

## AARP Experience Corps: A Case Study

By Lincoln Caplan

### *History*

In 1988, when John W. Gardner, Jr. was 75 years old,<sup>i</sup> he completed a concept paper about the idea for what he called “The Experience Corps.”<sup>ii</sup> Writing in the first-person plural, he spoke for himself and other people 65 and over who, in his words, tended to be pushed aside by “conventional views of aging.”<sup>iii</sup> They were partly at fault, he said, because “we have accepted that approach to the later years.”<sup>iv</sup>

In the previous quotation, however, the “we” reflected his sense of solidarity, not reality. In 1980, at 68, he had co-founded Independent Sector,<sup>v</sup> to speak for the interests of tax-exempt organizations. It has since become the most prominent network of leaders of civic and philanthropic organizations and a valuable resource for the social sector and the country.

In 1970, at 58, he had launched Common Cause as what he called a “citizens’ lobby,”<sup>vi</sup> a nonpartisan group to advocate for open and accountable governance and aim to help American citizens rein in excesses of government.<sup>vii</sup> It now has close to 400,000 members and offices in 36 states and Washington, D.C. It is one of the strongest voices in America today against <sup>viii</sup> the equation of money and speech in politics, and in favor of an amendment to the United States Constitution that would allow effective campaign finance restrictions.

Gardner was widely considered a singular citizen by the time he proposed Experience Corps. He had been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor,<sup>ix</sup> because of his accomplishments in supporting education when he was president of the Carnegie Corporation. He had served as a highly effective secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and, in that role, had successfully introduced Medicare. As *The New York Times* explained when he died in 2002 at 90, he was, “to many Americans, a personification of political reform and volunteerism in democratic society.”<sup>x</sup>

He was basically a motivator—in his work as a policy innovator, in his bestselling books like *Self-Renewal*, *Morale*, and *Excellence*, and in his personal mentoring, for example, of people who had been through the White House Fellowship program. That was another of his innovations, which he persuaded President Lyndon Johnson to create and which turns 50 this year. (The White House website describes it as “one of America’s most prestigious programs for leadership and public service.”<sup>xi</sup>)

Gardner held a PhD in clinical psychology. In his work, he liked most of all to focus on the promise of America and, really, of Americans. He believed that the American promise would be fulfilled only if individuals felt a responsibility and an opportunity to contribute to society. As the last of his big ideas to be realized, Experience Corps was designed to make it possible for a much larger number of older adults to do just that..<sup>xii</sup>

He wrote, “We have an active feeling of obligation to our society and our communities. We know the conventional view is that society owes its older citizens something, and we would be foolish to quarrel with that. But we owe something too, and this is in one sense our ‘operation give-back.’ It isn’t just altruism and a sense of duty, however: We believe that this will be a great adventure – good for us psychically and in every other way.”<sup>xiii</sup>

In 1995, with his guidance and in partnership with Marc Freedman of Public/Private Ventures (and soon after, Civic Ventures/Encore.org, where Gardner was a founding board member); Dr. Linda P. Fried, then of Johns Hopkins Medical School, now dean of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health; and Tom Endres, head of the Senior Corps, Experience Corps began a five-city pilot program New York, N.Y., Philadelphia, PA, Port Arthur, TX, Minneapolis, MN, and Portland, Oregon. (The program was under the joint direction of Public/Private Ventures, Johns Hopkins Medical School, and the Corporation for National Service, of which Senior Corps was a part.) Members of Experience Corps worked with students as tutors and mentors. They also developed after-school and community-service projects for students and helped engage parents in their children’s education.<sup>xiv</sup>

Gardner called Experience Corps “a flexible blend of national service and traditional volunteering,”<sup>xv</sup> which gave older Americans “the active, honored role that they deserve and the nation needs.”<sup>xvi</sup> In the concept paper, he explained: “One of the problems for those of us beyond the age of 65 is that we are apt to need a certain amount of encouragement to get into activities that we would surely enjoy once in them.” The Corps was designed to be “a program with the cachet and drawing power to pull the more hesitant of us out of our hideaways.”<sup>xvii</sup>

### *Measures of Success*

Today, in its 20<sup>th</sup> year of operation, the organization is AARP Experience Corps, as part of AARP, the non-profit organization for people 50 and over with 38 million members, which was founded in 1958 and used to be called the American Association of Retired Persons. AARP Experience Corps describes itself as a network of sites with “a common vision:” to “assure that adults 50 and older in service to children are an integral part of the education strategy across America.”<sup>xviii</sup> In 2014, the organization forecasts that its annual revenue will be \$14.3 million and its operating expenses \$11.6 million.<sup>xix</sup>

AARP Experience Corps operates in 20 cities<sup>xx</sup> in the United States—the original five plus 15 others. They include four branches, set up and run by AARP Experience Corps, and 16 affiliates, run by other non-profit organizations according to standards established in a memorandum of agreement.

For the 15 sites monitored in the year 2012-2013, the organization served 173 schools, 1,673 classrooms, and 27,112 elementary school students—5,000 more than in the previous year. The Corps consisted of 1,737 volunteers who tutored students a total of 512,990 hours—worth roughly \$11.3 million, based on Independent Sector’s valuation of a volunteer’s time at \$22 per hour.<sup>xxi</sup>

The largest program was in Baltimore, MD, serving 25 schools, 250 classrooms, and 6,876 students, with 296 members spending a total of 143,126 hours.<sup>xxii</sup> The newest program, in Chicago, IL, was also the organization's largest rollout—in 14 public schools, with more than 150 volunteers tutoring more than 1,000 students in more than 2,700 hours.<sup>xxiii</sup>

AARP Experience Corps generally refers to tutors as volunteers, whether the tutors receive a stipend for their service or not. Most volunteers receive some kind of payment—a stipend provided by AmeriCorps or a foundation or a reimbursement to cover part of out-of-pocket expenses for transportation, for example. The organization provides what John W. Gardner, Jr. envisioned, “a flexible blend of national service and traditional volunteering.”

Each volunteer receives about 25 hours of training altogether, before beginning as a tutor or a mentor and during service. Each site develops its own approach to training, but the approaches at all sites are similar. There is no distinction between the training for a tutor, who works a student on reading, or a mentor, who is more of a coach and an encourager. The main difference in those roles is the time commitment: tutors spend more time.

Often, a site will initially have more applicants than it can use before a school year. But applicants sometimes choose not to go forward because they do not want to make the time commitment or have concerns about being assigned to a “tough” school. A site's staff sometimes concludes that an applicant is not a good fit. Sites rarely have more volunteers than they need. Often, they must replace volunteers, because of illness or family obligations. This is a somewhat specialized volunteer opportunity, which calls for year-round recruitment by AARP Experience Corps.

The organization describes its current mission like this: “Experience Corps unites teachers, schools, and older adults to improve the academic and social outcomes of children. Our model therefore has three beneficiaries: children, schools, and older adults — a triple win.”

Students benefit from academic skill building and mentoring and make significant gains in reading. Schools gain valuable support for teachers and principals. Older adults who serve as tutors gain meaningful opportunities to engage in their communities and enjoy improved physical and mental health.

These benefits have been confirmed repeatedly—notably, in a randomized, controlled trial undertaken by Linda Fried and Johns Hopkins University, to determine the program's efficacy in preventing physical disability and cognitive decline among older adults, while raising child literacy. Benefits have also been confirmed by annual assessments of the organization's programs, through surveys of the views and experiences of teachers and volunteers and reviews of student data and other records collected electronically throughout the year.

In 2012-2013, according to the “Experience Corps Aggregate Evaluation Report” prepared by the American Institutes of Research, almost all of the teachers (93 percent) reported that tutors had either a moderate or strong impact on the reading of students they worked with and on the ability of students to read at grade level (92 percent).

Teachers also said that tutors contributed to improved participation or concentration (91 percent), reduction of disruptive behavior (82 percent), and

regular attendance (73 percent). Almost all tutors (98 percent) said that the work helped them stay mentally and physically active and expanded their personal learning opportunities and a high percentage (88 percent) said it expanded their social network.<sup>xxiv</sup>

AARP Experience Corps attributes its success to these factors:

- A focus on outcomes: measurable results for students, schools, and adults who are 50 and over
- High member commitment: reliable, consistent support to students
- Rigorous member training: highly qualified tutors and mentors for students, and new skills for volunteer members
- A team-based approach: a peer support network; a significant presence in schools
- Community roots: connecting schools with communities; fostering public/private partnerships

In addition, from the 2012-2013 evaluation, AARP Experience Corps learned that students who have 30 or more tutoring sessions a year are significantly more likely (53 percent versus 46 percent)<sup>xxv</sup> to have their “overall reading and literacy grade-level rating improved from the beginning to the end of the school year.” The program learned that students who meet with a tutor two or more times a week are more likely to have their rating improved (48 or 49 percent versus 44 percent).<sup>xxvi</sup>

The organization also learned about the remarkably high level of satisfaction for volunteers. In measures of satisfaction about scheduling, guidance, quality of training, and the overall program, only a small percentage (between 2 percent and 4 percent) expressed dissatisfaction and a high percentage (64 percent to 75 percent) said they were very satisfied.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Ninety-six percent of volunteers said they either were satisfied (48 percent) or very satisfied (48 percent) with the academic progress of students they worked with. An even higher share (99 percent) said they either were very satisfied with the relationship they had with students (73 percent) or satisfied (26 percent).<sup>xxviii</sup> Most volunteers (71 percent) had served in the program for at least two years. Almost all said that it increased their sense of purpose in life (97 percent) or allowed them to make a difference in their community (93 percent).<sup>xxix</sup>

The students in the programs surveyed were 54 percent male and 46 percent female. In terms of ethnicity, 61 percent were black, 22 percent were Hispanic, 8 percent were white, 3 percent were Asian, 1 percent were American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 4 percent were other. As for grade levels, 17 percent were in kindergarten, 32 percent in first grade, 28 percent in second grade, 19 percent in third grade, and 4 percent in fourth grade or higher.<sup>xxx</sup>

Eighty percent of volunteers were in their 60s and 70s (the breakdown of age was 14 percent in the 50s, 48 percent in the 60s, 32 percent in the 70s, and 5 percent in the 80s.) In terms of tenure in the program, 29 percent of volunteers were in their first year, 18 percent in their second, 17 percent in their third, 11 percent in their fourth, and 24 percent in their fifth or more—so more than half had been involved for three or more years. Volunteer ethnicity was 59 percent black, 34

percent white, 2 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Asian, 1 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1 percent other. In terms of education, 22 percent of volunteers had a high school diploma, 34 percent had some college education, 20 percent had a bachelor's degree, and 23 percent had a graduate or professional degree—that is, more than three-fourths had some college education or more.<sup>xxx</sup>

The survey did not include the genders of volunteers, but in past surveys, Experience Corps has found that “members are overwhelmingly female.” In 2010, the George Warren Brown School of Social Work of Washington University found that “only 14%” were male.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Barb Quaintance, who is the managing director of AARP Experience Corps, was recently asked about the most important ingredient of the program's success—its secret sauce. She said, “It's the opportunity kids have to develop a relationship with an older person who, to the student, offers wisdom, experience, and patience.”

For a student with a grandmother who is, say, 35 years old (which is common in parts of many cities where generations are only 15 years apart), a volunteer who is 60 represents a grandparent in the sense of providing wisdom, experience, and patience. That intergenerational connection differentiates AARP Experience Corps from some other first-rate programs where support often comes from people who are near-peers and closer to the students in years.

### *Future Growth*

AARP Experience Corps is working on a plan for expansion to cities and states where there is a high need of assistance for students, a large pool of older adults, and either a state mandate for students in each grade to read at a specified level or a campaign underway for that kind of standard.

A basic constraint on growth is funding. AARP Experience Corps depends in part on fees from schools or school districts using the program and such funding is vulnerable and sometimes erratic. Since stipends represent the largest cost of the program, AARP Experience Corps aims to reduce that constraint by limiting the amount of money spent on stipends for volunteers.

Volunteers are motivated by the work the program offers, not by the compensation. It is possible to recruit volunteers without paying a stipend. But AARP Experience Corps does not want to take stipends away from volunteers already receiving them. It also recognizes that many volunteers could not take part in the program without pay—that they need a stipend.

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- <sup>i</sup> The concept paper is dated September 14, 1988. He was born on October 8, 1912, so he was a few weeks shy of 76, or 75.
- <sup>ii</sup> See concept paper draft from Marc Freedman.
- <sup>iii</sup> P. 1, concept paper
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>v</sup> He founded it in 1980 and worked there until 1983.
- <sup>vi</sup> See Elizabeth Drew piece about him for The New Yorker, July 23, 1973, "Conversation with a Citizen"
- <sup>vii</sup> He founded it in 1970.
- <sup>viii</sup> <http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=4764181>
- <sup>ix</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/11/20/president-obama-honors-2013-medal-freedom-recipient>
- <sup>x</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/18/us/john-w-gardner-89-founder-of-common-cause-and-adviser-to-presidents-dies.html>
- <sup>xi</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/fellows>
- <sup>xii</sup> See Elizabeth Drew piece about him for The New Yorker, July 23, 1973, Conversation with a Citizen
- <sup>xiii</sup> Concept paper, p. 1, op. cit.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Modern Maturity AARP Perspectives
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Concept paper
- <sup>xviii</sup> AARP Experience Corps, 2013 Annual Report, p. 8
- <sup>xix</sup> AARP Experience Corps, 2014 CY Forecast as of 3/31/14m provided by AARP EC
- <sup>xx</sup> List from AARP EC website, May 24, 2014
- <sup>xxi</sup> AARP Experience Corps, 2013 Annual Report, pp. 6-7
- <sup>xxii</sup> P. 14, op. cit.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> P. 11-12, op. cit.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Pp. 6-7, op. cit.
- <sup>xxv</sup> P. 10, Experience Corps Aggregate Evaluation Report, 2012-2013
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> P. 33, op. cit.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> P. 34, op. cit.
- <sup>xxix</sup> P. 35, op. cit.
- <sup>xxx</sup> P. 40, op. cit.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> P. 43, op. cit.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Center for Social Development, June 10, 2010