

October 15, 2008

Experience Corps: The Volunteer Experience

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

EC members provide a range of services at various levels of engagement. These data derive from 435 members who joined EC in the 2006-07 (Cohort 1) and 2007-08 (Cohort 2) academic years, were active with EC at least part of the year, and participated in a phone survey before and after their EC service.

Types of volunteer work

There are a variety of service opportunities within the EC program. The large majority of EC members (85%) provided one-on-one tutoring. Almost 38% provided small group academic help, and 11% reported serving as an assistant to the teacher.

Intensity and duration of work

Volunteers averaged working about 12 hours per week for the EC program. The most common hours worked per week was 15 hours, with 30% of volunteers providing this level of service.

EC hours per week

5 or less	15%
6-10	15%
11-15	54%
16 or more	16%

Most EC members (69%) received a stipend during their service. These stipends are tied to higher level of commitment. Over half of the stipends were associated with the AmeriCorps program.

New EC members initiated work in the schools throughout most of the school year. Some members served throughout the calendar year, while some worked for only four months. The average number of months served in the academic year is eight.

Time off

EC volunteers generally took very little time off for health reasons or vacation. Most volunteers took no time off during the academic year (63%). Of those that were absent, 53% took only 1-3 days off. Nineteen percent took 7 + days off.

Members felt their EC service was very important; 91% said it was very true that they take their work with EC as seriously as they would a job.

Life events

Many life events occurred during EC service; some challenged member service in EC.

- 31% had close friends die
- 26% had family members die
- 9% were diagnosed with a serious illness/injury
- 7% started a new job
- 7% moved

It is interesting to note that 17% took an additional volunteer position during the academic year.

Tenure of service

Most volunteers started and finished the school year (71%). Some volunteers started the program but left before the academic year ended (16%). Of those, 35% left for health reasons, 17% for family reasons, and 14% for monetary issues. Thirteen percent of volunteers signed up for EC, but were never placed in a school. This group of “non-starters” was more likely to be in worse health, to be younger, and have less education. They were also more likely to be first time volunteers.

Perception of impact

Almost all EC members (99%) thought that they helped the children with whom they worked and that the teacher felt they made a positive impact (97%). Eighty-five percent felt their relationship with students was excellent or very good.

Tutors rating of quality of relationship with student

Excellent	51%
Very good	34%
Good	11%
Fair	1%
Poor	2%

EC overwhelmingly meets expectations

Over 55% of members reported that the experience met their expectations. Another 37% felt that the experience exceeded their expectations. Seven percent stated that EC did not meet expectations. When asked why, the most common response was that there was a discrepancy between what was expected of the program and what actually happened.

Interest in serving again

After one year of service, 58% of members stated that they were "very likely" to continue serving next year, while 17% feel that it was "likely." About 13% were unsure and 12% said it was unlikely that they would continue.

Top 5 reasons for not continuing a second year

- Time constraints (19%)
- Dissatisfied with organization of EC (16%)
- Health issues (15%)
- Found a job/not enough stipend (9%)
- Program discontinued (8%)

Member perception of program support

Overall, members felt recognized for their work with EC. Further, they were satisfied with the training, supervision and assistance they received.

	Not true	A little true	Somewhat true	A lot true
Felt recognized by EC	4%	9%	27%	61%
Felt recognized by school	9%	13%	26%	52%
Felt appreciated by teachers	4%	3%	5%	88%
Received enough supervision	2%	7%	29%	62%
Received enough training	5%	8%	33%	54%
Received assistance when needed	6%	14%	12%	68%

EC affects attitude on public education

Since joining EC, 81% reported that their views/outlook on public education had changed. Additionally, the table below highlights that EC participation had an effect on the way members felt about the public school system/education.

	Not at all true	A little true	Somewhat true	A lot true
More likely to vote in favor of public education	5%	6%	17%	69%
Have less faith in public school system	51%	20%	19%	10%
More likely to speak up about public education in a meeting	4%	6%	29%	60%
More interested in public education	2%	8%	20%	68%

Summary and Implications

Most EC members engaged students in one-on-one tutoring, eight months of the academic year, 12-15 hours per week. Nearly three-quarters finished the academic year. They took this position as seriously as a job; and common later life events, like death of family and friends, challenged their participation.

EC members perceived that they were effective with the students and teachers. Over half rated their relationships with the students as excellent. It may be important to devise strategies to improve tutor-student rapport in the 14% of cases where the relationship was viewed as less than "very good," given that the quality of these relationships related to student progress.

Overall, members reflected positively on program operations. They felt recognized for their work and adequately trained and supervised. It is important to note that 9-13% thought more training/supervision was necessary; and 20% felt that they did not receive assistance when needed. Further, some members experienced a discrepancy between expectations and reality. Although 75% of members returned for a second year, program development in these areas may increase this retention rate.

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

Mathematica Policy Research provided data collection services

This work was funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies