



# National Evaluation of Service Corps Programs

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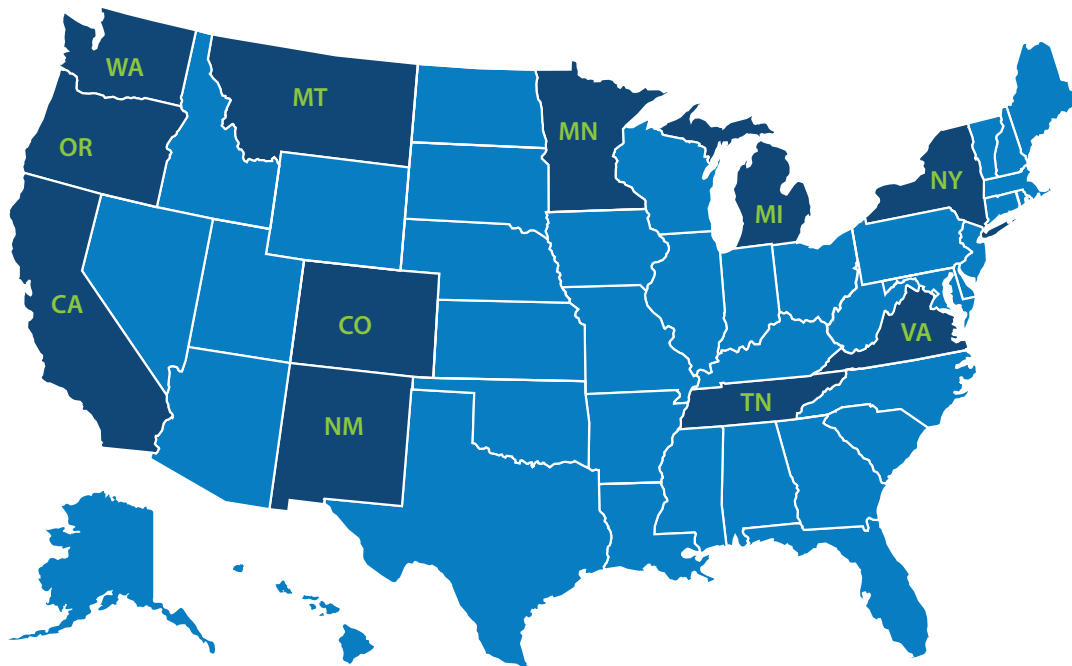


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# 1

## Introduction



Service Corps programs are offered across the country each year to provide hands-on service opportunities for youth and young adults to engage in short-term environmental conservation projects and develop skills to be successful in their careers and communities. Corps programs operate in both rural and urban areas within national and local park systems, as well as on tribal lands. The shared goals of Corps programs are for members to become engaged citizens and environmental stewards while learning concrete skills and giving back to local communities.



In 2021, the National Park Foundation (NPF) and Public Lands Service Coalition (PLSC) contracted with RTI International to conduct an outcome evaluation of Conservation Corps programs. The NPF and PLSC sought to better understand the range of benefits of Corps programs and inform program improvement for Corps programs. These organizations also sought to broaden their understanding of systemic barriers in conservation contributing to exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and participants with other social identities who have been historically excluded from the conservation field.

The purpose of the evaluation was twofold:

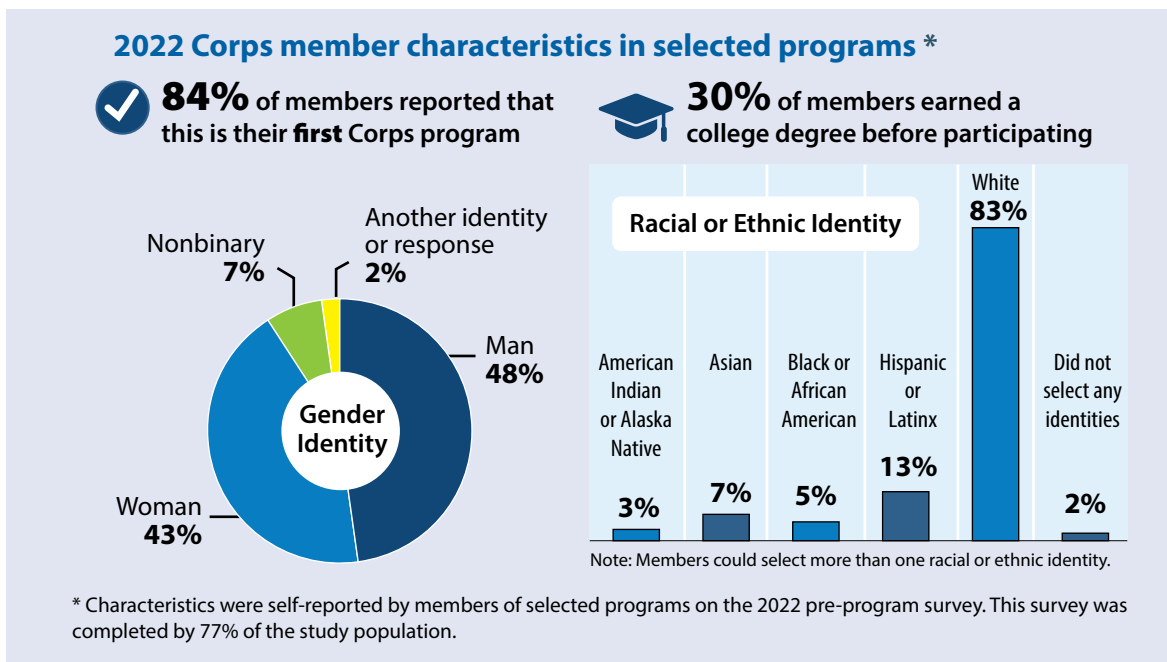
1. Examine post-program outcomes for Corps members in terms of skills, knowledge, interests, and future activities.
2. Understand the experiences of Corps members from historically disenfranchised and excluded communities.

To examine these topics, RTI worked with NPF and Corps program leaders to identify Corps members' outcomes of interest, co-develop data collection materials, collect data from Corps members, and interpret findings. Data were collected through a series of surveys (pre-program, immediate-post-program, 1-year follow-up survey), a photovoice participatory action research project, focus groups and interviews with Corps alumni, and interviews with Corps organization staff. See the appendix for more details on data collection methods.

The population for the study included 540 Corps members who participated in one of 16 programs across nine organizations in 2022. A total of 416 members participated in data collection. For the purposes of this study, RTI focused on Corps programs lasting from 6 weeks to 6 months that used a cohort model, where a group of members began and moved through the service term at the same time. This decision was made to adhere to the study timeline and concentrate on one type of Service Corps program. Corps organizations were selected based on their program offerings, willingness to participate in data collection, and diversity of members who were typically served.

**Through participating in the Corps program, organizers hope members will:**

- Learn 21st-century workplace skills needed to drive America's growing economy.
- Demonstrate knowledge and interest in conservation stewardship.
- Engage in environmental stewardship actions after their service term.
- Experience a sense of belonging in the conservation community, within the Corps, and at large.
- Gain skills and knowledge to pursue careers of interest, especially in the conservation field.



This report synthesizes findings across all data collection activities conducted by RTI and a consulting subject matter expert. The report is broken into seven chapters. Each chapter begins with a spotlight capturing the true story of a Corps member who participated in the study. All members gave us permission to use their real names and some provided an identity statement to accompany the spotlight.

- **Chapter 2** starts with a snapshot of Corps member activities 1 year after they completed their service term.
- **The next three chapters** summarize program impacts on career pathways—how the Corps program helped members get to this point—by highlighting the impacts of the Corps program on pursuit of conservation-related careers (Chapter 3), impacts on general career readiness (Chapter 4), and impacts outside of the workforce (Chapter 5). Importantly, the activities captured in this study represent one point in time and long-term activities or outcomes may differ.
- **Chapter 6** diverges from the focus on career pathways to explore members' sense of belonging during the service term and understand how Corps organizations may support diversity and inclusion in their programs.
- **Chapter 7** concludes with implications for Corps organizations and future research based on member suggestions and lessons learned from the evaluation. The full Panel met 18 times during the 2-year project, with subgroup meetings during development of the Panel's Principles in Year 1 and IEP template section revisions in Year 2. Meetings were conducted both in person and virtually. Facilitators gathered input on agenda and action items through group discussion. Meetings included whole-group discussions, small-group discussions in response to a specific prompt or discussion item (conducted in breakout rooms during virtual meetings), and brainstorming of next steps. RTI staff attended Panel meetings and a sample of small-group meetings to observe and document the process.

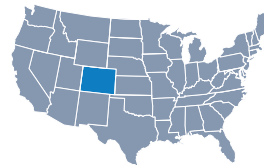
# 2

## Where were Corps members 1 year later?



Dan  
**Mile High Youth Corps, Summer 2022**

*"I am a non-binary queer individual assigned female at birth. I am also Puerto Rican."*



Dan participated in the Corps program while pursuing their undergraduate degree. Prior to joining the Corps, Dan was unsure whether they

ultimately wanted to pursue conservation work because they didn't know if they wanted to pursue a career that required manual labor and being outdoors often. Dan enjoyed engaging in field work during the program and is hoping to incorporate that in their career. **Dan noted that, "through the Service Corps, I realized I love this work and it is something I want to go into." Now in their last semester, Dan is graduating with a Bachelor of Science in geosciences and a focus on climate change.** Dan is currently in a research assistantship while applying to master's degree programs in geosciences, prompted by their experiences in the Corps. In the long term, they are considering a PhD and government career pathway with organizations such as the NOA or USGS.

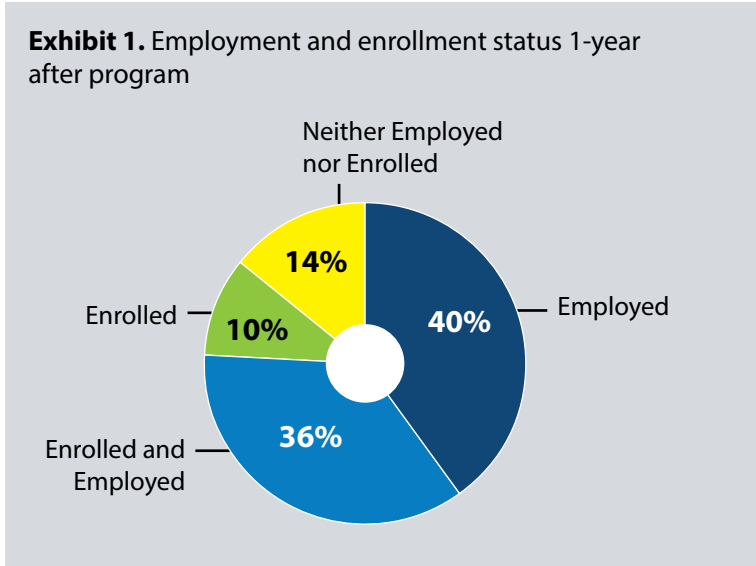
In addition to affirming their career interests, Dan's experience in the Corps program prompted them to volunteer more often in their community (at least once a month), engaging in work such as beach cleanups, counting and examining oysters and seagrass cells, and conducting water samples with their local environmental science lab. Dan explained that they pursue these volunteer experiences to learn and foster their passion for environmental conservation work. **Dan applies conservation and technical knowledge and skills in their volunteer work that they learned through educational seminars that they attended during the Corps program.**

*One year after completing a Corps program, 162 Corps alumni responded to a survey about their employment, their education, and how those activities related to conservation. About 84% of alumni reported at least one job or education program (Exhibit 1). This chapter summarizes Corps member activities 1 year after the program.*

**Most (76%) alumni were employed in a paying job, internship, or service opportunity.**

Among the 123 employed alumni:

- **Job intensity**—50% were in a full-time position, 38% were in a part-time position, and 12% were in a short-term opportunity such as another Employment and enrollment status 1-year after program Corps program or other national service opportunity.
- **Wages**—63% reported earning between \$10,000 and \$50,000 per year, and 5% reported earning over \$50,000 per year. All alumni earning over \$50,000 were employed full time.
- **Industry**— 31% worked for a government agency, with most in a federal (19 alumni) or state (10 alumni) agency. Two alumni worked in tribal government. Among alumni employed in federal agencies, eight worked in the U.S. Forest Service and three worked in the National Park Service.
  - Outside of government, alumni had positions in education and health care organizations (15%), other nonprofit organizations (19%), and for-profit institutions (35%).
  - About 51% of employed alumni who reported a connection to conservation were working for a government agency.
  - Among those in a short-term opportunity, seven alumni were pursuing another Service Corps service term.



**Close to half (46%) of alumni were enrolled in a degree program or other type of education program.**

- About 40% of alumni used their AmeriCorps Education Award within 12 months of program completion, and another 49% intended to use it in the future. The percentage of alumni who used the award was lower for those who identified as BIPOC than for other alumni (36% vs. 46%).
  - Most (74%) used or intended to use it for tuition toward a higher education program or repayment of a college loan.

**Most alumni who planned to enter conservation were in conservation-related positions 1 year later.**




- On the immediate-post-program survey, 91 alumni reported envisioning themselves in conservation. One year later, 69 of these alumni (70%) reported conservation-related jobs or education programs.
- One year after the program, 89 alumni (64%) perceived that their education or employment activities were related to the conservation field.
- Alumni felt the Corps program directly impacted their understanding of and interest in conservation-related job and education opportunities.

“Serving in the Corps highlighted the parts of the green sector that were valuable to me. I learned how to get involved at the community level, and it inspired me to focus on conservation and go to school!”

“While I was on the job, I did very exclusively trail work and removing vegetation. I learned that I can do that as a member of the park service and make a lot more money than I could on a conservation crew, which was also cool to learn.”

**Most alumni who planned to enter conservation were in conservation-related positions 1 year later.**

- On the immediate-post-program survey, 91 alumni reported envisioning themselves in conservation. One year later, 69 of these alumni (70%) reported conservation-related jobs or education programs.
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Conservation connections to jobs		
 <p><b>Engage in government land, animal, and/or ecosystem preservation</b></p> <p>“I work in enforcement for [Midwest State] department of environmental management’s office of water quality. This job helps to reduce water pollution in [this state].”</p> <p>“We work to preserve our wetlands, streams, and all together ecosystems in the national forests. We work to ensure the health of our watersheds continues into the future.”</p>	 <p><b>Job responsibilities include community engagement, research, and/or education related to conservation</b></p> <p>“I educate and demonstrate proper conservation of our environment to protect these aquatic animals. I am also encouraging a new generation to care about the environment.”</p> <p>“I work for a company that specializes in green energy solutions such as energy recycling, efficiency optimization, and renewable energy.”</p>	 <p><b>Change the conservation field through policy and advocacy efforts</b></p> <p>“I have learned how to talk to people and encourage good communication in my current job. This is huge because strong conservation is only possible through politics. You must be able to communicate with all types of people in politics.”</p>



**Alumni continued their environmental commitment after the program.**

- About 93% reported they were likely to take actions to mitigate climate change personally or professionally.
- About 93% perceived that their health and future were directly tied to the health of the environment.
- If they had extra time or money, 95% agreed they would devote some of it to engaging more with environmental issues.
- About 80% saw themselves as stewards of the land.
- Over the course of the year following the Corps program, 80% continued to educate themselves about environmental issues and 63% raised awareness about environmental issues among peers or family.



**I have gained an appreciation for experiencing our climate-changed environment on a visceral level as opposed to purely thinking about it on an intellectual/academic level."**

**"I also got a firsthand view of how impactful wildfires can be, so I'm very interested in figuring out a way to continue helping heavily impacted burn zones. It was eye opening to see how much climate change has affected the Pacific Northwest."**

**Conservation connections to further education**



**Field of study explicitly related to environmental science or conservation**

"I am studying environmental justice and the intersection of identity and nature. Conservation is a big part of many people's identities that I hope to encourage."

"Environmental science goes hand in hand with conservation efforts to provide more sustainable practices. I'm looking to use the degree to become a conservation officer for the state."



**Coursework that intersects with the study of conservation**

"In anthropology, I personally see a great connection to conservation and learning about the earth and how we can prosper as humans living alongside nature. There are many avenues one can take in anthropology, and I am very interested in learning about conservation to see if it is the path I would choose after graduation."

"Studying environmental philosophy through literature. Literary theory, social theory, cultural geography, etc."



**Pursuing research or further training connected with the conservation field**

"My graduate program aims to address complex ecological issues and make scientifically based solutions that are beneficial to people, the environment, and our economy. This is driven by the need for sustainable practices and conservation efforts."

"I'm interested in being an EMT for fire crews."

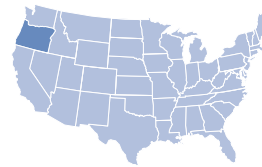
# 3

## Connecting Corps experiences with conservation careers



Amellia  
**YouthWorks, Summer 2022**

*"I identify as a white female."*



After graduating from a 4-year degree program, Amellia worked in a seasonal labor job and a bakery. She soon went on to participate in the Corps and then apply to public agency jobs, looking for positions related to her degree in biology at the local, county, state, and federal levels. **Amellia was able to confidently navigate the USA Jobs website and complete her applications.** However, none of her applications was successful and she found the application process challenging because of the number of jobs she had to apply to and the minimal number of offers she received.

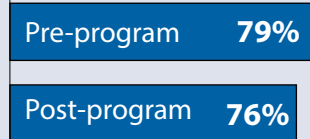
Amellia eventually found a seasonal role at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a biological science technician. Although Amellia is currently serving in a short-term program with the American Conservation Experience Corps, she plans to return to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service after her term. She chose these activities to continue building her background in the public service sector. **Furthermore, it was her experience in the Corps program that prompted her understanding of how nonprofit and government agencies work together to spur change. She noted, "After my time in the Corps, I have a solid definition of public service, which is working in a way that builds community at multiple levels and comes from multiple levels of background and expertise."**

*The Corps program impacted members' interest and participation in conservation-related jobs and education programs. This chapter describes members' interest and participation after the program at two time points: immediately after the program (308 alumni) and 1 year after the program (162 alumni).*

**Alumni expressed high interest in conservation-related careers before and after their service term.**

- Over three-quarters of Corps members were interested in pursuing a career in conservation at the time they entered the program and at the end of the program (Exhibit 2).
- Most members who completed the program (78%) envisioned themselves with a career in the field of conservation at the end of the program. This sentiment was similar across members with different racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identities.
- About 84% of alumni agreed that they would take a job in the field of conservation, if given the option, 1 year after the program.

**Exhibit 2.** Interest in conservation careers, before and after the program



**Alumni reported the service term enhanced and reinforced their interest in the conservation field.**

- Alumni reported that the service term helped them identify the specific jobs or types of work they enjoyed completing, such as invasive species removal and trail development.
- Alumni determined whether they enjoyed being out in nature and/or participating in manual labor as a job.
- Some members, particularly those who identified as women or nonbinary, realized that they were capable of types of conservation work that they had not particularly considered. The program gave them confidence to be in nature and doing hands-on conservation work. One member described how the service term helped them understand their own strengths and interests:

*"I live in Florida, so I've never really gotten to experience mountains before. And to be able to work in the mountains and do conservation work. Conservation work is something that I've always wanted to do, ... I hadn't had the chance up until this point. So I was a little nervous to participate in the Service Corps because I had never done anything like that. And I was like, 'Well, what if I hate being outside? It sounds really fun, but what if I get there and I'm miserable? What if this is not cut out? What if I'm not cut out for this?' And so I was nervous when I first started participating, but I ended up really, really liking it, and I'm glad that I put myself out there for this program because it's not something that a lot of people can say that they've done."*

**"**It had a pretty profound effect on my future career aspirations because I didn't really know what I wanted to do before. And then, after doing Service Corps, I was like, oh, I really enjoyed that. I want to do more of that. That's the world I want to live in, because I didn't realize that this was a whole kind of professional world that existed in conservation. So before I was majoring in philosophy and actually changed my major to forestry, fisheries, and wildlife."

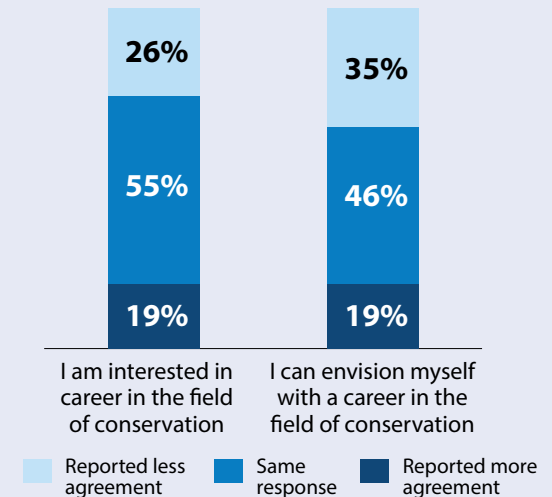
**"**Working in the Corps has impacted my school path as it helped me realize my passion for balancing recreation with conservation. Also, in the Corps, I learned that I enjoy manual labor, active jobs, learning opportunities, and working with my hands. These things I learned about myself will impact my future work and school decisions."

- For about half of members, the service term did not change their mind about whether to pursue a career in conservation (Exhibit 3).
  - About half reported that their interest or ability to envision themselves in conservation did not drastically change over the course of the program.
  - About one-third reported decreased interest, with most changing their mind to being unsure of whether they agree with statements about their interest.
  - A smaller percentage (17%) moved from being uninterested or unsure into being interested in conservation.

**Alumni learned information about conservation-related opportunities that helped them gain entry into related jobs and majors.**

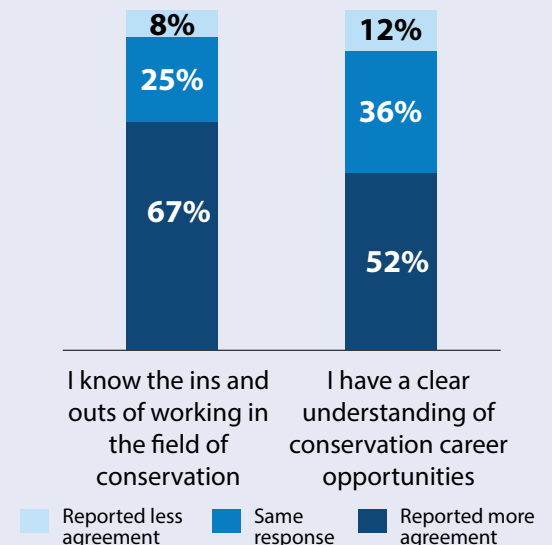
- At the end of the program, most members agreed that they had a clear understanding of conservation career opportunities (81%) and understood the ‘ins and outs’ of working in the field of conservation (73%) after the program.
- For most members, their understanding of the field improved over the program (Exhibit 4).
  - 67% of alumni increased their agreement that they understand the ‘ins and outs’ of the field.
  - 52% of alumni increased their agreement that they have a clear understanding of related career opportunities.
- Gains in understanding were higher in a statistically meaningful way for BIPOC and woman-identifying members than for other members. Specifically, 67% of BIPOC members and 59% of women reported a clearer understanding after the program, compared with 48% of non-BIPOC members and 49% of non-woman members.
- Exhibit 5 provides examples of information that members learned during the program. Activities that contributed to enhanced understanding included working on different types of projects, talking to alumni or veteran Corps members (Corps members who had done multiple rounds of service), and talking with project partners and building their network of potential employers.

**Exhibit 3.** Changes in member agreement with statements regarding their conservation career interest from pre- to post-program



Source: 2022 pre-program survey; 2022 post-program survey.

**Exhibit 4.** Changes in member agreement with statements regarding their understanding of the conservation field from pre- to post-program



Source: 2022 pre-program survey; 2022 post-program survey.



Exhibit 5. Types of knowledge members learned about the conservation field during the Corps program

**Breadth of job opportunities**



"Working in the Corps has helped me familiarize myself with land management agencies. I have learned about trail management and developed a variety of maintenance skills."

"Talking with project partners gave more insight into career opportunities related to landscape architecture."


"My Corps experience introduced me to what it was like to be in a position that works alongside nonprofits and agencies in the public sector, which has been valuable insight."

"The Corps has shown me some of the many different fields I can enter regarding my field of study and ideal career field. I have a better grasp of some of the intricacies and necessary areas within the conservation field."


**Pathways into conservation, including what education or work experience was required**

"The experience helped me find out what I would like to study in college and what sorts of career paths I can take upon completion of said college."

"I guess jobs in the park service. I didn't really know much about how to get into that; it seemed like this insurmountable wall. But then after seeing people put a face to it and realizing that I knew them and they were kind of saying, if you're interested, get to know us or reach out to us. Just having that exposure and learning that that's a career opportunity was really useful, I think."



**Better picture of what conservation work looks like day to day**



"I learned that there's many activities that go into conservation from hard work in the field and there's management work. There's just so many opportunities and so many things that contribute towards this goal or this idea of conservation. And everyone plays a part one way or another, whether it's writing papers for grants or managing work crews that are sent out to perform a wide variety of projects that manage plants or help clean up certain places. There's just many things that go into it."

"I have gained a better understanding of how the field of conservation operates and become more aware of the effort it takes to maintain trails and forests properly. I learned what it was like to work outdoors and got a taste for the line of work I want to do."

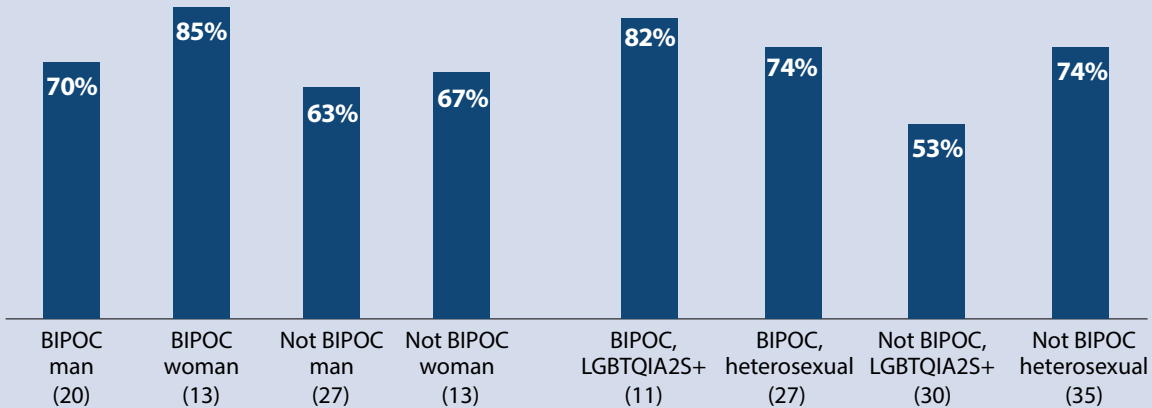
Source: 2022 post-program survey.

- **Some alumni report that, in the first year after completion, the program helped them to enter and be successful in conservation-related pathways.**
- Alumni felt that the Corps program helped them apply for jobs that they would not have otherwise considered.
  - Several members felt the experience gave them a foot in the door for conservation-related jobs. One member perceived that they were “considered for positions I otherwise would not have.” Another felt that they received a job with the Forest Service due to the “related experience” gained during the program.
  - 76% of members reported that their confidence in their ability to navigate federal job applications increased over the program.
- About 95% of alumni felt the Corps program was helpful for learning specialized skills or knowledge.
  - 77% of employed alumni who earned a technical certification in their program reported it was or would be useful in the workforce. For example, one alumni expected their new fire mitigation skills to be helpful in their future career as an arborist. Another alumnus felt the experience prepared them for the “conditions and expectations” in their current field research internship.
  - Other alumni reported the technical certifications enabled them to work on projects and complete tasks that their coworkers were not able to complete.
- A few alumni worked for the Corps organization or one of the partner organizations 1 year after the program. For example, one alumnus worked with a group doing wildland firefighting after learning about this organization during the Corps program.

**Most alumni of different identities continued to pursue conservation, though results indicate some variation across identities in the participation rates and places of employment.**

- Over half of alumni across different genders, sexualities, and racial/ethnic groups were pursuing a job or education program related to conservation 1 year after program completion (Exhibit 6).
- An area for further research is whether propensity to obtain government jobs varies across social identities. Among alumni working in conservation-related jobs, the percentage entering government jobs may differ across identities. These percentage differences are not statistically meaningful, potentially due to the small number of study participants identifying with nondominant identities. We were unable to further interrogate this finding in the current study.
  - 50% of BIPOC alumni reported their conservation-related job was in government, compared with 38% of other alumni.
  - Similarly, a lower percentage of men than women and other genders reported taking jobs in government (52% vs. 65% and 75%, respectively).
  - A higher percentage of alumni identifying as LGBTQIA2S+ reported government jobs related to conservation relative to other alumni (74% vs. 51%).

**Exhibit 6.** Percentage of alumni who were in an education or employment activity related to conservation 1 year after the program, by identifying characteristics



Note: Among alumni who provided demographic information in the pre-program survey and responded to the following survey 1 year after. Sample size varies based on whether alumni provided information on an identifying characteristic. Source: 2022 pre-program survey; 2023 1-year follow-up survey.

**Alumni in activities unrelated to conservation still considered entering the field as a long-term goal.**

- Of the 22 alumni who were not engaged in a conservation-related job or program, 19 (86%) still desired to find a job related to the conservation field.
- Interview participants expressed that people may be working outside of conservation jobs, even if they are interested in the field, for two main reasons:
  - There are few long-term jobs in the conservation field, leading many alumni to apply for the same jobs.
  - Alumni see a career in conservation as a longer-term goal. Even if it was not an area they worked in 1 year after program completion, they still felt this was an area they could pursue in the long term.
- One-year after program completion, eight alumni who were not in a conservation-related activity reported that they would not take a job in this field, if offered.
  - Seven of the eight alumni reported the reason as wages being too low.
  - An area for further exploration is why alumni identifying as both BIPOC and LGBTQIA2S+ are or are not interested in taking jobs in the conservation field. In this current study, alumni who identify with those identities were overrepresented in the group of alumni who said they would not take a job in this field if offered. This group of 12 individuals made up 10% of question respondents, and they made up 38% of alumni who were unwilling to take a job in the field (three of eight alumni). We were unable to explore these specific reasons in this study.

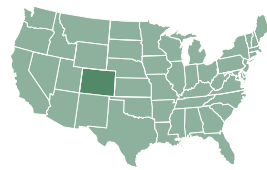
**“My Corps experience opened my eyes to the conservation work realm. It made me realize a true appreciation for nature and an urge to protect and preserve the planet’s precious, limited resources. Maybe not right away but in my career future, I will pursue environmental work!”**

# 4

## Connections to career readiness and durable skills



Gillian  
Conservation Legacy Durango, Summer 2022



Gillian joined the Corps program in the summer of 2022 between the first and second years of her master's program. Although the program aligned with her hobbies and interests—such as camping and hiking—she recalled that it initially seemed unrelated to her career and professional goals.

At this point, Gillian's education journey had already been in fields tangentially related to conservation, with her undergraduate degree in civil and environmental engineering and ongoing graduate work in environmental engineering.

Yet, Gillian's Corps experience ended up influencing her career in many ways. The Corps experience introduced her to a different realm of environmental work that combined her passion for outdoor activities with civil engineering tasks like preserving, building, and maintaining land.

Currently, Gillian is pursuing a lifelong goal of joining the Peace Corps as a math teacher in Tanzania.

**While she does not see this position as connected to conservation, she is considering Forest Service positions upon her return, where she can merge her love for environmental engineering with her enjoyment of being immersed in nature.** Gillian described how the Corps helped her see the connection between these interests, "I've always known I loved math and problem solving, but I didn't realize until my Corps experience and doing trail preservation work how much I loved being immersed in physically building and maintaining spaces too."



*Corps alumni indicated that the program provided skills and knowledge that would help them succeed in the workforce, regardless of whether they entered the field of conservation. During the Corps program, organizations offered training for members to learn how to find a job and be ready for a career and offered opportunities for members to learn durable skills relevant to any industry. Durable skills—also known as soft or transferable skills—are professional capabilities such as teamwork, leadership, and communication. This chapter describes shifts in members’ career-related skills, mindsets, and knowledge through the Corps program.*

### **Members gained clarity around their career interests and how to pursue them.**

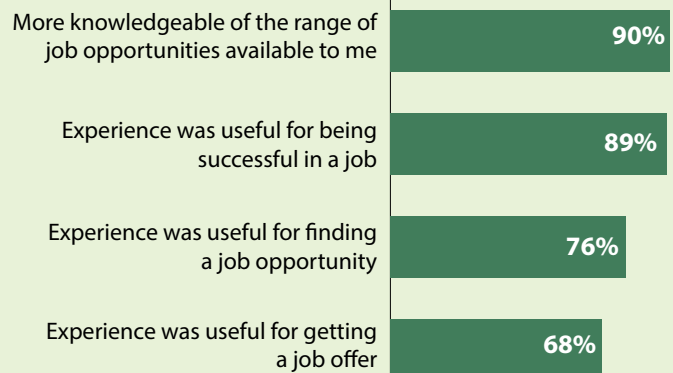
- Almost all alumni (91%) felt the program was useful for improving clarity about their career path.
- For those interested in conservation, as described in the previous section, this involved improving their working knowledge of the field, which clarified their career path.
- Many members learned more about their personal interests and ways to enter their field of interest, even beyond conservation.
  - 71% of alumni reported improvement in their confidence that they know the education and training opportunities aligned with their career.
  - Members reported feeling more cued in on their professional interests. Members shared sentiments such as having “more direction for my career goals” and being “more able to express my values and goals in my professional career.”

### **Although members felt more equipped for success in the workforce, some remained uncertain of whether they could acquire jobs, and most did not expect immediate pay raises.**

- Through participating in the program, 72% of alumni self-reported that they gained or identified the necessary resources for well-paying, stable employment.
  - The percentage of members who experienced this gain is higher among those identifying as BIPOC than for other individuals (84% vs. 70%) in a statistically meaningful way.
  - Fewer members (51%) felt the program helped them feel confident in their ability to obtain gainful employment, indicating that alumni faced other barriers to acquiring these jobs.

- At program completion, members reported gaining knowledge about workforce opportunities and how to obtain a paying job (Exhibit 7).
  - Almost all members reported they were more knowledgeable of the range of job opportunities available to them after participating in the program (90%) or felt the program was useful to be successful in a job (89%).
  - Fewer, though still more than half, felt more able to find jobs (76%) and obtain a job offer (68%).
  - Learning was similar across members with different identities, with one exception: Fewer members identifying as LGBTQIA2S+ indicated the program was useful to be successful than did other members (83% vs 94%). This difference is statistically meaningful, meaning it is unlikely due to chance.
  - Some Corps programs offered specific training on how to build a résumé or interview for job opportunities. Members who had access to these opportunities reported increased confidence in their abilities: 43% of members were more confident in their ability to build a résumé, and 53% were more confident in their ability to interview for a job.
- About 43% of members perceived the Corps program was not useful for improving pay.
  - For 20% of members, immediately after the program was too early to tell if they would experience a pay increase. In interviews, members suggested that earning higher wages was not a priority outcome of the program because they were not expecting to earn higher wages after participation.
  - However, in interviews, some members described low wages as a possible impediment to taking certain jobs in conservation in the long run or seeing this as a lifelong career.

**Exhibit 7.** Alumni agreement with statements about benefits of the program experience



Source: 2022 post-program survey.

### Members learned durable skills to succeed in any industry.

- At the start of the program, members rated themselves highly on questions about their teamwork, working across differences, and communication skills. As a result, a small number of members showed growth in these skills when survey responses before and after the program were compared.
- However, in open-ended responses about program impacts, many members indicated immediate gains in durable skills through their programs.
  - Most commonly, members described changes in their ability to communicate and work with others (Exhibit 8).
  - Other durable skills gained by members included leading a group, setting goals, and adaptability in professional settings.

**Exhibit 8.** Types of durable skills that members learned during the Corps program



**Working with others, especially across personal or social differences**

“[I have a] better understanding of group dynamics and being aware of different leadership styles.”

“[I] learned more about talking with people I am uncomfortable with.”

“I grew more comfortable working in a group among people of different backgrounds.”

**Interpersonal communication in professional settings**

“I have learned better communication skills and working with a team. I have learned to be independent while still accepting help from other people.”

“I am more confident as an individual, and I have learned to more clearly communicate my thoughts to a group.”



Source: 2022 post-program survey.

- One year later, 96% of alumni felt that the Corps program was useful for improving work skills.
  - Most (85%) employed alumni perceived that the program helped them build skills or gain knowledge that were helpful in their jobs, even outside of conservation. One alumni is now a graphic designer and feels the skills are still applicable: “I’ve found that many of the soft skills I gained working in a Corps have translated well into working in different industries. For example, I am capable of verbalizing my capacity and ability to complete tasks and am comfortable advocating for myself.”
  - Alumni indicated that some of the same durable skills—communication and interpersonal skills—were helpful in the workforce (Exhibit 9). This impact was shared across alumni of different identities.

**Exhibit 9.** Percentage of alumni who perceived various skills learned during the program were helpful in the workplace

<p><b>98%</b> Communicating with others in a group setting</p>	<p><b>94%</b> Managing workplace conflict</p>	<p><b>93%</b> Working with others through personal differences</p>
<p>“[I learned] how to interact/communicate with employees and employers.”</p>	<p>“The Corps experience helped me learn how to feel confident leading folks to a common goal; it also helped me learn how to handle conflict in the workplace professionally.”</p>	<p>“It helped me understand that different people work differently and it’s up to the manager to know what is the best-suited jobs and direction to give.”</p>

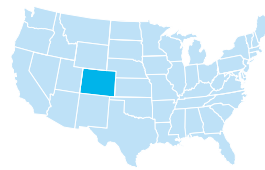
Note: Among Corps members who reported the program helped them build workplace skills.  
Source: 2023 1-year follow-up survey.

# 5

## Changes beyond the workplace



Haley  
**Mile High Youth Corps, Summer 2022**



After Haley participated in the Corps program, she worked at an oyster farm in Rhode Island. Haley found this opportunity through a fellow crew member who

recognized her strong work ethic and resilience and passed along Haley's resume.

After about one year, Haley left the farm due to a lack of advancement opportunities and is now pursuing a short-term woodworking training program. Haley credits her time in the Corps, where she was introduced to hand and power tools, as critical to her acceptance into this woodworking program. Additionally, **Haley's Corps experience taught her about her own toughness and ability to handle manual labor—camping on-site, carrying heavy tools like rope bars up to the worksite, and working in the sun. This experience gave her a sense of strength and perseverance, showing her what she is truly capable of.** Haley explained that, "Before Mile High, I never would pick up a screwdriver voluntarily. While on site we used all sorts of tools to build stuff as a team and I enjoyed that experience of seeing the progress that we were making. It felt very different from my schoolwork, where I didn't really see a point. By showing me the alternative, Mile High introduced me to a whole new set of career fields that no one ever told me were an option."

Haley's work with the Corps gave her a profound sense of pride and fulfillment. She shared, "People were hiking on the trails we were fixing," highlighting the powerful impact of her daily efforts. **This experience instilled in her a desire to continue making positive contributions to communities.** Inspired by her time in the program, she joined a food waste prevention group that delivers meals to people in need. Through this work, she finds herself at the intersection of learning about and raising awareness of environmental issues, driven by her passion for making a difference.



*Corps alumni experienced an evolution in their personal sense of self, especially in their level of self-confidence, and their environmental connection. This chapter summarizes alumni perceptions of how the Corps program influenced these areas of their lives.*

### Many alumni self-reported changes in their self-regard, self-confidence, and/or self-awareness.

- Most commonly, alumni described an increase in their self-confidence.<sup>1</sup>
  - For some alumni, this looked like a better understanding and view of themselves. For other alumni, this involved pushing their own physical and mental boundaries and becoming more confident in their abilities.
- Members with different social identities responded similarly to most questions regarding their sense of self. There are two exceptions:
  - Members identifying as BIPOC rated themselves higher than other members on their ability to cope with situations that are uncertain or unclear (37% vs. 25%).
  - Members identifying as LGBTQIA2s+ rated themselves higher than other members on their ability to find something positive to learn from a situation where they failed (31% vs. 19%).
- Members articulated that team-building activities and the structure of the cohort model provided opportunities for them to grow as individuals.
  - One member felt that their growth in sense of self went hand in hand with growth in her ability to work with a team: “I gained effective teamwork skills and the appreciation to collaborate! Just as much, I gained a stronger independence in my own work and strength to push through on my own.”
  - Another member described how their experience as part of a crew connected with their personal growth: “I met four people that I can fully trust and that I've had meaningful, difficult conversations with. The Corps helped me build confidence in my own ability to be self-sufficient and ready for adulthood.”

“I am more confident as an individual and I have learned to more clearly communicate my thoughts to a group. I feel better mentally and physically. I feel prepared for the future.”

“I gained a greater understanding of my wants and needs both personally and professionally.”

“I believe my world view and self-identity have changed for the better; serving gave me a lot of time to think about my future and what I wanted to do with my life.”

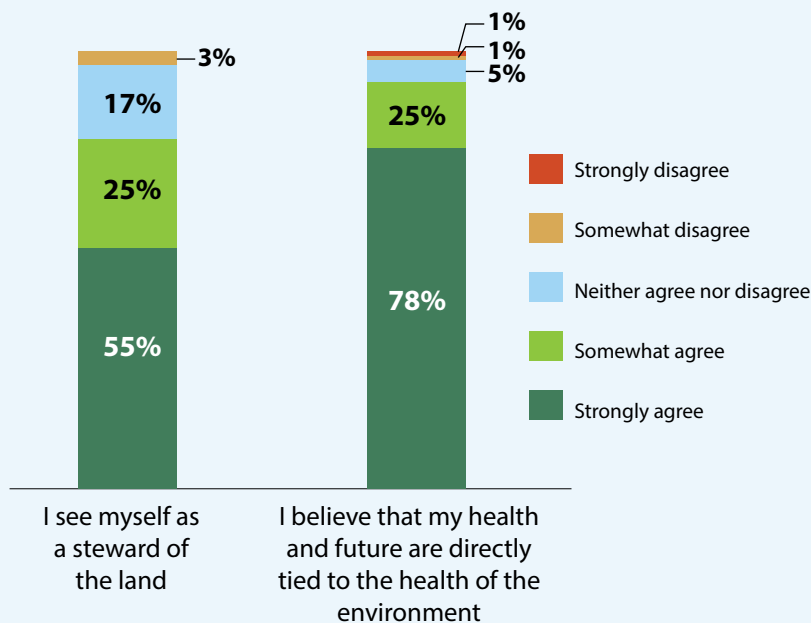
“[The Corps experience] had an overwhelmingly positive impact on my life path. The quality people and environment provided allowed for me to become more aware of myself, my desires, and my future. I am currently farther than I have ever been from knowing what I want to do with my life or having any plans for success; however, for the first time in my life I have genuinely felt confident in taking control of my life and future... [the experience] did start me down a life path of self-growth and healing.”

<sup>1</sup> While many alumni described changes in their sense of self, their self-ratings on related survey questions did not change in a meaningful way during the program. This may be because members' self-ratings on questions regarding these characteristics were high before the program. This is a common challenge in pre-post surveys where participants do not know where they really sit on a competency before learning about it during a program. In conversations about this result, Corps organization staff affirmed this possibility, speculating that members rated themselves highly because they did not realize they had room to grow in these areas.

**Alumni commitment to the environment continued and, for some, evolved into deeper understanding.**

- On the one-year follow up, almost all alumni (92%) reported continued engagement with the environment and most alumni felt connected to the environment.
  - Almost all alumni agreed that they were interested in learning about the natural environment (99%) and/or new ways to protect the natural environment (98%).
  - About 80% of alumni felt that they were stewards of the land, and 93% agreed that their well-being was tied to the environment (Exhibit 10).
  - Feelings of connection and types of engagement with the environment were similar across alumni of different identities.
- In interviews, alumni shared that they already felt connected to the environment before the program due to previous interest. For some, the Corps program changed the connection by:
  - increasing their comfort-level and self-confidence in natural settings, and/or
  - allowing them to move from reading about the environment to working with it, resulting in a deeper connection.

**Exhibit 10.** Agreement with statements regarding alumni’s personal connection with land and the environment immediately after the Corps program



Source: 2022 post-program survey.

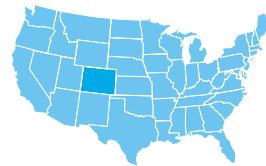
# 6

## Belonging in the Corps and the broader conservation field



Nessa  
**Mile High Youth Corps, Summer 2022**

*"I identify as a 1st generation person of color."*



Nessa participated in two Corps programs through the same organization – first as a crew member and second as the leader of two crews, one of which was the BIPOC group. **Nessa chose to get involved a second time to enhance her skill in the conservation field, take on a leadership role, and advocate for individuals**

**from marginalized communities to engage in leadership positions within Corps-like organizations.** Nessa's experiences deepened her connection to the community and desire to give back, as she was consistently involved in community work and land preservation during her time in the Corps. Nessa continues to pursue this passion in her community by occasionally refereeing Little League and participating in tree-planting opportunities.

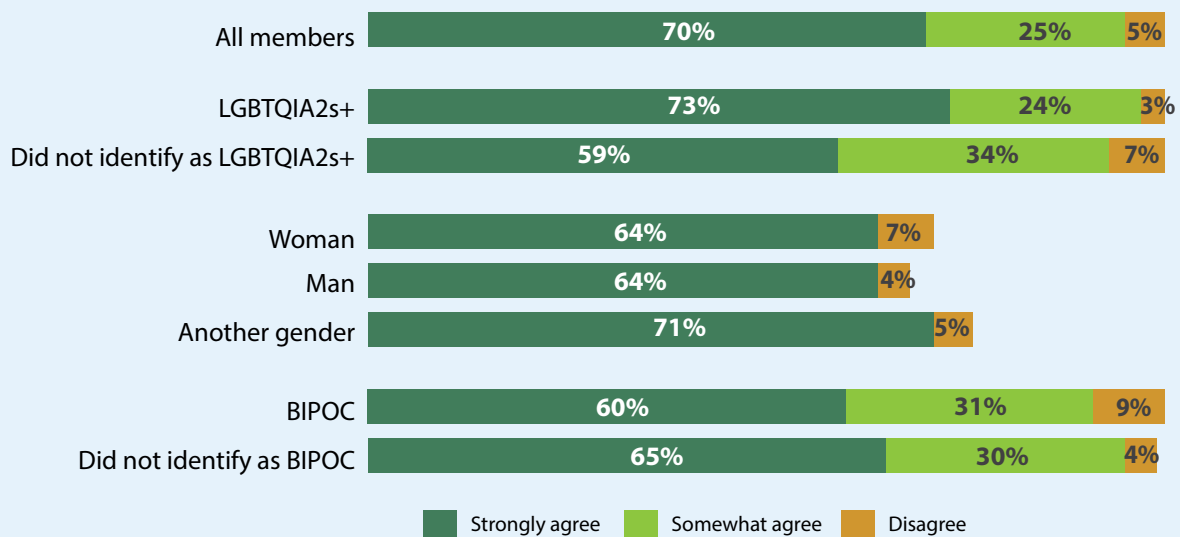
Nessa recently accepted a position as a park ranger with Denver Parks and Recreation. Nessa was interested in park ranger positions because she believes "work that is supporting community through recreation and being in the environment is more fulfilling than any other job I've done before." **She felt confident in her ability to find a park ranger role because her Corps experiences prepared her for the application process and what to expect in conservation workplaces.**

*The evaluation examined whether Corps programs were welcoming and inclusive for all members and specifically for those who reflect social identities that may have been systematically excluded from the conservation field. This includes people who identify in a racial or ethnic group that is not White, people identifying as women or nonbinary, and also people from the LGBTQIA2S+ community. By understanding their Corps experiences, we gain insights into the programs’ potential to serve as a gateway to diversify the conservation field. The evaluation also explored the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices of the organizations themselves to understand the context in which programming and support are offered to members.*

**Corps programs participating in this study provided a welcoming and supportive work environment for members from marginalized social identities.**

- Almost all (95%) of corps members felt a sense of belonging, with more than half of surveyed corps members strongly agreeing that they belonged in their Corps program. (Exhibit 11).
- Sense of belonging was similarly high for members who identified with different racial, gender, and sexual identities. There were no statistically meaningful differences in sense of belonging for members of different social identities, such as BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ members.
- Members felt supported when they did face challenges. For example, among members who experienced a challenge, 94% knew who to ask for support and 97% felt they received the support they needed after reaching out for help.

**Exhibit 11.** Member agreement with the statement “I felt like I belonged in the Corps program”



Source: 2022 post-program survey.



- All 22 interviewees who identified as a woman, nonbinary, and/or being a person of color saw the programs as inclusive and welcoming. For example:
  - Nonbinary member: “So I liked that my program was really inclusive, and I think it's really hard as a trans person in the workforce to find a place that feels safe and affirming to work at. And I was never mis-gendered at [program], and everyone was really welcoming. And so I really enjoyed that aspect of it. The people there were very cool.”
  - Member of color: “There were only four crew members along with myself and then one group leader. And, out of that, all four crew members, we are all people of color. Our group leader was White, but she has a native background. She's a queer woman. And I felt like it was a very inclusive space for all of us. I felt like we all were seen; we had a lot of open, honest conversations about our backgrounds; and I really felt welcomed. I felt like it was a great space for people of color, a great space for queerness. Yeah, I felt like we had a good time.”

**While members with underrepresented identities felt programs were generally inclusive and welcoming, some members still experienced incidents where they felt unwelcomed and/or experienced discriminatory actions from their peers or project partners.**

- One hundred and twenty-five crew members (41%) reported experiencing at least one discriminatory action during their service period. Discriminatory actions were defined as feeling threatened or harassed, being treated with less respect, or feeling less supported than other peers.
- The most common discriminatory action inflicted by others people acting as if they thought members were not smart. The most extreme instance of discriminatory action reported by members was being regularly threatened or harassed; eight members felt threatened or harassed at least once per week. These members most often felt that their gender identity, age, and/or physical ability were the basis for their discrimination. Fewer than 20 members reported the following reasons for the experiences with discrimination: ancestry or national origin, education or income, race or ethnicity, religion, skin color, and sexual orientation.
- Members who identified with social identities typically excluded from conservation described experiencing **two types of microaggressions** perpetuated by project partners and/or crew members:
  - Questioning authority or capabilities of crew members who did not present as a man:
 

*“The people at the national park that we worked with, I feel like towards the beginning of the program, we felt very underestimated because we were a very female-heavy crew. So I do think we definitely felt some underestimation towards us, but not within my immediate crew mates.”*
  - Insensitive comments about gender or racial identity:
 

*“The project partner at the time was really pushing our group to do more.... He wanted us to do the work of six big burly men, so I had said that to the group, and one of my other teammates or crews had said, ‘Yeah, he should have hired some Bolivians to do all the heavy, hard work for cheap.’ That had just set me off just because I am a first generation and I do come and I do see their struggles.”*

*“And I was in a crew of six and it was all men besides me, which is fine, but I felt really alienated from some conversations.... And just little snide comments here and there that kind of just made me feel not good about myself and my position in the crew.”*

- A small percentage of members (16%) considered leaving the program because it was unwelcoming and/or because they did not feel as if they belonged. The survey did not ask respondents why they felt unwelcome, but disaggregating data by social identity characteristics indicates that most members who considered leaving the program identified as LBGTQIA+.
- **Most members who reported discriminatory actions still felt supported by others and felt like they belonged in the Corps program.** Data suggest that corps members who felt supported by their program staff and felt valued in their program were able to compartmentalize the discriminatory incidents in ways that did not affect their overall experience. However, this study did not systematically explore this possibility or the directionality of relationships between discrimination, program support and sense of belonging.
  - **About 79% of members who experienced discriminatory actions felt they belonged in their program, compared to 100% of members who did not experience these actions.**
  - Corps members who felt supported by their program were less likely to report instances of discrimination or lower sense of belonging. This was statistically meaningful.
  - Members reported that they felt supported when crew leaders managed the microaggressions or noninclusive interactions by addressing instances with the crew and intervening with project partners who were acting noninclusively. For example, a crew leader corrected someone mis-gendering a nonbinary crew member and provided education on why it was important to use correct pronouns. Only one crew member felt that their crew leader was not able to handle the incident.

**Sense of belonging in the conservation community at large is related to belonging in the Corps program. Members who reported more connection to the conservation community reported higher rates of belonging in their program, and vice versa.**

- Most members reported a sense of belonging **in the conservation community (90%) and that they were a member of that community (84%)**. When asked what helped them feel like members of the community, alumni most often pointed to a connection with nature and interest in outdoors activities.
- Corps members who identified with a marginalized social identity felt that their sense of belonging depended on whether the space included people from different backgrounds and social identities. They acknowledged that their Corps program was more diverse than other conservation spaces and that presence of people that looked like them influenced their sense of belonging.



## Photovoice Project

To continue exploring sense of belonging in conservation, RTI facilitated a photography research project where three Corps members who identified as a woman or nonbinary and as persons of color documented their experience through photography. These participants noted they felt their experiences shifted the narrative of “who belonged” in conservation. They initially perceived conservation as mainly a White and male-dominated field, but their own and fellow crew members’ experiences were influencing this shift.



### Dan

"This picture is of me during my second field day of S-212 Wildland Fire Chainsaw training. In this picture, I am making my first face cut ever. This photo in particular is significant to me because it was the first time I had ever done something like this, and it was a profound moment in which I recognized how privileged I am to be able to be doing something like this as a Hisapnic woman. Chainsaw usage can be seen as a "manly" job, and conservation jobs are still overpowered by men and those who are not people of color."

### Nessa

"This experience is one that makes me feel like my authentic self as I am able to use my full body to swing this axe and take down a tree while being able to see the reward of my effort. I feel like within this project site that I felt most comfortable and able to shine within my identity."



Their experiences in nature and connections with their crew allowed members to feel like their authentic selves and have a strong sense of belonging.

**Most members felt their Corps programs were committed to diversity and provided resources to support an inclusive culture** (Exhibit 12).

- Ninety-four percent of members strongly or somewhat agreed that their program had a strong commitment to DEI.
- About 88% of members strongly or somewhat agreed that their program provided sufficient resources to support a diverse group of Corps members.

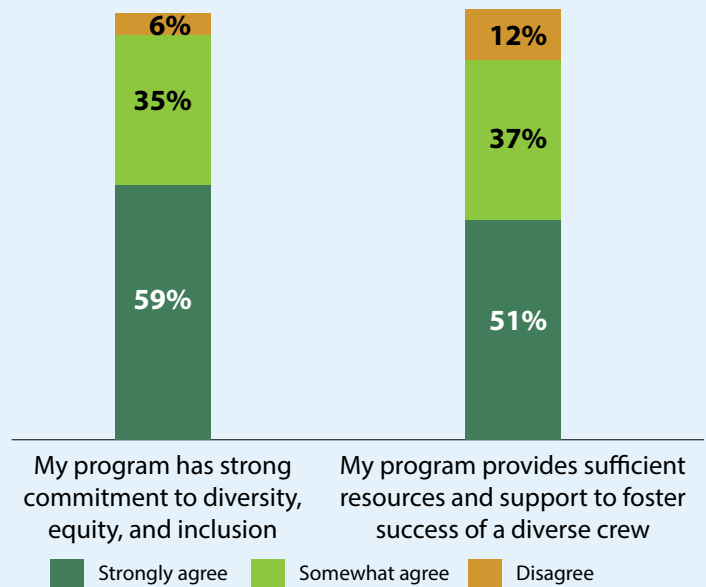
**Corps members identified three aspects of the Corps program that contributed to a welcoming and inclusive culture.**

1. *Providing explicit educational opportunities on DEI and inclusivity that were required*

The main way Corps programs created an inclusive culture was providing ongoing and intentional educational opportunities about DEI topics that signaled to participants identifying with nondominant and dominant social identities the value of inclusion. Often these happened in the orientation or at the start of the program to set the tone for the entire experience. A few Corps programs also educated members about the history of the land, which members reported as emphasizing the DEI lens of the program. Beyond general concepts about DEI, Corps programs provided training on microaggressions and pronoun usage that taught members how to be inclusive.

- “Although there was a White American majority, I still definitely felt like I belonged there because on day one was a big lesson on inclusivity of different racial groups or those of different backgrounds. And this carried on for pretty much the first week of the Service Corps, where we were constantly taught with the idea that everyone, no matter their experience or their background, is welcome in the Corps and that we should pretty much treat each other as equals.... It was completely mandatory; we had to always sit down and discuss it with our crews. So again, it definitely hammered the idea that you should be more diverse or be more inclusive for people of different backgrounds.”
- On learning about comments and statements one could make that would be considered microaggressions toward the LGBTQIA+ community: “I’m just from a really, really small town and it was really eye-opening for me and there was definitely some microaggressions [toward the LGBTQIA+ community] I had not noticed were microaggressions. So it was a really good learning experience for me for sure. And I think it would be for a lot of other people.”

**Exhibit 12.** Agreement with statements regarding DEI support and resources during the Corps program



Source: 2022 post-program survey.



## 2. *Having diverse crews reflecting nondominant identities*

Corps programs created an inclusive culture by having Corps members with nondominant identities serving in the corps, especially as team leaders.

- “I feel like all my crews were very inclusive; I feel like we all came from different backgrounds and all the crews were different races, each individual and we all just.... I feel like everybody got along very well and we were all accepting of each other and knowing that we're different, we always still tried to work together and just get along well no matter what the situation was.”
- “I think we had more women in the crew than in the entire program, than men, by probably a long shot. And all the men that I interacted with were very respectful, and I'm still friends with some of them. My crew lead, one of them was nonbinary and then one of them was a woman, and they were both very supportive.”
- “I think it was just the people who were there. I really loved that [my program] is very woman focused and empowered, which I thought was really great. Most of the Corps was women, which I hadn't really seen before in a hard labor job like that. So that was really inspiring. and I thought that was helpful to help me feel included while I was learning all these skills that I'd never done before.”

## 3. *Providing affinity spaces*

Some Corps organizations had affinity crews that organized around a specific identity (for example, cultural or gender based). Some did not have the formal crew but created informal gatherings across crew leaders and members around social identities. Crew members found both venues affirming. They signaled to them that they belonged because the Corps recognized the need for affinity groups.

- “Well, going into it, [affinity groups] made me feel a lot better because I knew I wouldn't be the only queer person of color there. And so it put me at ease. I was a little nervous, because when we got the acceptance emails and everything, they explained that Montana is a predominantly White state, built across a lot of Native land, so I was a little nervous about that because I come from a pretty diverse area. So it just put me at ease going into it.”
- “Before the program started and during, they let everyone know that there was a community, two different community spaces, one for Corps members of color and one for LGBTQ+ members, Corps members. And so there were group chats for that. There were separate camping trips and it was all very inclusive. And then in the first week during training, there was also a lot of, there was diversity training, but then there were activities to get everyone comfortable and understanding of that.”

**While members noted factors that made Corps programs more inclusive for people representing different marginalized identities, they also called out the lack of diversity in program membership and organization staff.**

- Members noted that programs reflected demographics of the environmental field at large. One member of color shared:
 

*“I did some research and I got a feeling [the Corps program] would be definitely diverse, but at the same time I knew they were a part of the conservation field or the environmental field so I knew in the end, no matter how diverse they would be, I would definitely meet a lot of male White Americans”*
- Corps members perceived that the programs were limited in their efforts to increase diversity in the program membership. A few members gave suggestions for different recruitment strategies such as partnering with Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

**Future research can explore the relationship between financial supports and increased diversity of the Corps programs.**

- A few Corps members hypothesized that lack of diversity in the Corps programs could be attributed to limited pay and/or lack of housing, noting that engaging in a service program might require members come from more privileged backgrounds. However, lack of pay and challenges with housing were mentioned by many members, not solely by members from historically excluded communities. One Corps member said, “[Corps program does not] provide housing, which I understand why, but myself and a lot of the other Corps members were living in our cars, which at least they allowed us to park overnight at the office.”
- Corps members mentioned that a few programs provided additional stipends for members from different backgrounds. Additionally, one program was noted for offering support to all members without requiring members to fit into any specific demographic characteristic nor requiring any proof of need. One member explained, “We had a community food market that was accessible to everyone. You didn't have to offer up any personal information about yourself. They would provide funding to help buy gear. Again, no information was asked about your financial needs.”



**What approaches do Corps organizations use to lay the foundation for a welcoming and inclusive culture?**

Members pointed to practices in three organizations that were particularly effective at fostering a welcoming, inclusive culture. RTI interviewed staff in these organizations. In interviews, staff in these organizations lifted practices that provide a foundation for the effective inclusion and belonging programming:

A strong commitment to transformative change at all levels of the Corps organization	Addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion in specific training modules and throughout other training opportunities	Individual reflective practices at the staff, crew leader, and crew member levels
Embracing work related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging as a process, not a product		Communication within Corps programs and across the organization to support continuous improvement

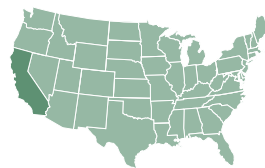
# 7

## Lessons learned



Gillian

**Student Conservation Association East Bay Regional Park Corps, Summer 2022**



Gillian participated in the Corps program directly after graduating with a bachelor's degree. She has since taken jobs in several short-term conservation positions.

**Gillian began with an internship in the Cultural Resource Management Department with Mammoth Cave National Park, a role she found through the**

**Student Conservation Association website, using her trail crew supervisor as a reference.** Next, she secured a seasonal role as a park ranger with Fredrick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. Most recently, she transitioned to work as a seasonal archeological technician at Deschutes National Forest, again leveraging her Corps experience in the application process.

The skills and certifications that Gillian gained during the Corps program proved invaluable in her work. Gillian believes that the Wildland Fire Chainsaws certification, in particular, significantly impacted her career: When a severe storm struck Mammoth Cave, she was one of the few staff members trained to use a chain saw, enabling her to help clear trails and mitigate damage. This experience also sparked her interest in working with wildfires. She is now working on obtaining her red card and taking courses to become a resource advisor, where she would advise on mitigating damage and protecting natural and cultural resources during incidents. **Gillian hopes to gain hands-on experience this summer during fire season, and she directly linked this interest to her exposure and experiences in the Corps, stating in her interview, "that one little certification that I got during my trail crew days really shaped where I am today.**

*The Service Corps programs set out to support members' skill, knowledge, and personal development. They also seek to support interest in environmental conservation and continued commitment to community while helping members from BIPOC and other communities to feel a sense of belonging in conservation. The evaluation results show that Corps programs are effectively achieving these program outcomes related to member impact and sense of belonging.*

RTI found evidence of members entering pathways into the conservation field and maintaining their environmental commitment during the first year after program completion. Through member-focused data collection, we heard firsthand reports of how members gained career-related knowledge that will help them in the conservation field and beyond, learned new skills that will be useful in the workforce, and experienced enhanced self-confidence and compassion for nature. Additionally, members representing different social identities reflected on their sense of belonging during the program and aspects of the program that helped them feel included. Members felt the intentionality of Corps organizations' steps to create a culture of belonging. Having a welcoming, inclusive space allowed members to take risks that led to their personal and professional growth throughout the program.

**The findings in this report have implications for where the National Park Foundation and Corps organizations could concentrate resources to best serve and impact members of all social identities.**

The following recommendations reflect Corps member and staff suggestions and implications based on RTI's findings for organization programming.

- ▶ *Invest in DEI trainings, affinity spaces, and diverse membership*—Corps members felt that mandatory DEI training made programs feel more inclusive and equitable for all social identities. These steps created space for all members to feel safe and take risks, which improved their self-confidence. Members, especially those representing marginalized social identities, emphasized the importance of diverse representation among partners and crew leaders to support their sense of belonging and appreciated affinity spaces when available. Both members and staff saw value in individual reflective practices at the staff, crew leader, and crew member levels.
- ▶ *Start with prioritizing DEI across the organization*—Corps organization staff indicated the importance of sustained, institutional support for DEI programming, starting with equity-centered organizational culture and intentional engagement of partners representing diverse identities. Staff felt that effective lines of communication and viewing DEI as a process rather than a product were key elements to support continuous learning and improvement of DEI practices.
- ▶ *Grow partner understanding of DEI initiatives*—Corps organization staff recognized a need to shift external partnerships to better complement their initiatives. Corps members reported microaggressions during the partner interactions, echoing the need for enhanced partner training or understanding to improve feelings of belonging for members.

- ▶ *Consider offering additional housing and financial supports*—Some corps members desired more pay to reach a living wage as well as support finding affordable housing during the program. The lack of resources made members feel that they were not valued and, in a few cases, were alone in dealing with challenges such as a lack of housing or negative experiences with neighbors. In line with this request from members, Corps staff also noted a need to advocate for changes within AmeriCorps-funded programs to increase the maximum stipend.
- ▶ *Continue emphasizing career awareness activities*—RTI's analyses suggest that BIPOC members have more gains in knowledge of resources to find jobs and in understanding of the conservation field than other members, despite starting off with similar levels of knowledge. This indicates that the program features are effectively helping members, especially those social identities who have been historically or currently excluded from conservation, learn about the workforce and the conservation field.

Additionally, RTI recommends **three priority areas for further study:**

- ▶ *Explore ways to connect LGBTQIA+ members*—Members identifying as LGBTQIA+ were overrepresented among people unwilling to take conservation jobs and people reporting discriminatory experiences during the program. Additionally, this group was less likely to be pursuing conservation than other groups, and fewer felt the program was useful preparation for job success. These findings indicate more research is needed on how to promote inclusion for LGBTQIA+ members.
- ▶ *Examine activities more than 1 year after the program*—During this study, many alumni were still enrolled in degree programs or early in their work experience before they had a chance to spend ample time in the conservation workforce. Most Corps members (96%) participating in the study were in their early twenties, a time when many young adults are in transition. The activities they reported 1 year after completing their 2022 Corps program represent one point in time along their life journey. Their long-term activities may differ. For instance, at the time of the survey, 64% of employed alumni reported their current job was related to the kind of work they would like to do in their future career, suggesting about one-third were not reporting on the type of activities they intended to pursue. This percentage was higher for those in conservation-related jobs (93%), but interviews with these alumni indicated that seasonal or short-term positions were the norm and they did not consider their employment to be long term. RTI suggests exploring alumni pursuit of conservation careers 5 or 10 years past their initial service term to better understand barriers to entering and/or continuing in the conservation field.
- ▶ *Assess the impact of participation in other Service Corps programs*—The study focused on crew-based Service Corps programs that serviced young adults and were offered within the study timeline. In practice, the Corps offers a variety of programming such as individual placements, internships, longer-term opportunities, programs that with rolling admissions, and programs targeting other demographic groups (e.g., veterans, Latine, indigenous communities). The outcomes and impacts for members in these programs may look different from opportunities where a crew goes through a short-term experience together. RTI suggests conducting an evaluation of other Service Corps programs to expand understanding of potential member outcomes. The evaluation scope should be developed with a set of Corps programs in mind to maximize the variety of programs that could participate in a study.



# Appendix

## Study Background

In June 2021, RTI International answered a public request for proposals (RFP) issued by a cohort of Corps programs in the Public Land Services Coalition (PLSC) and the National Park Foundation (NPF) to conduct a mixed-methods evaluation that assessed the impact of the conservation service program on their Corps members. RTI was selected as the evaluation consultant and began their 3-year partnership in October 2021 with the contract ending September 30, 2024.

The purpose of the evaluation outlined in the RFP was threefold:

- Deepen knowledge about the ways in which Service Corps participants continue conservation action after their program, including in future education and career pursuits.
- Further understanding of the aspects of Service Corps programs that drive this future action, with specific attention to participants in the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and participants with identities that have been historically underrepresented in the conservation field.
- Inform future changes to Corps program design and training for members and program leaders.

## Site Sample and Program Selection

RTI, PLSC and NPF representatives jointly developed criteria to identify programs that would help meet evaluation goals. Criteria included the following:

- Program intentionally recruited and served BIPOC participants and participants underrepresented in conservation.
- Program utilized crews and a cohort-based approach, as opposed to members participating in individual placements with varying start-times.
- Program had service periods from a minimum of 8 weeks, with at least one beginning between May and July 2022.
- Program mainly served adults 18 and over.

RTI collaborated with PLSC and NPF representatives to identify programs that fit these criteria and conduct outreach to invite interested Corps programs. RTI held information calls with interested organizations to explain the study purpose, understand their program and demographics of Corps members, and talk through logistics of participating. Eleven organizations agreed to participate in the study, with two organizations opting out of the study before data collection started.

**Sample Limitations:** Corps programs with rolling enrollment that are typical of more “urban” Corps programs were not included in this study even though these programs historically tend to serve Corps members who may be typically excluded from the conservation field, including Corps members of color. The decision was made to limit this evaluation to understand the impact of summer-specific programs and expand future evaluations to Corps programs with rolling enrollment, while noting that the current evaluation would not be generalizable to the experiences of BIPOC or historically excluded Corps members who only participate in rolling enrollment programs. In addition, efforts to recruit Corps programs that are directed toward Native American or Indigenous communities were unsuccessful.

## Data Collection Methods

This study used a mixed-methods approach involving a combination of interviews, surveys, and participatory data collection. RTI collaborated with NPF, PLSC, and representatives of all participating sites to develop the data collection content areas and instruments. Below, we provide details on the survey, focus group, and interview data collection activities.

1. **2022 pre-program survey:** Between May and July 2022, RTI administered a pre-program survey to members of 16 programs across nine organizations. Participants answered questions about their identity, career-related and technical skills, sense of self, interest in the environment, and interest in careers in conservation. Program leaders shared the survey in welcome packets, over email, and during orientation activities. A total of 408 of 540 Corps participants completed the pre-program survey.
2. **2022 Immediate-post-program survey:** Between August and December 2022, RTI administered a post-program survey to program completers in the same programs. Participants answered questions about their identity to allow us to match their post-program responses with their pre-program responses. They responded to repeat questions on their sense of self, interest in the environment, and interest in careers in conservation. They also responded to new questions on their experience and the Corps program's impact on their lives. Program leaders shared the survey in exit packets, over email, and during closing activities. RTI also directly reached out to Corps members who participated in the pre-program survey to boost participation. A total of 297 of 473 program completers participated in the post-program survey, 232 of whom also completed the pre-program survey.
3. **Focus groups with recent completers:** Corps members were asked about their willingness to participate in further data collection on the immediate-post-program survey. In December 2022, RTI conducted focus groups with 22 Corps members who completed the program and indicated a willingness to participate in additional data collection. Focus group participants received a \$50 gift card as a thank you for their time. Participants shared about the immediate impacts the Corps program had on their awareness, mindsets, knowledge, skills, and environmental commitment. The participants also reflected on how Corps programs could be more inclusive and equitable, and what program elements helped them feel a sense of belonging.
4. **2023 1-year follow-up survey:** Between August and December 2023, RTI contacted all Corps member alumni who completed short-term Corps programs in 2022 to request their participation in the 1-year follow-up survey. RTI contacted all 416 alumni who provided valid contact information on the pre-program survey or the immediate-post-program survey. Survey participants received a \$50 gift card as a thank you for their time. Participants answered questions about their job and education activities, work-readiness preparation and skills, and connectedness to the conservation community. A total of 162 alumni participated in the 1-year follow-up survey, with 158 alumni completing the full survey and 4 alumni partially completing the survey. Of those 162 alumni, 99 alumni completed all three surveys.

5. **Interviews with Corps alumni:** Corps members were asked about their willingness to participate in further data collection on the 1-year follow-up survey. In February and March 2024, RTI conducted individual interviews with 12 Corps members who completed the program and indicated a willingness to participate in additional data collection. Interview participants received a \$50 gift card as a thank you for their time. Participants shared about their career pathway and how the Corps program factored into their journey.

## Participating Organizations and Programs

Organization Name	Program Title
Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa	Summer Youth Corps/Summer Seasonal program
Conservation Legacy	Appalachian Conservation Corps program
Conservation Legacy	Southeast Conservation Corps Great Smokey Mountains program
Conservation Legacy	Southwest Conservation Corps Durango program (2 cohorts)
Conservation Legacy	Southwest Conservation Corps Salida program (2 cohorts)
Mile High Youth Corps	2022 Summer of Service Corps programs in Colorado Springs
Mile High Youth Corps	2022 Summer of Service Corps programs in Denver
Montana Conservation Corps	Kalispell Region Field Crews
Northwest Youth Corps and Idaho Conservation Corps	Young Adult Oregon Summer program
Northwest Youth Corps and Idaho Conservation Corps	Young Adult Washington Summer Program
Rocky Mountain Youth Corps	Youth Development and Conservation Program
San Jose Conservation Corps and Charter School	Resilience Corps
Student Conservation Association - Community Programs	2022 George Washington Memorial Parkway Young Adult Invasive Species Team
Student Conservation Association - Residential Corps Program	Adirondack Corps
Student Conservation Association - Residential Corps Program	East Bay Regional Park Trail Corps teams
YouthWork – Child & Family Services of NW Michigan	YouthWork Conservation Corps program (2 cohorts)

## Demographic Characteristics of Member Sample

The below table shows the characteristics of Corps members who participated in the pre-program survey and members who completed both the pre- and one of the post-program surveys. The participants who participated in the post-program surveys had similar demographic characteristics to those who entered the Corps programs.

Characteristic	Pre-program survey	Pre- and immediate- post program surveys	Pre-program and 1-year follow-up surveys
<b>Experience with Service Corps</b>			
This is his/her/their first Corps program	84.4%	87.0%	87.9%
Previously participated in a different type of placement	4.3%	3.5%	1.6%
Previously participated in a similar placement	11.3%	9.5%	10.5%
<b>Gender identity</b>			
Man	48.1%	42.7%	43.5%
Woman	42.9%	41.4%	43.5%
Non-binary	7.0%	9.1%	10.5%
Prefer to self-describe	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Did not select one of the above categories	2.0%	6.9%	2.4%
<b>Racial/ethnic identity (may select more than one)</b>			
American Indian or Alaska Native	3.1%	2.3%	1.7%
Asian	6.9%	8.3%	11.6%
Black or African American	4.6%	3.7%	3.3%
Hispanic or Latinx	12.6%	13.9%	19.8%
White	82.9%	85.2%	77.7%
Did not select one of the above categories	2.0%	6.9%	3.2%
<b>Highest level of schooling thus far</b>			
Less than high school	2.3%	1.8%	0.8%
High school degree or equivalent	20.3%	18.0%	22.3%
Some college	47.1%	54.4%	47.9%
Associate's degree	8.0%	8.3%	9.1%
Bachelor's degree	20.3%	16.6%	18.8%
Graduate degree	2.0%	0.9%	1.7%

Note: These characteristics represent 408 pre-program survey respondents, 232 respondents who completed the pre-program and immediate-post-program surveys, and 124 respondents who completed the pre- and 1-year follow-up surveys. These percentages exclude individuals who did not complete pre-experience survey questions regarding demographic characteristics (16 individuals).



## Organization Representation in Member Sample

The below table shows the organization count of Corps members in selected programs, members who participated in any data collection, and members who participated in at least two surveys.

Organization	All members	Members who participated in data collection	Members who participated in pre- and immediate-post program surveys	Members who participated in pre-program and 1- year follow-up surveys
<b>Total</b>	<b>540</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>162</b>
Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa	80	54	34	18
Conservation Legacy	148	126	56	49
Mile High Youth Corps	57	49	36	21
Montana Conservation Corps	55	40	14	14
Northwest Youth Corps	54	37	33	21
Rocky Mountain Youth Corps	40	22	17	8
San Jose Conservation Corps	28	28	na*	8
Student Conservation Association	20	20	19	8
YouthWork- Child & Family Service of Northwestern Michigan	59	48	23	15

## Corps Experience Representation and Generalizability of Findings

The structure and length of Service Corps programs vary within organizations and across the country. As described in Study Background, the evaluation focused on short-term programs using a cohort model and targeting individuals who were at least 18 years old. This limits the generalizability of the study findings to this program type and population; a study of long-term programs, programs with rolling admissions, or programs targeting minors may yield different results.

The model examined in this study is what has been seen as the more traditional Corps model. Exclusion of other forms of programs, particularly programs in urban areas with hourly pay, limits our understanding of BIPOC communities in Corps programs. Future research should focus on including these corps as well as organizations predominantly serving Native American youth.

There are two points where bias might be introduced into the sample of students, making the results less representative of all short-term cohort program members and generalizable to this group of programs.

- The first point is from the pre- to immediate-post-program survey. We do not expect bias due to self-selection into participation because most Corps organizations distributed the survey as part of exit survey requirements. Bias could be introduced here because the survey only reached individuals who completed the program; any members who left the program before completion were not included in the survey distribution process. However, because the survey is focused on the impact of completing the program, we do not believe this presents a problem for the study implications.
- The second point is in the 1-year follow-up survey. To participate in the 1-year follow-up survey, members must self-select into signing online and completing the survey. While a monetary incentive was offered, it is possible that the willing survey participants were over-representative of members who felt most connected to the Corps. For example, those who participated in the follow up surveys may be more likely to say they were interested in careers in the conservation field, felt like they belonged, or had a positive program experience. We explored this possibility by comparing responses to immediate-post-program survey questions for all participants and just those who went on to complete the 1-year follow-up survey. We find no meaningful evidence of bias related to satisfaction or connection. Tables available upon request.