

REVITALIZING CITIZENSHIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The Commission Finds:

- ▶ America's current loss of faith in shared truth underlies a crisis of citizenship.²⁵⁵

- ▶ In a pluralist democracy, civic identity plays a crucial unifying role.

- ▶ Americans must work together to establish shared civic narratives that support a sense of citizenship.

- ▶ A shared identity that transcends politics could revive American citizenship.

- ▶ Many Americans lack the necessary civic and new-media literacies to participate effectively in the democratic processes of the 21st century.

- ▶ American citizens must exercise their right to participate in, and acknowledge their responsibility to maintain, their democracy.

- ▶ Civic engagement and discourse will allow citizens to take pride in their democracy and identify the shared values that build a common understanding of citizenship.

- ▶ This crisis of citizenship has created a moment comparable to when the Soviet Union launched its first Sputnik satellite in 1957, one that requires significant "moonshot" responses in attaining citizen literacy and engagement.



The Commission Recommends:

Recommendation 8 **LITERACY**

- ▶ Revitalize education in civics and 21st century literacies for all citizens in order to better align the democratic process with America's modern, highly connected culture.
 - A. Revitalize civic education through rigorous civic literacy standards and a sustainable funding model for new educational initiatives.
 - B. Provide 21st century literacies for all Americans.
 - C. Develop sustainable funding models for civic and other new literacies.

Recommendation 9 **ENGAGEMENT**

- ▶ Create local spaces for constructive civic dialogue bridging various communities, and encourage broader civic engagement.
 - A. Create inclusive civic spaces for dialogue at local and online levels.
 - B. Develop a campaign to rebuild support for civic institutions.

Recommendation 10 **COMMITMENT**

- ▶ Encourage widespread commitment to a year of voluntary national service.

A

merica does not simply face a deficit of trust in technology or the media or politics. Underlying the current loss of faith in shared truth and democratic processes is a crisis of citizenship.

“Citizenship,” said businessman and former Ambassador Walter Annenberg, “is every person’s highest calling.”²⁵⁶ It entails the freedom, right, ability and obligation to actively maintain one’s government. It is engagement with democratic governance and the many ways it interacts with the broader society. Citizenship is strengthened by civic knowledge, civic participation, the ability to access and use critical information resources, and ultimately by the unifying role that civic identity plays.

In the United States, civic participation has declined for nearly a half-century. Low levels of voting participation coincide with a larger civic disengagement. Normally only 50 to 60 percent of the eligible population votes for the U.S. presidency, and far fewer vote in off-year elections. Even the significant surge in voting in the 2018 midterm elections, while encouraging, still did not amount to half of eligible voters.²⁵⁷

Low voter turnout is not the sole indicator of disengagement. Other factors, such as declining knowledge of civic matters and familiarity with American history and institutions, suggest that the problem could be structural as well as individual.

Basic civic knowledge in this country is dismal. A 2017 survey²⁵⁸ by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that:

- More than a third of those surveyed (37 percent) could not name any of the rights guaranteed under the First Amendment.²⁵⁹
- Only a quarter of Americans (26 percent) could name all three branches of government, while a third of the country could not name even one branch.²⁶⁰

More ominous, American politics has become increasingly polarized and tribal. People lack the shared civic identity necessary to undergird the country’s sense of citizenship. And Americans are less willing to engage in productive dialogue with individuals who hold different points of view.²⁶¹

In the American system, citizens elect representatives at every level of government and rely on them to represent their interests. Yet attitudes toward the “other” in politics, including statements by elected officials themselves, have become so hostile that the public doubts its leaders’ abilities to lead.

This demonization has had the effect of over-politicizing solutions and increasing polarization, adding to the broader distrust of the democracy.

Instead of a broadly shared understanding of American citizens’ rights and responsibilities, there are now two competing conceptions of citizenship. Some understand citizenship in largely individualist, rights-based terms, though they disagree with one another about which rights to emphasize. Others understand citizenship in terms of virtue and obligation to others, even while disagreeing about what “virtue” entails and to whom obligations are owed.

Furthermore, what constitutes acts of citizenship—beyond traditional behaviors, such as voting or understanding how the government operates—is a question whose answer continues to evolve. The internet and social media platforms present opportunities for digital participation and activism through direct messaging, community engagement and coalition-building. Citizenship in the 21st century thus encompasses a wider array of skill sets, knowledge and experience that aligns with both our democratic process and our highly connected culture. Indeed, the Commission believes that being literate in civics, news, media and digital technologies is a responsibility of the modern citizen.²⁶²

To address these conflicting understandings of the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the Commission calls for a commitment to revitalize American citizenship through education, through constructive dialogue across political divides, and through a year of national service. By adopting the measures proposed below, Americans can begin to reconstruct a shared identity that transcends current political divisions.

CITIZENSHIP IS STRENGTHENED BY CIVIC KNOWLEDGE, CIVIC PARTICIPATION, THE ABILITY TO ACCESS AND USE CRITICAL INFORMATION RESOURCES, AND ULTIMATELY BY THE UNIFYING ROLE THAT CIVIC IDENTITY PLAYS.

Recommendation 8

LITERACY

Revitalize education in civics and 21st century literacies for all citizens in order to better align the democratic process with America's modern, highly connected culture.

The crisis of citizenship in America coincides with a crisis of civic education. Many Americans, especially young people, lack basic civic knowledge critical for democratic processes. The 2014 Nation's Report Card revealed that fewer than a quarter of eighth-grade students were proficient in civics.²⁶³ And a 2018 report on the state of civics education found that:

- Nationwide, students score very low on the AP U.S. government exam.
- Only nine states and the District of Columbia require one year of U.S. government or civics.
- State civics curricula are heavy on knowledge but light on building skills and agency for civic engagement.
- While almost half of states allow credit for community service, almost none require it.²⁶⁴
- States with the highest rates of youth civic engagement tend to prioritize civics courses and AP U.S. government in their curricula.²⁶⁵

A. Revitalize civic education by setting rigorous literacy standards.

The Commission recommends a revitalization of civic education in America based on more rigorous expectations for civic literacy.

Educators throughout the country need to establish viable frameworks for revitalizing civic literacy with an emphasis on teaching history and government (knowledge), civic behavior (values), the rights and responsibilities of citizens (impact) and digital literacy (engagement).

These frameworks will set local expectations and establish standards for civic literacy rather than mandating a specific curriculum. Our aim is to create a culture in all communities that values civic engagement and collaboration through an understanding of the history and application of American democracy.

Expand experiential learning. Civic education requires more than just knowledge of history and facts. It must also equip students with the skills to apply their knowledge through participation in democratic processes, an important component that is often overlooked.

The whole purpose of civic literacy is to enable and encourage participation in democratic institutions and processes. Thus, communities must foster a culture of engagement. This requires community leaders, including local business executives, to acknowledge and promote the importance of continually participating in an active democracy.

Though many schools offer debate, school journalism and participation in democratic simulations, it appears that none of the 50 states requires “experiential or local problem-solving components” as part of their civic education programs.

Despite the value of community service as a means of encouraging longer-term civic engagement, only the District of Columbia and Maryland maintain a community service requirement to graduate from high school.²⁶⁶

The Commission, then, encourages experiential learning as part of the civic education process. Such a framework will require collaboration across private and public entities to develop a sustainable funding model.

**UNDERLYING THE CURRENT LOSS OF FAITH
IN SHARED TRUTH AND DEMOCRATIC
PROCESSES IS A CRISIS OF CITIZENSHIP.**

COLLABORATIONS TO INCREASE CIVICS EDUCATION

Several promising programs are working to increase civic literacy and citizen engagement through schools and community partnerships. Some examples:

The Center for Civic Education is a nonprofit organization that partners with public institutions and private industry to implement civic education programs in every congressional district in the United States.²⁶⁷

CivXNow is a collaborative effort calling for a national commitment to produce prepared and engaged citizens. Among the partners is CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, which has prepared a white paper on the civic mission of schools.²⁶⁸

iCivics, founded by former United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, provides free online civic learning tools, such as lesson plans for instructors and interactive video games.²⁶⁹ It is a leader in the CivXNow campaign.

The Democratic Knowledge Project, part of Harvard University's Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, will bring eight years of development into a partnership with two states, initially, to build new resources in support of civic education organized around a set of five "pillars": agency, responsibility and trustworthiness, bridging skills, political institutions and history and theory of democracy, and U.S. history and history of American political thought in a global context.²⁷⁰

CivicAmerica, still in formation, is a multiyear campaign to make access to high-quality civics education a national priority. The campaign will establish goals for measuring and scaling successful initiatives, and for building a diverse network of partners to support the development of civic literacy skills. These partners should include, among others, media, philanthropy and business.



Setting standards and expectations. Drawing from past educational experiences and promising new initiatives, the Commission recommends the following strategies for civic education:

State and local lead. In the same way that STEM education has been a national priority in recent years, civic literacy should become a shared national priority. The push to improve civic education, however, should be led by state and local policymakers, educators and nonprofits. The first step is to expand access to innovative civic education models within schools and communities.

A recent example of state action comes from Massachusetts. In 2018, the state enacted legislation that requires American history, social science and civics to be taught in all public schools. Notably, the requirements include “the development of skills to access, analyze, and evaluate written and digital media as it relates to history and civics.” It also calls for schools to establish “non-partisan voter challenge programs” that will help students register or pre-register to vote. Notably, this legislation was originally advocated by a group of high school students in the state.²⁷¹

Setting goals. Civic literacy efforts should create a set of robust K–12 civic education standards:

Prior to participating in social media, every child should have a basic understanding of digital media and how to use it safely. Under the federal COPPA law, the minimum age for establishing an individual account online is 13, but in reality, use often begins at a younger age. Schools should therefore start these efforts early.

Prior to reaching the legal voting age of 18, individuals should be digitally-literate as well as civically-literate citizens (i.e., they are able to find and use the information necessary to be knowledgeable voters).

Students should have the knowledge to pass the U.S. citizenship exam or a civic knowledge test prior to high school graduation.²⁷²

Higher education. While the focus of civic education should be on K–12, which is virtually universal among American children, higher education also has a role to play in fostering civic understanding. Indeed, preparing students for the duties of citizenship has long been one of the key goals of a liberal education. Institutions of higher education should ensure that their students graduate with an essential understanding of America’s civic institutions and processes. Therefore, these institutions should incorporate civics education in their curricula, encourage community service and civic engagement, promote experiential learning in civics, and, as many already do, host civics-centered events on their campuses.²⁷³

Metrics. Civic literacy experts should establish concrete metrics to measure effective citizen education efforts. The Commission supports efforts such as those of CivicAmerica, currently in development.²⁷⁴

Restraint. Finally, while the Commission strongly supports these efforts, it understands the possibility that some may devolve into exercises in propaganda rather than the educational efforts contemplated. We need to encourage civic pride and understanding, but not at the cost of overzealousness. As in all that the Commission is advocating, common sense and restraint are paramount.

B. Provide 21st century literacies for all Americans.

America is arguably the global leader in the creation and use of digital technologies. It is, after all, the place where the internet was invented and the home of many of the world's most dominant digital platforms.

The United States, however, is not the leader in ensuring that all its citizens have the skills to use digital media well.²⁷⁵ In fact, this country is in the midst of an undeclared and underappreciated crisis in the new literacies. Alarming research has documented the widespread inability of Americans, even presumably well-educated college students, to distinguish between news and opinion, news and advertising, real news and disinformation.²⁷⁶

And yet, citizens today cannot carry out their civic responsibilities without understanding how to use and consume digital media. Accordingly, the United States needs a multigenerational plan to provide its citizens with the skills needed to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act on digital information.

New literacies. The fundamental literacies of the 21st century (also described here and in the 2009 Knight Commission report as the “new literacies”) include information, digital, news, media literacies as well as civic literacy.²⁷⁷ And of course, they all begin with basic literacy skills in reading and writing.

The media literacy movement emanated in the last quarter of the 20th century from concerns that television was overly affecting children of vulnerable ages. It asserts that one must have the ability to “access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication.”²⁷⁸ The new literacies essentially extend that approach to newer forms of media. And “news literacy” specifically targets these skills for a better understanding of the news, obviously a more complex challenge in the world of mis- and disinformation.

Individuals who lack these literacies are less able to assess the reliability of information sources in order to tell fact from fiction, and are thus less likely to trust institutions based on facts. They are easier to harass, mislead or defraud online. They can find it harder to gain knowledge, pursue education or careers, stay healthy, protect their rights and help their communities improve.²⁷⁹

A plan for America to become the world's most digitally literate nation would aim to attain several ambitious goals set forth below. Key to the success of this recommendation is the need to develop a consensus among educators on the fundamental elements of the “new literacies” and strong tools for measuring these capabilities.

The Commission also underscores that intertwined with the goal of a digitally literate constituency are underlying issues of accessibility and income inequality. In order for people to acquire these new literacies, access to connectivity (either via broadband or mobile) and content (information accessible without a subscription) are imperative for success.

Moonshot goals. As we believe this is a crisis moment, the Commission proposes the following moonshot goals for media and digital literacies:

1. **All young people, even before the legal age of 13 for participating in social media, should know enough about digital literacy to conduct themselves safely on social media platforms. Specifically, young users need to know the fundamentals of cyber safety, spam and hoaxes; understand the difference between news and advertisements, and news and opinions; and be able to question the accuracy of news and information they find online—and offline. All individuals should be “digitally literate citizens” by the time they reach voting age. Accordingly, by the age of 18, individuals should be able to find and make use of the information necessary to be knowledgeable voters.**
2. **All citizens should have access to the resources needed to become self-learners. Civic institutions such as public libraries, which already provide broadband connectivity and quality content, should play a vital role in achieving this goal.**

Twenty percent of adults already express interest in improving the literacy skills required in the 21st century.²⁸⁰ While progress in teaching new literacies has occurred, various literacy skills are often taught independent of one another. The Commission believes that progress could accelerate substantially if literacy programs are integrated in a comprehensive manner. Each type of literacy is valuable independently, but combining them can have much greater impact.

Digital literacy and government. New literacies are important not only for exercising acts of citizenship but also for governance. In an era driven by data, technological literacy for policymakers and policy literacy for technologists is critical.²⁸¹

The Commission applauds efforts such as Code for America at the local level²⁸² and the United States Digital Service in the federal government,²⁸³ which bring coders and other technology-savvy individuals into government positions. We are aware, as well, of efforts by foundations to bring technical capacity to nonprofit organizations.

Congress has several bipartisan caucuses that focus on new technologies. But we would urge Congress to revive its Office of Technology Assessment or a modern equivalent to advise members on important questions raised by the ever-advancing technologies. The new literacies are important at every level.

C. Develop sustainable funding models for civic and other new literacies.

Civic literacy. The current civic literacy and engagement efforts across the country are laudable. But the lack of a bold funding model to sustain them is a major barrier to bringing them to scale. The success of this recommendation will require collaboration among government at all levels, educators, corporations and the broader public to identify and develop ways to support a national program on civic literacy—funding that is commensurate with the scale and seriousness of the crisis of citizenship. We envision that private foundations would provide significant seed money, with the aim of securing state and federal government financing as a longer-term financial base.

The Commission also proposes the creation of a corporate giving campaign to fund civic education initiatives. Given the growing distrust of big business among consumers,²⁸⁴ the campaign could serve as an investment opportunity for corporate America. A trusted nonprofit should administer the funds.

Wide engagement with businesses, especially in the technology industries, can also build literacies and competencies through hands-on learning. Technology companies could offer apprenticeships and cultivate skills and literacy in an applied way. For instance, while creating civic opportunities for employees, firms could create and support a tool that allows students to participate in open-source fact-checking.

Finally, the Commission stresses the importance of structuring civic literacy efforts in a way that will improve, rather than aggravate, existing disparities in access to civic literacy among low-income and other disadvantaged citizens.

New literacies. The Commission acknowledges that education reform in the United States is not a simple task. To date, only a handful of states have approved standards for digital media literacy.²⁸⁵ Meeting the Commission's moonshot goals would require a substantial expansion of existing programs, with attendant expenditures that many schools simply do not have.

Furthermore, the proposed reforms would not be a one-time fix. To mitigate the risks of declining digital literacy as new technological innovations arise, education standards will need to evolve with technologies. For example, the use of digital media as an educational tool has led to an explosion of in school and extracurricular learning, from self-directive, adaptive courses to video games.²⁸⁶ Emerging technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality are likely to offer new learning tools.

To achieve these goals, educators and experts in the field must lead. Although educators are already undertaking some of these actions, each community needs a comprehensive approach. Accordingly, the Commission proposes the following actions:

- **Create learning modules on key new-literacy topics that can be incorporated in different curricula.**
- **Develop tools and clear metrics to measure the effectiveness of new-literacy education efforts.**
- **Develop new opportunities and increase awareness of current opportunities for adult education in libraries.**

Some nonprofits and educators have modules or other materials that can be a first step.²⁸⁷ Ultimately, however, local leaders must take the initiative to move this forward with action in their communities.

Recommendation 9

ENGAGEMENT**Create local spaces for constructive civic dialogue bridging various communities, and encourage broader civic engagement.****A. Create inclusive civic spaces for local dialogue.**

The political divide in this country is particularly acute at the national political level, and somewhat at the state level. Locally it is less pervasive,²⁸⁸ though polarization is stronger in some communities than in others.²⁸⁹

Current forums for problem-solving at the local level—e.g., city councils, citizen advisory committees—do not necessarily provide ideal structures for addressing complex issues that need sustained dialogue. Nor are they necessarily the best venues for building the social capital (especially “bridging” capital that strengthens ties across disparate groups) that is critical to restoring healthy civil discourse and democratic processes.

There is a need for inclusive spaces where American citizens can meet and discuss issues. Through skillfully moderated face-to-face discussions with the “other,” individuals should better understand and empathize with those who hold different perspectives.

Accordingly, the Commission recommends that communities develop programs within trusted institutions to convene local dialogue among citizens. These discussions should address questions of importance to the community, ranging from local issues and initiatives to larger constitutional issues. One obvious location present in almost every community is the public library, which typically ranks as among the most used and most trusted local institutions.²⁹⁰

Because of the pervasive geographic segregation of Americans along racial, socioeconomic and even political lines, these exchanges should be designed to bring people together across such boundaries. For example, urban libraries in a metropolitan area should collaborate to create dialogue among residents of different neighborhoods. Or they might collaborate with a library from neighboring rural communities. Such programs have the potential to gain national momentum and develop larger campaigns.

There is reason to believe that in these times, bringing together conflicting “tribes” may actually increase hostility.²⁹¹ But the Commission believes that with proper framing and moderation, seeing and listening to the other will breed understanding and greater consideration of their views. To ensure that civic dialogue on contentious issues does not devolve into acrimony and prove counterproductive, the Commission suggests that the conveners of these dialogues utilize well-trained facilitators to frame the issues and moderate the dialogue.

EXAMPLES OF LOCAL CIVIC DIALOGUES

There are currently several models in development that could serve as examples of civic dialogues intended to rebuild trust and bridge divisions, including the following:

Local Voices Network. A big story in recent years has been the movement of civic conversations online, sometimes at the expense of face-to-face dialogue, especially among groups with different political perspectives. Cortico, a nonprofit 501(c)(3), in cooperation with MIT’s Laboratory for Social Machines,²⁹² is developing methods for combining these two modalities to encourage local public conversations across tribal boundaries that are deeper, more civil and more constructive. Slated for testing in Wisconsin and Alabama in 2019, Cortico’s Local Voices Network (LVN) is designed around three core efforts:

- Facilitating in-person conversations at scale
- Connecting facilitators and conversations digitally to enrich local dialogues
- Opening a new channel for journalists, leaders and the community at large to understand residents’ concerns

Deliberation Day, proposed by political scientists Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, suggests a framework in which small groups from specific communities jointly view political debates and then engage with experts and policymakers.²⁹³ The Commission supports a similar framework, with participants from each community representing diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Another organization developing programs for civic discussion is the nonprofit **Citizen University**, which leads initiatives ranging from weekly civic education seminars and local civic-themed festivals to local and national roundtable discussions.²⁹⁴

The Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries, in collaboration with major urban libraries, is proposing the creation of **America’s Civic Square** to develop a network of libraries committed to hosting community dialogue.

B. Develop a campaign to rejuvenate civic institutions.

Communities with strong social capital are more likely to collaborate and find common solutions. Conversely, declines in civic engagement increase the likelihood of negative outcomes in “education, urban poverty, unemployment, crime and drug abuse, and even health” as well as “job placement and many other economic outcomes.”²⁹⁵

Civic engagement is critical to the health of local communities. To address this issue, the Commission recommends that communities and organizations partner to produce public service campaigns that will educate American citizens on relevant civic matters and encourage healthy civic interaction. The goal is to drive engagement in local trusted institutions, such as libraries, parks and civic organizations. Engagement can also come through participation in civic-minded institutions such as Rotary or the Girl Scouts.

Such a campaign could take the form of a national awareness day, a holiday, or as we suggest here, a large-scale integrated media campaign. The efficacy of such campaigns to alter behavior is well documented in efforts such as antismoking, reduce-reuse-recycle and no-drinking-and-driving campaigns.²⁹⁶ The Foundation for a Better Life’s “Pass It On” campaign aims to promote basic American values through various media.²⁹⁷ The Commission endorses a new Ad Council initiative that would seek to combat the spread of mis- and disinformation.

Ultimately, this recommendation addresses American polarization and political bias by using public service campaigns to reinforce positive cultural norms and to encourage political discourse among citizens.

With respect to funding, these recommendations represent an opportunity for private businesses, both large and small, to prioritize civic needs and produce positive change in communities across the nation. The Commission urges a strong commitment from corporations, foundations and local governments toward the creation and implementation of local civic dialogues and campaigns.

Recommendation 10

COMMITMENT**Encourage widespread commitment to a year of voluntary national service.**

As American politics has become increasingly tribalized, citizens have lost a shared narrative and a sense of citizenship. To address this loss, the time has come to revitalize efforts to encourage a year of voluntary national service.

General Stanley McChrystal has articulated the case for national service:

Democracy grants rights and requires responsibilities. This reciprocal notion of citizenship is as old as the concept of self-government.

Civic participation grants a sense of ownership to citizens....

Active citizenship, when tied to a common endeavor, instills pride in a nation—it's why we point to those who fought together in World War II as the Greatest Generation, not only for what they did from 1941 to 1945, but for how much they accomplished for the country in the following decades.

Today, the need for such a common experience of citizenship is more poignant than ever.²⁹⁸

The Commission agrees.

Private and public donors should fund national service programs that will bring people of differing views together for a shared purpose. While the primary target populations would be upper-level high schoolers and college students, national service programs could include older Americans as well. This recommendation seeks to revive the concept of giving back to the country and to foster a sense of common obligation as American citizens.

The Commission defines a “year of voluntary national service” as a full school year. As envisioned by David Walker of the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, opportunities for service should:

...involve more than serving in the government, either in a civilian or military role. It can also involve service in the not-for-profit or citizen sector and even in selected occupations in the for-profit sector that are designed to help others (e.g., teaching, nursing, elder care).²⁹⁹

The proposed year of service seeks to close the gap between *knowledge* of civic duties and *active engagement* in civic duties. It would encourage a willingness to serve the nation and empathize with others as well as to encourage a greater commitment to one’s responsibility as a citizen. In establishing an expectation of civic service, there is an opportunity to renew American cultural and civic organizations.

A current initiative to promote voluntary service is the Service Year Alliance.³⁰⁰ General McChrystal and John Bridgeland, co-founders of the Franklin Project at the Aspen Institute, in partnership with ServiceNation at Be The Change, Inc. and the Service Year Exchange at the National Conference on Citizenship, have all combined to create this alliance. It includes an online database that allows individuals to search for areas of need in their communities and find opportunities to serve.

NATIONAL SERVICE IN LITERACY AND MEDIA

The Commission identifies three specific areas where national service could help reverse the negative trends in civic engagement, enhance citizenship and renew trust among Americans: traditional and digital literacy, journalism and libraries.

Existing year-long national service initiatives related to these primary areas include:

Literacy. AmeriCorps, which provides a broad range of civic service opportunities, works with national literacy programs, such as the Literacy Lab (theliteracylab.org) and Literacy First (www.literacyfirst.org), to train teachers for work in schools and community centers throughout America. Efforts should also include digital and civic literacy projects.

Journalism. Report for America (www.reportforamerica.org) provides service opportunities by connecting talented young journalists to newsrooms across the country to report on under-covered issues in specific communities. This could expand to newer areas of public-interest information and network services as well.

Libraries. Libraries throughout the country have employed volunteer Homework Helpers (www.techsoupforlibraries.org/blog/library-homework-help-what-works-what-doesnt) to aid children in need. This could develop into a larger yearlong program for national service.



BENEFITS OF SERVICE—AMERICORPS CASE STUDY

Adapted from *The Economics: Why National Service Is Worth It* by Clive Belfield³⁰¹

Studies of AmeriCorps find a significant upgrading of participants' skills as well as gains in civic engagement and improvements in community infrastructure. For youth, there are substantial benefits such as lower delinquency, a greater sense of worth and improved health status. Studies also associate national service with lower criminal activity,³⁰² better health³⁰³ and increased lifetime incomes.³⁰⁴

Older volunteers also benefit. Those in Senior Corps or Experience Corps see improvement in health (physical and psychological), self-esteem, life satisfaction and civic commitment. There are also gains in financial security (from expanded employment opportunities after service).

Communities, meanwhile, stand to gain from improvements in local services—most notably in schools—as many seniors provide tutoring and educational assistance. Mentoring programs may motivate students to invest more in their education and communities to make greater investments in their schools. Conservation or crime-prevention projects may lead to increased property values and encourage investment in civic infrastructure. And society and taxpayers benefit from a healthier population, particularly one that is more civic minded and productive.

How do the benefits of service, expressed in monetary terms, compare with the estimated \$2 billion cost of service? The youth and senior programs listed above produced an estimated \$7.9 billion in total social benefits of national service, a net benefit of \$5.9 billion. In other words, for every dollar invested in national service programs for youth and seniors, the programs return almost \$4 to society in future benefits.



Expand incentives. The Commission recommends expanding incentives from public and private organizations to encourage involvement in a year of voluntary national service. One potential model is the GI Bill, which helped military service members and eligible veterans cover the costs associated with getting an education or training.

Similarly, the Commission urges state legislatures, institutions of higher education and community colleges to consider incentives such as tuition benefits, student loan forgiveness or admission advantages for those who participate in a year of voluntary national service.

Bridging differences. One criticism of voluntary national service is that economic disparities could dictate which populations are most likely to volunteer. The great advantage that military service offered—particularly during the draft, and thus in the World Wars, Korea and Vietnam Wars—was that it mixed young Americans of all backgrounds and classes.

As with all this Commission recommends, it is important that administrators create opportunities for people of all socioeconomic classes to participate. One of the main rationales for national service is for Americans to meet, understand and empathize with fellow Americans from all sections, sectors and classes of society. It would not serve that purpose if disadvantaged people did not have equal opportunities to engage and if the more advantaged did not have meaningful incentives to participate.

For those who go on to college, the Commission has several suggestions to expand a shared narrative and sense of citizenship. Colleges and universities need to find more effective ways of diversifying their students' experiences, creating more inclusive encounters across socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, religious and geographic lines. These might include outreach programs to recruit students in underserved communities. They might also engage students in service learning programs that integrate volunteer participation with academic study of these experiences, or in curricular and co-curricular programs that bring students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives together. Creating student and professor exchanges with colleges that have a distinctively different student body is an additional tactic. We suggest that admission offices consider national service as a plus in the application process, as many colleges and universities already do.

The time for national service has come. The Commission hopes that highlighting current initiatives will catalyze a new movement in that direction.