

Study of Race, Class, and Ethnicity, Final Report, Macro International, November 1997.

An examination of diversity in 12 selected AmeriCorps programs.

This study was conducted by Macro International for the Corporation for National Service to answer three fundamental questions: What elements are indicative of successful support of diversity? What are the benefits of diversity? What effect does the AmeriCorps experience have on members' tolerance of and attitudes toward others?

To answer those questions, Macro used a case study approach in which researchers made intensive visits to twelve programs, interviewing program staff, host site staff, and service participants. The study sample included programs with diverse member corps, and varied according to geographic location, urban/rural settings, program focus and model, service area, and member status. The researchers conducted focus groups, observed members performing service activities, and administered a written attitude survey at the end of the program year. In order to narrow the range of variables to be studied, the Corporation defined diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and class, recognizing that a wider variety of characteristics may be relevant.

The study identified benefits of diversity for members, service recipients, host agencies, program staff, and the community. For members, being with and serving people from different communities was beneficial, enabling members to dispel stereotypes, learn to approach things from different perspectives, develop self-confidence, and extend diversity lessons to the workplace. For many service recipients, diversity among the corps members allowed for greater exposure to people different from themselves. Service recipients saw that one's willingness to help crosses cultures and they gained an opportunity to exchange perspectives. Host agencies reported improved outreach to groups that they had not previously served, especially non-English speaking populations. An added benefit was that diversity within the AmeriCorps program served as a catalyst to forge connections between various community organizations that had not interacted in the past. Program staff developed relationships with people from various cultures with whom they might not otherwise have come in contact. Many also found that their skills in managing diversity, communication, and problem solving were enhanced. Community benefits include enhanced service delivery and the development of positive relationships among members, service recipients and their families or neighbors in disadvantaged communities. This benefit was noted more strongly in the more segregated communities.

The study also identified eight program elements that had the potential to successfully support diversity. Programs that integrated diversity into policies, procedures, and daily operations reinforced its value to members and the community. For program staff, cross-cultural communication skills proved vital to managing and supporting diversity within the corps. Intentionally developing and implementing recruitment strategies to yield the desired diversity mix was essential, as was ongoing diversity training and employing strategies or tools to address conflict in a constructive manner. While member assignments were dependent on program goals and service needs, they were also structured to achieve and support diversity. Host agencies' acceptance and reinforcement of diversity emerged as a critical factor in helping members feel supported. Many host agencies were active in the recruitment, selection, and placement of members. Programs that successfully supported diversity recruited and retained a diverse group of members, contributing to morale, motivation, team cohesion, and group effectiveness.

The study found that a diverse group of members, working together effectively, provided a range of benefits at the personal, programmatic, and community levels. Effective strategies

in supporting the three dimensions of race, class, and ethnicity can be found in the guidebook: Practical Applications: Strategies for Supporting a Diverse Corps, available through the National Service Resource Clearinghouse.