The Corporation for National and Community Service

Stategic Evidence Plan

The Corporation for National and Community Service's Strategic Evidence Plan

Importance

Communities grappling with challenging economic and social issues want solutions that will effectively address them. As such, it is the responsibility of public-serving institutions like the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to provide citizens access to resources that can help drive the positive changes they seek. Building evidence for what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, is a central part of ensuring the public's access to effective solutions.

Purpose

The agency's strategic evidence plan provides a roadmap for generating credible, relevant, and actionable information about its organizational effectiveness, the outcomes of its national service programs[1], and ultimately, the extent to which it is achieving its mission. This plan is designed to provide the executive leadership, the management team, and the staff with the information needed for strategic learning and decision making to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the agency and its programs.

Principles

The agency's emphasis on evidence is meant to support, not inhibit, innovation, improvement, and learning. The intent is to integrate the use of evidence and opportunities for further learning into all activities. Where an evidence base is lacking, evidence will be developed through systematic analysis. Where evidence exists, it will be used to encourage replication and expansion of effective solutions. As a learning organization, CNCS uses many types of evidence[2] and understands that a culture of continual improvement relies on multiple sources of information. CNCS uses the following principles to guide its evidence-building activities[3]:

- *CNCS adheres to rigorous scientific and data standards.*
- *CNCS prioritizes relevant evidence.*
- *CNCS makes findings from its evidence-building activities broadly available and accessible.*
- *CNCS protects the independence and objectivity of its evidence.*

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[1] The CNCS national service programs included in this strategic plan include AmeriCorps State & National, AmeriCorps VISTA, AmeriCorps NCCC, Senior Corps Foster Grandparents Program, Senior Corps Senior Companion Program, and Senior Corps Retired and Senior Volunteer Program.

[2] Evidence can be defined as the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid as defined in the OMB Circular No. A-11 Section 200 page 13. Recent budget guidance (See OMB *Analytical Perspectives, Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2020,* page 59) further states "*A portfolio (of evidence) can and should include many different types of evidence, including results from program evaluations, policy analyses, performance measurements, and statistical analyses.*"

[3] Please refer to the agency's Evaluation Policy for a more detailed description of these principles, available at https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/CNCSEvaluationPolicy.pdf.

- *CNCS conducts its evidence-building activities in an ethical manner and safeguards the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants in these activities.*

Organizational Capacities

CNCS's organizational capacity to develop and implement a strategic evidence plan depends upon agency-wide competencies. Specifically:

- The **CNCS Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE)** workforce has the necessary expertise and specialized experience for providing leadership on complex social science, program evaluation, and methodological issues consistent with professional standards. ORE relies on scholarship in relevant fields of academic study (e.g., systematic reviews of the research, sponsoring studies conducted by academic experts), a variety of research and program evaluation designs (e.g., exploratory, experimental, non-experimental) and methods (e.g., participatory field research, survey research, case studies), administrative data, and different statistical analyses to build the agency's body of evidence. ORE also plays a leadership role in the agency's knowledge management efforts to ensure that the agency's evidence is continuously reviewed, summarized, and disseminated in ways that a variety of audiences can access easily and use for decision-making.

- **The CNCS Office of Information Technology (OIT)** workforce has the professional credentials and specialized experience appropriate for providing the agency with robust business intelligence capabilities (including appointing a Chief Data Officer and the future hire of a team of data and analyst officers). The OIT is responsible for the agency's formal data governance functions, including the business processes and structures needed for managing its data assets. This essential business function ensures that high-quality data is available to managers and staff for robust analysis that can be used for evidence-informed decision-making and management as well as more cost-effective research and evaluation projects.

- **CNCS Program (Headquarters) and Regional Offices** have impact staff with the professional competencies and specialized experience needed for establishing strategic goals and performance targets and for using management reports needed to effectively inform program innovation, improvement and impact.

Strategic Collaboration

CNCS's ability to use evidence to drive business decisions, allocate resources strategically, and grow effective national service programs depends upon agency-wide business processes that support strategic collaboration. Specifically:

- **CNCS integrates evidence planning into its annual budget formulation process**. The agency's evidence plan is updated each year so that spend and acquisition planning is informed by what was learned in the previous fiscal year. Each office will include in their budget justification to

the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) money allocated for evidence-building, the evidence to support their planned investments in participants, partnerships and projects, and evidence that needs to be further developed in the coming fiscal year.

- **CNCS convenes quarterly meetings that cascade from the annual budget formulation meetings conducted at the beginning of each fiscal year.** The quarterly meetings are used to assess progress against the agency's evidence, spend and acquisition plans in order to manage agency resources more effectively.
- **The CNCS Impact Council facilitates cross-agency planning and coordination for evidence building activities.** The Council includes representatives from ORE, OIT, HQ Program Offices, HQ Operating Offices, and Regional Offices. Members work together to design and use specific data, research and evaluation projects (e.g., identifying priority information needs, ensuring relevance of projects, and applying findings to practice).

CNCS Learning Agenda

Organizational and programmatic effectiveness are essential if CNCS is to achieve its mission of improving lives, strengthening communities, and fostering civic engagement through service and volunteering. Given this mission, and the centrality of sound operational functioning for its successful execution, the agency's learning agenda includes the evergreen questions listed in the table, below.

CNCS LEARNING AGENDA QUESTIONS

	CORE QUESTIONS	RELATED QUESTIONS
1	How is the agency improving its organizational effectiveness?	1.1 How effective is the agency's fiscal management? 1.2 How effective is the agency's grant making? 1.3 How effective is the agency's evidence-building efforts? 1.4 How effective is the agency at recruiting, developing, and retaining qualified staff? 1.5 How effective is the agency's internal and external coordination, communication, and collaboration? 1.6 How effectively is the agency using evidence to assess its performance and progress? 1.7 How effectively is the agency using evidence to allocate its resources?
2	How do CNCS programs affect national service participants?	2.1 How do participants experience their service in national service programs?

		2.2 What, if any, economic, social, or health benefits do national service participants experience?
3	How do CNCS programs affect the communities served by national service participants?	3.1 What, if any, local issues do national service programs successfully address?
		3.2 In what ways, if any, do national service programs help local organizations better achieve their missions?
		3.3 What, if any, economic, social or health benefits do community members served by national programs experience?
		3.4 How effective are national service programs at fostering civic engagement in communities through service and volunteering?

CNCS Existing Body of Evidence

CNCS success depends on a robust pipeline of committed national service participants, a vibrant network of partnerships with community-based organizations, and projects capable of creating positive change in communities. Evidence is used to inform each component of this business model. For example, evidence about what motivates individuals to serve in CNCS programs and evidence about the positive economic, social and health benefits associated with serving can be used for outreach activities. With respect to project development, implementation, improvement, impact and return on investment – research and evaluation evidence can be used throughout the lifecycle to increase the likelihood of success.

CNCS has a robust body of evidence that can be used to empirically address its learning agenda questions. The following exemplars illustrate how the agency prioritizes evidence and what the agency has learned and knows based on the evidence to date.

Exemplar 1: CNCS invests in evidence-building and uses evidence to allocate its resources effectively. The percentage of grant dollars allocated to strong, moderate, preliminary, and no evidence categories has shifted over the last 4 fiscal years such that more FY19 AmeriCorps State and National grant dollars were awarded to applicants with strong and moderate levels of evidence (41% in FY19 v 37% in FY18 and 29% in FY17) for proposed interventions, and fewer grant dollars were awarded to applicants with little to no evidence of effectiveness.

Exemplar 2: AmeriCorps programs reduce the negative, and improve the positive, emotions of community residents as established in a ground-breaking and replicable study conducted by a nationally recognized

researcher at University of Texas. AmeriCorps programs improve early literacy, increase access to college, increase employability and improve physical and mental health outcomes. AmeriCorps Alumni are twice as likely to advance in a hiring process as non-AmeriCorps Alumni. AmeriCorps creates a strong employment pipeline for Alumni.

Exemplar 3: *Senior Corps (Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions) volunteers are healthier, less depressed, and less socially isolated than those who do not serve according to a recent longitudinal survey study. According to an exploratory study of the Senior Companions program, within one year following the start of respite support, caregivers perceived their health as having improved and a lower proportion of caregivers reported functional limitations.*

CNCS Evidence-Building Priorities

CNCS will build on its existing evidence base in FY20 by prioritizing the following projects (see table, below). The projects reflect customized evaluation strategies that are most aligned with the specific national service program to be assessed. For example, AmeriCorps NCCC is a team-based, residential national service program that deploys members to communities to conduct projects over a 10-month time period. The corresponding evaluation plan, therefore, will build evidence for the impact of NCCC on the members (leadership development) and the communities (sponsor partnerships, alignment with state priorities, project outcomes). Program improvement will be informed by the member retention study. As another example, the Senior Companion Program is designed to promote the health of older volunteer companions and independent living among older Americans. Accordingly, the corresponding evaluation plan focuses on volunteer outcomes, caregiver outcomes, and independent living outcomes. As a final example, the AmeriCorps State and National Program funds members who serve in organizations that implement a wide range of interventions to address a range of local issues. As such, the evaluation strategy is more complex and relies on intervention-specific evaluation studies that are compiled based on similar program models and target outcomes (e.g., early literacy interventions that rely on national service participants to improve literacy skills).

Because the agency has established a credible evidence base for its national service programs it is now well-positioned to assess the cost effectiveness of national service. The agency is therefore prioritizing the development and implementation of targeted return on investment studies for AmeriCorps and Senior Corps in Fiscal Year 2020. These analyses will enable the agency to compare effective service solutions to similar solutions in different sectors to assess cost efficiency at the beneficiary level[4]. If these targeted analyses identify significant cost-savings the agency will have compelling empirical data that demonstrates the value of national service relative to other potential strategies and solutions.

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[4] Note that beneficiaries in the case of national service-based solutions encompass the individual service recipients, the national service program participants, the organizations national service participants serve, and the larger community.

CNCS EVIDENCE-BUILDING PRIORITIES (FY20)

In FY19 CNCS invested close to 9 million dollars in research, evaluations, and evaluation technical assistance. The agency's FY20 priorities build on these FY19 investments and are anticipated to require similar levels of appropriated dollars to successfully execute. Some priority projects are central evidence building activities that are expected to be a priority each year. In other cases, projects will be designed, implemented, and completed within the fiscal year. Priorities will be reviewed and updated annually based on what was learned in the prior year. Specific research questions and required resources are detailed in separate, individual project work plans.

Organization & Programs	FY 20 Priority Projects
Organizational Effectiveness	➤ Conduct a workforce analysis that would inform the agency's Congressional budget requests, assess feasibility in converting payroll to the General Schedule, facilitate more strategic hiring practices, and increase the agency's ability to recruit and retain professional talent. ➤ Research systems, tools and best practices for grants management (e.g., risk assessment, monitoring, technical assistance) to strengthen the agency's oversight capacity.

All AmeriCorps Programs	➤ Annual Member Exit Survey
	    o Explore how to deepen our measurement of civility and diversity
	➤ Targeted return on investment analysis/cost effectiveness of national service education and disaster response interventions
	    o Explore how to quantify more systematically the role of national service as a life-long "volunteer accelerator"

AmeriCorps State & National	➤ Establish annual investment targets for the portfolio that increase the % of public dollars invested in evidence-based interventions each year
	    o Support grantees in deepening the evidence base of their projects and in replicating evidence-based interventions
	    o Annual evidence review and summary of grantee evaluation reports
	➤ Initiate planning for a FY21 evaluation of the organizational effectiveness of State Commissions

AmeriCorps NCCC *(3-year plan)*	➤ Service Project Database and Analysis ➤ Member Retention Study ➤ Leadership Development Longitudinal Study ➤ Community Impact Study
AmeriCorps VISTA	➤ Implementation evaluation of sponsor best practices
All Senior Corps Programs	➤ Initiate planning for future research ideas

Organization & Programs	FY 20 Priority Projects
	o Use findings from the 50-year research review completed in FY19 o Assess feasibility and utility of conducting another longitudinal study of senior volunteer outcomes, including with what frequency
Senior Corps Senior Companion Program	➢ Targeted return on investment analysis. Fund a national expansion to build on work underway in Maine and Minnesota that demonstrates Senior Corps programing saves the tax payer Medicare and Medicaid costs, Healthcare costs, etc..
Senior Corps RSVP	➢ Assessment of best volunteer management practices (of the RSVPs and their volunteer coordination roles, expanding on research funding in FY17-19)