

The Voice of Corps Participants

A Qualitative Analysis of the Conservation Corps Experience

Andrew Lacanienta

Mat Duerden

Brigham Young University

Mike Edwards

North Carolina State University



This report synthesizes 1338 open-ended responses from participants in the corps experience during 2013. The data was analyzed by coding responses into categories and sub-categories. There are eight main codes that categorize responses: Positive experience, learning, work, interactions, future, teamwork, fun, and negative comments. Descriptions of each code are provided in the main report along with corresponding representative participant quotes. A proposed model details a possible linear relationship between the identified codes. Recommendations based upon the findings include a continued analysis of the corps program by using the provided Participant Toolkit and the exploration of the perceptions of corps participants their motivation for joining. Specifically, what were the participants' motivations for entering the program and what role did the corps play in participants' personal, educational, and career goals and aspirations.

The Voice of Corps Participants

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONSERVATION CORPS EXPERIENCE

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the analysis and findings of qualitative data gathered from 2013 Conservation Corps participants. At the conclusion of participant's time in the corps they were administered a survey consisting of primarily quantitative questions and one qualitative open-ended question that read, "Please share with us one or two sentences that best summarize your conservation corps experience". A total of 1338 open-ended responses were collected during the 2013 evaluation.

Open-ended responses were compiled into an Excel file and paired with participants' ID, sex, and age. The responses to the one open-ended question ranged from one to six sentences in length. Using qualitative analysis software each response was read and labeled with codes. For example if a response said, "My experience with the corps was great! I had a lot of fun!" It would have been coded in two places, "positive experience" and "fun". After analyzing roughly 300 responses there were 81 different codes. 81 codes were then narrowed down to the eight that were most prevalent. These eight codes can be seen below in Table 1. After identifying the eight main codes we continued through the remaining 1000 entries coding sentences in the responses only if they fell into at least one of the eight main codes.

No pre-determined ideas or hypotheses about the data were used during coding. Responses were read and then assigned into different categories. While coding found multiple sub-categories that can be seen in the table below. Each of these codes and their sub-categories will be explained in further detail in their own identified sections following Table 1.

Theme	Description	Reference count
Positive Experience	We define a positive experience as an overall satisfying interaction with the corps, its activities, work, crewmembers, and/or work locations. Sub-categories include: Fulfillment, life changing, memories, and promotion.	570
Gaining Knowledge	We define learning as gaining knowledge or skills. Sub-categories include: Conservation knowledge, social skills, technical skills, and self-discovery.	483
Work	We define work as physical labor or tasks done while participating in the corps. Sub-categories include: Outdoors, projects, work ethic, and work setting.	276
Interactions & Relationships	We define interactions as relationships both new and old and how they affect the overall corps experience. Sub-categories included: Meeting new people and staff/crew.	265
Perceived Future Benefits	We define “future” as positive results, changes, or improvements that have the possibility of taking place as a result of the corps experience. Sub-categories included: High school, college, and future work.	209

Teamwork	We define teamwork as working together as a group to accomplish a unified task. Sub-categories included: Leadership.	176
Fun	We define fun as enjoyment or amusement during the corps experience. Whether it was fun work, fun with people, or fun in general.	155
Negative experience	We define negative comments as frustration, disagreement or disappointment about one or more aspects of the corps experience. Subcategories include: Communication, projects, staff and crew, missing family, low pay, and organization	88

Table 1 – Theme, description, and reference count

Codes Explained

Coding consisted of categorizing participant responses based on the criteria outlined in the table above. Further descriptions of codes and representative quotes for each category can be found below. These codes will be presented by order of frequency as they appeared in Table 1.

Positive Experience

The most referenced code in the study was a *positive experience* referenced 570 times. We defined a *positive experience* as an overall satisfying interaction with the corps, its activities, work, crewmembers, and/or work locations. This code contains four sub-categories: Fulfillment, life changing, memories, and promotion.

Fulfillment. *Fulfillment* was referenced 36 times and defined as a feeling of accomplishment, achievement as a result of participant's effort and involvement in the corps.

- “It was very challenging but ultimately *fulfilling*.”
- “Very *rewarding* experience especially taking on a leadership position on the past year and a half leading youth crews into the wilderness.”
- “It was one of the most challenging and *rewarding* experiences of my life.”

Life changing. There are 37 references in which participants mentioned their corps experience changed their life. *Life changing* is defined as a noticeably large change or impact in participants' lives that will affect them far after their completion of the corps experience.

- “Conservation corps have *changed my life*.”
- “This program changed the way I view my life and what my future will be.”
- “My corps experience was *life changing* because of all the knowledge I obtained, the friends I made, and the projects I have done.

Memories. We defined *memories* as a mental take-away or impression from the participant's corps experience and found it was referenced 15 times.

- “I made great *memories* . . .”
- “My experience with the CCC was one that *I will never forget*, lots of changes with in my self that make me who I am today.”
- “It was most definitely some of the most *unforgettable* experiences I have ever had.”

Promotion. *Promotion* was referenced 74 times and we defined *promotion* as any mention about telling others about the program or coming back for a second or third time.

- “I would highly *recommend* the program to others”

- “I hope this program continues so my future children may partake in it.”
- “Can’t wait to come back next session!”
- “I love this program, and am planning to do at least two more before I am done with youth corps.”

Gaining Knowledge

The second most referenced code in the analysis was *learning* with a total of 483 references. We defined *learning* as gaining knowledge or skills. It contains four sub-categories including: Conservation knowledge, social skills, technical skills, and self-discovery.

Conservation knowledge. *Conservation knowledge* is defined as any mention to knowledge gained pertaining to conservation or the environment and found it referenced 79 times

- “I learned more about construction and about weatherization installation and keeping your house more energy efficient with more energy savings.”
- “I learned a lot about backcountry living and rock work.”
- “I’ve learned how to take care of the environment.”

Technical skills. We defined *technical skills* as the gaining of knowledge pertaining to camping, outdoors, building structures, and other hard skills, and found this code referenced 72 times.

- “I enjoyed working outside and learning new *technical skills*.”
- “Finally, I gained hard skills of learning how to use a chainsaw, fence and do trail work.”
- “The conservation corps has given me confidence in handy-work type skills that would be hard to obtain otherwise.”

Self-discovery. Another section dense with references was that of *self-discovery*. *Self-discovery* is defined as gaining knowledge about ones self or the experience of personal growth and referenced this

code 72 times. In addition to references to personal growth, “I can” statements were often referenced. These participants stated they did not think they could do certain things but learned through the corps that in fact they could.

- “I learned a lot about myself and what I thought were my limits.”
- “Most importantly, I learned a lot about myself during this process and what I truly want to do with my time and efforts.”
- “It has opened me and made me grow exponentially.”
- “I learned that I can accomplish much more than I thought I could.”

Social skills. We defined *social skills* as interpersonal skills gained or developed while participating in the corps and found it referenced 31 times.

- “I learned new skills in communication, self confidence, and teamwork that will be sued throughout my life.
- “I learned how to take responsibility and make decisions. . .”
- “I have discovered how important it is to me to help individuals and mediate social situations so all parts have a better understanding of each other.”

Work

Work related comments were coded 276 times and we defined *work* as physical labor or tasks done while participating in the corps. *Work* contained four sub-categories: Outdoors, projects, work ethic, and work setting. Whether it was talking about working outdoors, specific projects completed, improved work ethic, or where they did their work it was coded in this section.

Outdoors. *Outdoors* is defined as any mention to working, learning, living, or spending time in nature and found this code referenced 25 times.

- “I get an opportunity to work outside and improve the areas around my home.”
- “I really enjoyed working outside and making new friends and doing things I’ve never done before.
- “A great opportunity to work in the outdoors with new and different people.”

Work ethic. We coded *work ethic* 21 times and defined it as improving the way participants look at and do work and work related tasks.

- “I developed a stronger work ethic . . .”
- “I learned how to work hard, plus lots of new and practical skills.”
- “I learned a lot about work ethic, responsibility, and how to work at a faster pace.”

Projects. *Projects* are defined as specific jobs or tasks completed by participants and found this code referenced 59 times.

- “Completed invasive species removal, disaster response, tree felling, and trail work.”
- “Built a lot of boardwalks.”
- “We had cleaned up our community and helped our community out with cleaning it or repainting stuff. . .”

Work setting. *Work setting* was coded 18 times and defined as a specific mention of a place, the setting in which participants worked, or the beauty of work sites. □

- “I got to work in Point Reyes with the National Park Service and couldn’t have asked for a better setting.”
- “It was incredible to spend the season in areas such as the Maroon Bells and Colorado Forest State Park.”

- “Had the privilege to work all over state of Montana, got to see everything from the prairies to the mountains.

Interactions & Relationships

There are 265 references to *interactions and relationships* and we defined *interactions and relationships* as associations both new and old and how they affect the overall corps experience.

Interactions and relationships contained two sub-categories: Meeting people and staff/crew.

Meeting people. *Meeting people* was coded 109 times and observed that it was generally a positive experience and often referenced making new friends.

- “I had a great time *meeting new people* during this year.”
- “I made *many new friends* and meet great people along the way.”
- “Got to meet a lot of *new people and friends*.”
- “The best thing about CCND is the people you meet . . .”

Staff and crewmembers. We coded comments made about the *staff and fellow crewmembers* 85 times and often observed positive interactions, but if a negative comment was made concerning people it was generally about a slacking team member or a misunderstanding with a staff member. These comments were also coded as a negative comment and representative quotes can be found under the negative comments section.

- “I loved my coworkers and supervisors . . .”
- “My crew was wonderful and hilarious.”
- “My crew leader Abby made it [the corps experience] fun though. She is the reason I kept going.”

- “. . . The crew (although I love them) was not united and talked about me behind my back as well as others.”
- “Staff management was very frustrating due to lack of information, organization, and too much micromanagement.”

Perceived Future Benefits

We defined *perceived future benefits* as positive results, changes, improvements, or perceptions that may take place as a result of the corps experience and found this code referenced 209 times. Sub-categories included: High school, college, and future work.

Future work. *Future work* was coded 63 times and is defined as takeaways from the corps experience that helped prepare participants for future work opportunities.

- “It [the corps} helps you in your future jobs and hiring.”
- “Perfect job training.”
- “It allowed me to round out a section of my resume so I can increase m chances to get hired at a State or National park.”
- “My experience has served as the launching pad for what will be a long and wonderful career of work relating to outdoor recreation.”

High school. Participants also mentioned 6 times how much the corps helped in attaining a *high school* diploma.

- “It was a great experience for me because I was able to get my high school diploma . . .”
- “When I starting this program I wanted to finish my high school and gain some job experience, but more into the program I’ve learned to work with others and experience helping the communities and the city.

College. Others mentioned 18 times how the conservation corps helped give direction towards *college* or affirm interests in a specific field of study.

- “. . . This experience validated my passion for nature and my decision to continue studying Environmental Science in College.”
- “Now I know who I am and what I want enough to further my education and take bold steps as I continue forth on my journeys in life.”
- “I was encouraged and helped to . . . seek a college degree.”
- “By being part of the Watershed Stewards Project I have gained the practical skills, field experience, and career opportunities that will allow me to enter . . . graduate school with self confidence and purpose.

Teamwork

Teamwork was referenced 176 times and was defined as working together as a group to accomplish a unified task. We defined one sub-category, *leadership*, as experiences participating in leadership or growth as a leader, which was coded 76 times.

- “A great opportunity to grow through small group interactions . . .”
- “Not only have I gained knowledge but I have learned how to work with others and as a team.”
- “I also learned to work with people I don’t always like.”
- “I always hoped for and also feared the possibility of being a leader.”
- “It was a great way to improve my leadership skills . . .”
- “The Youth Crew Leader position was not for me.”

Fun

Participants often mentioned how much *fun* they experienced during their corps experience. During the analysis of the data we coded 155 sentences or references to the word *fun* and defined it as enjoyment or amusement during the corps experience. *Fun* was used in a handful of different contexts but references were coded *fun* only if participants explicitly stated they had *fun*. More often than not the word *fun* was used as a generalized way. *Fun* was also used in the context of work. Responses indicated although participants were in a work situation, participants still had *fun* doing the different jobs or tasks assigned to them. Participants also talked about how the overall experience was *fun*. *Fun* was often found in the same sentence as learning.

- “It [the corps] was a lot of *fun*.”
- “Working in the woods is rewarding and *fun*.”
- “My MCC experience was *fun* and insightful.”
- “I had a lot of *fun* and learned a lot. . .”
- “My conservation corps experience was exciting, *fun*, challenging, and rewarding.”
- “We worked hard and had a *fun* time.”

Negative Experience

Although the corps is highly successful and provides a positive experience for most, there were 88 *negative experiences* coded in the survey responses. We defined *negative experiences* as frustration, disagreement or disappointment about one or more aspects of the corps experience. Subcategories of *negative experiences* include: Communication, projects, staff and crew, missing family, and organization. Representative quotes that can be used as constructive criticism can be found below.

Communication

- . . . Communication between the staff and crews could use some work.”
- “Break down in respect and communication between corps members and higher ups.”

Projects

- “I was slightly disappointed with some of our projects that were either too easy or not enough work.”
- “There should be more emphasis on personal development, and less on project work.”
- “We really need new hand tools and some power tools.”
- “I wish it was longer so I can learn more trades.”

Staff and crew

- “Degenerating to treat adults and be treated by adults like children.”
- “The crew was not united and talked about me behind my back as well as others.”
- Negative, extremely incompetent leaders, on a crew that couldn’t work together, staff was of no help in dealing with one leader that was extremely hostile towards a single member (me).”
- “We were soured by interactions with a fellow crew member.”
- “Our work didn’t bridge cultures as much as throw a group of diverse people together to let them duke it out.”

Missing family

- “I wish we were able to call our parents more than once. . . .”
- “The positive aspects of this work are not enough for me to justify the distance it requires I be away from my family.”

Organization

- “. . . I feel that I would have enjoyed the experiment more if the organization I served for was much more organized.”
- “Staff management was very frustrating due to lack of information, organization, and too much micromanagement.”

Proposed Model

Looking from a bird’s eye view of the corps experience it seems that crew leaders have the greatest amount of control over the participants’ experience while gaining knowledge, working, and participating in team, staff, and crew interactions. A strong crew leader seems to have the power to improve learning, provide good work conditions, encourage teamwork, and facilitate good crew interactions. As management selectively chooses top-notch crew leaders, crew leaders will be able to focus on improving, if needed in the previously mentioned categories. We may then be able to facilitate more positive experiences, avoid more negative experience, and in turn provide more future benefits for conservation corps participants. A model derived from the codes is explained below.

Taking a step back from the eight main codes we see how the themes flow and tie together into four main sections, see Figure 1. Gaining knowledge, work, interactions & relationships, and teamwork all seem to be part of the actual participant experience. Then depending on what takes place in those four codes we see a fun, positive experience, or a negative experience. It should be noted that there is a much larger amount of fun, positive experiences being mentioned compared to a much smaller amount of negative experiences which can be seen in the model depicted by a larger arrow leading to fun, positive experiences and a smaller arrow leading to negative experiences. Now whether or not participants have a positive or negative experience may then have an effect on the amount of perceived future benefits they receive from the program immediately after attending or in the distant future. Again

it can be illustrated in the model that although some participants with a negative experience still may gain perceived future benefits, the large majority of participants with perceived future benefits had a fun and/or positive experience. Representative quotes of the model can be found below.

- One participant mentions learning, growing as an individual, and having fun. He also talks about graduating and receiving his high school diploma, which fall into the category of perceived future benefits, “My experience in the California Conservation Corps have been up and down but most of all fun. I came in a shy kid and I sill am but not as much. I managed to graduate and get my high school diploma... Thank you so much everyone and a special thanks to Chris Rocke and Duane Wilsom for giving me this opportunity. I would recommend this job to anyone...”
- Another participant discusses learning, a fun experience, and how the corps has taken him on a better path, “It [the corps] was fun and a good experience to learn some things I wasn’t aware of. Now I believe it took me on a better path.”
- Another fun, positive experience shows a distinct perceived future benefit of discovering career interests, “It’s been super fun with some great memories. This experience has showed me what I really am interested in career wise.”

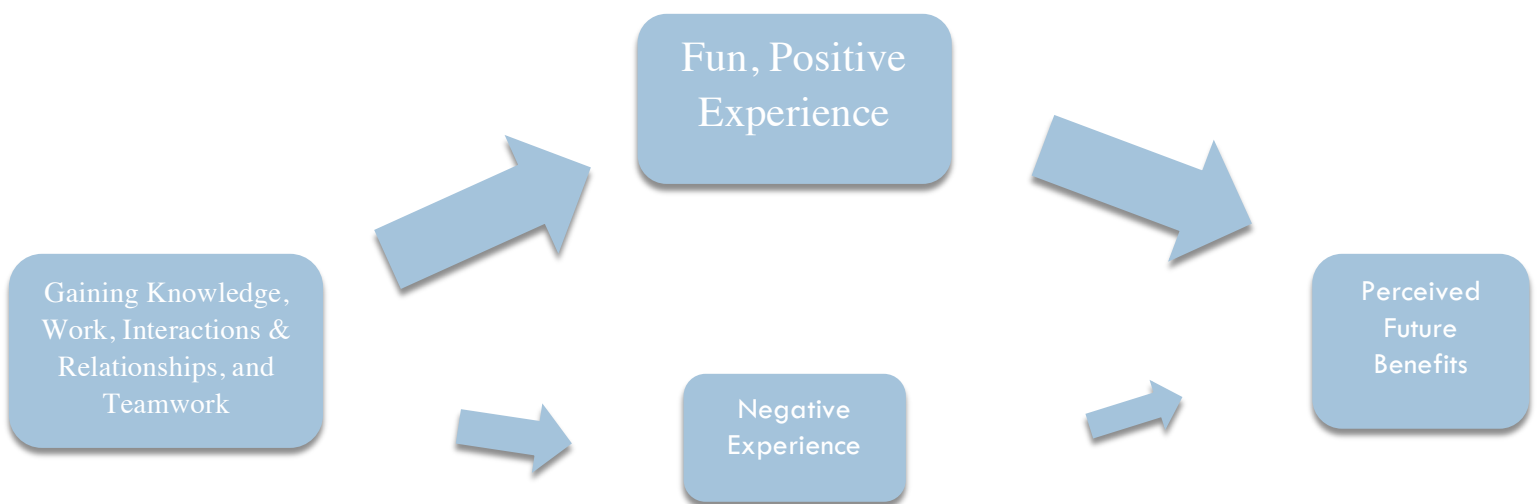


FIGURE 1 – BIRDS EYE VIEW OF THE CORPS EXPERIENCE

Conclusion

The corps experience is widely diverse and offers a myriad of different experiences for its participants. Participants are able to learn and work during what seems to be a very positive experience for many. Through their interactions with crewmembers and staff, corps members are given opportunities to gain and refine skills that may benefit them in their future endeavors. From teamwork and leadership to building fences and clearing trails, the corps experience provides a fun experience where the upcoming generation can flourish.

Relationships between the codes were often seen in the data. One relationship among codes worth noting is that between work, fun, and positive experience. Although work or living conditions can be challenging participants often mentioned having a rewarding experience or having fun as they worked or participated in tasks. Another interesting relationship was that between negative comments and interactions. Very few of the negative comments were about the work or living conditions, whereas most of them were concerning crewmembers, staff, and the hierarchy of the program.

Similar types of analysis can be done using the Participant Toolkit provided to the corps. Surveys consisting of an open-ended question will provide the means by which to collect and analyze data containing information that will help in the improving and refining of your current programs.

One interesting point noticed outside of the data was that of the perceptions of participants in relation to the corps. Some participants seemed to look at the corps with a goal in mind, e.g. getting a high school diploma. Others left having an idea where they wanted to go to college or what kind of field they wanted to work in. Future research might explore participants' motivation for entering the program and seeking to understand what role the corps plays in participants personal, educational, and career goals and aspirations.