

# Civic Pathways Out of Poverty and Into Opportunity

Presented by PACE  
Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement



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## INTRODUCTION

This white paper is the product of nearly two years of conversation, research, deliberation and writing. We began this project to explore the idea that service and civic engagement can be more purposely focused on workforce development goals and post-secondary educational achievement for low-income youth and young adults. We had a particular interest in reversing the conventional view of service as something ‘done to’ people in need. As we began our outreach and research we discovered that there were many other individuals and organizations interested in joining this conversation. This paper is a result of this wide-ranging dialogue with those in the service field about how these ‘civic pathways’ can be created.

This is the second white paper published by PACE this year, the first was ‘An Evolving Relationship: Executive Branch Approaches to Civic Engagement and Philanthropy’. We hope that by commissioning this type of work we can encourage fresh thinking and new perspectives around the task of revitalizing our nation’s civic practice.

We thank the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the New World Foundation for both supporting this effort and for leading it as active partners. This project has truly been a collaborative effort between PACE and these three key members. In particular, we want to thank Steve Patrick at Gates, Kara Carlisle at Kellogg and Anna Fink at New World for their deep involvement in shaping and guiding this effort.

We also thank the staff at Marga Incorporated for their good and hard work in doing the research and writing of this paper. We know it is sometimes challenging to work within a collaborative environment with many moving parts and we especially thank Marga for their patience during this effort. In particular we want to thank David Maurrasse, Marga’s President and Founder, and Cynthia Jones, Marga’s Chief Executive Officer, for all of their efforts.

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## ABOUT PACE

PACE, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, is a national non-profit organization that serves as a learning collaborative of funders and foundations doing work in the fields of civic engagement, service and democratic practice. Formerly known as the Grantmakers Forum for Community and National Service, PACE was created five years ago to signal a broader approach to educating grantmakers about effective civic engagement strategies that strengthen our communities and our democracy.

As an affinity group of the Council on Foundations, PACE both helps funders stay abreast of recent developments in the field and advocates for more funders to include the health of America’s democracy as one of their funding priorities. Through white papers, webinars, email alerts, convenings and creative partnerships, PACE promotes an active conversation within the field of philanthropy, and within the broader community, around the need to think in creative ways about how to use new tools and new approaches to encourage more authentic and more extensive civic engagement in America’s communities.

For more information about PACE, or to download other PACE white papers, you can go to [www.pacefunders.org](http://www.pacefunders.org) , or contact Chris Gates at [cgates@pacefunders.org](mailto:cgates@pacefunders.org) .

## I. Overview

Service is increasingly important within the public, private, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), a collaborative of national foundations, has been exploring the role of foundations in advancing and rethinking service as private philanthropy has increasingly been supporting service and civic engagement over recent decades. Evidence of the continued expansion of the service and civic engagement arena is demonstrated in recently passed federal legislation that substantially expands the public service infrastructure, a growing spirit of voluntarism, and the institutionalization of service into the core of colleges and universities. Many have concluded that service and civic engagement can nurture a sense of purpose and provide “real world” experiences that develop potentially marketable skills. Additionally, service enhances educational performance. Active learning eases young people’s progression along an education and employment pathway.


Community organizing remains an important expression of civic responsibility. Youth organizing in particular demonstrates the next generation’s interest in making their voices heard around the issues and policies that shape their lives. Various manifestations of service, civic engagement, and organizing have been incorporated into a cross sector infrastructure. Numerous entities, from small grassroots nonprofit organizations to larger youth development initiatives to well-funded federal programs collectively comprise a service and civic engagement field.

In a wider context, racial and economic inequities continue to persist, only exacerbated by a lengthy economic downturn. The nature of industry and work has shifted, with knowledge and technology driving the way. The educational system is not fully prepared to adapt to an increased demand for technical skills and the need for improved school performance across the board. Low-income people and communities of color are most vulnerable within these dynamics. Innovative strategies are required in order to expand opportunities for the next generation of vulnerable communities.

While service and civic engagement have not exactly been framed as potential solutions to economic and racial inequalities and the need to expand educational and employment opportunities for low-income youth and youth of color, with creative thinking, possibilities can emerge. Involvement in service brings extraordinary learning to participants and can improve school performance, sharpen skills, and increase employment opportunities. How can some marriage between the service and civic engagement infrastructure and the need to increase educational and workforce opportunities improve the life chances of low-income youth and youth of color?

Despite the increased popularity of service and civic engagement in discourse and action, the concepts have traditionally not been adequately tied to diminishing the effects of poverty. While the service field has involved many young people, it has not sufficiently increased opportunities for low-income young people and youth of color. The basic act of engagement is important in itself; however, the potential of the service field to expand opportunities and solve critical social challenges has not been fully tapped, nor has the ability of service to transition young people out of poverty.

Under the auspices of PACE, three major foundations, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the New World Foundation, found a common interest in wanting to more thoroughly understand how service and civic engagement can strengthen pathways into and through higher education and meaningful careers for young people from low-income families and communities of color. With the support of these three institutions, PACE has commissioned this report by Marga Incorporated to assess and analyze the state of the field and inform the future of service. *Civic Pathways Out of Poverty and Into Opportunity* is this report’s proposed reframing of the potential value of service and civic engagement to society.



The potential role of policy in service, education, and workforce development has been well documented; however, service's potential to expand life-changing opportunities for the poorest young people has not been sufficiently studied or discussed. This report is informed by an inclusive cross-sector dialogue focused on how civic engagement, youth organizing and national service expansion strategies can improve workforce development and access to and success throughout postsecondary education. Greater connections across established fields are necessary to bring about new civic pathways that increase opportunity. This paper captures insights from various stakeholders on how the fields of service, civic engagement, community organizing, workforce development and higher education can better connect with each other and low-income youth and youth of color. Three overarching messages emerge from this research:

1. Across the country, elements of effective civic pathways exist in the form of community-based organizations, national service programs, and civic engagement opportunities. Replicating, scaling-up, and connecting these elements is the work that lies ahead;
2. The importance of civic engagement transcends charitable acts of kindness – the skill development, increased content knowledge, and self empowerment resulting from civic engagement activities foster the necessary confidence and skills for success in higher education and the workforce; and
3. Civic opportunities like national service, community organizing and civic engagement can and should be more viable opportunities for young people on the road to success in education and careers, particularly within current economic and policy contexts.

In light of these observations, this paper proposes a variety of recommendations relevant to particular stakeholders (youth, community-based organizations, philanthropy, all levels of education, the private sector, government entities, and others) to connect, promote, and scale-up existing efforts and concepts. Each stakeholder is situated within a larger interdependent context. Each can play critical simultaneous and collaborative roles in strengthening postsecondary success and workforce development. Various formal and informal programs, policies, and networks can shape opportunities available to youth at different stages in development, but these efforts will achieve greater impact if they are strategically connected.

Additionally, the impact of service and other civic opportunities should be promoted differently. Service must be reframed as an opportunity to develop content area knowledge, as well as professional, social, and personal skills. The importance of opportunities available through service should be promoted through both government and private channels, building on the cross-sector nature of effective civic pathways.

Finally, the field should scale-up existing initiatives to more adequately include and reflect the unique needs of low-income youth and youth of color. This includes a commitment to diversifying national senior level leadership, decreasing barriers to organizational participation in national service, increasing incentives for more inclusive participation, and crafting workforce development strategies around viable industries.

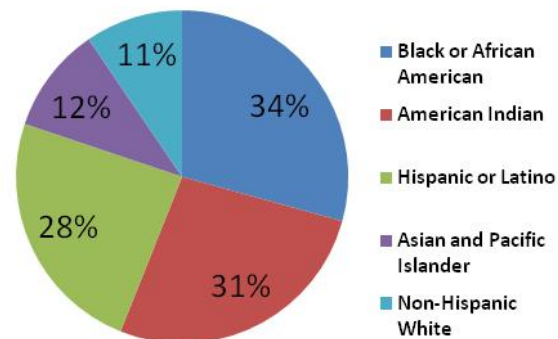
This paper is a call to build a tighter pathway across relevant fields, incorporate innovative approaches, and respond to the urgent need and opportunity to provide structures for young people to leverage civic opportunities to build their communities and the skills necessary for success in college and meaningful employment.

## II. BACKGROUND

This research was driven by the need to address persistent barriers for low-income young people and young people of color in college access/completion and job readiness. This paper proposes new and innovative ways to better pave civic pathways to success. Based on this work, it is clear that service<sup>1</sup>, civic engagement, and youth organizing can improve educational and employment opportunities. Federal policy, programs, and knowledge must be connected, promoted, and scaled-up to maximize engagement among low-income youth and youth of color.

Our pursuit is distinctive in its focus on low-income youth<sup>2</sup> – and largely youth of color – and their engagement with civic pathways leading to higher education and the workforce through service, civic engagement and youth organizing. Methods to leverage federal policy to reduce poverty<sup>3</sup> and to engage the nation in service activities<sup>4</sup> have been addressed. Other relevant reports highlight the anticipated leadership shortage in the nonprofit sector<sup>5</sup> and the nature of civic engagement patterns among disadvantaged youth<sup>6</sup>. None of them frame service as a means for disadvantaged youth and young adults to achieve postsecondary credentials *and* meaningful employment within or outside the field. Given substantial evidence of the positive impact of service on educational improvement, it is only logical to explore service and civic engagement as essential features of strengthening the educational and employment pathways for youth.

CHILDREN IN POVERTY



Source:  
[Http://Datacenter.Kidscount.Org/Data/Acrossstates/Rankings.aspx?In d=44](http://Datacenter.Kidscount.Org/Data/Acrossstates/Rankings.aspx?In d=44)

### History of Service Legislation

Conceptions and manifestations of service abound in U.S. history. The modern federal service infrastructure began to take on its more formalized current state during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was created by the Roosevelt Administration in order to engage millions of unemployed men in restoring parks and building public facilities and other infrastructure. This effort was designed to revitalize the economy, as well as to support families. The better known GI Bill, created in 1944 on the heels of the Second World War, was designed to provide educational opportunity for those who had served in the military. This concept was based on exchange – educational access in return for military service. Indeed, the link between service and employment as well as that between service and education has historical precedence in federal policy.

In 1961, the Kennedy Administration developed the Peace Corps, which promoted service throughout the world. The VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program was developed by the Johnson Administration in 1964 as a part of the War on Poverty. Overall, the 1960s was a period of substantial growth in service legislation. With the development of Work Study in 1965, college students could earn income to help them get through their studies in higher education, and colleges and universities could

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper the terms “service,” “civic engagement,” and “community organizing” are used repeatedly to describe the breadth of fields under consideration. In part, this is in response to the fact that language limitations around the single term “service” sell the concept short and does not incorporate all potential civic pathways available to young people.

<sup>2</sup> Youth is broadly defined, but the key group in the paper is ages 16 to 25.

<sup>3</sup> Center for American Progress. (2007). *From Poverty to Prosperity: A National Strategy to Cut Poverty in Half*.

<sup>4</sup> ReImagining Service Task Force. (2009). *ReImagining Service: Converting Good Intentions into Greater Impact*

<sup>5</sup> Ierney, T.J. (2006). *The Nonprofit Sector's Leadership Deficit*. The Bridgespan Group.

<sup>6</sup> Spring, K., Dietz, N., and Grimm, R. (2007) *Youth Helping America: Leveling the Path to Participation: Volunteering and Civic Engagement Among Youth From Disadvantaged Circumstances*. Corporation for National and Community Service.

receive financial incentives in the process. Legislation during this period was accompanied by the development of “service learning”, and various expansions in volunteer programming in the nonprofit sector and higher education.

Federal programming continued to evolve during the 1970s through programs such as the Youth Conservation Corps<sup>7</sup> and the National Center for Service-Learning. The more deliberate legislative and conceptual link between service and learning began to solidify during this period. Official statewide (California) service initiatives emerged during this time as well. The nonprofit infrastructure for service learning and various aspects of student voluntarism experienced substantial growth during the 1980s. Campus Compact, founded in 1985, began to crystallize contemporary ideas of the role of colleges and universities in promoting civic engagement among students. This organization leveraged official institutional membership, at the presidential level in colleges and universities, as a means of securing a longstanding commitment to service learning and civic engagement via a collectively signed “compact.”

With the range of related service initiatives in the federal government and elsewhere, a need for coordination among efforts, and more clear overarching institutional commitments to service arose. Towards the end of the 1980s, the George H.W. Bush Administration, created the Office of National Service in the White House along with the Points of Light Foundation to promote volunteerism. A more sweeping effort to develop an increasingly centralized federal service unit surfaced under the Clinton Administration.

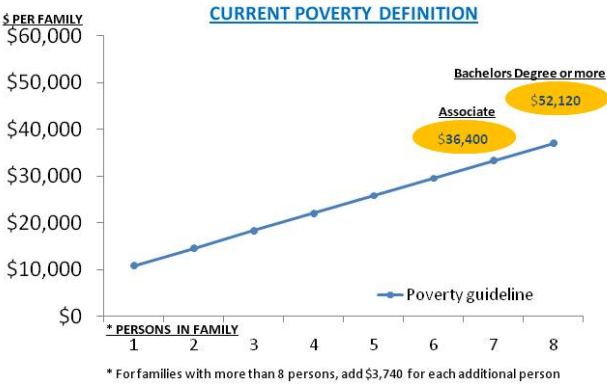
With the intent of increasing opportunities for Americans of all ages to connect to communities and increase their involvement in service, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) was created in 1993. The office, which continues to expand via the recent Serve America Act, was originally created with three enduring components: AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve. All of these programs have expanded within the federal infrastructure over the years. The development of CNCS represented an acknowledgement of the critical value of service and an opportunity to increase coordination across established philosophically-aligned programs.

### Educational and Employment Landscape

Civic pathways to opportunity in higher education and the workplace can build upon the nation’s rich history of service, but more explicitly address the challenges currently facing young people.

### Drop Out Rates

According to the United States Census<sup>8</sup>, the 2007 dropout rate for the United States stood at 10.2%, a number which has gradually decreased since 1980, when the number was 15.6%. The current African American dropout rate was right at the national average in 2007, having decreased from 23.5% in 1980. Hispanic dropout rates remain staggeringly high, at 25.3% in 2007, down from 40.3% in 1980. Dropout rates among Hispanics have been



Source: Federal Register, Vol. 74, No. 14, January 23, 2009, pp. 4199-4201

<sup>7</sup> Hosted by the National Park Service, the Youth Conservation Corps engages youth ages 15 to 18 in paid service to protect and preserve national parks.

<sup>8</sup> From the United States Census Bureau 2010 Statistical Abstract: the National Data Book. These numbers are based on “status” dropouts alone. The numbers would increase with the addition of “event” dropouts. Status dropouts are those who have not completed high school and are not enrolled.

especially high among males (29.2% in 2007). Economic correlations between high school dropouts and high school graduates are quite evident. High school dropouts are much more likely to be unemployed than those who have graduated. In 2008, unemployment rates for high school dropout rates across racial groups exceeded 20%, ranging from 22.2% for white high school dropouts to 40.1% among African American dropouts.<sup>9</sup> Boredom, falling behind in class, and disinterest in school among peers are among the critical reasons for dropping out of high school.<sup>10</sup>

Without high school graduation, stable employment and postsecondary success remain elusive. Among those admitted to college without graduating, the need for income is the most significant reason for dropping out.<sup>11</sup> If service can help increase the likelihood of high school graduation, the opportunity for further progress on the pathway is more feasible.

## Postsecondary Credentials and Employment

Success in higher education is a precursor to success in the workplace. Postsecondary credentials can range from union technical training programs to community college certificate programs, to degrees from four-year colleges, universities, and professional schools.

The current median income for an individual with an associate's degree is \$36,400, or two times greater than the federal poverty line for a family of three. Recipients of bachelor's degrees earn \$52,120 on average – or almost three times the federal poverty line for a family of three.<sup>12</sup>

Half of new jobs by 2018 are projected to require a postsecondary degree or award with the fastest growing demand in areas requiring an associate's degree.<sup>13</sup> Among the 30 fastest growing industry areas, 21 require at least a postsecondary vocational award, and 14 require at least a bachelor's degree.<sup>14</sup> Educated and employed community members tend to contribute to positive changes across a wide set of community well-being indicators including but not limited to income, health, housing, and safety.

## Contemporary Service Landscape

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, signed by President Barack Obama in April of 2009, is the most recent sweeping federal policy designed to strengthen the United States federal government's commitment to service. This legislation reauthorizes and expands the work of the Corporation for National and Community Service. The current Administration's commitment to service is reflected throughout various aspects of the government and in the White House itself. Over the years, the service infrastructure has become substantial and multifaceted. However, the tremendous foundation that has been created is not sufficiently tapped to improve access to education and jobs for low-income young people and youth of color, or to concretely and purposefully address issues of national significance in communities.

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<sup>9</sup> Data from another chart from the Census Bureau's 2010 Data Book.

<sup>10</sup> Bridgeland, J.M., Dillilio Jr, J.J., and Wulsin, S.C. (2008). *Engaged for Success: Service-Learning as a Tool for High School Dropout Prevention*.

<sup>11</sup> Public Agenda. (2009). *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities About Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College*.

<sup>12</sup> Calculated using U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 2009. Retrieved September 15, 2009

from [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032009/perinc/new03\\_000.htm](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032009/perinc/new03_000.htm). (This table was prepared September 2009.)

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09\\_385.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_385.asp) and the US Federal Poverty Measure at

<http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/09poverty.shtml>

<sup>13</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. December 10, 2009. *Employment Projections: 2008-2018 Summary*.

(<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.nr0.htm>)

<sup>14</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. December 10, 2009. *Employment Projections: Table 7. The 30 fastest-growing occupations, 2008-18*.

(<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t07.htm>)



The core programs of CNCS began to engage hundreds of thousands of volunteers, especially seniors and college students. The overall service infrastructure continues to engage and promote the act of volunteering and the numbers of people involved. The notion of service in exchange for jobs or education appears less emphasized in the current service landscape. Moreover, diversity in the leadership and practice of these forms of service is lacking despite changing demographics.

The nonprofit service infrastructure that has accompanied the growth in the public sector is similarly lacking diversity, especially among executive directors. Greater diversity in the field is needed in terms of those leading service and civic engagement organizations and initiatives as well as among those involved in service. As substantial evidence suggests, service is more than a matter of doing good deeds, it has the potential to enhance learning and thus school performance and thus access to jobs and higher education. Involvement in one's community promotes skill development and personal growth. Participants in national service programs have shown a greater<sup>15</sup>:

- Acceptance of personal responsibility in employment advancement,
- Likelihood of engaging in public service,
- Commitment to, attachment to, and awareness about the community served, and
- Sense of the ability to leverage government to meet community needs.

Evidently, much more is to be gained from service than traditionally considered. Individuals, communities, and society at large can benefit from creative ways to leverage and expand service. Integrating service into a linked civic pathway can strengthen opportunities and reduce inequities.

### III. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This paper's findings and recommendations are informed by a qualitative field scan. Interviewees represented components of what we see as a civic pathway. The research stimulated a cross-sector dialogue, incorporating the voices of thought leaders, experts, practitioners, and youth in the areas of civic engagement, youth and community organizing, national service, leadership development, social entrepreneurship, philanthropy, government, higher education and workforce development. Participating foundations developed an initial list of representatives of these fields. From this group, forty-nine individuals were interviewed. An in-person dialogue among eighteen leaders in the relevant fields was convened to discuss preliminary findings. We also conducted a focus group of twenty-four participants in the YouthBuild (see YouthBuild sidebar on page 19 for further information on this initiative) Young Leadership Council.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the process, researchers took careful note of the overarching lessons learned and compiled common messages and themes. Additional perspectives will influence continued research in the months and years to come.

### IV. FINDINGS

A synthesis of the responses from interviewees demonstrates the potential for developing an adequate civic pathway. These findings were captured both verbally and graphically.

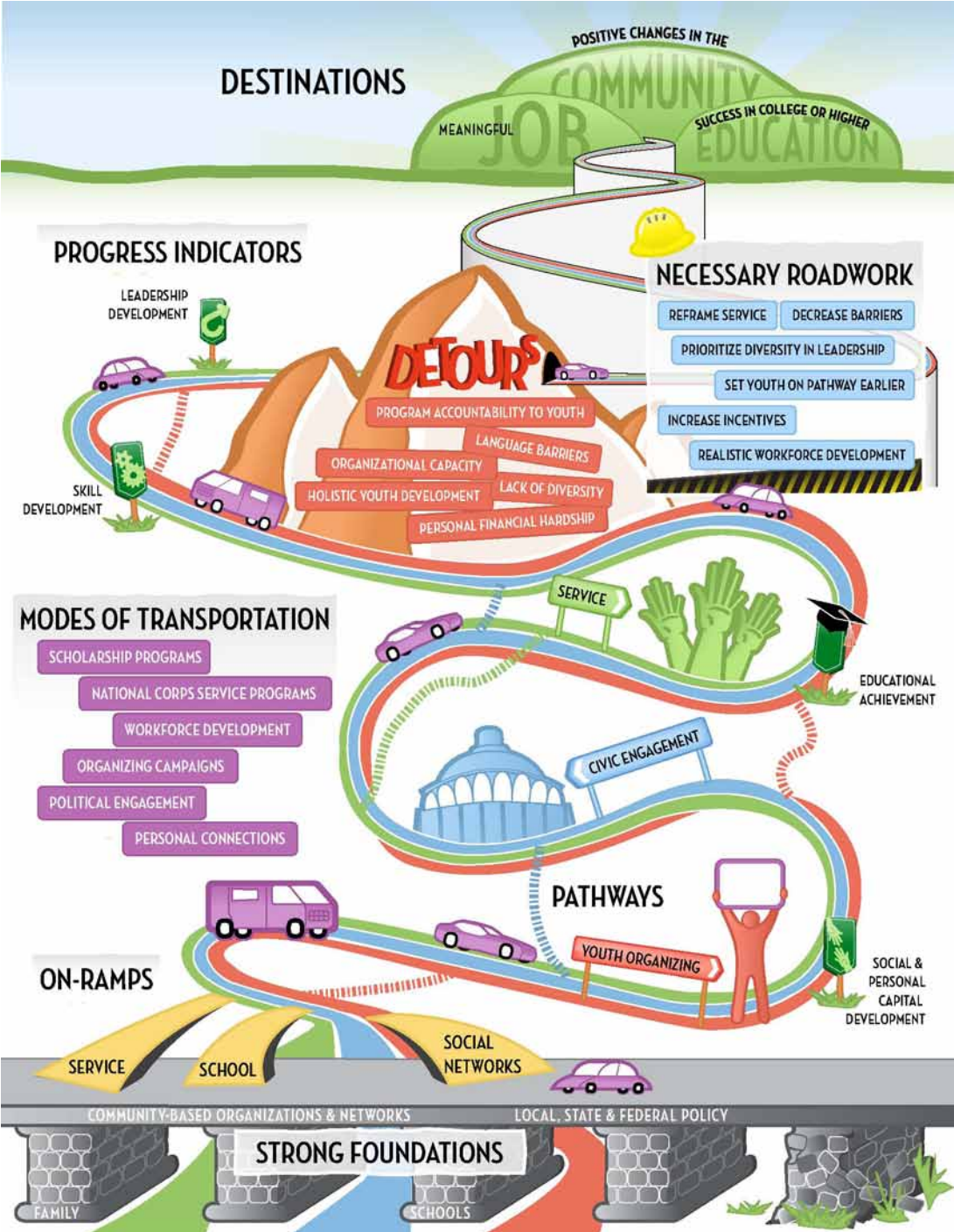
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<sup>15</sup> Frumkin, P., Jastrzab, J., Vaaler, M., Greeney, A., Grimm Jr., R. T., Cramer, K., and Dietz, N. (2009). *Inside National Service: AmeriCorps' Impact on Participants*. (<http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/rgk/research/workingpapers/JPAMNationalServicePaper.pdf>)

<sup>16</sup> Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 years and represented rural and urban communities in 11 states. Almost all indicated that their parents had not finished high school and only three indicated that their parents had attended college. Five have a post-secondary degree or certificate, eight have completed some college, nine have a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma, and two had not yet completed high school.

# Graphic Representation of Civic Pathways

Graphic recorders visually enhanced our understanding of *Civic Pathways Out of Poverty and Into Opportunity* through their periodic engagement in the research. The resulting graphic is a tool for youth and the field to better comprehend the landscape and work required to enhance and connect the pathways for low-income youth and communities. Elements of this graphic represent findings from our conversations, but the overall map exhibits how these elements connect and may be leveraged.



### *Destinations and Pathways*

The **destinations** of the pathways – success in college or higher education, meaningful employment and, secondarily, positive changes in communities, motivate the elements on the map and provide incentives to continue on the pathway. It is important to ensure the visibility and attractiveness of the destinations to young people from any point along the pathway. Service, civic engagement, and youth organizing are the **pathways**. These pathways, represented by different colors, run simultaneously toward the same destinations. In reality, they overlap, as young people’s experiences with service, civic engagement and youth organizing move fluidly.

### *Strong Foundations*

Conversations with practitioners in the field reveal that multi-pronged **strong foundations** are an essential element of success for a young person. Some foundation elements are perceivable to young people in their everyday lives, often developed through informal community ties such as family members with a clear commitment to their community or social networks that invest in a young person’s human capital development. Others are fostered through more formal social structures, such as schools (through civic engagement and political education curriculum) and community-based organizations (through diverse staff and strong programs that engage young people in their communities). Yet other foundation elements are systemic and may be less obvious to youth. These may include policy initiatives at local, state, and federal levels that shape government-funded opportunities in national service, workforce development and education access. Ongoing home and community lives of young people also present foundational elements that can be stable and supportive or destructive and unreliable.

### *On-Ramps*

Young people embark on pathways from various starting points, using **on-ramps** shaped by their individual life experiences, entering at various points along this pathway. Certainly formal sporadic and long-term opportunities to serve through K-12 schools, colleges, faith-based organizations, and traditional service programs play a role. Events and programs like community service days, summer of service, and service learning can provide the necessary spark for a young person to remain engaged. However, deeper engagement with a caring or supportive individual, organization, or system seems to hook young people who develop a life-long commitment to service and use it as an on-ramp to higher education and meaningful work. Examples range from having a positive mentor who introduces youth to service, to taking leadership on a youth organizing campaign, to finding oneself unemployed with service as a viable employer. Other less orthodox on-ramps include the juvenile justice system, military service, social media and the influence of pop culture. More and more organizations discuss the influence of the latter channels.

### *Modes of Transportation*

There are various **modes of transportation**, which are to some degree informed by one’s chosen path. Often for the young person, this vehicle represents the specific organization or set of people through which they choose to engage in their community. The vehicles represent approaches organizations take to their civic pathways work with youth. Programs that both reward (i.e. AmeriCorps) and incentivize service (i.e. Bonner Scholars) for education have proven to be important modes of transportation. As modes of transportation, national service programs require a set number of hours of service, but like workforce development, they also incorporate career, leadership, and skill development that prepare participants for jobs in other sectors. Service, civic engagement, and community organizing build agency and self-efficacy through meaningful activities with wider value for communities, beyond individuals.

### *Indicators of Success*

Progress along the pathways is measured incrementally by **indicators of success**, which are mile markers of progress of importance to youth, organizations and the field broadly. Specifically, educational achievement and advancement, development of leadership skills and other skills of value in the workforce, as well as personal and social capital acquisition represent particular mile markers. While educational achievement and technical skill development are institutionalized measures of success, leadership skills, personal and social capital, often known as “soft skills”, can translate into workplace advancement and performance. Still, individual organizations are developing various ways to measure these indicators.

### *Detours and Exits*

Any journey is fraught with **detours** -- exits and re-entries, slow-downs, and challenges. Potential detours include a variety of cross-sector organizational challenges as well as those faced by individual youth. Language development, personal concerns, financial hardships, mental health challenges, entanglement with the juvenile/criminal justice system, immigration status, acculturation, and family issues or obligations are among the challenges faced by individuals. Financial need tends to be the primary reason for dropping out of college, followed by familial commitment.<sup>17</sup> The sector as a whole confronts its own challenges, including a limited capacity to engage all of the young people who want to be involved, difficulty providing holistic support for youth, organizational financial challenges, limited diversity among leadership, and barriers to cross-sector collaboration.

### *Necessary Roadwork*

No road is perfectly paved. Pathways can improve by reframing service, increasing diversity in the field, decreasing barriers to participation, increasing incentives, and integrating realistic workforce development. Recommendations in this paper elaborate on the breadth of roadwork required in repaving pathways.

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<sup>17</sup> Public Agenda (Ibid)

## Pieces of Pathways Exist in Programs Nationwide

Significant pieces of civic pathways exist but require greater connectivity. Outstanding work with young people continues in various capacities. It is important to create a cohesive pathway among various relevant stakeholders by connecting the dots. Here is what we learned about some of these stakeholder groups.

### Youth

*“One day we were enrolling my daughter in a day camp. She said, ‘Daddy you work all the time, do you go to school?’ It means a lot to me. What can I do to make sure she has clothes? Life is more than about working liking a dog.” - Focus Group Participant*

- **Young people from low-income and historically marginalized communities have the interest and passion to serve** and to commit to a life of engagement in their communities, particularly where that engagement involves issues impacting them directly and is of intellectual interest. Many of the programs which directly engage youth noted this almost immediately as they began discussing how their programs work. These interests can be expressed in enabling young people to attain skills relevant to employment in a desired field, meeting personal goals, or responding to specific community-related issues. Many interviewees noted that real passion for civic engagement often resulted from engaging youth on issues or personal goals that matter most to them.
- **An early start on the civic pathway is significant to success.** Although most national service programs target individuals over age seventeen, many interviewees stressed the importance of engaging youth in service well before high school graduation. They suggest developing curriculum for earlier grades to engage youth in service or civics as early as possible. Continuity in curricula from K-12 systems to higher education and an early understanding of the value of service can be essential. Ensuring that civic opportunities are developmentally appropriate is essential – primary and secondary school students have different developmental needs, interests, and goals than postsecondary students.

### YouthBuild USA

**Established:** 1990

**Location:**  
273 sites nationwide

**Mission:**  
To unleash the intelligence and positive energy of low-income youth to rebuild their communities and their lives.

**Population served:**  
Low-income young people ages 16-24, mostly non-white (49% African American), and many with experience in foster care, juvenile justice, welfare, and homelessness.

**Overview:**  
In YouthBuild programs, participants work towards a GED or high school diploma while gaining construction and project management skills with real value in the labor market. YouthBuild participants assist in renovating low income/affordable housing units over a 6-24 month period. During that time, they are simultaneously enrolled in a YouthBuild alternative school while earning income and gaining professional development. Additionally, YouthBuild fosters and builds a strong community and develops a social network among participants.

**Individual Impact:**  
Content knowledge, interpersonal skills, leadership development, experience in construction, and experience in making a demonstrable difference in one’s own community.

- **Youth development is central to ensuring pathway success.** However, many organizations lack the capacity to holistically address the full range of issues confronting young people. Many organizations are not equipped to handle unanticipated matters, such as financial hardships, immigration–related concerns, family events or tragedies, and so on. While organizations often do not focus on these areas, they are aware of these clear barriers to service participation, education acquisition, and workforce development opportunities.

### **Communities**

*“The incentive is the family base. For some of these people, they have nowhere to turn, including myself. I don’t have anyone else to turn to if I’m about to be evicted. That’s that family base with a bunch of people that just want you to succeed. If someone says they’re not gonna give up on me, that’s an incentive to do better in my life. A lot of people never had that growing up.” – Focus Group Participant*

- **Communities are a part of the solution.** Young people require the support of their communities and the organizations serving them. Community-based organizations provide opportunities for young people to develop the personal and social capital necessary for pathway success. Interviewees suggested that service programs are often the first encounter with an encouraging and supportive community of people. Some of the best civic pathways for low income youth foster self-empowerment among participants and their home communities.

### **Bonner Scholars Program**

**Established:** 1990

**Location:**  
24 college campuses across the US

**Mission:**  
To improve the lives of individuals and communities by helping meet the basic needs of nutrition and educational opportunity.

**Population served:**  
Admitted students at 24 colleges and universities throughout the US with high financial need; 85% are Pell grant eligible.

**Overview:**  
The Bonner Scholars program is a merit service-based scholarship program for college students with high financial need. Bonner provides the opportunity for students to serve others and earn a supplemental scholarship for college. Scholars are expected to engage in 10 weekly hours of community service during every school year and an additional 280 hours over the summer. Bonner helps develop skills and leadership abilities by assisting students in shaping their academic journey to include community engagement. Each Bonner site is managed independently, guiding students to available resources and connecting their service experiences to their overall development.

**Individual Impact:**  
Leadership development, content knowledge, scholarships, and postsecondary degree.

### Service Field

*“Asians are seriously underserved and Asian youth have a different pattern of behavior – they continue to do well in school and are not territorial and they do not have visible gang wear. Even though they are delinquent- the traditional ways youth have been identified as needing service, Asian youth don’t follow that behavior.” – Service Provider*

- **Leadership more reflective of the diverse demographics in communities served can enable effective connectors, mentors and role models for youth participants.** Transitions into and through higher education and careers are enhanced by diverse adult participation and guidance. Leaders who can secure a sense of trust from community constituents and understand particular community cultures are poised to improve their organizations’ impact. Interviewees consistently stressed the significance of cultural context and diversity.

### Community Colleges & Higher Ed

*“With community colleges, students are already civically engaged. If you can incorporate some of the work they are already doing with their classes, you can imagine how much that is more empowering.” - National Service Provider*

- **Community colleges educate and meet workforce needs for substantial populations of youth of color and low-income youth<sup>18</sup> and in meeting workforce needs in the future, community colleges are a key element of the civic pathway.** Despite their substantial enrollment of youth of color, community colleges often do not play significant roles in national service programs. According to respondents, community colleges are, however, open to the role that service and civic engagement play in the education of young people.

### Civic Opportunity Initiative Network (COIN)

Established: 2009

#### Location:

Six pilot sites: Los Angeles, CA (Community Coalition of South LA and Coalition for Humane Immigration Rights of Los Angeles); Alexandria, VA (Tenants and Workers United); Albuquerque, NM (Southwest Organizing Project); Brooklyn, NY (Make the Road New York); and, Miami, FL (Florida Immigrant Coalition). Population served: Low-income youth ages 16-24 from communities of color.

#### Overview:

A program of the New World Foundation, COIN intentionally links community organizing opportunities to higher education through a structured seven-year program beginning during the sophomore year of high school through a national network of community based organizations, young people, foundations, and institutions of higher education. Applying social and emotional learning concepts, COIN participants work directly with one of six community organizing groups via internships, receiving academic and leadership development support. Additionally, COIN provides the opportunity to earn scholarships for college.

#### Individual Impact:

Experience in community organizing, content knowledge, interpersonal skills, higher education preparation, scholarships, and post-college employment.

<sup>18</sup> Barrios Marcelo, K., and Ruiz-Healy, C. (2010). *An Overview of Civic Engagement Programs on Community Colleges*.

## Service Is an Opportunity to Attain Knowledge, Learn Valuable Skills and Develop Valuable Relationships

### *Skill Sets*

*"We realize when people were really involved with us, their grades improved and their skill set improved. People who previously couldn't talk in front of a room could converse with many kinds of folks. Then they would start to focus on college attendance – also getting people in real practical ways to think about transferring those skills to the work force. I think jobs sort of break down along these lines: there are jobs that use the same skills as you would use as an organizer, for example: union organizer, staff for an elected official, campaign work, public policy advocacy group. For those people the skills are very directly transferable. These are what I think of as direct jobs where the tasks are the same. It turns out that the demand in those fields is pretty high so our folks come in a good position. Then the rest of the workforce – in jobs where the tasks are related but the job itself is different – jobs in fields like public affairs, doing PR for a corporation... Your relationships and the ability to navigate the community is an asset – but you're not directly transferring those skills literally. Then there's a third category – completely unrelated jobs – but still in those jobs, reading comprehension, meeting facilitation, project management all come in to play. "*

*– Community-Based Organization*

- **Service effectively develops both “hard” and “soft” skill sets that enable success in higher education, the workforce, and in a young person’s community and home life.** Interpersonal skills such as teamwork, organization and communication were often cited as soft skills that have direct impact on a young person’s ability to succeed in college or a job. Overwhelmingly, interviewees shared from their experience clear examples of how and why the skills a young person (often unknowingly) gains through civic engagement, service and organizing are relevant and applicable in higher education and the world of work. Building these skills can be intentionally incremental and progressive over time. Some noted that while they were able to observe changes, evaluation would help them demonstrate the significance of the skills acquired.

### Community Development Technologies Center (CDTech)

**Established:** 1995

**Location:**  
Los Angeles, CA

**Mission:**  
To build livable and economically viable communities in the low-income areas of Greater Los Angeles by strengthening the skills and self-sufficiency of residents, businesses and community serving institutions through a variety of capacity building and direct service programs.

**Population Served:**  
Low-income youth in Los Angeles, primarily ages 18-30.

**Overview:** CDTech is embedded in the Los Angeles Trade Technical College and is focused on developing a community change pipeline by grooming participant skills in a variety of content areas including technology, health policy, green education, and community development and organizing. Through their programming, which includes managing the Los Angeles Public Allies program, participants engage in projects to find solutions to community issues while acquiring technical skills or knowledge in related areas.

**Individual Impact:**  
Content knowledge and experience, community college credit, leadership development, community change skills, and increased self-worth and efficacy.



## Significance of Relationships

*"If 20% of young people in the US go to college – what percentage come out as doctors, investment bankers, etc.? A TINY 0.0001%? But to people in that room at that meeting, most of who went to college, probably 20% of people they know went in to those fields. So the challenge in the field is a disconnect between diverse pathways and contexts in which young people live and the context in which the staff of these organizations live. So, if we want service to be more diverse and inclusive we have to think that way." – National Service Provider*

- **Relationships created through organizing, civic engagement, and service opportunities develop support networks, strengthening social capital and a young person's potential for success throughout higher education and careers.** Civic engagement, service, and organizing in the lives of young people enhance their social capital by building and nurturing relationships and ties within their communities and among young people. Ensuring deep and authentic community representation in civic engagement, service and organizing programs and organizations is critical in gaining community and family buy-in.

## Existing Policy

*"Job training needs to be connected to real jobs in a field that is actually hiring. For example - we may have an intensive amount of training in the medical sector in LA – also in LA, we recruit nurses from the Philippines. The waiting list for nursing school is 2-3 years long and people get turned away from nursing school and yet we don't have enough nurses. LA is also a travel and tourism magnet – but now those jobs are going away because of internet travel arrangements. But still we train kids by the dozens for those jobs that don't exist anymore. When you make a reservation on the phone you're talking to Southeast Asia or to someone in prison. So, young people do this program and then there's nowhere to go from there." - Community-Based Organization*

- **Robust incentives to serve vis-à-vis higher education enhance the viability of the pathway.** Young people from low-income backgrounds take advantage of service-related programs offering a reduction in the cost of higher education (i.e. AmeriCorps education awards and scholarship programs that include a service component like Bonner Scholars, etc.). As expressed in the focus group, the idea of gaining an education while earning money initially attracted a number of participants to YouthBuild. Though some entered service based on the need for income, their engagement began with a focus on earning an education. The availability of need-based public and private grants and scholarships related to service help young people see the educational and workforce preparation gained through service. A low-cost higher education credential can be an incentive to serve. The acquisition of higher education credentials can be evidence of individual capacity and skill.

## Cross-Cutting Themes

### *Significance of Language*

*"Some people think that service is a punishment. Like, some friends be like: 'Well, I ain't doin' no service, I ain't gotta do no service for no jail or nothing so I ain't gonna do no service.'*

*' You really gotta do 675 hours? Like, that's horrible.'*

*But then they just don't know, like, service is good.... I don't need service for probation or anything like that. It's just I want to do it...You can help your community by doing service and I don't think they realize that it's really helping the community if you do service. They don't realize that it helps the community." – Focus Group Participant*

- **The term “service” itself is sometimes a barrier to participation or successful engagement.** Expressed repeatedly during interviews and convening conversations this tension resonates across the sectors and communities throughout the country. For some, the term *service* carries a negative connotation associated with an obligation or punishment, perhaps resultant of a court sentence or school community service requirement. For others, it is associated with perceptions of poor compensation for community-based work – i.e., working for one’s community does not pay the bills. From the perspective of community organizing and civic engagement, “service” is often perceived as a band-aid solution, merely masking a community’s problems rather than addressing them structurally. Additionally, the concept of service may have a different label or source of motivation according to cultural values and beliefs.

### *Significance of Diversity*

*“If I had 15 people, and 10 needed language supplements, and we get them some support for that, they would be good for the course. If the language wasn’t really strong, you’ve just eliminated 10 people...Kids are often misdiagnosed as having special needs. The reason they are falling behind: it isn’t because they have a learning disability unless you count language as a learning disability.” – Service Provider*

- **The importance of diversity at the leadership level in the service, civic engagement and organizing fields is an urgent theme among practitioners.** As previously indicated, role models, mentors and leaders who share common history with young people engaged in their communities can improve outcomes.
- **Diverse learning styles and language understanding are important factors in educational success.** Many of the young people interested in community issues are nontraditional learners by a number of criteria. They may have different ways of learning, undiagnosed learning disabilities or immediate needs require departure from school. One focus group participant left school because it was not interesting, but another later discovered what was required in order to more effectively learn classroom material. The language spoken in the classroom can present a barrier to learning. This problem is often missed or ignored, compounding a knowledge gap or lack of engagement over the long-term.

## **Complex Impact of Poverty and Unique Capital**

*“You know people are not going to hire you when you get out, and everyone else is upset you are in jail.” – Focus Group Participant*

Many of the programs working with youth addressed the additional issues arising when working with young people. Some young people not only lack access to financial resources, but their families often lack experience or the ability to successfully navigate systems.

- **Common byproducts of poverty influence the nature and scope of participation.** Many interviewees discussed the special needs of low-income youth and youth of color. Barriers to participating in education and service often include disruptions in home life, the need to care for parents, siblings, or their own children, and homelessness (consistently or episodically). These challenges prevent young people from withstanding an inability to generate income, adhering to full-time education rigors, or meeting long-term voluntary service requirement.

- **Entanglement with the juvenile justice system is a reality for many youth, particularly young men.** While this experience can serve as an on-ramp to a civic pathway for some young people, it often poses barriers to employment and successful education re-entry, particularly where there was a conviction, even long after the event. Service, organizing, and civic engagement can be leveraged for education and meaningful jobs, and ultimately ease re-entry. Almost all focus group participants thought service re-entry programs should begin before offenders are released from the system.

## V. THE ROAD FORWARD

Its potential to increase college completion rates, reform education, and strengthen America's global competitiveness demonstrates the urgency of the civic pathways concept. Stronger civic pathways can enrich national conversations on a range of issues of critical significance. Many programs already provide civic pathways to opportunity, but often not on a large enough scale. Recent legislation has expanded service opportunities, increased investment in community colleges, and created jobs; yet sufficient strategic partnerships across fields are not in place to maximize impact.

Furthermore, a large base of research and resources on higher education offer solutions to challenges facing communities, though those connections are often unrealized. Even greater civic engagement through service and organizing, increased avenues for access to higher education with supports for student success, and more effective workforce development with a proven pipeline to meaningful careers is all desirable and still needed. To achieve these ends and ensure ideas on civic pathways expressed by practitioners in the field come to fruition, the following policy and systems innovations are recommended:

### 1. Systematically Connect Existing Public and Private Entities in Civic Pathways to Postsecondary Education, Meaningful Employment and Positive Changes in Communities

Low-income youth and youth of color are not well represented among service participants in many of the more well-resourced programs. The act of service can strengthen school performance and overall enthusiasm around progressing along a civic pathway to higher education and the workforce. Every stage of completion along the civic pathway, from high school to postsecondary and beyond, from volunteering to organizing, increases employment opportunities and potential income. Institutions of higher education require a range of capacities to improve retention and matriculation. Greater clarity and commitment in policy and philanthropy around what it takes to strengthen the overall progression along civic pathways can enhance connections across various fragmented components.

#### a. Connect programs, communities, and young people through existing infrastructure

The significant budget increase of the Corporation for National and Community Service could bring opportunities to increase inclusivity in existing federal service programs. Potential philosophical alignment with the idea of service as a means to strengthen communities may open doors to dialogue. Close communication and emerging collaborations between philanthropy and the federal government, as demonstrated in the Social Innovation Fund, opens doors to creative approaches to rethinking and retooling the service infrastructure for greater opportunities for low-income youth and youth of color.

- *Diversify participation in existing federal service initiatives. Increase the representation of organizing groups, civic engagement initiatives, and workforce development opportunities among federal service partnerships. Bring program participation closer to more communities, schools, and community-based organizations that participate in these activities and support low-income youth.*
- *Leverage the emerging connection between institutional philanthropy and the federal service infrastructure and the White House to bring innovation to existing programs that can diversify service participation and provide greater support for the progression of low-income youth and youth of color along civic pathways.*

#### **b. Institutionalize promising models of civic pathways into federal policies and programs**

The magnitude of the challenge of strengthening civic pathways for low-income youth and youth of color, especially in an unstable economy, requires a level of investment that only the federal government can provide. Philanthropy can provide flexible and catalytic resources to strengthen connections and innovate to complement governmental support. The strengthening of civic pathways requires leveraging existing resources as well as developing new resource possibilities. It is important to build upon success in the field. The promotion of these advances could raise awareness around various possibilities.

- *Integrate promising approaches designed to strengthen civic pathways for low-income young people and youth of color (some of which are featured in this report) into existing federal programs. This could include supporting any of the components in the civic pathways diagram with particular attention to the cross-cutting themes.*
- *Establish or promote initiatives that explicitly engage low-income youth and youth of color in service of meaning to their communities, connect these experiences to progression through secondary and postsecondary education, and limit financial barriers to college attendance.*

#### **c. Establish strategic and purposeful cross-sector dialogue around potential ways to create linkages to enhance civic pathways**

Connecting across sectors requires deliberate attention. If the civic pathways we envision are not fully developed due to fragmentation across relevant stakeholders, conversations explicitly intending to identify strategies to refine and solidify civic pathways could lead to a range of unexplored possibilities.

- *Continually convene dialogue across public programs, philanthropy, youth, community-based organizations, schools, and higher education around the possibilities, barriers, and future opportunities in greater connectivity in their collaborative efforts to strengthen civic pathways.*

## **2. Promote the Impact of Service**

### **a. Shift the perception of the pathway: reframe the discussion around “service”**

The act and impact of true service is deeper than what is achieved by simply volunteering, but this reality has not transformed the image of service in the public eye or in federal, state, or local legislation. Many participants in this research recommend adjusting the way advocates discuss service so that the value of these programs is accurately conveyed.

Advocates believe that particular attention should be paid to the framing of the national service debate. Currently, national service is not explicitly viewed as a means to address national priorities. At a time when government agencies are cutting costs and payrolls, service corps programs can provide support in places where human capital is sorely needed. While the youth in service programs gain valuable skills, they can simultaneously fulfill needs identified by their communities but unmet by local, state, or federal government.

- *Conduct advocacy at the federal level for national service reform that reframes service in a jobs and education context. Service should not be regulated through the Corporation for National Service and service legislation exclusively. The skills acquired in service are relevant to all areas of the workforce and should be reflected through the work of multiple government agencies.*
- *Incorporate service into the jobs, juvenile justice, and higher education legislative initiatives to respond to the ways in which service relates to job creation, workforce development, dropout prevention, higher educational achievement, etc.*
- *Partner with comparatively untapped federal agencies such as the U.S. Departments of Labor, Justice and Education to ensure a deeper understanding of the importance of service in these sectors.*
- *Investigate how the impact of service can lighten the load of the federal government in areas where it is already deficient. In other words, what work could participants in service programs achieve that the federal government cannot currently accomplish, due to capacity and budgeting limitations? Examples could include building civic structures and parks, fighting wildfires, trail maintenance, and education and health services.*

**b. Prioritize increasing diversity at the senior leadership level in the service sector**

As noted previously, diversity in the service field remains an ongoing concern. Most service, civic engagement and community organizing groups work extensively in communities of color, and some work in communities of color exclusively and by design of their mission; however, in many situations, the leadership of service organizations does not, at least in part, represent either participants or the communities where those participants serve and work. This can strain trust, damage credibility, and limit connection in low-income, racially diverse, and immigrant communities.

- *Prioritize developing and engaging leadership reflective of the communities where their participants live and serve.*
- *Develop a carefully facilitated leadership pipeline stemming from community-based organizations, as well as the sector more broadly, to provide highly qualified and competent senior level leadership positioned to successfully fill these roles in the long-term.*

**c. Set young people on the pathway early: incorporate the skills taught through service, civic engagement and organizing into the curriculum at all levels**

Evaluations of youth-serving organizations suggest the skills acquired through youth involvement with service, organizing and civic engagement shape success in college and jobs for young people from low-income backgrounds. Although research acknowledges the importance of these skills, especially in the workplace, our public and higher education systems do not prioritize these skill sets.

- *Provide real opportunities for meaningful civic engagement through the public school system by developing ways for students to engage in their community and reflect through readings and classroom teaching and learning.*
- *Develop national standards around civic engagement that reflect the “soft skills” students learn through service to enhance their value in education circles. These could include non-cognitive attributes that have been associated with nontraditional student success, such as knowledge acquired in or about a field, successful leadership experiences, realistic self-appraisal, positive self-concept, understanding and knowledge of how to handle racism, and others.*

### **3. Scale-Up Existing Pathways for Disconnected Youth and Young Adults**

#### **a. Decrease the barriers to service**

Often low-income youth are the most under-engaged group in their communities due to myriad pressures in their lives, especially when constraints are placed upon the organizations and systems offering service, civic engagement and organizing opportunities. While the country does not have a comprehensive second-chance system for youth and young adults who have dropped out of school, are ex-offenders, or are leaving the foster care system, many strong second-chance programs have begun to figure out how to use service as a strategy for reengagement and success achievement for those that have been disconnected from pathways to higher education and employment. This approach should be a priority for state, federal and philanthropic investors, especially with national service funding. Current national service programs restrict organizational participation to those that can accommodate a minimal number of volunteers – leaving out what may be a substantial number of organizations providing critically needed work in communities but without the capacity to manage such a large number of volunteers at any given time. They may also not be able to generate the required matching dollars to implement such programs. Ineligibility of some effective community-based organizations may translate into a missed opportunity for their populations.

- *Reduce the matching requirement of national service programs in order to be more inclusive of smaller community-based organizations and the populations they serve.*
- *Integrate the service experience gained in national service programs with the actual attainment of postsecondary credentials. Presently, participants work towards their desired degrees independent of the knowledge and skills gained during their service tenure. Additionally, the education award is underleveraged among AmeriCorps members who have not completed college.*

#### **b. Increase incentives to serve by providing more options for affordable access to college to those who serve in their communities**

Considering that this study is concerned with pathways out of poverty, the cost of higher education has been a recurring concern. The U.S. has historically rewarded service to country with college assistance: the GI Bill, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Segal AmeriCorps Education award, loan deferral during participation in the Peace Corps and similar full-time volunteer programs, etc.; however, it is clear to organizations that engage low-income youth in service, civic engagement and especially organizing, that these opportunities are not widely available. Even when they are available, they do not sufficiently increase the affordability of higher education for low-income communities.

- *Provide support to increase the number and geographic spread of institutions that match the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. Currently, less than 100 colleges and universities and only one community college (the Community College of Rhode Island) match the award.*
- *Decrease the threshold for determining economic need and, most importantly, attach that award to proven civic engagement or service in a student's life. Ensure that civic engagement or service is not limited to AmeriCorps approved programs, allowing for students to also serve at smaller, community-based organizations.*
- *Incentivize full-time paid service for national service participants who are recruited from low-income communities and establish a set of transitional opportunities that allow their members to transition successfully from paid full-time service into and through college.*
- *Support community colleges that engage young people in civic engagement by supporting greater numbers to match the Segal AmeriCorps Education award and by financially supporting those specific departments and programs that effectively develop opportunities for civic engagement.*

**c. Craft workforce development programs around viable industries**

Too often workforce development programs are training young people for careers in fields that do not offer viable career paths. Young people see programs that do not reflect their existing needs or personal goals and, as a result, become disengaged. Young people with the kinds of skills developed through service, civic engagement and organizing could find meaningful work and excel in a variety of fields. The nonprofit sector, for example, is rapidly growing, as it already represents 11% of the jobs in the U.S. A transition to the nonprofit sector is a natural fit for civic-minded young people who want to serve in their community and adapt transferable skills.

- *Provide support for workforce development programs to scale up their nonprofit sector skill building programming and placement process.*
- *Engage the nonprofit sector in further developing workforce development programs tailored to the nonprofit sector to ensure appropriate skills development, as has been done in the business sector.*
- *Identify other sectors where employment opportunities will likely grow, and align skill sets enhanced by service accordingly.*

Overall, these recommendations can increase connectivity throughout civic pathways. They can increase access for low income youth and youth of color, as well as enhance the impact of service and civic engagement on issues of national concern. This is a critical opportunity to refine the continually expanding civic infrastructure, and, in effect, usher in a new era in the rich historical evolution of service in the United States. Ultimately, this strategic leveraging of service and civic engagement can result in greater opportunities for young people, and more stable and resilient communities.

## VI. ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations to the Corporation for National and Community Service and State Commissions

The need to strengthen civic pathways out of poverty into opportunity is especially timely and particularly relevant to how the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and State Commissions plan and function. If involvement in service can increase educational and employment opportunities for disadvantaged young people as this paper demonstrates, then our nation's public service infrastructure is especially poised to make substantial contributions to critical contemporary concerns.

As recent headlines remind us that poverty in the United States is at its highest level in fifteen years, we know that young adults are confronted by a range of obstacles exacerbated by deepening economic insecurity. We know that a better future for the United States as a whole requires expanded opportunities for youth. The magnitude of the challenge before us is reflected in a range of indicators on the state of affairs for America's youth. Consider that:

- One-third of American students never graduate from high school;
- Only half of students of color graduate from high school; and,
- Nearly six million youth (ages 16 to 24) are not in school and do not have a job.


The evidence of a crisis facing America's future is overwhelming. As this paper indicates, long range opportunities are dramatically influenced by circumstances early in life. For example, over 75% of state prison inmates and 59% of federal inmates do not finish high school. Myriad interventions are required to alter these directions; one option is increased service participation. Additionally, service can develop pathways to rebuilding communities. Lower income communities in particular are facing substantial instability in the face of the persisting global economic downturn. Engaging young people in the process of rebuilding their communities demonstrates strategies to reconstruct social economies at the neighborhood level from the ground up.

As President Obama champions the urgency of increasing postsecondary success, and as we face historically high youth unemployment, national and statewide service agencies should comprehensively review their makeup and priorities and plan anew. By aligning service goals with the intent to improve youth employment and advancement through postsecondary education, service can play an increasingly relevant role in strengthening and expanding opportunities.

We think AmeriCorps participation in particular can be the pathway toward college completion and jobs. For low-income young people, participating in AmeriCorps to build communities strengthens agency, self-efficacy, and social capital. Moreover, stipends through AmeriCorps provide compensation, which is sorely needed by lower income populations. AmeriCorps' Segal Educational Award, along with Pell support, could be an important ticket to a postsecondary credential and a career, breaking an intergenerational transmission of poverty in many cases. Indeed, AmeriCorps provides service opportunities, but for those in financial need in particular, participation in the program can mean access to resources.

Overall, we see signs of an improved commitment to civic pathways in the CNCS and the current Administration as whole. We applaud the recent substantial CNCS AmeriCorps grant to Youth Build, as it prioritizes civic pathways. We encourage significant investments of this sort, and would like to see similar grants into the future. CNCS is on the right track in a number of areas in addition to this grant, including collaboration across federal agencies. We see other indicators of progress to increased opportunities for disadvantaged young people in various aspects of the Administration as well, such as





a recent Department of Labor Youth Offender grant program, and an upcoming initiative by the Department of Interior to engage formerly incarcerated young people in service on public lands.

Too many young people are left behind. Particular groups of young adults, such as those who have been incarcerated are denied second chances. These disadvantaged young people span the nation and span racial and ethnic groups. We see disproportionately challenging economic circumstances for youth of color. Thus, we recommend explicit strategies that target service opportunities that can effectively reach youth of color. And yet, we encourage a balanced approach to communities of color that not only acknowledges challenges, but highlights and begins with assets. Too often, communities of color are viewed through the lens of deficits. Any effective engagement of communities of color employs asset-based methods. Additionally, understanding that economic challenges are not exclusive to youth of color; we recommend service opportunities targeting low-income white populations as well.

If the Corporation and State Commissions refocus intentions and efforts toward increasing second chances for young adults who have been denied opportunities, the public, in greater numbers, will come to recognize the power and potential of service as a pathway out of poverty. Programs that intentionally recruit high school dropouts to serve in AmeriCorps should be a priority for funding from CNCS and State commissions. Moreover, an emphasis on the least advantaged brings additional contributions to the Federal infrastructure, as it reduces cost. In an era where the deficit looms and efficiency will increasingly become a critical and central mantra, strategies that limit public sector costs and the cost of incarceration are necessary. Overall, expanded service opportunities can lead to healthier communities and brighter futures for young people.

Service models that increase opportunities for disadvantaged populations are not without precedent, as various approaches have been emerging in recent years. The Clean Energy Service Corps, for example, provides career opportunities for traditionally marginalized young people in various aspects of the “green economy”. The Civic Justice Corps utilizes service to reintegrate incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth back into their communities. We see tremendous potential to build upon lessons learned from initiatives capturing the spirit of service as a pathway out of poverty.

## Setting a Big AmeriCorps Goal

The Corporation could start by setting a big goal. As the Serve America Act has bolstered expansive aims, some deliberate tweaking toward explicitly increasing inclusion of lower income young people and youth of color could widen service’s impact. For example, with the existing goal to bring AmeriCorps participants to 250,000:

- *Aim for half (125,000) of these participants to reflect disadvantaged and lower income populations.* With such a goal, AmeriCorps would represent the largest reconnecting pathway for disadvantaged young people, doing so through the power of service. It would fully engage and bring new opportunities to over ten percent of the 1.2 million Americans who drop out of the education pipeline.
- Clearly define the characteristics of this population, and include dropouts, young people aging out of foster care, and the formerly incarcerated.

What it would take to achieve a goal of this magnitude would involve changes to all aspects of the way the Corporation does business internally and externally:

## CNCS Infrastructure

### ***Leadership***

- Hire a senior staff person serving on the leadership team who brings extensive experiences working on the ground with harder to serve populations, and an understanding of culture shifts required in engaging these communities.

### ***Staff Composition***

- Hire staff more reflective of these populations – people of color, those who have worked more directly with disadvantaged populations, those who have experienced foster care and/or the criminal justice system, and those from lower income backgrounds.
- Identify primary causes of staff turnover and consider alternative approaches in pursuing and hiring newer, more diverse staff.

### ***Internal Training***

- Pursue more deliberate and focused training for staff on the various dynamics of working with harder to serve populations, and pay particular attention to cultural sensitivity in recruiting, engaging, and building trust with lower income young people and youth of color.
- Educate staff on barriers to working with these populations and various at risk factors in order to manage expectations and increase sensitivity and patience.
- Expose program officers to actual work in communities through site visits to programs and other forms of experiential and direct connecting.

## ***Program Design and Implementation***

- Review how program implementation must adapt to the different populations in their expectations, timing, placements, and various other relevant concerns.
- Change programs accordingly. For example, integrate longer terms of service into the program design, as these experiences are more amenable to the circumstances of less advantaged young adults. Programs should recruit young adults with the intent of full-time participation in AmeriCorps for two years, providing member development opportunities that include academic remediation and acceleration, General Equivalency Diploma (GED) attainment and preparation for college placement exams. Two years of participation would enable access to twice the amount of the Education Award.
- Create a transparent grant review process that incentivizes and rewards grant applications that serve this population.
- Set realistic goals for program experiences and completion that are based on data and lessons learned from organizations currently engaging these young people effectively. For example, provide more flexibility in retention rates for grantees that serve this population.
- Support creative and innovative ways to finance and meet member needs for low-income young adults, such as leveraging transportation, child care, housing, academic acceleration, and various other forms of additional assistance.
- Identify appropriate first stage experiences for this population, and appropriately adapt retention goals.

## ***Assessment and Evaluation***

- Broaden intentions and desired outcomes and results to include factors that would alter life chances for disadvantaged young people in areas such as college completion, access, and employment.

- Design indicators and evaluation processes accordingly in consultation with organizations with working knowledge of strategies to reach and successfully retain disadvantaged youth.
- Document findings throughout to improve future program designs.

#### *External Partners*

- Build extensive relationships with organizations serving these populations and communicate the intention to reach out and diversify those receiving service opportunities.
- Create partnerships with community colleges to enable service opportunities for students at these institutions and strengthen access to postsecondary education for young people who are not enrolled in any form of higher education.
- Engage Campus Compact and Community Learning Partnership in dialogue around connecting to their member community colleges and other postsecondary institutions that serve lower income and nontraditional populations.

#### *Collaboration with other Federal Agencies and Programs*

- Offer service as a component in strengthening outcomes in Federal agencies and programs pursuing increased employment and educational opportunities. The Serve America Act emphasizes the role of service in meeting the goals of other Federal agencies. The U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Transportation, and the Interior are among various likely partners within the Federal government.
- Seek to leverage resources through the Workforce Investment Act.

### **State Commissions and a Suggested Next Step**

Including 125,000 lower income young people and youth of color who have experienced dropping out of school, aging out of foster care, or leaving the criminal justice system in AmeriCorps as participants would require changes in State Commissions:

- They would shift from primarily prioritizing projects – “getting things done” - to including low-income young adults as target populations to recruit to accomplish these tasks.
- With Commission formula funds, they could provide bonus points to proposals that recruit from low-income and disconnected populations and allow for AmeriCorps resources and/or match to focus on the supports that help put young adults with barriers to success on a pathway out of poverty.

The day-to-day efforts of implementing programs could be easier with:

1. Less onerous monitoring processes (current efforts focus almost exclusively on attempting to find negatives) and more focus on program design and quality.
2. Extended ability to utilize fixed-cost awards to all programs.
3. Simplified information technology processes including the e-grants process.

## VII. APPENDIX

### Interview and Convening Participants

	First Name	Last Name	Organization
1	Jennifer	Bastress Tahmasebi	YouthBuild USA
2	Debbie	Bial	Posse Foundation
3	Wayne	Branch	American Humanics
4	Michael	Brown	City Year
5	Charisse	Carney-Nunes	Jamestown Project
6	Oona	Chatterjee	Make the Road New York
7	Elizabeth	Clay	Be the Change
8	Cole B.	Cole	Movement Strategy Center
9	Carl	Colonius	Rocky Mountain Youth Corps
10	Ernesto	Cortes, Jr.	Industrial Areas Foundation
11	Steven	Culbertson	Youth Service America
12	Maureen	Curley	Campus Compact
13	Maria	Delacruz	The Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation
14	Cheryl	Dorsey	Echoing Green
15	Mark	Edwards	Be the Change
16	Denise	Fairchild	Community Development Technologies Center
17	Ryan	Friedrichs	State Voices
18	Catherine	Gautier	Hands on Gulf Coast
19	Andrew	Gillum	Tallahassee City Commission/ Young Elected Officials Network
20	Marqueece	Harris-Dawson	Community Coalition
21	Mikel	Herrington	AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps
22	Everrette	Hill	New Mexico Forum for Youth in Community
23	Hyepin	Im	Korean Churches for Community Development
24	Jakada	Imani	Ella Baker Center
25	Olin	Lagan	Kanu Hawaii
26	Kimi	Lee	Movement Strategy Center/Alliance for Education Justice
27	Dennis	Littky	Big Picture Learning and the Met Center
28	Geri	Mannion	Carnegie Corporation of New York
29	Michael	Mata	World Vision
30	Wayne	Meisel	Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation/Bonner Scholars
31	Andy	Mott	Community Learning Partnership
32	Nelly	Nieblas	Public Allies
33	Scott	Nielsen	Alexander Nielsen Consulting Group, LLC

34	Michelle	Nunn	Points of Light Institute / Hands On Network
35	Gihan	Perera	Miami Workers Center
36	Colette	Pichon Battle	Gulf Coast Fellows for Community Transformation
37	Supryia	Pillai	Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing
38	Sally	Prouty	Corps Network
39	Catalina	Ruiz-Healy	Rappaport Family Foundation
40	Bruce	Saito	LA Conservation Corps
41	Paul	Schmitz	Public Allies
42	Robert	Sherman	Mercy Corps
43	Dorothy	Stoneman	YouthBuild USA
44	Susan	Stroud	Innovation in Civic Participation
45	George	Torres	La Causa
46	Billy	Wimsatt	Movement Strategy Center
47	Harris	Wofford	
48	Kent	Wong	UCLA IRLE-Labor Center
49	Tony	Woods	Be the Change

## YouthBuild Focus Group

	First Name	Last Name	Organization
1	Nathaniel	Almeida	Poughkeepsie, NY
2	Derrick	Ayson	Stockton, CA
3	Karegma	Barr	Bloomington, IL
4	Lavelle	Baskins	Bloomington, IL
5	Mauro	Castillo	Oklahoma City, OK
6	Brandon	Cross	Bloomington, IL
7	Janet	DeJesus	Chelsea, MA
8	Nakita	Estevez	Lawrence, MA
9	Austin	Garcia	Sweethome, OR
10	Allen	Green	Thibodaux, LA
11	Christopher	Gress	Medford, OR
12	Paladin	Jordan Jr	Boston, MA
13	James	Mackey	Columbus, OH
14	Tiffany	Murphy	Boston, MA
15	Sandra	Quel	Washington, DC
16	Travis	Redfield	Medford, OR
17	Justin	Roebuck, Sr.	Columbus, OH
18	Grisel	Santiago	Lawrence, MA
19	Marlo	Saunders	East St. Louis, IL
20	Kendra	Scialdone	W. Bridgewater, MA
21	Felicia	Smith	North Chicago, IL
22	Brian	Veloza	Palm Bay, FL
23	Jasmine	Wilson	Bloomington, IL
24	Alisha	Young	Montgomery, WV