

Pocantico Convening on Service and Bridging

Expanding the Bridging Impacts of
Volunteering and Service Programs



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About the Consensus Building Institute (CBI.org)

CBI is a nonprofit organization with more than two decades of experience helping leaders, organizations, and stakeholder groups negotiate wiser agreements, improve partnerships, and resolve disputes.

CBI is internationally recognized for assisting diverse stakeholders to work constructively together and resolve conflict. CBI has deep substantive expertise on issues of governance and democratic participation, as well as social, economic and environmental issues. We work with leaders and constituencies at every level, from community development planning to global climate change negotiations.

CBI's headquarters are in Cambridge, USA, with staff and offices across the US, and in Canada and Chile. The organization also convenes a Global Network of colleagues who work as a community of practice and as CBI consultants.

About Convergence

Convergence is a leading national organization building bridges across differences to address critical issues. For more than a decade, Convergence has facilitated nonpartisan collaborations among leaders divided along political, ideological, sectoral, and identity-based lines to produce solutions that create meaningful change in the lives of millions of Americans.

The goal of this work is twofold: to identify actionable solutions to urgent problems facing Americans today, and to strengthen American democracy by fostering a culture of collaborations across differences.

Convergence's evidence-based approach to collaborative dialogue is informed by continued advances in contact theory, neuroscience and psychology; and it's refined by years of successful practice. Convergence knows how to forge trust and unlikely alliances for action among even the most improbable collaborators.

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INTRODUCTION: VOLUNTEER AND NATIONAL SERVICE PROGRAMS AS WAYS TO BRIDGE SOCIETAL DIVISIONS

America benefits from a volunteering ethos that extends back to our founding, and that today includes about 60 million Americans. Roughly 30% of adults and millions of youth volunteer regularly through faith communities, employers, schools, community organizations and social service programs. Millions more serve neighbors and their community outside of these programs. At the national level, numerous large volunteer-based organizations (such as Habitat for Humanity, Red Cross, United Way, YMCA, large religious denominations, etc.) each work with hundreds of thousands or millions of volunteers.¹ Though few of these organizations explicitly seek to bridge social divisions as a primary goal of their work, many participants find powerful, life-changing opportunities to work with other program participants, community volunteers and other community members whose life experiences and views are very different from their own.

Civilian “national service” is a government-supported form of volunteering, and has played an important part in our national psyche since the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933. National service programs have been designed to promote an ethos of service; provide young people valuable experiences, skills and networks; offer elders pathways for contributing their skills and wisdom; and make direct contributions to solving important community and national challenges. There has been variable emphasis on using national service to bridge societal divisions, with perhaps the strongest focus on the bridging through service during the 1960s.

Within the local and national service communities, practices often associated with bridging are recognized as ways to advance service goals. Service experts and community advocates emphasize serving “with” the host community, rather than offering service “for” or “to” the community. In this context, service programs may seek to build deeper and more reciprocal relationships between service volunteers and community leaders and members in order to achieve service outcomes.

In parallel, as partisan, class and race divisions have become more visible, national service advocates have emphasized the potential for service programs to bridge those divides. From established leaders in civilian and military national service to political scientists and journalists, there have been many calls to expand national service, often with an emphasis on these programs as a vehicle for overcoming geographic, ideological, racial, and class divisions among people who serve, and in the communities with whom they engage.²

¹ AmeriCorps, Office of Research and Evaluation. (2021). [Key Findings from the 2019 Current Population Survey: Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement](#). Washington, DC: AmeriCorps.

² See for example Evan Osnos, [“Can a Vastly Bigger National-Service Program Bring the Country Back Together?”](#) *The New Yorker*, Nov. 19, 2021.

The theory of change behind these calls (implicit or explicit) has been that, by bringing diverse volunteers together to achieve service program goals, service experiences can:

- a) create positive relationships among volunteers and/or community members that transcend their differences;
- b) increase understanding and reduce bias and stereotypes among both volunteers and members of communities/constituencies that are the focus of service; and
- c) cement these gains among all participants, so that both volunteers and engaged community members will experience lasting positive changes in attitudes and behaviors, including greater openness to the perspectives of others and increased motivation and ability to work constructively with people whose backgrounds and beliefs are different from their own.

This same theory of change could apply to large-scale volunteering programs, in addition to those identified as national service programs.

There are several ways that service and volunteering programs can support bridge-building within the context of their core service work, including bridging among and between:

1. Volunteers (including National Service participants) who come from outside the community/constituency they engage
2. Volunteers within the community/constituency being engaged
3. Community/constituency members directly engaged
4. Other community members, including those from polarized groups within the community
5. Service program/organization leadership and staff

At Pocantico, participants focused on bridge-building among those who serve/volunteer, as well as bridge-building between service volunteers/participants and members of the host community. The possibility of bridging among other possible pairs or trios also was acknowledged.



1. THE EVIDENCE FOR SERVICE PROGRAMS' IMPACT ON SOCIETAL DIVISIONS

The relevance of contact theory: Participants reviewed evidence that supports the view that service programs can produce positive impacts on attitudes, relationships, and civic engagement. Around the world, studies have tested Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis that bringing together members of majority and minority groups to pursue a common task can reduce prejudice and conflict. These efforts can be more effective if participants have:

- equal status within the contact-promoting program or activity;
- common goals;
- a need to collaborate to reach the goals; and
- reinforcement from jointly accepted authority, law or custom.³

Social science research has found that activities aligned with these principles can build relationships of understanding and respect as well as reduce prejudice and conflict, though there is ongoing examination of how strong the effects are, and the conditions under which they can be achieved.

At the convening, scholars who have led contributions to the ongoing research on contact theory and other approaches to reducing inter-group conflict summarized the main points of evidence, implications for service organizations seeking to use contact to promote bridging, caveats about the evidence, and emerging trends toward which new research appears to be pointing.

In brief, the strongest meta-analytic research on the effect of substantial, face-to-face contact between members of polarized groups shows that whether contact is intentionally designed or the result of a "natural experiment" (e.g. entry of a new ethnic group into a housing complex), the more contact people from polarized groups have with each other, the more invested they become in each other's welfare. Contact that creates positive relationships increases empathy and reduces the perceived threat between members of polarized groups. While there is a great deal of variation in the strength of these empathy and threat reduction effects, the core causal pathway is through relationship building.⁴

There are significant caveats and limitations to this body of evidence:

- It is not clear how effectively or sustainably contact in highly polarized situations can overcome very intense animosity between groups.
- It can be very difficult to create conditions of "equal status" when the power imbalances (including socioeconomic status) between groups are very large.

³ Allport, Gordon W., 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Addison Wesley.

⁴ For the most extensive meta-analysis of research on the contact hypothesis, see Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp, 2006. "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90 (5): 751–783.



- In some circumstances, bridging programs that explicitly communicate the goal of bridging to participants may be perceived as “manipulative” and rejected by some participants; however, in other circumstances explicit bridging can be effective. There is ongoing exploration of when to be more explicit and when to be more tacit in conveying bridging goals to participants.
- Even when participants succeed in building positive relationships within teams, without more extended work, those relationships and attitudinal changes may not survive the participants’ “reentry” into the larger society, where they may face rejection from members of their own group as they try to maintain changes in their own attitudes and relationships.
- Most studies have focused on younger people, and few have considered differences in participants’ personality characteristics (e.g. openness to experience, deference to authority, etc.). There also may be a “selection bias” effect in the research because many participants in bridging programs have “opted in” to those programs, so their characteristics and experiences may not generalize to less motivated members of their own groups; and ideological conservatives may be less motivated to participate than liberals, depending on how the activities are designed. These demographic, personality and motivational characteristics may enhance or counteract the positive effects of contact, but the evidence base is limited.⁵

Service learning as a form of contact: The group also heard about complementary applied research and evidence from the field of “service learning.” While there is not a fully agreed definition for service learning, there is general agreement that it includes service activities undertaken either in the context of school- or university-based education or through community-based service with explicit reflection on the purpose of service, why the need exists, and the roles of service learners, community members and others with significant roles. Reflection generally includes participant self-reflection on the experience as a core component of program design.⁶ As with contact generally, the evidence for service learning suggests that more frequent and deeper contact through service learning leads to more significant empathy and changes in attitudes and self-understanding.

Notably, research on “transformational” approaches to service learning suggests that significant and lasting changes in students’ attitudes and behaviors can occur when programs combine substantial, sustained contact with structured reflection on both the societal dimensions of the service experience and the individual’s own experience, to draw out implications for individuals’ perceptions and behavior. However, in the context of school- and university-based service learning, teachers and professors generally have limited incentives to reach beyond the walls of the institution to promote this kind of experiential learning, and there is even less incentive to focus on the experiences and reflections of community members who are not enrolled as students. The recent rise in social justice

⁵ For a recent re-examination and qualification of the evidence, see Paluck, Elizabeth L., Seth Green and Donald Green, 2019. “The Contact Hypothesis Re-evaluated.” *Behavioural Public Policy* 3:2, 129-158.

⁶ For example, Cornell University now uses the term “Community Engaged Learning” to emphasize the reciprocal engagement of volunteers from the university and members of the local community in volunteer activities.



activism on many campuses has promoted a shift in the focus of service learning from personal responsibility toward social change, but there is also some backlash and division about making service a form of “activism.”

A starting list of good bridging practices for service organizations: Beyond the substantial evidence for contact’s positive effects, and the caveats noted above, the evidence for contact specifically in the context of community service in the US is limited.⁷ However, there is ongoing applied research across a wide range of volunteering contexts in the US. This research suggests that service organizations that want to promote bridging through contact should:

- Start by **clarifying what the organization seeks to accomplish** by integrating bridging into the service program or project. Traditionally the focus of bridging work has been deficit-based, reducing attitudes and behaviors based on stereotypes and prejudice; but more recently organizations are placing more emphasis on bridge-building as asset-based, increasing understanding and the sense of inclusion and belonging.
- **Consider the timing of interventions:** “Stopping to reset,” by creating a deliberate pause in interaction between groups in order for each group to reflect and find more constructive ways to engage, may be helpful before undertaking new kinds of contact.
- **Look for “positive deviance” within the organization and the community**, to see where and how current initiatives and activities may already be bridging differences. Assess how those strengths could be enhanced, and consider whether there might be the unintended consequences of tinkering with what works.
- **Set realistic expectations** for measurable outcomes based on the intensity and longevity of the experience. One contact experience won’t be enough to change attitudes or behaviors. Repeated and sustained contact is important to achieving meaningful, measurable outcomes.
- To promote a shared sense of equal status between groups involved in joint work, **identify and support facilitators/leaders from both/all groups involved**, and ensure that the facilitators/leaders have equal authority and show mutual respect.
- Rather than create new programs, **integrate contact into existing programs and make bridging outcomes a positive byproduct of great teamwork**. By the same token, make as few demands as possible on staff and volunteers to set aside time for “bridging” activities that don’t contribute directly to the main goals of service (build a house, clean up the riverbank, feed the hungry, etc.).

⁷ One significant, recent study of service and contact through Teach for America (TFA) finds significant positive impacts on attitudes and civic participation among predominantly white, middle class TFA volunteers teaching in lower income communities of color. See Mo, Cecilia H. and Katharine M. Conn, 2018. “When Do the Advantaged See the Disadvantages of Others? A Quasi-Experimental Study of National Service.” *American Political Science Review* 112 (4): 721-741.



- **Limit direct discussion of inter-group differences in early stages of a team’s work.** In early stages this kind of discussion can feel threatening or uncomfortable. It is better to start by building relationships and a sense of being “one team,” de-emphasizing group differences. Then **after rapport and trust are established, create safe settings for self-reflections and conversations about group differences.**

To bridge among volunteers:

- **Assign volunteers from polarized groups to integrated teams**, rather than allowing them to self-select into own-group teams. To prevent self-selection within teams, make sure that as many team tasks as possible are done by mixed working groups.
- **Make sure that team members need to work together actively** to achieve a shared goal or outcome (e.g. make a film together, don’t just watch one and discuss it).
- **Design the project/program so that teams meet repeatedly over a sustained time period** (weeks to years), in order to build relationships and a sense of interdependence to accomplish their shared task(s).

To bridge between external volunteers/service providers and the local community:

- Ensure that service and bridging goals are jointly developed by service providers and stakeholders in the community.
- Partner with community leaders and members to engage broad community support for the service engagement.
- Seek explicit, visible support from community leaders representing the groups involved.
- Engage local community volunteers to serve alongside external volunteers.
- Integrate shared learning, dialogue and reflection among groups comprised of participants from both the community and the service program. This process can create more complex and nuanced understanding of the other group’s members, interests and values, and of the interaction between groups, to break through oversimplified “us and them” thinking.
- Use joint physical activities, from walking to sports to dancing, as a key complement to conceptual thinking and dialogue.
- Ensure program leadership and staff have been or will be engaged in similar bridging experiences with the community.



Current challenges and opportunities for service-bridging initiatives: After the initial presentations, the group discussed some of the historical and current societal drivers of polarization and bridging in the US, and how those drivers influence efforts to promote bridging in the context of service programs.

- Divisions based on race and ethnicity, class, religion, gender and other group identities have a long history in our society. Though many structural inequities persist and “conflict entrepreneurs” continue to manipulate divisions for political gain,⁸ there also have been many successes in bridging these divisions, including major institutional changes that were not primarily designed as bridging activities, such as the racial and ethnic integration of youth team sports, the increasingly positive portrayals of LGBTQ people in pop culture, and the growing number of older people who want to make contributions and maintain connections in their communities. It is important for service organizations to consider how to “ride the wave” of social trends and norms that are favorable to bridging activities in at least some contexts, while being sensitive to heightened polarization and distrust in other contexts.
- In our current, highly polarized political climate, framing bridging through service as a way to prevent the further fragmentation of society may appeal to a substantial constituency of Americans who are deeply concerned about the downside risks of polarization. For others, however, a more positive framing may be more appealing: bridging through service can contribute to a renewed sense of “we the people,” with the capacity to transcend our differences and create a more unified society.
- Many in our society now see service organizations (which benefit from public support through the tax code), and the national service ecosystem (which is meant to directly serve the most important needs of the country) as having the capacity, the positioning, the opportunity, and the responsibility to address polarization.
- Bridging activities in the context of service can achieve several different goals:
 - creating relationships and improving mutual understanding between members of polarized groups;
 - helping to counterbalance highly unequal socio-economic status and power relationships in the context of service;
 - helping service participants build a shared understanding of institutional and societal challenges that must be addressed to deal with the underlying needs that service programs can only partially address; and
 - helping to build coalitions across lines of difference to push for institutional and societal change, and reduce the danger posed by toxic polarization.⁹

⁸ See for example Ripley, A. 2021, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

⁹ See for example Schirch, Lisa, 2021. “Transforming the Colour of US Peacebuilding: Types of Dialogue to Protect and Advance Multi-racial Democracy.” Policy Brief 114. Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute.



While each of these goals may be legitimate and appropriate in a particular context, differences in programs' broader service objectives may lead to differences of view on which of these goals is "better" or "more important." Those differences can themselves become a source of conflict in the design and implementation of bridging programs. Service organizations interested in bridging should commit to inclusive discussions on what bridging goals they seek to achieve, and focus on selecting goals that are seen as legitimate, desirable, and feasible by their stakeholders (board, staff, communities/constituencies engaged, volunteers, funders, etc.).

- The number of organizations and people involved in service in the US is very large. There is little consensus among non-profits on the goals of service, or on the relative value of integrating bridging activities into service. The potential for constructive dialogue among leading service organizations on integrating bridging into service is high, but this dialogue is likely to be more useful if it does not seek full consensus among organizations, and is framed as an exploratory and learning process.

2. LESSONS FROM CURRENT SERVICE AND BRIDGING INITIATIVES

After reviewing the evidence that contact through service can contribute to reducing bias and improving relationships, participants explored the approaches that three organizations are taking to bridging through service work.

The American Immigration Council seeks to improve support for fair and just immigration, and recognition of the benefits that immigrants bring to the US. It is currently partnering with service and business organizations (including YMCA of the USA, Council on Christian Colleges and Universities, Walmart, Trust for Public Lands, among others) to create opportunities for citizens and communities who are concerned about immigrants to interact directly with immigrants through shared service. The community-level bridging work reflects AIC's recognition that public support for immigration is heavily influenced by the extent to which citizens have meaningful contact and constructive relationships with immigrants.

AIC has aimed to identify service organization partners who are already credible with constituencies that are concerned about immigration policy and immigrants. With these partners, AIC seeks local leaders who are willing to engage in joint activities. Together, they build on common identities and interests among immigrants and the native-born, from youth sports to gardening, to bring people together for joint projects. AIC seeks to help participating service organizations develop individual programs, and also build organization-wide commitment and capacity for bridging work. AIC offers fellowships, grants, technical assistance, and a community of practice for its service partners.

City Year helps students and schools succeed, while preparing the next generation of civically engaged leaders who can work across lines of difference. Partnering with teachers, diverse teams of City Year AmeriCorps members cultivate learning environments where all students can build on their strengths, fully engage in their learning, and thrive.



City Year places strong emphasis on supporting equity and belonging in its internal organizational culture, and in the schools in which AmeriCorps Members serve. Bridging for City Year has been happening primarily in the context of this work. City Year aims to promote mutual understanding, respect, open communication and meaningful relationships among AmeriCorps Members, students, teachers and staff in school settings, and among managers, staff and AmeriCorps members at all levels within the organization. This ongoing work seeks to address structural racism and other barriers to student success and to City Year’s own success, by creating communities of belonging among managers, staff and AmeriCorps members.

Thread is a Baltimore-based non-profit that harnesses the power of relationships to create a new social fabric of diverse individuals deeply engaged with young people facing the most significant opportunity and achievement gaps. Thread commits to every young person it enrolls for 10 years and matches them with an extended Family of up to four volunteers who provide tailored support like rides to school, weekend dinners or navigating transitions to adulthood. This customized support provided by “Thread Families” is complemented by community collaborators who provide everything from tutoring or community service and employment opportunities, to legal, healthcare and housing services.

For Thread, bridging is the central goal, with “student support” acting as an entry point for volunteers and students to discover each other’s inherent value & barriers to personal goals. The longer-term goal is to reach a “tipping point” within Baltimore: ultimately bridging 20,000 individuals across lines of difference and working within their relationships with families, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities – creating an intentional and sustained ripple effect that erodes systemic inequities. Thread guides this bridging using the *Thread Engagement Process* for building relationships across lines of difference: encouraging people to **connect, set bi-directional goals, identify and remove barriers, and achieve goals**. Its community norms, the “Thread Core Competencies” have been defined and refined by the young people, volunteers, collaborators and staff over nearly two decades, explicitly creating a community that is both welcoming and allows all within it to feel a sense of belonging. While Thread does not focus directly on public policy, it does engage a wide range of Baltimore private and public leaders as volunteers and supporters, and its student and volunteer alumni provide a growing network for building the community Thread envisions.

Discussion of these examples and others raised several points about the lessons that service organizations are learning as they seek to integrate bridging into their work:

- **There are close links between DEI work and bridging work, but they are not identical – and some tensions exist.** Some DEI work can be understood as bridging, but not all DEI work has bridging as its goal. DEI can also focus on advocacy to shift power relationships and overcome injustices, and may place lower emphasis on improving relationships and mutual understanding. In addition, the primary focus (though not the only focus) of DEI work has been on divisions between racial and ethnic identity groups. Conversely, the work of bridging is generally understood to apply to many different kinds of division: faith, political ideologies, geography, and class, along with race and ethnicity. It is important for organizations to clarify what they are seeking to achieve independently and jointly through DEI and through bridging work, strive for complementarity, and resolve trade-offs when necessary.



- **Combining interpersonal connections, joint work, and constructive dialogue over a sustained period of time seems to be the right “package”** to integrate bridging experiences into service work. However, there are many context-specific issues that service organizations need to work out in order to create bridging impact, from clarifying the place of bridging in the organization’s mission and programming to designing specific activities within the scope of current programs. Beyond this room, there are not yet many examples of service organizations systematically planning for and implementing the integration of bridging into their service work.
- **Different programs will seek different levels of integration between service and bridging**, in some cases explicitly identifying bridging work as a critical element of success, and, in others, simply building the bridging practices into the service programming, without being explicit. Both styles of incorporating bridging require strong intentionality; therefore it is critical to make a deliberate decision which modality the program will use.
- **There are challenges for large service organizations that want to work on bridging.** The senior managers of many large organizations place a strong emphasis on quantitative metrics for program outputs and outcomes. This is necessary for organizational goal setting and effective operations. However, the qualitative gains that can be made through bridging work may be more difficult to measure, may take longer to achieve, and may contribute indirectly to achievement of the service organization’s primary goals. Therefore it is important for senior leaders of large service organizations to make internal commitments to support bridging as part of organizational mission and culture, not just as an element of program design, whether that manifests as an explicit commitment to building bridges, or as tacit but intentional integration into the service work.

3. THE CASE FOR INTEGRATING BRIDGING INTO SERVICE: PRINCIPLES, PRACTICES AND CONSTRAINTS

Building on the evidence from research and their own experiences, participants worked together to “make the case” for integrating bridging goals and activities into the work of service organizations. They responded to “why” and “how” questions, and also noted constraints and risk factors for service organizations to consider.

Why integrate bridging into service work?

To strengthen service organizations’ work and impact

- In many cases effective service delivery requires bridging differences among staff, volunteers, and the communities served. Effective bridging enables the service to be provided with, rather than “to” or “for” the community. Failing to bridge differences can undermine both programs and the organization’s mission.



- Bridging through listening and understanding also provides insight into how different people experience and respond to service work. Bridging drives positive changes in behavior and attitudes, especially in our understanding and trust of each other. In turn, higher understanding and trust make the work of service more meaningful and more effective.
- The tax code incentivizes community service and government funds national service to meet America's core priorities. Contributing to healthy relationships across lines of difference is now a top national need, and arguably a responsibility of all service organizations.
- Many young people are hungry for bridging experiences, and service organizations that demonstrate capacity to integrate bridging into service can attract young people as volunteers.

To scale bridging experiences to the level needed in our country

- Polarization (some of it manufactured) is preventing America from solving critical problems that are undercutting America's productivity, health, economic mobility and prosperity. Only half of Republicans and one-third of Democrats have more than a few friends from the other party, and our opposing "tribes" are becoming more entrenched.¹⁰
- Service organizations have the potential to engage millions of Americans across difference, from the country's largest non-profits to national service programs, to community-based organizations that can bring major groups in the community together.

To strengthen our sense of common identity, belonging, and purpose

- Bridging that builds social cohesion will enable more collaborative problem solving in increasingly diverse communities, fostering their resilience and flexibility.
- A more cohesive society will enable a much more shared sense of well-being, fulfillment and belonging, with less anxiety and anger, and greater motivation for service across lines of difference.
- One widely shared core civic value is to make our country an inspiring example of unity in diversity, both for ourselves and for people around the world. To advance that goal, effective bridging of our differences is more essential than ever.

¹⁰ Survey Center on American Life, 2021. "American Perceptions Survey." National sample from May 2021. Accessed at [https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/..](https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/)



How can service organizations and programs integrate bridging opportunities?

Frame bridging as a way to support the achievement of shared organizational goals

- Design bridging opportunities to support the organization’s goals and work. Don’t create “stand-alone” bridging programs that are disconnected from those goals and work.
- Assess the need and opportunity for the organization to bridge between specific groups, and be clear about the groups that the organization is seeking to build bridges between (see below).
- Focus on opportunities to deepen connections, teamwork, and joint impact among those participating in bridging. Be clear about any other goals you are trying to achieve (e.g. longer-term shifts in attitudes/behavior, and/or shifts in institutions and power structures).
- Without concealing the organization’s intent, be only as explicit about bridging as needed for bridging and/or service impact, or for the organization’s branding and/or recruitment success. In many cases, bridging activities will be more effective if they are not “called out” to participants, but rather are seamlessly integrated into service work.

Use inclusive & equitable approaches to assess and plan for bridging

- Engage diverse and representative voices (board, leadership, staff, communities, volunteers) to consider whether/ how to integrate bridging into existing service delivery streams and programs.
- If needed, address any significant differences in values and perspectives among Board, management and staff to seek alignment on the role of bridging in the organization’s work.
- In the assessment/planning process, aim for worldview diversity that is relevant to the organization (geography, economics, politics, faith, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.).
- Recognize, acknowledge, and work with power differentials among bridging stakeholders.
- Use intergroup contact theory and evidence-based practices as a starting point for assessment and planning. Ask whether and how well the organization is doing the following:
 - Targeting outcomes based on depth, duration and repetition of contact? (repeated and sustained contact is important to producing meaningful, measurable outcomes)
 - Ensuring a safe setting, start with common goals, and build on shared identities, before moving to reflection and dialogue about differences?
 - Rather than creating new programs, injecting effective contact practices into existing programs to promote bridging?

- For bridge-building among volunteers/participants:
 - Creating integrated teams?
 - Making sure they need to work together actively to achieve a goal?
 - Within the team, establishing equal status in roles and contributions?
 - Putting sufficient time into dialogue-based context-setting and reflection?
- For bridge-building with/among people in the community:
 - Acting on expressed needs of the community?
 - Engaging community leaders in setting bridging goals and endorsing bridging as part of the organization's work?
 - Engaging community members in all aspects of service, including the volunteering/service planning, activities, context-setting and reflection?
 - Addressing power-based differentials in status between program participants and people engaging from the community?
- Based on this assessment, identify where the organization already supports successful bridging, and where it inhibits bridging, and where opportunities are present to increase bridging outcomes consistent with maintaining or strengthening service outcomes.
- Understand that the integration of bridging is a change management process, and foster patience within and outside the organization in moving the needle.

Build organizational capacity for bridging work

- Recognize successful bridging work, even when it has not been explicit, and build on it.
- Make bridging a core competency for those staff and volunteers who will be involved in service work that integrates bridging – whether those practices fall under a banner of “service practices” or “bridging practices.”
- Do training and team building with all involved in bridging work before implementing service activities that require bridging, and tailor the training to the service work, showing how bridging will help achieve service goals.
- Make bridging a process of service, reflection and dialogue, in a space where all can belong.

What are key organizational constraints and risks to consider?

Expect risk aversion, fear, and cultural resistance

- Like all of us, program leaders, staff, volunteers and community members are all subject to toxic polarization themselves – bridging with people with whom they may viscerally disagree may initially appear unattractive.
- Old thinking, old habits, and old paradigms are challenges to any change process, including the integration of bridging into service work.
- Bridging may be experienced by members of dominant groups as a threat to their power, and if so, they may not embrace the case for bridging.
- People tend to avoid what feels uncomfortable, and bridging work sometimes requires moving out of individual and organizational comfort zones.
- Boards may be especially concerned about downside risk of backlash from staff, communities served, or other external stakeholders, especially if bridging work is perceived as shifting the organization’s mission or culture, or as moving it into controversial forms of advocacy.

Be thoughtful about who designs and decides, and about external backlash against bridging

- Resist the urge to “parachute in” to “save” a community or constituencies from their divisions. If there is no history of the organization playing a bridging role, it will be essential for community/constituency representatives on all sides to have voice in defining that role.
- Design *with* communities in order to integrate their history, culture, and power dynamics – both assets and challenges – into the approach(es) the organization takes to bridging. Community divisions and the norms for dealing with those divisions – the language used, the kinds of interventions and intervenors seen as helpful, etc. -- should all be considered, both to build on community strengths and to address limitations.
- Stakeholders focused intently on accomplishing important DEI objectives may object to bridging work as having the potential to slow or impede social justice objectives. It may require in-depth exploration to find opportunities to align bridging and social justice goals and activities.
- For larger organizations that work in many contexts, resist the urge to use a single model for bridging, and instead tailor bridging principles and approaches to each particular context.
- Ensure that volunteers and staff are highly reflective about “service mindsets” that can be antithetical to effective bridging, such as feeling superior, “ogling” less privileged lifestyles, and knowing they can retreat to their comfort zone after service activities.



- Be ready for manufactured distrust and misunderstanding: the more deeply engaged in bridging the organization becomes, the higher the risk of attacks from those who benefit from division.

Recognize and work within organizational limits

- Don't overreach in bridging work: be very thoughtful about the divisions the organization can meaningfully address while advancing its core goals, and which it cannot.
- Work and learn with other organizations that seek common or complementary service-bridging goals. Collaboration will help organizations go further together, and make better use of limited resources.
- Avoid the temptation of expediency, especially in context of urgent issues. Effective bridging work takes time to build trust and relationships.
- Maintain humility and an experimental disposition, and promote continuous learning.
- Ensure that bridging work happens at a scale and pace matched to the organization's capacity to implement effectively.
- While striving for clear and measurable outcomes, recognize that not all bridging outcomes are easily measurable or attributable, even when the organization's contribution is significant.
- Use periodic reflection and evaluation to ensure that bridging work is demonstrably supporting the organization's core goals and mission.

4. REFINING THE CASE FOR INTEGRATING BRIDGING INTO SERVICE: COMMUNITY-BASED, LARGE FEDERATED, AND NATIONAL SERVICE ORGANIZATION PERSPECTIVES

After developing their case for integrating bridging into service, participants formed groups based on organizational context, to test and refine the key points they had made. The groups focused on a) service organizations based in a particular community; b) large national, federated organizations; and c) organizations involved in national service.

Following are key additional points and refinements from these three organizational perspectives:



	Community-based	Large federated	National service
Why?	<p>Case for bridging should be made as a positive opportunity for the community, not as a fear-driven effort to avoid collapse</p> <p>Not all differences in a community are toxic; important to clarify where difference is actually a problem for the community</p>	<p>For nearly all organizations, bridging will not be in conflict with the mission, even if it's not at the core</p> <p>Risks of bridging work may be overstated relative to the benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● most organizations can find appropriate ways to integrate bridging ● should view this as an opportunity with some important caveats, not as a high-risk venture that they may not want to try 	<p>Strong imperative for national service to integrate bridging now:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● risk of division undermining service work ● demand among volunteers ● favorable AmeriCorps context
How?	<p>Smaller organizations can do more innovative bridging work, acting as labs to test ideas that may then diffuse or scale with larger organizations</p> <p>Organizations should avoid creating cookie cutter “bridgits” (bridging widgets)</p> <p>Volunteers don’t have to commit to bridging to be involved in bridging activities, as long as there are gentle and carefully designed “on-ramps” in those activities</p> <p>Bridging has to balance between relationship building and activities that may bring people out of their comfort zones, especially where there are significant power differences</p>	<p>Storytelling is a powerful on-ramp for people to begin connecting, and can be woven into many service activities</p> <p>Large organizations have complex partnerships, and need to build and maintain alignment with those partners on bridging activities</p> <p>For organizations with large, diverse staffs, building commitment and capacity for bridging (including at leadership level) is crucial as a basis for effective integration of bridging into programmatic work</p>	<p>Map the bridging field nationally</p> <p>Convey positive messages to Congress and other stakeholders on the value and feasibility of integrating bridging into service, without making overblown claims</p> <p>Create partnerships between bridging organizations and AmeriCorps programs, being attentive to left-right balance</p> <p>Prioritize AmeriCorps programs and members that have sustained contact with a community</p>



	Community-based	Large federated	National service
Constraints?	<p>Key to avoid perception that the organization is manipulating situations of conflict for its own benefit</p> <p>Power is not a zero-sum resource, and working with differences doesn't always require redistributing power</p> <p>Organizations that are in dominant positions must share decision making on bridging with the groups they seek to help, and try to balance power among those groups as well</p>	<p>Donors may bring their own agendas regarding bridging; organizations need to ensure that donors do not have undue influence on these issues</p> <p>Volunteers are increasingly seeking short-term opportunities, which limits the potential for deep bridging work</p>	<p>Some programs will be risk averse and/or will be concerned about maintaining focus on their core work</p> <p>Conflict entrepreneurs on left and right may take aim at AmeriCorps for supporting bridging work</p>

5. NEAR-TERM OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT

After clarifying the case for integrating bridging experiences into service organizations, the group explored specific opportunities to experiment with integration and to accelerate the spread of this approach across service organizations. Key opportunities included the following:

Building Civic Bridges Act: Legislation introduced in the current Congress (in both House and Senate bills) would provide \$25 million annually to AmeriCorps to provide grants for AmeriCorps programs to integrate bridging into service activities; train AmeriCorps members in bridging approaches and skills; conduct research on bridging efforts, and hold convenings to share experiences and findings. The AmeriCorps CEO is strongly supportive of this legislation, and a significant number of organizations within and beyond the bridging field have stated their support.

AmeriCorps strategic plan, and actions by AmeriCorps programs: The new AmeriCorps strategic plan calls for AmeriCorps to bring Americans together through service, with or without the passage of new legislation. Some AmeriCorps programs are already actively experimenting with bridging activities. Some state service commissions (notably California) are actively looking for ways to integrate bridging into a range of service activities at the state level.

Trust for Civic Infrastructure: Proposed by the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship in its report, *Our Common Purpose*, the Trust would provide funding, knowledge-sharing and technical support for communities to undertake bridging activities. It is anticipated that the Trust will launch with \$30 million in philanthropic funding for a 3-year pilot phase, and then seek additional public and private support for ongoing operations.



Congressional and Administration interest: There is strong bipartisan Congressional interest as well as Administration interest in bridging divisions among Americans. There may be possibilities for bipartisan and White House convenings, as well as work with executive agencies to integrate bridging into their ongoing work on specific issues, such as election integrity.

Interest in piloting bridging approaches among large service organizations: Some of the country's largest service organizations have expressed interest in experimenting with more intentional and consistent integration of bridging activities into their work with volunteers. They could serve as proving grounds both for testing and for scaling the integration of bridging with service.

Opportunities for smaller organizations with deep experience/expertise in integration to provide technical assistance to others: A relatively small number of community-focused organizations have built very strong integration capacity, having “learned by doing” over many years. Some of these organizations might be interested and available to provide technical assistance to others, particularly to larger organizations seeking to tailor integration strategies to diverse local contexts.

Opportunities for researchers to contribute to ongoing experimentation: There is a small community of university-based researchers who have deep expertise in this area, and are already working with some organizations on integrating bridging into service activities. These researchers could be tapped to provide guidance on principles and strategies for integration, and could provide tools for setting baselines and measuring the bridging impact of integrated activities over time.

Messaging and language research: Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) recently completed a public perception research project on language to promote civic engagement. Some of the findings are highly relevant for messaging on integrating service and bridging. The term “unity,” had positive associations for more than 70% of respondents. The terms “liberty,” “justice,” “citizen,” and “democracy” had positive associations for more than 60%; and “diversity,” “common good,” “patriotism,” “belonging,” “civility” and “bridge builder” all had positive associations for more than 50% of respondents.¹¹

In discussing these opportunities, the group made several cross-cutting points:

- **Building support for bridging-service integration requires both tailored messages and dialogue:** While there is evidence and emerging good practice that can be referenced for many different audiences, it is important to work with particular communities and volunteers, smaller and larger service organizations, philanthropic and public funders, to develop shared answers to the “why” and “how” of integration. The process of developing goals and designing integrated activities should be understood as the first step in integrating bridging into the work of the organization and the communities served.

¹¹ More information and interactive data analysis are available at www.pacefunders.org.



- **Bring top-down and bottom-up approaches together:** Fully bottom-up, localized approaches are hard to scale, and fully top-down approaches often don't work well in specific local contexts. The challenge in pursuing national opportunities will be to find ways to accelerate experimentation, learning, and uptake, offering evidence-based guidance without creating a single blueprint.
- **Orchestrate complementary roles:** Large and small service organizations, AmeriCorps and state service commissions, philanthropic funders, bridging organizations and researchers all have important roles to play in developing effective approaches to integrating bridging into service. Building good mechanisms for programmatic collaboration, shared learning, and community of practice will be critical to ensuring complementarity and minimizing the risk of acting at cross-purposes.

6. OPTIONS FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY(IES) OF PRACTICE

The group explored ways to build community(ies) of practice (CoPs) among service and bridging organizations, funders and researchers interested in integrating bridging experiences and activities into service. Initial remarks from participants with experience building CoPs, and subsequent group discussion highlighted these overarching points about CoPs:

- **CoPs can be organized around sharing learning, active experimentation, or both.** Whichever of these goals is pursued, the value of a CoP depends significantly on participants having enough commonality of goals and contexts to make each other's perspectives and experiences relevant and actionable.
- **It is possible to have diverse types of participants (implementing organizations, funders, researchers) in the same CoP,** but they need to be aligned on the questions they are trying to answer together and on the roles they will play in the CoP.
- **Increasingly, organizations are taking responsibility not only for achieving their individual program goals, but for contributing to collective impact on a larger scale.** Collaboration for collective impact requires new approaches to experimentation and to learning. In some cases, third-party evaluation may not be as helpful as joint evaluation by the participants, with researchers playing supportive roles. In this sense, some collective impact collaborations are simultaneously coalitions for action and CoPs.

Focusing specifically on opportunities for CoP on service-bridging integration, the group made these points:

- **There may be a logic to bringing together larger federated organizations as a CoP, with participation by specific affiliates who have common and/or complementary goals and contexts.** Senior leaders would play champion roles for the community of practice but would have less direct involvement in its work. The work that the American Immigration Council is doing with some large, federated organizations is moving in the direction of this kind of CoP.



- **As a complement or an alternative, large, federated organizations could create internal CoPs among affiliates who are motivated by this work.** Senior leaders could support their ongoing experimentation and learning, and develop strategies for diffusing good practices over time to other affiliates. This approach is well-established among large federations for many other issues, and it seems likely that it also could work for service-bridging integration.
- **It may be useful to create a CoP specifically focused on AmeriCorps and national service programs,** given their specific context, opportunities and constraints. Some large, federated organizations with large numbers of AmeriCorps members might be particularly interested in this focus as a starting point.¹²
- **Whatever approach to CoPs is pursued, the goal should be to produce very practical guidance on service-bridging integration** that can be taken up by participating organizations, and ultimately by others beyond the direct participants.

The final discussion topic related to CoPs was on ways to build awareness, commitment and capacity on service-bridging integration among service organizations, bridging organizations, and funders.

Awareness: The group stressed the need and value for **leadership-level engagement**, including through peer leaders who are already motivated to pursue service-bridging integration. For this to work well, the peer leaders need to tell **clear, powerful success stories**, and to share **reflections on their organization’s journey** (as far as it has come) and lessons learned. **Positive media coverage** is another valuable resource for awareness raising, and should include not only traditional news media, but also social media posts by participants, local influencers and celebrities.

Commitment: “All-in” commitment should not be expected or asked for at the beginning of an organization’s work in this space. Rather, the goal should be to **build commitment by thoughtful experimentation and the delivery of positive results**, iterated with lessons learned and expanding to other programs, issues, constituencies, and/or communities as appropriate over time. At the organizational level, **sharing stories** (especially peer-to-peer among staff and volunteers) and **making it as easy as possible to integrate bridging activities into service work** can strengthen commitment.

Capacity: Discussion reiterated the point that organizations need to **treat service-bridging integration as a change process**, with appropriate and adequate support for goal setting, program design, implementation, evaluation and learning. This **requires developing human resources**, ranging from board, senior management and staff, to volunteers and community members. Tools should include tailored training, communities of practice, outside expertise where necessary, and ensuring that the full set of actors is in **periodic, reflective dialogue about goals, activities, and results**.

¹² Subsequent to the convening, California's AmeriCorps agency (California Volunteers) has emerged as a potential model for the service+bridging concept. The agency is partnering with Othering & Belonging Institute and Greater Good Science Center to integrate service with bridging, starting with their Fall 2022 volunteer cohort. See <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/CAVOLUNTEERS/bulletins/31cb841>

7. NEXT STEPS

The convening concluded by identifying promising follow up actions and next steps. Possible actions that generated significant interest included the following:

Collaboration in building the evidence base: it may be possible to expand the set of researchers (both academics and evaluation consultants) working on methods, metrics and the production of evidence. This could be explored further by the researchers participating in the convening, and others whom the conveners and other participants can identify. The gathering of additional evidence could be part of a virtuous circle if linked to the work of communities of practice, producing direct benefits for those CoPs and for the wider service and bridging communities.

Disseminating the case for service-bridging integration, with principles and guidance for organizations interested in this work: Building on the ideas presented in the convening and summarized in this report’s “case for change” section, it might be useful to produce a “white paper” or equivalent document that could help interested organizations learn more about the why, how and constraints on service-bridging integration. In addition, some of the convening participants are already working on a document with a similar purpose, based on their ongoing collaborative work. Convening participants could disseminate this document when it becomes available.

Creating a white paper on the case for bridging in national service, and/or a convening focused on this opportunity: Given multiple service-bridging opportunities and explorations at the Federal and state levels, participants with a particular interest in national service could collaborate to produce a document targeting AmeriCorps and national service programs. It may also be possible to organize a convening with White House and/or bipartisan Congressional sponsorship to explore the bridging-national service opportunity, and raise its visibility at the national level.

Creating one or more communities of practice, including bridging and service organizations: As the group explored, the time may be right to build on the nascent communities of practice that exist. Several participants stated their interest in developing one or more CoPs, and in integrating research and practice through the CoPs.

Matchmaking among service and bridging organizations: Given the strong complementarity between bridging and service organizations who wish to pursue forms of integration, and the limited contact that now exists between them, it might be useful to organize a convening and/or to organize specific opportunities for place-based and/or issue-based contact among interested organizations. The potential power of bringing the expertise of bridging organizations to service organizations which have motivation and access to significant numbers of volunteers is substantial, and the experimentation could be fed into communities of practice to the benefit of both fields.

The organizers committed to producing a report of the convening, and to conducting a follow up survey to elicit and clarify participant interests in follow-on activities.

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