



# Credit for Serving

A New Vision for National Service in Higher Education

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By Carmel Martin, Ben Miller, Shiv Rawal, and Phoebe Sweet September 2015

Center for American Progress



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## Introduction and summary

This past spring, A'licia Williams, 20, a student at Miami Dade College, spent a week working with Breaking Free—an organization that serves survivors of sex trafficking in St. Paul, Minnesota—as part of her college's alternative spring break service program. Even as Williams and her peers were making a difference in the lives of those who survived horrible circumstances, the one-week service experience altered the course of Williams' life as well. After speaking to a trafficking survivor and learning about the woman's efforts to reconnect with her daughter despite the trauma she had endured, Williams made a decision about the future. Reflecting on her service, as well as on her own difficult upbringing—being raised by a mother who dropped out of high school and growing up without a father's presence—Williams, a pre-med student, realized her true passion was to pursue a career as an adolescent psychologist.<sup>1</sup>

Williams' experience working with the St. Paul service organization inspired her to become more involved in her community at home in Miami, Florida. Since her spring break experience, Williams has volunteered in the maternity ward at a local hospital and has become an advocate for student service through her work-study job at her college's Institute for Civic Engagement and Democracy, where she works 17 hours a week. Moreover, Williams says that her service experiences are helping prepare her for a career of assisting children and teens overcome challenges similar to the ones she faced as a child.

Today, Williams juggles a part-time job, which contributes to her family's bottom line, with her school and service schedules. She is determined to make the balancing act work. Williams is on track to graduate with an associate's degree in psychology in 2016 and plans to go on to a four-year college after graduation. And she says that service has become both a valuable part of her education and a way to prepare for a career in the social service field.

Learning through service has been shown to have many important and tangible benefits for students, including enhanced leadership skills, increased self-confidence, and improved academic outcomes.<sup>2</sup> It can also provide students with relevant workforce experience that builds the types of skills employers seek.

Unfortunately, lower-income students, such as Williams, are less likely to participate in service while in college compared to their higher-income peers,<sup>3</sup> which means they have limited access to the benefits that accrue from participating in service. More affluent students, meanwhile, may not be attending colleges that have established robust service opportunities, and all students need access to service programs that do not delay their progress toward completing a degree. Williams and other students who participate in service despite these challenges demonstrate a clear appetite for intensive service-learning opportunities on college campuses. But more must be done to help them pursue these opportunities.

Given the importance of service learning, colleges cannot keep treating service as merely an extracurricular add-on. Instead, the Center for American Progress proposes a new vision for service learning in higher education. Under the CAP proposal, colleges and universities would establish service programs that award college credit for service opportunities that directly relate to a student's area of study. A student would spend up to one-quarter of their degree program participating in intensive service opportunities. When paired with some additional academic work, these service experiences would yield sufficient academic credit so that students stay on track to graduate. Importantly, these service programs would be eligible for federal student aid funds, which would make them more affordable for students.

Williams' difficulty finding the time and resources to serve highlights the need for new ways of structuring these programs. She does not receive college credit for her service work at the hospital—nor did she earn credit for the service trip to Minnesota because there was no formal academic component to the program. Taking a week off from work to go to Minnesota meant working extra hours at her part-time job for the next week in order to catch up financially. Since Williams helps support her siblings, mother, and grandmother, she needed to make up the income lost during her service. Furthermore, the trip to St. Paul itself cost several hundred dollars, a sum that Williams struggled to pay despite fundraising to cover a portion of the expense.

Awarding credit for intensive service learning would go a long way toward overcoming the barriers that students such as Williams face. For the low-income and older students who make up an increasing share of today's college attendees, adding sufficient academic rigor in order to make service programs eligible for federal student aid would help them pursue service while worrying less about how to cover increasingly high tuition bills. And students from all income backgrounds would benefit from receiving college credit, so they do not have to choose between service and taking longer to graduate.

This credit-for-service proposal is also a way to bridge the disconnect that exists today between students and their preparation for the workforce. While most students see getting a good job as a key reason for attending college,<sup>4</sup> the majority of students do not believe college adequately prepares them for employment.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, employers say that college graduates lack the skills they need for the real world.<sup>6</sup> National service—community work that addresses the major challenges facing the United States—can mitigate this disconnect by allowing students to gain practical, real-world skills. Supplementary coursework can help students grow academically at the same time. Schools can spread the benefits of service in a smart, accessible, and effective way by implementing programs that pair national service with learning, and the federal government can facilitate this process for community colleges and universities.

This report lays out what it would take for colleges and universities to establish the types of programs discussed above. In particular, it considers how these programs could overcome barriers to service, as well as what they would need to do to become eligible for federal student aid. The report also includes real-life examples of colleges and students participating in the exact type of opportunities this proposal would like to see flourish.



## The case for service

The never-ending rise in the price of college has today's students increasingly worried about whether their academic programs will pay off in the long run. More than 85 percent of incoming freshmen indicate that getting a good job is a very important reason for attending college.<sup>7</sup> While the benefits to college clearly go beyond just financial returns, the economics of attending college is a very understandable fear, particularly given that 70 percent of students who earn a bachelor's degree have to borrow for college, and those who borrow walk away with an average debt balance of nearly \$30,000.<sup>8</sup>

Making sure that students graduate from college with the necessary skills for success in the workforce is crucial to ensuring that a college degree is worth the expense. What are those skills? According to employers, they want graduates who have participated in an experience where they can apply their learning; work with others in a team setting; and can engage in ethical judgment and decision-making.<sup>9</sup>

Yet neither employers nor students believe that college graduates are acquiring the skills that they need. One poll found that only 35 percent of surveyed students believe college prepared them for a job.<sup>10</sup> And just 23 percent of surveyed employers said students know how to apply knowledge and skills to the real world.<sup>11</sup>

Encouraging more students to pursue national service is one way to help college graduates secure the skills necessary for success in today's workforce. By placing students into real-world situations in their communities, they can learn how to work collaboratively, manage projects, and apply their academic learning. Such opportunities are also likely to help with so-called soft skills—such as teamwork, communication, and networking—that also matter for workforce success.<sup>12</sup> Service learning—the practice of integrating service into the academic instruction of a course—has been shown to promote leadership skills, a commitment to diversity, self-confidence, a stronger sense of self, and a stronger commitment to social issues in participating students.<sup>13</sup> One study found that service learning had positive effects on academic outcomes, self-efficacy, leadership, and plans to participate in further service after college.<sup>14</sup> These are the skills and values that employers demand.

However, the benefits of service remain out of reach for many lower-income college students. According to U.S. Department of Education survey data that looked at dependent students at public or private nonprofit four-year colleges, those in the bottom income quartile were 25 percent more likely to not volunteer each month than those in the highest income quartile.<sup>15</sup>

Lower service rates among less-affluent students reflects the reality that many of these individuals, rather than participating in service, have to spend their time outside the classroom working in order to make ends meet, not only for themselves, but oftentimes for their families as well.<sup>16</sup> Research further suggests that socioeconomic status might influence students' likelihood of participating in service both in high school and in college. One study found that students who did not participate in service in both high school and college came from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, those who participated in service in both high school and college came from the most affluent families. The authors additionally found that the students who participated in service in high school but not college had the highest student loan debt.<sup>18</sup> But among students who do participate in service, there is little difference in the amount of time spent serving. Disadvantaged youth who do engage in service do so at the same intensity as those from more privileged backgrounds.<sup>19</sup> These students are also more likely than their more affluent peers to want to engage in service in order "to gain experience for school or work."<sup>20</sup>

Admittedly, concerns about debt and cost burdens may not be the only barriers that explain why service is not often attainable for lower-income students. Lower-income students enroll in college at lower rates than their wealthier peers and are less likely to complete their degrees.<sup>21</sup> Though it is too much to expect service programs alone to solve these major higher education issues, ensuring that these service opportunities contain academic credit and provide relevant workforce experiences may at least help students stay in college and be better prepared to succeed in their careers.

While closing service gaps by socioeconomic status should be of paramount concern, more must be done in order to raise the percentage of students engaging in service learning among students from all backgrounds. According to the same Department of Education data on dependent students referenced earlier, only about half of the most affluent students reported doing any volunteering each month.<sup>22</sup> In addition, just 14 percent of those same students volunteered more than 10 hours a month.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that far too many students are neither presented with nor taking advantage of important opportunities to serve their communities while simultaneously developing skills that will serve them well in the workforce in the future.



## Phillip Ellison and his City Year experience

In 2008, just two years into his education at The Pennsylvania State University, Phillip Ellison dropped out of college—a victim of the Great Recession. Seven years later, Ellison is back in school, is an honors student at Tufts University, and is a co-founder of a tech startup. Ellison, who always wanted to finish college, credits a year of serving with an AmeriCorps program for setting him back on track to a degree.

Ellison participated in AmeriCorps' City Year program, which places young adults in high-poverty public schools.<sup>24</sup> In exchange for service, the program offers a monthly stipend along with monetary awards that can be spent repaying student loan debt or pursuing further education. Ellison said these incentives, as well as an interest in working in the education field, inspired him to apply for City Year in 2009. Although his service year was one of the most challenging experiences of his life, it sparked his passion for service and gave him skills that have put him on a path to graduate from college in 2016.

City Year was just the start of Ellison's service work. After City Year, Ellison went on to work with NYC Service, where he joined an effort to cool rooftops in the city.<sup>25</sup> He also enrolled in City University of New York, or CUNY, Hostos Community College, where he was both a tutor and mentor.

Ellison's next idea for helping students came during his own move from CUNY Hostos to Tufts. During that process, he was struck by the lack of advising resources available to students interested in transferring to four-year colleges and universities. So he started working with nearby Roxbury Community College to explore a solution to what he termed the "advising gap" that he experienced at his community college.<sup>26</sup> This work turned into the idea for ULink,<sup>27</sup> a tech startup Ellison is working on that aims to leverage technology to connect college students with the resources they need in order to plan their futures. He is currently working on ULink at Smarter in the City—a high-tech business accelerator in Boston.<sup>28</sup>

Ellison credits City Year for changing his trajectory and putting him on track to graduate and start his own business. Because of his experience, Ellison wants to see colleges do more to connect students to service opportunities. He points to Tufts' 1+4 Bridge-Year Service Learning Program<sup>29</sup>—which is placing 15 incoming students in domestic and international organizations for a year of service before they begin their four-year degrees at Tufts<sup>30</sup>—as an example of how schools can secure partnerships and funding to make long, intensive service accessible for students like Ellison, who stand to both gain and contribute through national service.

# Service-learning proposal

Opening the benefits of service to all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, requires rethinking its place in postsecondary education programs. This means students truly dedicated to service should no longer have to treat it as either an extracurricular activity done in one's spare time or an intensive experience that requires temporarily pausing studies and extending the time to graduation. Instead, colleges and universities should start creating dedicated service opportunities that are integrated components of degree programs. This would be done through establishing programs in which students would spend one year within a four-year program—or one semester in a two-year offering—pursuing service activities. These activities would carry college credit; be supplemented by additional academic courses as needed; and have to provide experiences directly related to a student's major.

Under this proposal, students would engage in 20 hours to 30 hours of service per week with an organization that has partnered with their university. Alongside their service, students would simultaneously enroll in academic for-credit courses. These courses would serve as a companion to their service and would align real-world experience and academic learning with the goal of building career readiness. In addition to approximately five hours of academic coursework per week, the programs would provide support services, such as advising, in order to ensure that participants are fully engaged in their service activity, as well as keeping pace with the attainment of academic and career skills. Colleges and universities would be required to develop appropriate academic coursework that ensures students receive credit for their service and keeps them on track to complete their degrees on time.

How might this look in practice? Imagine a student who is majoring in computer science. Instead of spending a full year exclusively learning coding in a classroom, they would spend a year as a web developer for a nonprofit organization serving high-poverty communities while simultaneously taking supplemental courses. The hands-on experience helps the student sharpen his or her skills while serving communities in need; the supplemental coursework helps the student stay on track for graduation. Other pairings could include a student

studying environmental sciences working with a local city agency that measures the health of nearby forests and bodies of water, or a business major who spends a year assisting a nonprofit's management team.

Service-learning opportunities, however, can only work if they carry legitimate academic rigor and are relevant to a student's academic and career readiness. For effective service experiences, colleges and universities would need to cultivate strong partnerships with well-managed local service organizations that have the ability to ensure students are getting the most out of their service. Colleges would also need to fully vet opportunities and make sure that strong accountability structures are in place.

Supplementing service with academics is a key part of CAP's proposal. Research shows that benefits from service learning are most strongly associated with academic outcomes and that a student's degree of interest in the subject matter is the most influential factor to a positive service-learning experience.<sup>31</sup> Successful programs would also provide a forum for students to critically reflect and discuss their experiences. Research shows that reflecting on the experience of service through processing and digesting the experience—especially through discussions with other students—contributes to the positive benefits associated with service.<sup>32</sup> One study even suggests that the core experience of service is the exchange of ideas across “boundaries of perceived difference,” both during the service and through reflection.<sup>33</sup> These studies underscore the importance of structured reflection through student discussions, journals, and relationships with professors. As forums for reflection, supplementary academic courses can serve as a critical part of students' service experiences, helping them to maximize their learning from community work.

The awarding of college credit is also important in order to ensure that participating in service does not impede progress to graduation. If students were to only earn a fraction of the credits they would normally receive in a semester, they would be unable to complete college on time, which raises their overall price of attending college and attaining a degree. Given the role family income plays in students' likelihood of participating in service, a proposal that would delay graduation and increase the cost of college would not be feasible for many low- and middle-income students.

In order to measure the efficacy of programs and contribute to research on service learning in college, schools would be required to track student outcomes both during and beyond the service term. By measuring and publishing these outcomes, schools would generate the data needed to gauge their respective programs' performance,

as well as identify areas in need of improvement. The data would also contribute to research in this field, allowing for the measurement of the effects of service experiences on academics, college completion, and career placement.

Because CAP's proposal would integrate service into existing degree plans and keep students on track for graduation, students would be able to apply their federal loans and grants toward their service experiences. The ability to use federal student aid toward a year-long service experience would be an important college financing mechanism for students.

Even though federal student aid funds would help pay for these service programs, some students may still be discouraged from participating because engaging in service could mean losing critical supplementary income from part-time work. At minimum, the service students complete under programs supported by this proposal should qualify as a work-study eligible activity. Colleges are already required to spend at least 7 percent of their work-study funds on students engaging in community service, and students who participate in service programs should be eligible for these funds. Additionally, any federal grant funds that help colleges finance service programs could prioritize schools that ensure their service programs are accessible and affordable for all students.

## Drake University's Engaged Citizen Corps

Drake University, a private university in Des Moines, Iowa,<sup>34</sup> offers one example of how a college can provide a credit-bearing academic component that supplements long service experiences for their students. Drake plans to offer a new service program, the Engaged Citizen Corps, in the fall of 2016.<sup>35</sup> Participating students will spend their first undergraduate year completing service with agencies or organizations that work on issues regarding housing, transportation, health and safety, business cultivation, and arts and culture in the city of Des Moines.

While serving, students in the Engaged Citizen Corps will also complete a course load that includes four to five classes related to their service. These classes will be worth enough credits during the year so that students will receive all the federal student aid for which they qualify.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, many of the service-related classes fulfill general education requirements, while the rest are general elective credits. These electives will allow students to choose courses that fit within

their specific degrees of study. Reflection and group discussion of students' service experiences are built into classroom instruction. Students in the program will also receive an \$8,500 living stipend, and they will all live on the same floor in a Drake University residence hall.<sup>37</sup> The program aims to recruit 15 to 20 students for the inaugural Engaged Citizen Corps in the 2016-17 school year.<sup>38</sup>

Before creating the Engaged Citizen Corps, Drake University underwent a detailed community assessment process for identifying nonprofits, community organizations, and local public agencies that could host students.<sup>39</sup> This included interviews and survey research with the university's existing partner organizations to identify specific community needs and the capacity of organizations to take on students interested in serving. This process will hopefully result in strong partnerships with well-managed local service organizations, which will allow students to get the most out of their service.

## Service and federal student aid

The national service opportunities described in this report must be eligible for federal student aid. This is crucial to guaranteeing the programs are available to everyone regardless of their economic background. Allowing students to continue to access federal grants and loans will make it possible for them to cover living and tuition expenses that they otherwise may not be able to afford without working instead of serving.

There are several ways a college could potentially make the embedded national service component of a degree program eligible for federal student aid. These depend upon things such as whether students complete their service near their college; if their institution is able to offer distance or correspondence education; as well as several other factors. But the overall theme is the same: Colleges need some way to combine service with rigorous educational experiences that are sufficient to justify the awarding of college credits that contribute to a degree program.<sup>40</sup>

Faculty buy-in will be crucial for determining the rigor of the educational component of service experiences. In most public and private nonprofit institutions, the choice to award credit and verify academic rigor is ultimately made by the faculty. They are also responsible for designing programs and thus will need to configure degree options that incorporate service.

Federal rules also play a role in governing what counts as a college credit for the purposes of financial aid programs. These rules define a credit hour as an amount of work that reasonably approximates “one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out of class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester.”<sup>41</sup> Equivalent work done for internships or other similar learning experiences can also be counted for credit.<sup>42</sup>

Institutions have significant flexibility within this federal definition. These time-based requirements do not have to be met each and every week but instead are the average over the course of the semester. So a college could still offer federal aid for a program where students spend some weeks doing only service work with an expectation that students record and reflect on their experiences, while other weeks students undergo a more intensive academic experience. A college also has the discretion to determine what reasonably approximates these requirements.<sup>43</sup>

Just making these service-learning opportunities eligible for some college credit is not enough: The combination of service and other educational work should ideally equal at least 15 credit hours per semester or the equivalent for other academic terms. This is because the amount of financial aid a student receives is directly tied to the number of credits they attempt. Students who attempt fewer than 12 credit hours in a given semester cannot receive the full amount of grant funds available to them, while students who complete less than 15 credit hours per semester might not be able to complete a bachelor's degree in four years or an associate's degree in two years.<sup>44</sup> Under this report's model, a college needs to combine the credit-for-service experience with whatever supplementary coursework is necessary to get a student to full-time status. Anything less would likely result in students failing to graduate on time or qualifying for fewer federal student aid dollars.

Given these requirements, colleges have various options to combine full-time or close to full-time service with sufficient academic credit for a student. These possibilities also vary a bit depending on whether a student will be doing the service close to their college. Below are a few different ways this could work in practice, although this by no means precludes other ways to address the problem.

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### Service near a student's college

If a student is doing their service near the college that they attend, the academic credit requirements could likely be fulfilled through a combination of independent studies or coursework back on campus. For example, a student could spend four days a week at their service project and one day on campus in order to check in with professors and attend classes. Some coursework could also be offered at night, allowing students to serve during the day. Proximity to campus could also allow instructors to visit service sites in order to ensure that the hands-on learning is properly tailored to the academic program.



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## Service away from a student's college

These service options could still be eligible for academic credit without great difficulty if students are not close to their home colleges. One option would be through online learning or some other kind of distance education. In this model, the student would complete their service work and then also participate in online classes that build on what they are learning during the day and are tied to their academic program. Alternatively, a consortium of colleges could form a written arrangement whereby they would each agree to accept service-learning credits from each other.<sup>45</sup> Such agreements would allow students to take courses at institutions close to their service site with the knowledge that those credits would be accepted toward their degree when they returned to their home campus. These types of arrangements are similar to how colleges handle the transfer of credit for students studying abroad.

Finally, a college could construct a model where a student's semester is comprised of 10 weeks to 12 weeks of service followed by three intensive academic weeks where they have in-person time with an instructor back on their home campus in order to supplement the learning that occurred while in service. The result would still be an average of roughly 12 hours a week of classroom time but compressed into the end of the semester.

# Ways to fund increased national service

Designing and implementing a successful service-learning program could require some upfront costs in terms of both dollars and staff time for participating schools. However, given the benefits of service to students, schools, and communities, the federal government should play a role in paving the way for institutions to develop and launch service-learning programs. There are several ways the federal government could financially support more national service models such as the ones described in this report. This involves finding ways to assist colleges in establishing new embedded national service programs, as well as directing more resources to students so that they can take advantage of these opportunities. Each type of funding is described in greater detail below.

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## Institutional support

While the cost of operating an ongoing embedded national service program may not be particularly expensive, colleges are likely to face implementation expenses. This includes direct financial costs, such as building online-learning opportunities, which would allow students who are not doing their service work locally to still take courses. But there are also expenses associated with freeing up faculty and administration staff to tweak or create programs of study that include national service; establish partnerships with service providers; and make sure the details align with accreditors and the Department of Education in order to ensure financial aid eligibility for participating students.

To assist in the speedy creation of these credit-bearing service programs, Congress should establish a new fund specifically designed for this purpose. This program could provide one-time grant funding to colleges on the order of \$100,000 to \$250,000 to cover curricular design, partnership building, and other related costs that must be addressed to get service opportunities created. These dollars would be separate from student support funds. One positive aspect of such a support model is that it easily scales up. The more Congress spends, the more programs it can help establish—but even smaller annual investments could still support dozens of colleges.

The structure of this new national service capacity-building program could take several forms. At its most basic, the program could award dollars based solely on the quality of applications, much in the same way as many other competitive programs. A more interesting model would be to effectively provide a startup loan to a college hoping to construct a service program. However, instead of repaying the loan with dollars, the college's obligation could be slowly decreased for each student that it successfully places in a credit-bearing service opportunity. This would encourage colleges to grow programs quickly and reward those that are able to do so on a large scale.

Congress could also support the creation of the programs described in this report by reviving support for the Learn and Serve America Program. Housed within the Corporation for National and Community Service, or CNCS, this program provided direct funding to higher education institutions, states, school districts, and nonprofits in order to engage in service-learning activities.<sup>46</sup> That program used to receive approximately \$80 million a year but has not been funded since 2011.<sup>47</sup>

There may also be existing options within the Department of Education's budget to help support similar activities. One option would be to use existing institutional support resources. For example, the department receives \$80 million each year for the Strengthening Institutions Program, which supports the "development and improvement of academic programs," among other purposes.<sup>48</sup> Since funds in these programs are competitively awarded, the secretary of education could give applicants seeking funds from this program additional points—and a greater chance of winning—if they promise to use the dollars they receive for national service programs. This would provide a way to fund at least \$10 million to \$20 million for national service.<sup>49</sup>

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## Student support

The structure of existing federal education benefits means that it should not be difficult to support students who participate in these embedded service programs. (See section on service and federal student aid for more detail) If institutions properly construct service experiences so that they award college credit, then it should also be possible to count these credits for the purpose of federal student aid eligibility. This would mean that a student who is participating in a service-learning opportunity and taking college courses could still receive the federal Pell Grants and student loans they are entitled to by law. In that regard, ensuring there is a credit-bearing element to these service programs is the most important part for addressing student affordability.

But in some cases, federal financial aid funding may be insufficient to fully support students. To further close the cost gap, Congress should create new special service grants. These funds would be paid out to students as they progress through their service opportunities, similar to how employees receive regular paychecks. Instituting a matching requirement for either schools or service providers could also help increase the number of students served by federal dollars. In addition to new service grants, the federal work-study program could also be better directed toward embedded national service programs. The work-study program disburses funds on a formula basis to colleges, which can then award them to students in the form of wages for either an on- or off-campus job.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the major federal grant and loan programs, work-study funding is not guaranteed for any eligible student—colleges choose which students can earn work-study wages, and no one is guaranteed to receive support. The work-study program is also quite small—the federal government spends only \$990 million on the program each year compared to more than \$32 billion it spends annually on Pell Grants.<sup>51</sup>

While increasing funding for the work-study program could help it reach more students interested in national service, other changes that do not require additional spending could also help accomplish this goal. First, Congress could change the required percentage of work-study dollars that each college must contribute to community service. Colleges currently must spend at least 7 percent of their work-study dollars on students performing community service.<sup>52</sup> In practice, about 17 percent of federal work-study dollars—and the same share of recipients—end up being community service related.<sup>53</sup> Raising the required percentage of work-study dollars targeted toward community service to 20 percent would result in an additional investment of nearly \$30 million in these types of positions.

Second, Congress could alter the federal work-study formula to better reward colleges committed to national service. The current federal work-study allocation formula inequitably distributes dollars toward expensive colleges.<sup>54</sup> That is because the formula includes what is known as a “base guarantee,” a promise that colleges will not lose dollars compared to what they received in the past. The problem is that these guarantees are tied to how the formula allocated dollars as far back as the 1970s, meaning they have not been updated to reflect subsequent increases in higher education enrollment in the nation’s West and Southwest regions, as well as away from the Northeast.<sup>55</sup> A change to the formula that modernizes its distribution could also include a component that rewards colleges for using more of their federal dollars for national service positions.

AmeriCorps awards are the other logical source of student support outside of federal student aid programs. Individuals participating in AmeriCorps awards are eligible to

receive Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards. These awards are equal to the maximum Pell Grant award and are prorated based upon the number of hours worked in a year.<sup>56</sup> A student who works at least 1,700 hours in a year can receive the full award of \$5,730 as of the 2014-15 academic year, with the smallest award being just more than \$1,212 for 300 hours of service in the summer.<sup>57</sup> Students who receive an education award can use it to cover future education costs or repay loans.

Making the embedded national service programs described in this paper eligible for AmeriCorps education awards should be done as part of a broader national push to increase the number of available AmeriCorps spots from 75,000 to 250,000. This is a goal that was signed into law in the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act and would more than triple the number of available awards each year by 2017.<sup>58</sup> Being able to offer AmeriCorps education awards for the credit-bearing service programs described in this report would provide several benefits. For students, it would mean several thousand additional dollars in support, which could also reduce financial aid spending for colleges. Additionally, it has benefits from an accountability perspective since AmeriCorps would approve the programs. The one downside worth noting is that AmeriCorps education awards can only be spent on future tuition costs or past loan dollars borrowed. As a result, students would not be able to use their awards to cover expenses immediately.

## Other ways to earn credit for service

For students already serving in AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA, or National Civilian Community Corps, or NCCC, there may be ways for them to receive college credit for their training. During the past several years, the Corporation for National and Community Service, or CNCS, has worked with the American Council on Education, or ACE, to have training courses recommended for college credit. This effort is being advanced through ACE's College Credit Recommendation Service, or CREDIT, in which faculty with expertise in the relevant field review the content, scope, rigor, and assessments of training opportunities that do not occur in a formal higher education environment. If the faculty determine that the training represents college-level work, they issue a recommendation for how many credits the training should be worth at a given college; whether it should be upper- or lower-division credits; and what majors it should count toward. Such a recommendation makes it easier for a college

to award credits for CNCS training without having to verify each and every piece of the course. At the same time, colleges preserve the flexibility to award more or fewer credits as they see fit.<sup>59</sup>

ACE currently recommends seven different courses offered by CNCS for credit.<sup>60</sup> These include "Introduction to Service Learning," which is recommended for three lower-division credits in human relations, interpersonal communication, or service learning, as well as "Resource Development and Grant Writing," which is recommended for three upper-division credits in communications, marketing, or fundraising and grant writing.<sup>61</sup> Students wishing to receive credit for these courses may purchase a transcript through ACE to send to their college. ACE will check with CNCS to verify that the student completed the work they are seeking credit for and then send the transcript. To date, 429 students at 334 colleges have requested credit for the CNCS courses.<sup>62</sup>

# Conclusion

Increasing service-learning opportunities at American colleges and universities presents many mutually beneficial opportunities. Communities would benefit from the good work of college students participating in service, and tapping youth as a source of human capital can be a potent strategy for positive social change.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, research shows that students who participate in service also benefit in the form of higher academic achievement, greater career readiness, and enhanced leadership skills and self-confidence.<sup>64</sup> By giving students access to real-world experiences, national service may also help graduates build up the types of workforce-relevant skills that are so necessary to finding, securing, and thriving in jobs and careers after college.

Establishing the types of programs that successfully blend service learning with rigorous academic experiences and college credit will take work. The federal government can and should do more to facilitate the creation of these types of programs. But the institutional examples noted in this report demonstrate that the implementation challenges are manageable and can be overcome with strong commitments to service. The experiences of these colleges should serve as a road-map for other institutions to follow.

Likewise, the student stories in this paper strongly suggest that there is significant demand for more service opportunities. For every A'licia Williams or Phillip Ellison, there are countless other students who would benefit from playing a greater role in their community while simultaneously furthering their studies. It is time to make sure they get full credit for doing so.



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## About the authors

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