

# A Cross-Cultural Year of Service Theoretical Model

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## ABSTRACT

Growing numbers of young people in diverse nations are participating in cross-cultural year of service programs. This paper provides an overview of global trends in the cross-cultural year of service, and a more detailed literature review of two such programs: AmeriCorps\*NCCC and the Peace Corps. Drawing upon the ecological model of human development, the theory of emerging adulthood, and the lens model of service-learning, this paper proposes a cross-cultural year of service theoretical model to inform the work of researchers, policymakers, and community development practitioners concerned with year of service programs.

## KEYWORDS

Civic Engagement, National Service, Voluntarism, Year of Service

## INTRODUCTION

While the dominant social narrative portrays Millennials as narcissistic (Twenge & Campbell, 2009) and lacking in empathy (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011), Millennials have a higher rate of volunteerism than any previous generation in history (Patusky, 2010). Growing numbers of young people around the world are crossing cultural barriers, either between nations or between communities within their own nations, to engage in a year of service through programs such as AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, and hundreds of other public, private, and faith-based programs (Bass, 2013; Curtis, 2014; Leanovicius & Ozulinciute, 2014; Snee, 2014; Wu, Pearce, Huang, & Fan, 2015). Converting this sense of voluntarism and participation in a year of service into positive outcomes for communities and volunteers, in both the short and long term, is thus a critical challenge for modern society.

A small, but growing, body of research has found positive outcomes for communities being served by year of service programs (Brower & Stokes Berry, 2006; Moss, Swartz, Obeidallah, Stewart, & Greene, 2001; Stipelman, Dinkins, Pruhs,

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Serr, & Young, 2014), as well as positive outcomes for volunteers themselves in the areas of civic engagement, education, employment, and life skills (Epstein, 2009; Flanagan, Finlay, Gallay, & Kim, 2012; Frumkin et al., 2009; Jastrzab et al., 2007; O'Shea, 2011; Snee, 2014; Ward, 2014). Other research, however, has found mixed results on the efficacy of year of service programs in strengthening communities and producing more civically engaged, cosmopolitan young adults (Amin, 2014; Calkin, 2014; Curtis, 2014; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012).

With vast differences existing among the hundreds of years of service programs operating today, as well as diversity among volunteers and the communities in which they serve, mixed findings on the efficacy of such programs should not be surprising, but they do raise several important questions. What are the key elements of a successful year of service program? What individual characteristics make a volunteer well-suited to a cross-cultural year of service, and what sort of training is needed to best prepare them? What elements need to exist within a community in order for it to benefit from a year of service program? Finally, what is the impact of a cross-cultural year of service program on a volunteer's home community? A theoretical framework is needed in which to organize these complex questions and inform the work of researchers, policymakers, and community development practitioners concerned with year of service programs.

This paper will provide a definition and overview of global trends in the cross-cultural year of service, and a more detailed literature review of two such programs: AmeriCorps\*NCCC and the Peace Corps. The paper will then present an overview of foundational theories which can inform study of the cross-cultural year of study. Finally, the paper will propose a cross-cultural year of service theoretical model.

## **DEFINING THE CROSS-CULTURAL YEAR OF SERVICE**

Before examining existing global trends in the cross-cultural year of service and proposing a theoretical framework, it is important to pause to define the term. A good starting point is the definition of the "gap year," of which voluntary service is one of several options. Jones (2004) defines a gap year as "any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual "takes out" of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory" (p. 8). The definition suggests an element of intentionality, where the individual chooses to "take out" the year, as opposed to lacking other options, and indicates that there is a further career trajectory ahead. White (2009) defines the gap year as "a break from formal education in order to become immersed in another culture, to volunteer domestically or abroad, to gain experience and maturity, to improve your skills in a sport, language, the arts, or academics, or take on some combination of any of these things." (p. 7). This definition expands Jones' by outlining the various types of activities that can take place during a gap year and including the concept of cultural immersion.

Building upon these definitions of the gap year, a proposed definition of a cross-cultural year of service is the following:

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