with years of teaching experience were pushed to learn new strategies. Natalie Calder, a 34-year veteran of elementary school teaching, relished her role as a curriculum developer and trainer because it gave her a new challenge: adult instruction.

Tutors, in some cases, think they know everything and that they do not need any help. And getting them to see that—maybe I can give you something you haven't seen before—is hard.... One of the tutors yesterday said, "I know how to do it," and I said, "Do you know how to do it this way?" So it's a constant battle to get them to see there's another way to do it.

Mrs. Calder discovered that adult learners are especially keen to know why a specific strategy

or approach is best. "They say: Prove it," she explained. In response, she crafted trainings to clearly relay her own expertise as a longtime teacher and convey her humble goal of making volunteers' work easier and more successful.

Volunteers also mentioned the concrete facts they learned from teachers, particularly in large classrooms. "I learn about people, history and the environment," said one volunteer. Some were quick to note the curricular changes that had taken place since their own school days. Nadira Spellings said, "Sometimes the work they do now is a little different than what we did in school, but I enjoy that

because I'm learning, too." Several volunteers were delighted about learning the new math: "The way they do the math these days, I say she's teaching me!"

A Child's Point of View

Other volunteers felt they learned from children's unique points of view. Abe Gillerman said about his young tutee, "Being eight, he's on a different level and thinks about things differently." Children also exposed volunteers to youth culture. One volunteer said:

One thing, you learn a lot. The children watch television more than I do, and it's interesting how they do things and tell you and show you. And they'll say, "Miss Waverly, you're wrong," and sure enough they do tell you.

Elizabeth Dorian, a former social worker, said volunteer service with children in an inner-city school kept her from cultural isolation in her own white, middle-class world: "It's enlightening to me to see what they know that I don't know about. And they can tell me things about the world that are sort of fun."

Volunteers, particularly the men, valued what they learned about developing relationships with children. Mike Rasso called Experience Corps "a re-education" because it had been many years since he had spent time with children. Abe Gillerman

"I don't know that any of these children will ever remember me, but I believe some of them will. And who knows what they'll contribute to life—and maybe I'll have had something to do with it."

enjoyed carrying over what he learned about working with children in Experience Corps to the time he spent with his grandchildren.

Volunteers most often thought about lessons learned and knowledge gained in terms of concrete facts, instructional skills or the art of relationship development with children. However, five volunteers described personal growth. In the words of one volunteer:

My patience and understanding of people has increased, and I have learned to relax. Like, once I wanted things done in a time limit, and I've learned you have to be repetitious with a child.

Staying Active

Six volunteers said they increased their physical activity because of the program by just getting out of the house or climbing the stairs at school. But most volunteers tended to already lead active lives and remained in relatively good health. More than a third participated in regular cardiovascular exercise, ranging from tai chi and dancing to swimming and long walks.

Of the 15 volunteers with regular exercise routines, two thirds volunteered part time, meaning their schedules most likely left room for exercise. The pattern is also indicative of the economic advantages, relative youthfulness and culturally influenced practices associated with the part-timers in our sample.²⁷

Social Benefits

Older adults with active family relationships, more friendships and greater organizational membership are shown to live longer than adults with fewer personal ties.²⁸ Some research even suggests that social activities have effects equal to physical fitness in terms of reducing the risk of mortality among those older than 65.²⁹

The knowledge of positive benefits of social relationships in part led Experience Corps' founders to place volunteers in schools as teams. Volunteers typically work alongside each other in classrooms or use one room as a base. In rarer cases, when

schools lack a dedicated space for Experience Corps, volunteers tend to gather at lunch, meetings and trainings.

Friendships and Social Networks

Ninety-five percent of the volunteers developed rewarding friendships or useful social networks in Experience Corps, making time at the schools more enjoyable.

Opal Waverly was among seven volunteers who described their entire teams as close knit:

During the summertime we would get together at someone's house and have an old-fashioned talk and eat; it's fun and makes life livable. And most of us, our husbands are gone and that helps you out, too, but we have one or two that are married, and they get out and go with us. And all these churches have things going on. We go to concerts everywhere... all the different places we've gone—from the clubs and casinos, and we go out to dinner.

Shared transportation to and from schools promoted individual friendships. June Parson waited each afternoon to ride the bus home with another volunteer who lived in her senior residence—she found it made the ride more enjoyable. Florence Day took turns driving to school with a volunteer who lived near her; it gave her more time with a neighbor she enjoyed and saved gas money. Marian Amesley talked about how carpooling across the city with two other volunteers enriched her overall experience with the program:

We had an hour commute each way [to get to and from the school], and talking about the kids and the funny things they did I think helped us understand the kids better.

The carpoolers' friendship soon spilled over into their personal lives, and they met several times for lunch in the summer.

Formal Experience Corps events fostered opportunities for socializing among volunteers as well. Boston's volunteer corps went on a year-end boat cruise; a team of Philadelphia volunteers planned a bus trip to New York to see the musical *Chicago* and

have dinner in Harlem. Volunteers at most schools planned holiday parties.

Volunteers often developed social networks to exchange favors and share advice. Money-saving tips were a particularly hot topic. One team regularly exchanged store flyers and extra coupons, and volunteers took orders among the group for special sale items at their local grocery stores. On a day we observed programming in Boston, a volunteer arrived with a shopping cart full of donations for the group, including a secondhand fur coat and two grocery bags of leftovers from multiple Thanksgiving dinners she had attended. Opal Waverly and Nadira Spellings gave volunteers in their neighborhoods rides to the grocery store. Two volunteers said they gladly accepted an invitation to attend another's church. Rayford King's team enjoyed shopping together:

The group I hang out with, we're very tight and close. We're always saying, "There's a sale over here—let's go." We go to different malls where there are sales, and we might go on a cultural thing together, things like that. We talk about, "Where's the cheapest place we can wine and dine." We stick together; we're a team.

Volunteers with close ties supported each other in times of need and sorrow. Sara Chatham described her team's response when one member had surgery and another lost her husband:

The lady who went into the hospital, she was nervous and we all took her to Red Lobster beforehand.... I stay in contact with her, and we all got a big card, and one of the volunteers went out and had a big plant sent to her home. [The volunteer who sent the plant] talked to us since and said, "You don't know how happy she was when that arrived." And one of our members lost her husband of 52 years, and Miss Lansing and I immediately went to her home and sat with her, and we offered our services.

Extended support and close friendships were most common among teams that had served together for

three or more years. Members of these teams drew analogies to family:

We're like family; we get along really good. We could talk about anything and laugh and make jokes and not take it seriously.

In a few cases, volunteering nurtured preexisting acquaintanceships into friendships. Gerald Marsh was recruited to Experience Corps by a fellow member of his Masonic lodge. Though really just acquaintances at first, they forged a stronger friendship that included getting together to watch football games on the weekends. Former col-

leagues recruited Ruby Langston and Natalie Calder, two retired teachers, to Experience Corps. Their small group formed closer friendships from working together to develop curricular materials. The team decided to meet at each others'

homes once a week to conduct meetings and share lunch. Even when Ms. Langston and Mrs. Calder later left the program, they continued to keep up with others from the team.

Collaborative Learning Community

Team settings positioned volunteers to forge collegial relationships and support one another throughout the school day. Lucile Hawkins summarized a popular opinion:

I think being a part of a group adds something. It's always good to be part of something, and group things are better because you have someone to commiserate with and discuss little problems and get their input, and they give you a different point of view.

Volunteers appreciated opportunities to receive informal advice from peers about how to work with children. During one lunch break, a volunteer shared his concerns about a challenging situation that morning when he was assisting a teacher in her classroom—a child stormed around the room knocking over chairs. The volunteer was stymied

Team settings positioned volunteers to forge collegial relationships and support one another....

about how best to support the teacher during the incident and asked another volunteer for advice. That volunteer was unable to provide concrete suggestions but did offer reassurance, which was helpful in and of itself.

Some volunteers were supportive in more systematic ways. Team members proved keenly attuned to the needs of less mobile volunteers, regularly running errands to the main office for them or collecting their students from classrooms. Volunteer teams also collaborated on group projects, such as the development of supplemental curricular materials, decorating of dedicated classrooms or planning of special celebrations for children.

Volunteers enjoyed sharing teaching resources. When Vivian Strand created a math table to illustrate the basic principles of multiplication, others asked for copies to share with their own students. Roxanne Fisher received three free boxes of notepads from her roommate, and she distributed them among volunteers and teachers. Sara Chatham shared the curricular resources she found on the Internet:

The ladies and I are always sharing and going on the Internet to get, like, this is a worksheet for a first-grader to learn to tell time, and this is [a worksheet] for after a child has read a story; we give them this to tell about the story.

Cultural Growth

Racial and ethnic differences generated broader cultural understanding and acceptance among volunteers. Five talked explicitly about valuing the opportunity to interact with people different from themselves. Iris O'Malley, a middle-class woman from Ireland, described how working in the inner city broadened her cultural understanding and changed some of her assumptions about race:

I find working in the inner city and with the other [volunteers] interesting and quite an eye-opener. I find it enriching. I'm more tuned in to people who are less fortunate and [experience racism].

Although cross-racial and cross-class relationships did not always lead to firm and fast friendships, they often promoted volunteers' cultural awareness and respect for people from different backgrounds.

Feeling Left Out

Selective comments from part-timers, who sometimes felt excluded from the team, underscore the importance of social interaction to the volunteers.

Some problems integrating part- and full-time volunteers centered on demographics: Part-timers in our study were five times more likely to be white and twice as likely to hold a professional degree or have had a career that required high levels of managerial responsibility. But the structure of the program also contributed to their sense of exclusion: Part-timers typically arrived shortly before their tutoring sessions began and missed periods of downtime, mainly lunch breaks, with their full-time peers.

Marian Amesley, a white, upper-middle-class, part-time volunteer, shared her perception of the division between part- and full-time volunteers:

The others [full-time volunteers] all tended to be here... in the morning sitting in the classrooms, so by the time we [part-timers] came they were already sitting in groups having lunch, and it was hard for us getting in the groups. And we tried to sit with someone when there was a party but... There was no hostility, just a lack of connection.

Mrs. Amesley, who was at the school just two afternoons a week for a total of four hours, found the "lack of connection" between full- and part-time volunteers a point of puzzlement, and though she forged rewarding friendships with two other part-timers, she would have liked to feel more connected to the entire team.

Frustrations

Volunteers described a limited variety of frustrations related to administrative practices or school conditions they felt minimized the program's effectiveness or shortchanged volunteers. For example, six volunteers insisted that more reading materials and supplies were needed at their sites to ensure quality instruction of the children. Nine volunteers felt discouraged by the amount of paperwork required to document one-on-one tutoring sessions—some believed it unnecessarily took time away from direct instruction of the children. Nine volunteers complained about school spaces being small, noisy and lacking in privacy, yet they understood this to be a common limitation of working in underserved schools. Five volunteers lamented unpredictable or delayed program start-up dates at the beginning of the school year, chiefly because they looked forward to beginning the work to which they had committed themselves.³⁰ Four volunteers resented sporadic kinks in stipend payroll systems that postponed their check delivery or caused slight inconsistencies in payment amounts.

In these ways, like any program, Experience Corps was not perfect. But by volunteers' accounts, the relatively minor frustrations paled compared with their overall reports of success and enjoyment.

The Greater Whole

Examining volunteers' experiences as a whole, the program's combination of meaningful roles, time spent investing in children and opportunities to learn new skills and life lessons, all in the company of similarly committed volunteers, produced strong feelings of reward. Several volunteers noted how program experiences affirmed their sense of self-worth. Barbara Zubansky explained:

It's very easy for a senior to feel like they're not worth anything—retirement is so traumatic. So this is my cup of tea. In the summertime [when the program isn't running], I'm miserable—I can't wait to get back to work again.

Volunteers pointed to retirement transitions, limited opportunities for engagement in their communities and, in one case, disability as having fostered prior feelings of low self-worth. For example, Charlie Davidson spent his first year and a half of retirement volunteering for community efforts that he thought failed to make good use of his time and talent. With Experience Corps, he opted to volunteer five days a week because it gave him an authentic, purposeful role:

You feel so good about yourself again.... The biggest reward is what you get: knowing that you are important and needed and you do make a difference to somebody. That old thing about self-esteem—really self-esteem is what you need as much as the children do.

For adults who came to the program feeling lonely, stressed, isolated or simply bored with retirement, the positive relationships they forged with co-volunteers and opportunities they were given to build new skills also contributed to feelings of self-worth.

How Were Volunteers Supported in Their Roles?

Chapter IV



Volunteers reported significant benefits from their involvement in Experience Corps, often because of the effort and creativity they put into working with the children. But the program also needed to put considerable energy into helping volunteers effectively deliver services in schools. Experience Corps provided a range of formal supports to the volunteers, while school staff often offered a variety of more informal supports.

Formal Program Supports

Pre-service training, typically held at the beginning of the school year, served as a time to welcome volunteers. In Philadelphia, for example, newly recruited volunteers spent 20 hours in pre-service training. Experience Corps staff and often lead volunteers introduced specific reading curricula and shared instructional strategies. They also offered guidance on building positive relationships with school staff and children and reviewed basic administrative policies.

Across the three cities, volunteers received more informal team-based training once or twice a month from an Experience Corps staff member or volunteer site coordinator. Training often varied depending on the needs and interests of individual teams but typically covered curriculum use, instructional strategies and ways to troubleshoot individual student challenges.

Day-to-day support by site coordinators and Experience Corps staff members was critical. Nine of the 16 schools represented by this sample had a dedicated full- or part-time site coordinator. The remaining seven schools shared coordinators who floated among several schools. Coordinators served as a liaison between volunteer teams and Experience Corps administrators: They made sure volunteers knew about upcoming Experience Corps events and saw that volunteers completed basic administrative tasks, such as signing in each day and documenting their time with students. Coordinators organized Experience Corps classrooms, making sure children's books and curricular resources

were available. Coordinators also served as liaisons between school and program administrators, teachers and volunteers: They shared program goals and services with school staff, kept volunteers abreast of school schedules, assigned volunteers to particular classrooms or students and notified teachers when volunteers were absent.

Site coordinators varied in the amount of direct instructional supervision and guidance they offered to volunteers. Some coordinators planned periodic team trainings and regularly observed volunteers' interactions with students, intervening as needed. Others played more subtle roles, sometimes serving as tutors themselves and simply responding to volunteers' periodic requests for help. The variation depended on coordinators' levels of experience and how program administrators defined their roles.

Nine volunteers mentioned ways good coordinators boosted team morale. Lynn McDevitt spoke enthusiastically about her site coordinator:

She's very supportive, just amazing. She's just dedicated and is always coming up with ideas. And she eats and sleeps this program. She gives 110 percent all the time.

Young site coordinators appealed to volunteers because they were often enthusiastic and added a third—young adult—generational component to the model. One volunteer described how a young female coordinator inspired her because she was “‘worldly wise’ and not afraid to open up, to try something new, to take something on and push for it,” which she noted was different from the way women of her generation were raised.

Strategic Team Environment

Strategically positioning volunteers to work as teams ensured that they had the opportunity to learn from, support and enjoy one another. Simple program practices like putting volunteers on similar schedules that allowed them to have lunch together and insisting on a common program space for

meetings and group tutoring sessions went a long way toward fostering rewarding and supportive volunteer relationships. More specific strategies, such as arranging for returning volunteers to mentor new volunteers and encouraging teams to initiate and plan special school projects, though used only sporadically across sites, forged opportunities for volunteers to engage with one another in meaningful ways. Group trainings, when planned well, positioned volunteers to work collaboratively toward recognizing and troubleshooting common challenges. In such ways, collaborative team environments probably strengthened the quality of services provided to children, schools and volunteers alike.

School-Based Supports

In perhaps more indirect ways, a friendly, inclusive school community in which volunteers felt known and valued by school staff served as an essential source of support.

Teachers

More than 60 percent of the volunteers said teachers gave them advice about instructional strategies. One volunteer said a teacher helped her better understand how to support a student with speech difficulties. Two tutors noted that when they picked children up from their classrooms, teachers offered insights into how the students were performing or acting that day. In working with a beginning reader, Iris O'Malley regularly asked the teacher what phonetic sounds the class was learning so she could review them during tutoring.

Those who served as in-class volunteers were 22 percent more likely than mentors or “pull-out”

tutors (those who worked outside the classrooms) to mention teachers as sources of support (63 percent versus 41 percent), most likely because in-class volunteers simply spent more time with teachers. Similarly, full-time volunteers had more opportunities to interact with teachers than part-time volunteers did because they were in schools more hours; 42 percent of full-time volunteers versus 58 percent

of part-time volunteers reported little or no communication with teachers. Though this lack of communication didn't greatly bother volunteers—all volunteers were keenly respectful of the existing demands on teachers' time—at least four volunteers described times that increased dialogue with teachers would have allowed them to share or gain valuable information about a specific child's needs or progress.

Volunteers talked about principals who made them feel valued by taking a moment to chat with them in the hall, personally matching them with a child, noticing improvements in students and coordinating volunteer recognition events.

Seven volunteers, including both in-class and pull-out tutors, described a “testing” period in which teachers became comfortable and familiar with the program. To ease into his working relationship with a new teacher, Henry Wooding, like other in-class volunteers, was careful about communicating his desire to help:

When I first went over there and spoke with [the teacher], I told her what my function was, and I made it clear to her that I'm well aware that [the classroom] is her territory and she should not fail to ask me to do whatever for her.

Mr. Wooding felt honored when this same teacher asked him to return to her classroom the following year. Three other volunteers described receiving similar requests.

Principals

Forty-two percent of the volunteers said principals welcomed them, recognized their efforts and helped meet program needs. Volunteers talked about principals who made them feel valued by taking a moment to chat with them in the hall, personally matching them with a child, noticing improvements in students and coordinating volunteer recognition events. In addition to reserving classroom space for the program, principals occasionally made special accommodations. The principal at David and Rosa Jackson's school arranged for the couple to tutor together in a small room near the main office. The principal at Cynthia Lane's school bought extra space heaters to keep one of Experience Corps' classrooms warm throughout the winter. Two volunteers decided to return the following year because of a principal's hearty encouragement.

Other School Staff

Volunteers occasionally mentioned additional school staff playing supportive roles. In two schools, reading specialists served as program liaisons, helping to coordinate schoolwide reading resources and facilitating communication between Experience Corps members and school staff. Another school's counselor was influential in matching children to volunteers. The occupational therapist at Iris O'Malley's school gave her advice on how to improve a child's writing skills. Evette Owens said her school's maintenance worker made her team feel most at home.

He always takes care of us with whatever we need. Like, when we first started this year, we needed cabinets to store some of our supplies, and he found some cabinets for us to use. And he brought in a big bag of tea bags; he just thought we'd like them, all these fancy teas.

In general, being recognized as a volunteer by school staff spawned a strong sense of being welcome. To promote recognition, the Boston program encouraged volunteers to wear Experience Corps T-shirts, making their presence more visible in the school and increasing the likelihood of a familiar "hello," even from school staff with whom they had little contact.

What the Future Holds

Chapter V



When we first met Florence Day, she was living in the sole company of her affectionate cat, Jigs. She happened to mention at the time that her son and daughter-in-law had graciously invited her to come live with them, a day's drive away, but Mrs. Day was not about to give up her independent lifestyle and long-cherished community interests. She kept extremely active—with church activities, Experience Corps and routine errands filling her weeks. Almost two years later, when we talked with Florence again, she had noticeably slowed.

Being 85, I really notice a change... I don't know if you remember the old TV shows [with] the cowboys and Indians, and they would come out of a battle with one of them with their hands up in the air. That's sort of how I'm feeling now: I'm coming up with my hands in the air. I used to be able to manage things just so, but now it's getting to where it's harder.

After catching a bad cold that lingered for months, Mrs. Day found herself thinking more about her son's offer. She also regretfully decided to bring her seven years with Experience Corps to a close.³¹ She believed repeated absences would have been unfair to the children.

Mrs. Day reflected back on her years with Experience Corps fondly, attesting, "I miss the whole program." She continued to keep in touch with three close friends she'd made in the program, and a favorite teacher had recently sent her a Christmas card. When asked if she missed the stipend, she replied longingly: "Oh, do I!"

Florence Day's story conveys how Experience Corps can contribute to a vibrant "third phase" of life. Mrs. Day loved the children and felt deeply enriched by the sense that she was making a difference in their lives. She was proud to have finally become a "real" teacher and enjoyed the meaningful friendships she forged in the program. The stipend, though modest, brought added financial security.

Strengths of the Model

Practitioners and funders have much to gain from examining the experiences of Florence Day and her fellow corps members. These stories of successful volunteers across a sampling of relatively strong sites illuminate the specific ways a service initiative founded upon the time and talents of older adults can excel. Central to Experience Corps' success is a powerful program model, attracting volunteers through key incentives and setting the stage for valuable rewards. Smart program policies that anticipate volunteers' needs and match their interests ensure volunteer effectiveness and bolster retention. Six practices are essential:

First, Experience Corps' model is strong because it is specifically **designed with a carefully integrated dual focus on older adults and children**, not just children. The model contributes to successful aging by crafting ways in which:

- Volunteers play meaningful and active roles;
- Volunteers are challenged by opportunities to learn new things and gain new skills; and
- Volunteers engage in service with a team of similarly committed members, with whom they form valuable relationships.

Second, the program's **intergenerational component** creates important rewards. Almost a third of volunteers described feeling deeply enriched by the belief that they are contributing to the success of future generations. Recognition of a cross-generational component may be an effective strategy for other service initiatives engaging older volunteers, even those that do not involve direct interaction with children. For example, efforts to preserve the environment, shape important public policies, and develop and sustain desirable community spaces and institutions all stand to leave their mark on the future.

Third, Experience Corps' **recruitment strategies effectively target older adults** by recruiting them through AARP, community centers serving seniors, senior residences and service fraternities. Determining additional methods to engage older adults affected by loss, loneliness and the stresses of caregiving may be fruitful as well, because these circumstances can lead to an interest in volunteering. Given participants' many rewarding experiences in the program, it may also be worthwhile to maintain incentives for active participants to recruit friends and acquaintances.

Fourth, the **stipend** is an impetus for some to volunteer, and it persuades many adults to serve a greater number of hours per week than they might otherwise. It is viewed by volunteers as a valuable benefit that enhances the quality of their lives by supplementing monthly incomes or simply defraying the costs of volunteering.

Fifth, Experience Corps strikes a wise balance between offering **flexible weekly schedules**, making available both part- and full-time posts, while simultaneously securing significant volunteer commitments by **insisting that individuals sign on for a full school year**. With recent surveys reporting that almost 7 in 10 employees plan to work in retirement³², part-time volunteer roles may grow increasingly desirable.

Sixth, Experience Corps heightens volunteers' success through the **provision of training, supervision and ongoing support**. This promise of training aids in recruitment—convincing volunteers that the program is genuinely open to all and they need only the will and interest to enroll—and in retention, by troubleshooting challenges and building volunteers' skills for success along the way. Furthermore, training and ongoing support strengthen the quality of services volunteers are able to provide within schools.

Seeds for Future Success

With expanding numbers of adults now reaching retirement, opportunities to engage older adults in meaningful service should be bountiful. But as yet, they are not. Experience Corps demonstrates the potential of well-designed and socially important service initiatives to benefit a multiplicity of public interests—chief among them, quality of life for a growing number of retirees. Service opportunities that encourage older adults to maintain levels of physical and cognitive engagement have the long-term potential to reduce national health care costs. Programs with well-crafted intergenerational components can foster greater tolerance and understanding between younger and older generations. Additionally, service programs that align volunteers in support of community organizations, institutions and causes—in this case, the public schools—can generate vital supplemental supports that would otherwise be too costly to implement on a large or sometimes even modest scale.

Of equal salience looking ahead is the fact that all individuals came to Experience Corps with a pre-existing belief in the importance of helping others, which sheds light on ways that ethics of volunteerism are sustained within American culture. Belief in the importance of giving back grew out of early lessons individuals learned within their families and faith-based, work and educational institutions. Continued policy efforts to promote volunteerism among people of all ages through such institutions appear vital to the nation's long-term health and robust participation in public service.

Endnotes

- 1 All names of the volunteers in this study have been changed.
- 2 Turnbull and Smith, 2004. *Experience Corps in Urban Elementary Schools: A Survey of Principals*.
- 3 The purpose of the expansion study is to determine if and how the program might grow to scale, incorporating more schools and a greater numbers of volunteers. Our report on these findings is forthcoming this year (Lauren J. Kotloff).
- 4 For more information on the history of the Experience Corps Initiative, see Marc Freedman and Linda P. Fried's 1999 report, *Launching Experience Corps: Findings from a Two-Year Pilot Project Mobilizing Older Americans to Help Inner-City Elementary Schools*.
- 5 Other major sources of funding come from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies and Senior Corps.
- 6 National Center for Health Statistics, 2005.
- 7 Independent Sector with AARP, 2003. *Experience at Work: Volunteering and Giving Among Americans 50 and Over*.
- 8 National Institutes of Health and National Institute of Aging, 2005. *Genes, Lifestyles, and Crossword Puzzles: Can Alzheimer's Disease Be Prevented?* in Rowe and Kahn, 1998.
- 9 Lippman et al. 1996. *Urban Schools: The Challenge of Location and Poverty*.
- 10 Anyon, 1997. *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*.
- 11 National Center for Education Statistics, 2005. *2005 Trial Urban District Results*.
- 12 Greene, 2002. *High School Graduation Rates in the United States*.
- 13 Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*.
- 14 Granville, 2001. "An 'Unlikely Alliance': Young Offenders Supporting Elderly People in Care Settings."
- 15 The purpose of the phone interviews was to understand why these seven had left the program.
- 16 Comparison data were drawn from P/PV's April 2005 survey of 891 Experience Corps volunteers in the initiative's five expansion cities: Boston, Cleveland, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, DC. Lauren J. Kotloff, forthcoming.
- 17 The program in Boston used its diversified funding stream, which is not dependent on AmeriCorps funds, to craft a multi-tiered stipend system allowing part-time volunteers to receive partial stipends.
- 18 The racial and socioeconomic distinctions between full- and part-time volunteers in our sample are echoed by P/PV's preliminary analysis of volunteer characteristics across the five Experience Corps expansion cities, in which part-time volunteers were roughly five times more likely to be white and 14 percent more likely to have had some higher education (80 percent of part-time volunteers as compared with 66 percent of full-time volunteers). Findings from the five cities will be presented in a forthcoming report by Lauren J. Kotloff.
- 19 AARP, 2003. *Multicultural Study: Time and Money: An In-Depth Look at 45+ Volunteers and Donors*. Available at: <http://www.aarp.org/research/reference/publicopinions/aresearch-import-498.html>.
- 20 For greater insight on the relationship between faith and volunteerism, see Alvia Y. Branch's 2002 report, *Faith and Action: Implementation of the National Faith-Based Initiative for High-Risk Youth*.
- 21 Hodge, Paul. 2004. Congressional testimony presented before the 2005 White House Conference on Aging and Policy Committee. Retrieved 12/12/06 from http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/news/onthehill/2004/hodge_100404.htm.
- 22 Community centers serving seniors and senior residences were recruitment clearinghouses for roughly 12 percent of the sample.
- 23 However, race and ethnicity did not distinguish these six individuals from our broader sample.
- 24 Brummet, 2003. Presentation to the American Psychosomatic Society.
- 25 Carlson, Seeman and Fried, 2000; Kotre, 1984.
- 26 National Institutes of Health and National Institute of Aging, 2005; Institute for the Study of Aging, 2001. *Achieving and Maintaining Cognitive Vitality with Aging*.
- 27 Part-time volunteers were 12 times more likely to be under the age of 60, five times more likely to be white and twice as likely to hold a professional degree or have had a career that required higher-level managerial or technical skills—and increased pay because of that.
- 28 Berkman and Syme, 1979; Garfein and Herzog, 1995.
- 29 Glass et al. 1999. "Population Based Study of Social and Productive Activities as Predictors of Survival Among Elderly Americans." *British Medical Journal*, 319.
- 30 Start-up delays resulted from districtwide school reforms that postponed typical program start dates and from additional time needed to reestablish school sites where a principal was new. In Washington, DC, delays were also caused by more extensive security background-check procedures for volunteers that were put in place after September 11.
- 31 Of the six other volunteers in the sample to leave the program after this study's first year, two lead volunteers departed when their positions as curriculum specialists were discontinued, one volunteer left due to chronic back pain and David and Rosa

Jackson left Experience Corps to return to the workforce—they were pressed to alleviate debt caused by recent dental surgery. Lastly, Herman Miller left the program because of his frustrations with the way Americorps' stipend funding was allocated at his program: After falling just eight hours short of the slated goal of 450 hours a year, he had to forgo two final months of stipend pay.

32 Employee Benefits Research Institute, American Savings Education Council and Matthew Greenwald and Associates. 2004. *Retirement Confidence Survey*.

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