

ENGAGING THE POOR AND PEOPLE OF COLOR IN ORGANIZED SERVICE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

**A Report of Proceedings from an
Immersion Learning Session of the**

**NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON VOLUNTEERING AND SERVICE
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I. INTRODUCTION

The Corporation for National & Community Service (CNCS) was created by Congress in 1993 to promote expanded national and local opportunities for Americans to address unmet community needs through volunteerism and organized service. CNCS was established by merging the work and staff of two predecessor agencies, ACTION, and the Commission on National and Community Service. Its mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. In this role, CNCS serves as a leader, partner, and grant maker working with non-profit organizations, corporations, educational institutions, and state and local governments to facilitate volunteering and service for Americans of all ages.

In June 2008, in partnership with the Points of Light Hands On Network, CNCS sponsored an annual meeting that convened more than 4,000 people in Atlanta, GA. The theme of the conference was "The Urgency of Now." As part of the conference, CNCS, for the first time, inaugurated a series of six Immersion Learning Sessions to provide opportunities for conferees to engage in deep discussion and exchange views on priority issues and challenges facing the nation's volunteer sector.

This report summarizes the discussion in one such session entitled *Engaging the Poor and People of Color in Organized Service: Challenges and Opportunities*. In the following pages, we will: (1) describe the preparation and the format of the session; (2) highlight the major themes that emerged from the exchange between our presenters and our conferees; and (3) outline a set of recommendations that evolved from the discussion.

Rationale, Preparation, and Format

National service and organized volunteer opportunities are an important resource to local communities and their efforts to address compelling unmet needs. Moreover, a new AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study verifies that volunteering and service also create opportunities and benefits that accrue to the individuals who serve – offering immense value to the human capital development and future civic engagement of members. The study suggests that these findings are particularly true for the poor and people of color – making them more likely to choose careers in public service, offering an advantage in the job market, and increasing their life-long involvement in civic affairs.

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Ironically, it is these same high-benefit populations, particularly African Americans and Latinos from disadvantaged backgrounds, which have historically been under-represented in many of the larger, nationally operated (e.g., AmeriCorps NCCC, Peace Corps, Teach for America, etc) and organized community service programs. Given the high needs in poor and minority neighborhoods and the enormous individual benefits that can accrue from participation, it is clear that efforts to engage more poor and minority residents in service can make significant contributions to our national efforts to fight poverty and improve conditions in disadvantaged communities.

This rationale compelled conference planners to explore the issue of minority participation as one of the priority focal areas for an Immersion Learning Sessions. In preparation for the session, CNCS contracted with Dr. James B. Hyman to assist in planning, preparing and moderating the session. Three pre-conference papers were prepared as background reading and made available to conferees on the Corporation's website.

- John Foster-Bey¹ authored a paper that uses data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Volunteering Supplement for 2005-7 to show that race and ethnicity and socio-economic status are each predictors of voluntary participation. Whites and people of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to say that they "volunteer" and that they engage in the other civic activities measured in the CPS.
- A second paper by James B. Hyman and Peter Levine² summarizes historical trends since the 1970s and provides hypotheses for the different rates of participation in various specific forms of civic engagement. It finds that race is a differentiating factor, but in complex ways. Groups may participate at differing rates by type of civic activity. For example, data suggest that African Americans are more engaged than all other racial/ethnic groups in working on "community projects."

Ironically, although whites are less likely than blacks to be involved in community projects and other local civic work, they are much more likely than blacks (and Latinos) to report "volunteering." Hyman and Levine suggests that whites may be more likely to

¹ Do Race, Ethnicity, Citizenship and Socio-economic Status Determine Civic-Engagement: Background Paper for 2008 Annual Service Conference

² Civic Engagement and the Disadvantaged: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations

choose forms of participation – for example, “service” activities such as serving at a soup kitchen or tutoring a child – that are classically *labeled* “volunteering” by the Corporation and other service institutions, whereas African Americans are more likely to participate in processes that involve organizing for social change. This further suggests the need to clarify the language of volunteering in ways that truly capture the civic activities and energies we intend.

- Finally, a short cover paper³ was prepared to put these materials in the context of this session and to offer six questions that could frame the discussion and learning experience.

Presenters

Six panelists, who have extensive experience working with service organizations and with residents of poor and minority communities, were invited to share their observations about: how service and volunteering actually manifest themselves in these communities; and about the challenges and opportunities involved in recruiting and sustaining poor and minority residents in service.

- **Merlene Mazyck** has served with the Corporation for National & Community Service AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps) program since 1994 and in 2004 became the director of the program. Merlene has worked in the youth development and service fields most of her professional career in various positions in both the non-profit and public sectors.
- **Michael Carmona** is a 22-year old New York City native and a member of AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps. He graduated from high school in 2004 and studied briefly at Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida. During his tenure with the NCCC, Mike has served: with the St. Bernard Project in Louisiana coordinating the work of other volunteers on housebuilds; with the Crown King Fire Department in Arizona removing hazardous wildfire fuels and constructing defensible space around homes; and with the Bay-Waveland Area Habitat for Humanity in Mississippi building homes.

³ Diversity and Equity in Civic Engagement: Two Background Papers for the Corporation for National and Community Service

- **Byron D. Amos** is the CEO of Capacity Builders, Inc., a community-based advocacy organization in the Vine City neighborhood of Atlanta, GA. He has been involved in community organizing for over 20 years – building strong collaborations with elected officials, educational institutions, businesses and the philanthropic community – and has several awards for his community service and leadership.
- **Armando Rayo** is the Director of Hands On Central Texas, a program of United Way Capital Area where he is responsible for a project called Culture Connections, an engagement initiative that focuses on communities of color and low-income communities around Austin, TX. Armando is a member of the Greater Austin Forum for Diversity and Inclusion. He serves as the board president for the Texas Association of Volunteer Centers and has been involved in the national Study Circles training, Facing Racism. Armando is a contributing writer for GoodCause Magazine and Austin American-Statesman. He has been featured in the Chronicle of Philanthropy and NPR's MarketPlace.
- **Dorothy Stoneman** is the President and Founder of YouthBuild USA, the national nonprofit intermediary and support center for more than 225 YouthBuild programs, and she is a leader in advocating for youth engagement in civil society. She is chairman of the National YouthBuild Coalition, with more than 1,000 member organizations in 43 states, Washington D.C., and the Virgin Islands. She has served on many prestigious boards and panels and is the author or editor of numerous practical handbooks regarding how to run independent community schools, parent-controlled day care centers, leadership development programs for youth, and YouthBuild programs.
- **Garland Yates** is Senior Fellow at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private philanthropy dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. Formerly, as a Senior Associate, Garland was responsible for managing the Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI), a comprehensive community initiative, and related grants. Garland was later responsible for managing several Making Connections sites, a successor comprehensive community initiative to RCI. As a Senior Fellow, Garland is exploring techniques and strategies that build the capacity of low income communities to develop and guide indigenous comprehensive community rebuilding initiatives.
- **John Jackson** is President of the Schott Foundation for Public Education where he leads the Foundation's efforts to ensure a high quality public education for all young people regardless of race or

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gender. Dr. Jackson previously served as the NAACP Chief Policy Officer and as the NAACP's National Director of Education where he worked with NAACP affiliates in several states including Florida, California, New York, and Maryland on a variety of initiatives to further opportunities for children of color. He has also served as an Adjunct Professor of Race, Gender, and Public Policy at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute and as Senior Policy Advisor in the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at the U.S. Department of Education.

II. ENGAGING THE POOR AND PEOPLE OF COLOR: Session Highlights

Amos: *"We enter these communities with the preconceived notion that help is needed – that service projects can help create a better life for these residents – but not once do we ever stop to understand or educate ourselves about these communities."*

Jackson: *"The question is how do we give AmeriCorps "streetcred" or as we say in a scholarly way, how do we build the cultural capital of AmeriCorps in the communities we want to serve?"*

Yates: *"Poor people and people of color volunteer because, beyond getting something done, they want to change things."*

Stoneman: *"The young people are looking for something but it has to have – the power of love coupled with the power of opportunity in a safe and caring environment that gives them a chance to believe in something."*

Carmona: *"AmeriCorps NCCC has definitely shown me a brighter future. I've been up and down many times probably more down than up but now I am able to look past what's next to a future. AmeriCorps has broadened my horizons."*

Mazyck: *"We want to encourage communities of color to promote these opportunities as important and necessary personal and professional development experiences that will help prepare young people for future leadership and community involvement, as well as personally enrich their lives."*

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The quotes cited above offer insights into the depth and richness of the 3-hours of presentation and exchange between the panelists and the 300 conferees who attended the Immersion Learning Session Engaging the Poor and People of Color: Challenges and Opportunities. Though the “conversation” about engaging these populations was far-ranging, three recurrent overarching themes dominated the deliberations. They were expressed as the needs for: (1) sobriety in assessing the engagement challenge; (2) sensitivity and respect in our approach to communities; and (3) personal and aggressive recruitment.

A. Sober Assessments Before We Start

Without question, providing service to others is a noble ambition – a manifestation of human virtue to which we hope all might aspire. But our session discussion suggested that this high-minded aspiration must be tempered by realities “on the ground.” The sense of the conferees was that our success in reaching the poor and people of color with meaningful opportunities for volunteering and service depends in large part on our commitment to tackling some difficult questions at the start.

Recognize who we are. One such question should be a consideration of who we are as sponsors of volunteer and service opportunities. Byron Amos put it this way:

*Dennis Kimbrough once said that we see things not as **they** are but as **we** are. Our perception is shaped by our previous experiences. So I submit to you, that before we ask the question, “Who are the people we need to engage?” we need to honestly ask the question, “Who are we?” Who are the people who are doing the engaging?” And if we really stop and take a look at the leadership of some of the largest nonprofits and the people who are offering the community service opportunities, what we see are single, upper-middle to upper class, educated, white females.*

Amos’ intent was not to suggest that, because of its leadership, the volunteer/service industry lacks legitimacy, but rather that we should, at very least, anticipate the likelihood that our institutions may not be fully appreciative of the conditions, needs and sensitivities of poor and minority communities we wish to serve. Panelist, Armando Rayo put it another way.

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United Ways are mainstream institutions that have been doing the same things for a very long time. Beginning about five years ago, we began to examine who we are. We looked at our board, at our staff, at our leadership teams and concluded that 90 percent of the people who have been helping us pursue our community change over the past many years have been the same people. This forced us to step back to think about how we can be more strategic in the ways we engage people out in the community?

The issue here is one of understanding our institutional limitations. These limitations begin with the differences in life experiences between those who promote volunteering and service and the poor and minority populations we wish to engage. These differences can be quite stark and where they are, they must be successfully bridged if we are to be successful in recruiting and retaining volunteers and in sustaining the gains that we hope they and their communities will achieve. In his comments, Garland Yates suggests the need for some humility in our approach.

We have to remember that the people like us, who are out here promoting volunteering, are all getting paid. That's not to say that that's bad but we're getting paid to go out and talk to people about how important it is for them to volunteer. Think about that and think about what impact that has on the people we're talking to. We should recognize that there is a distinct difference between talking about volunteering and service as an intervention strategy and trying to get people engaged when it is our paid profession.

Get to know the people we wish to engage. Discussion suggested that once we are well-grounded in our understandings of ourselves, that understanding can help us rid ourselves of our biases and stereotypes about working with the poor and people of color. For instance, conferees warned that it is a mistake to assume that poor and minority communities lack the capacity, will and/or resources to mount effective change efforts. Panelist John Jackson reminded us that:

The poor and people of color...have always been involved in this work. Following the New Deal, if you look at many of the social movements that have occurred since, it was the volunteer efforts of the poor and people of color that led to those movements. The efforts of Mexican Americans in 1945 in Orange County California led to Mendez v. Westminster – a 1946 anti-school segregation case that preceded the Brown

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vs. Board of Education case of 1954. In 1956, the efforts of a number of individuals in Little Rock, AR, led to a 1957 federal court decision to desegregate Central High School. On "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, hundreds of peaceful demonstrators walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, AL and were attacked by armed police officers. None of these people received a dime. They were volunteers who organized campaigns to bring about the changes we desired.

Indeed, rather than underestimate communities' capacities, panelists asserted that our effort to engage these populations should focus on identifying and utilizing their assets.

We speak about the poor and disadvantaged, although we may be poor in stocks and bonds, we are rich in culture, in history, and in civil movements that have changed not only the face of this country but the world. Byron Amos

Our discussions reminded us that people who are poor often must be extremely resourceful in order to get by in mainstream societies that expect them to function as well as the non-poor and the majority.

Over the last decade we have become increasingly aware that the poor and people of color are not bereft. In fact, much of the newer thinking in the fields of community building and community development begins with the assumption that, not only are these resourceful populations that have assets, but that their resourcefulness and their assets are cumulative across neighborhoods and can be marshaled by the communities and leveraged for change. Panelist Garland Yates makes this point:

My professional background has focused on community building and community change – working with change agents at the community level who are committed to engaging with neighborhood residents and others to build, increase, stabilize and sustain the social capital infrastructure of community. This community social capital – the relationship assets that are contained in groups of community residents on which consensus and collective action are built – is the foundation of a community's capacity to affect change. It is also at the heart of the community's ability to be resilient in the face of the challenges that may come from being poor and being powerless.

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Be careful about the application of best practices research. Substantial parts of the discussion focused on the need to be sensitive to local needs, agendas and preferences in structuring service projects. Much of that discussion mirrored the growing national concern about the role of best practices research in local applications – particularly the balance that needs to be struck between learning from others’ practices and experiences vs. the value of fostering local ownership through organically grown initiatives. Several of our panelists spoke to this issue.

We must understand that our approach is all wrong. We form the directions of our organizations by best practices structured on what worked in other communities. We must be willing to be flexible and stray away from best practices and understand the culture of the community that we’re in. To get residents out to a community cleanup, (for instance) the best practice will tell you that as long as it is organized and you have the trash bags and a little food to eat and keep them refreshed, you will succeed. Well, I think all of us know that that doesn’t work. My success has come from using best practices as the exception and not the rule. Byron Amos.

We have all of these models out here and we get frustrated when we try to implement them and they don’t work. That’s because we’re not asking people what they want. What are their aspirations for themselves, for their kids, for their schools, or for their neighborhoods? Armando Rayo.

B. Sensitivity And Respect Going In

A second major and complimentary theme that wove through the session was the need to approach poor and minority communities with respect and sensitivity – not as experts and saviors but as facilitators and partners. Treating them with sensitivity and respect means acknowledging that communities have histories and that they have assets. It means understanding that individuals in poor communities share the same aspirations for their children and neighborhoods as their counterparts in more affluent neighborhoods. And it means eliciting and honoring their views about priorities for and approaches to change in and for their communities.

Communities must have ownership. Issues of authenticity and ownership arose as important components of this sensitivity and respect. To our conferees, real success in engaging the poor and people of color requires

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that we must first empower them before we can recruit them. And though the need for empowerment and ownership were referenced by each panelist and acknowledged by our conferees, not all attendees were sure how to bring them about. So, when asked how we develop a spirit of project ownership among residents, Byron Amos suggested:

The answer is either they have to believe or you must convince them that this project is theirs. You have to instill something that has been lost to the neighborhood for some time – pride – where people come to understand that, if we clean up this vacant lot, it can become a park where our kids can play or we can throw a barbeque for the neighborhood or just hang out. We need to give people something that they are missing and see the value of. Put out the project idea and let them develop it. Allow them to interact with you to say what they need in their neighborhood instead of the reverse, as usual, of you telling them what they need.

The consensus of our session was that lack of community ownership could dampen community commitment and impede our efforts toward engagement. Panelist Garland Yates recalled an instance where the lack of community participation in a change effort actually backfired and spawned protests from the community.

I have been working with people in New Orleans. And if anybody would expect that people anywhere in the world wanted and needed help it would be in the wake of disaster. But, believe it or not, in the aftermath of Katrina, there were many people in New Orleans who were organizing to keep relief efforts out. People woke up one morning, saw lots of trailers and heavy equipment and they saw people digging and rebuilding things but they didn't have a clue about what was going on. Someone else had decided what to rebuild in their neighborhoods and how to rebuild it and had assumed that the residents didn't have the capacity to participate in those decisions. And so everybody was shocked when these residents started organizing and saying, "get this stuff out of our neighborhood."

This example vivifies what can happen, at the extreme, when we fail to respect communities. Part of the lesson is that it is incumbent upon us, as potential agents of change, to subordinate our aspirations to the agendas that may already exist in the poor and minority communities we hope to serve. Garland Yates continues with the following:

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When we go into communities it is imperative that we figure out how what we want to do connects with what the communities are doing already and/or how our notions of community needs to connect with the communities' own agendas for change. We need not be the experts on what ought to be done or carry the banner of self-righteousness. But instead, and with great humility, let us offer to become a part of their efforts, help strengthen the community fabric, and help people in the most authentic ways that we can.

Panelist John Jackson goes further to suggest his vision of both an appropriate role for the service community as well as the challenge.

I think the service community can play a huge role bringing in groups that can help manage a movement to fulfill the aspirations that a community might have. Those aspirations are quite high but the question is, how do we make them real? How do we manage relationships between schools, parents, and the faith community (for instance) into a network that can achieve the outcomes we desire?

Four core concepts for engaging the poor and people of color. Panelist Armando Rayo shared his experience working with the poor, Latino and African-American neighborhoods of Austin, TX. From his remarks we extract four principles that may be useful to engaging these communities. Each offers us an opportunity to demonstrate respect for and sensitivity to communities and their residents.

The first principle is authenticity. Residents need to feel that it is they and their interests that are being served and that the sponsors are driven more by the prospects of the community's success than their program's success.

This means engaging with and listening to neighborhood residents – building real relationships that can propel and sustain the work. It's not about bringing a bunch of volunteers into the neighborhood from outside. It's about bringing the community itself together around its concerns and mobilizing them to address them. Armando Rayo.

Authenticity also means being there for the long haul. Not every initiative will meet with immediate success. And it is likely that some efforts will result in frustration for sponsors and members alike. Residents need to

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know that our commitment is not conditioned on immediate success but on long term results.

A second principle is innovation. Rayo suggests that we have to be innovative in our approaches – that best practice literature can be helpful but we need to be deliberate about adopting only those practices and lessons that can be adapted to our communities. Programs that are effective in the Bronx are not guaranteed to work in Austin. An example of adaptation came from Byon Amos’ work in the Vine City community in Atlanta.

In 2005, along with help from the Mayor’s Office of Weed and Seed, we started the Vine City Parent Patrol. We placed ten residents on the streets to watch our children go to and from school. We created safety routes for our youth. We gave them radios and reflective vests so they could be readily identified. To this day, the Vine City Parent Patrol is a group that we can call upon for any service project as well as for neighborhood advocacy.

The secret to the success of this program is that the parents who participated were the ones who were already walking their kids to and from school. The only thing we had to do was to organize them on their level so they could continue to do the things that they had done daily. And now, they have been featured in several magazines and web cast specials and they have been recognized by the federal office of Weed and Seed as, that’s right, you guessed it, a “best practice.”

Still a third principle is one of readiness. Rayo suggests that we have to be sensitive to where each community is if we hope to have an impact. Our enthusiasm for working for change in poor and minority communities must not overreach their capacity for action.

We have learned this approach from The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation which is a national organization that helps people imagine and act for the public good. Their work looks at community rhythms – where communities are in relation to social organization and social cohesion and how they move forward together around issues. And if your community is not in a place where it can move this needle forward, then it’s not going to happen no matter what model you use or how hard you try.

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The last principle is collaboration. Community work needs partnerships not only with government and mainstream nonprofits but also with the faith community. Rayo reminds us, for instance, that churches have constituencies and in poor communities these are usually the neighborhood folks. If we attend church fundraisers, for example, we can engage neighborhood people who have already demonstrated their willingness to volunteer by being there every Sunday working at the lunch tables. Rayo suggests that, if we don't get into the community to engage these kinds of people in these settings, we will miss important opportunities to connect with them. John Jackson reminds us that churches are also a major financial asset base.

Another part of our key community resource is the faith community. People of color, and particularly African-Americans, give. In fact, they (African-Americans) tend to give at higher rates largely for two reasons: because they have higher rates of church attendance than other groups; and because collection plates in church are the most prevalent vehicles for individual philanthropy in the U.S. The challenge is tapping into those churches to create community service opportunities. If we attempt to go into poor neighborhoods without connecting with the faith communities that serve them, we'll be neglecting important resources.

Community Diversity vs. Community Engagement: A final issue that arose in our discussions of poor and minority communities was the need to be sensitive to the community's demographic makeup and the degree to which that makeup may enhance or impede engagement. This issue arose in the form of the following question from one of our conferees.

Is community diversity undermining community engagement? I just read some recent research suggesting the more diverse a community is – the larger the number of racial/ethnic groups in the community – the less engaged people are in the community. And I sense that in my neighborhood with a wide variety of people. What was formerly a Jewish and Irish community is now Cape Verdian, Honduran, Montserrat, Vietnamese, Upsouth Black, Jamaican, and Trinidadian. All of us are somehow disconnected a bit from each other and less engaged than we should be. My questions are: first do you see that? And second, do you have ideas about how to overcome that?

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Panelist Garland Yates was the first to respond.

I think Robert Putnam's latest book addresses this. His analysis of the problem is dominating the conversation and we're missing what he later says about what needs to be done about it. The reason this is such a big question is that it is happening in every city in America. Our nation and the cities in particular are becoming more diverse by the moment. And where the big cities used to be the places that were overwhelmed by diversity of language and culture, now it's everywhere. One of the states with the fastest growing immigrant population in the nation is Arkansas, for example.

So, where this increasing diversity exists, the big challenge for volunteering and service is finding ways to help the neighborhoods function as communities. It is really important for us to dig in on this question because it follows a long line of dialogue about the evils of diversity and the warnings associated with too much tribalism and how that threatens democracy. So, this isn't a new conversation although Putnam's may be a new voice weighing into it. But again it is important because it has immense implications for the future of the communities that we live in and serve.

Byron Amos offered a concrete example of how and why it is important to put Yate's suggestion into practice.

Let me address that from my perspective in Vine City. We have white residents who come in and buy property at very good prices and think that because the area is in decline, the residents must not care. Then we have black residents who think, "why do we have all these new people coming in here buying up all this property?" No one has stopped to talk to each other. So, my first recommendation has to do with neighboring. Communication is foremost – taking time to go next door or stop in the neighborhood to say hello to people and talk to them about your common concerns. This is not my neighborhood or your neighborhood but our neighborhood. We're all in this together. My door gets kicked in today; your door can get kicked in tomorrow. Let's get together and talk so we can make sure that no doors get kicked in tomorrow.

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C. Personal And Aggressive Recruitment

The fundamental question of our session revolves around the issue of under-representation. And though our report so far makes clear that engaging to correct that under-representation involves a complex array of issues and considerations that extend beyond matters of recruitment, it is nonetheless that true recruitment and particularly our recruitment strategies for poor and minority populations are pivotal components of an overall strategy for achieving parity. The discussion in our session suggested that our recruitment strategies for the poor and people of color need to be more personal and more aggressive on two fronts – sending an empowering message and building relationships and trust.

Crafting/sending an empowering message. One powerful suggestion that arose from the session was that, if we hope to be more successful recruiting the poor and people of color into community service, we have to begin thinking about service as more than just service “delivery.” Though tutoring in schools and serving in soup kitchens, for example, may be important means of meeting the needs of certain poor and minority community residents, many of the larger community’s needs revolve around failures in major people-serving institutions and systems – the schools, social services, the courts and public works, for instance. In fact, our panelists strongly suggested that, because of this reality, efforts at recruiting this population must offer powerful messages of empowerment for community change or empowerment for personal development. Garland Yates offered his view on the community change message.

Poor people and people of color volunteer because, beyond getting something done, they want to change things. They are less motivated by the notion that volunteering and service are worthy pursuits and ends unto themselves. Instead they are more receptive when they see these things as part of a strategy of opportunity to make permanent and sustainable change.

Dorothy Stoneman offered insights on the personal development message from her experience in engaging poor and minority young people in YouthBuild. She believes that, to attract young people, community service has to be seen as a real opportunity.

And here’s a lesson. If we want to pull the youth who are out of school and out of work and disconnected and disaffected into service, it has to be a pathway for them out of poverty. It has to be a way for them to fulfill their own aspirations while

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giving back. It has to include education. They have to go back to school. They have to belong to something that they can believe in. They have to get paid because a lot of them are hungry and a lot of them are homeless and a lot of them have obligations to their families. And there has to be a positive peer group that can compete with the lure of the streets. There has got to be a sense of safety. And most of all, when they walk in the door, they have to feel respected and they have to feel that someone cares about them – maybe for the first time.

Building relationships and trust. Panelists and conferees alike believed strongly that success in recruitment requires personal involvement and can not be done by remote control. There are a myriad of activities in our work and leisure lives that compete for our attention and our time. The messages we send can make a difference but the vehicles through which and the manners in which those messages are received is equally important. For example, research tells us that most people who volunteer do so because someone asked them. One panelist put it this way.

One way to recruit people from the neighborhood is to walk up to them and engage them. People in the community don't know that these opportunities are there. Over the years, we've tried the traditional approaches to recruitment – announcements, flyers, etc. And the truth is that most of our flyers ended up on the ground. Most of the people we have working on the ground have come from relationships – I've "given them the fire" and told them this was the opportunity to make a difference. So, we, as leaders, have to do more by way of people-to-people engagement and stop relying on the easiest and remote way to communicate. Byron Amos

Armando Rayo offered a complementary approach.

Another thing that is important is to just show up. Show up at their community meetings, at their parent groups and at things that they care about. It's part of that slow process of building relationships. One of the things we have in the Latino culture is we have platicas. Platicas are conversations. You need to show up and focus on those platicas. And that may mean going to those informal places where folks are hanging out – taco stands, or anywhere. I'm serious! You have to go where people are to start the conversations.

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One of our youth conferees agreed:

I have been to Boys and Girls Clubs and to community centers. Those are the places young people go when they don't want to be involved with what's going on in the streets. We go there to escape that and to have a sense of freedom and a sense that you can be yourself. But opportunities are not advertised enough there. You have to reach those places and you have to reach parents so that you can help them do a better job of informing us that there are positive opportunities available to us. Youth Conferee.

Indeed, people-to-people contact and word-of-mouth transmission are well-recognized as the most effective forms of information dissemination in poor and minority communities. And when the message being transmitted is coming from a credible, trusted source it can also be persuasive in forming/changing opinions and behaviors. As such, building trust, in tandem with our message development, was seen by our conferees as the recipe for recruitment success with these populations. The question that remained was, "how?" Garland Yates provided one perspective.

There are a few observations I have made about how we enter communities and about gaining their trust. One comes from a community in Seattle where there were about 27 different languages spoken. In that community, they relied on what they called "Trusted Advocates" – a group of people from the neighborhood that they trusted to come and learn about what we were doing so that the community's understanding of our work and the connections between our programs and that neighborhood could be based on how those advocates saw it (not just on what we said).

A similar example comes from Denver where they have people called "promotores." In Denver's Latino community, these promotores are community advocates/spokespersons – sort of promoters. And in approaching the community, we learned a lot about the importance and power of these promotores' role in the Latino culture.

In both of these cases, we reached out to these community representatives and asked them to help us learn the culture

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so we could engage the relationship-building and conversations processes that would help us better understand what they thought should be done. And then we had to provide them with resources so they could learn about us and our interests so they could determine where our respective interests meshed and how we might best serve their needs.

One of our conferees expressed specific concern about our ability to recruit young people from poor and minority communities into service. She asked, "How do we get our young people to trust that we can bring them into something positive and that we have their best interests at heart?" Dorothy Stoneman gave a reply.

The first thing is that we have to be trustworthy. We have to tell them the truth and not over promise. And we have to create opportunities according to what really is in their best interests. So, if they need to finish an education we need to make sure the opportunity makes provision for them to reclaim their education; if they need job skills that it includes that. If they need to be paid a wage then the stipend should be at a sufficient level. If they need a pathway to college, then the education award has to actually be available to them. Young people will recruit each other if they find all the things they are looking for in the opportunities we offer. And so we have to be sensitive to the things that they really want. If we give them the respect, give them the opportunity to make a difference and give them a comprehensive pathway towards success, they will gravitate toward it. But we have to produce it.

D. Summary and Recommendations

The above presents major points of presentation and discussion at the Immersion Learning Session on *Engaging the Poor and People of Color in Organized Service: Challenges and Opportunities*. The exchange between our panelists and conferees was far ranging and exhaustive of many of the issues thought to be important to the challenge of engaging these populations.

In this writing, we organized our recap into three major overarching themes that were woven throughout our discussions: (1) the need for sober assessments before going into poor and minority communities; (2) the importance of entering these communities with sensitivity and respect; and (3) the necessity of being aggressive and personal in our recruitment

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strategies. From within these broad themes we can extract several recommendations:

- Recognize who we, the sponsors, are.
- Get to know the people we wish to engage.
- Be careful about the application of best practices research.
- Allow communities to take ownership of change strategies.
- Consider principles of engagement like authenticity, innovation, readiness and collaboration.
- Recruit participants by crafting/sending an empowering message of community change and/or personal development
- Build relationships and trust

III. RELATIONSHIP TO PRE-CONFERENCE PAPERS

The preceding pages reported the substance of the presentations and discussion during the Immersion Learning Session but, to capture the fullness of the entire Immersion Learning experience, it is important to also consider the substance of the pre-conference papers. Interestingly, as discussed below, these two exercises – the papers and the session – provided very different exposures to the question.

Focus of the Papers. The papers focused on exploring and understanding the differential rates of engagement by the poor and people of color when compared to more affluent whites. They verified that participation differences do exist in volunteer activities that are measured by formal census surveys but that these surveys typically measure activities which trend toward delivery of a discreet service such as tutoring a child, serving at a soup kitchen, or “Meals on Wheels,” etc. The papers suggested that this service delivery “bias” in the data excludes the kinds of civic activities most practiced in poor and minority communities – involvement in “community projects” – and that expanding the focus of volunteer surveys would provide a more accurate reflection of volunteer, service, and civic activity in our communities.

So, the pre-conference papers attempted to set the stage by placing the volunteer behaviors of the poor and people of color in a clearer context. And we expected that developing this baseline understanding would provide the kind of common ground reference that would help launch a vigorous and well-informed set of presentations and discussions. In fact, to jump start the exchange, a two-page cover paper was prepared that offered a summary as well as six questions for session consideration as follows:

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- What disparities exist in civic engagement by race, ethnicity, education, wealth, and immigrant status? Should we care about these disparities and why?
- What are the obstacles, barriers and circumstances that contribute to these disparities?
- Are there cost/consequences associated with these disparities?
- Who are the injured?
- What are the remedies?
- How do we mount the remedies?

Focus of the Session. Interestingly, the issue of racial and/or socio-economic disparities in participation never arose during the session. Nor did the issues of definition, measurement, or survey bias. Neither did questions of barriers and impediment to participation. Our conferees showed surprisingly little inclination to pursue those topics. Remarkably, and as we have reported above, the session focused, almost from the “opening bell,” on issues grounded in the nature of poor and minority communities – how we relate to them, how we *should* relate to them, and how we can engage them.

A Single Point of Convergence. One major point of connection relates to the intersection of our session discussions about empowerment and our pre-conference observations about participation in “community projects.” Conferees repeatedly emphasized the importance of addressing community aspirations in our efforts to enlist the poor and people of color in service. They were clear and unified in their assertions that poor and minority residents want opportunities to work for community change and that their young people want and need opportunities for personal development. We do well here to reprise the remarks of Garland Yates.

Poor people and people of color volunteer because, beyond getting something done, they want to change things. They are less motivated by the notion that volunteering and service are worthy pursuits and ends unto themselves. Instead they are more receptive when they see these things as part of a strategy of opportunity to make permanent and sustainable change.

This quote may offer the single, most-important observation and lesson from our immersion learning session. And it is perfectly consonant with, validates, and perhaps even explains our pre-conference findings about “community projects.” Indeed, our pre-conference papers assert that

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African Americans are more likely to participate in processes that involve expressing interests and organizing for social change. Addressing a community problem seems to require a deeper level of ongoing participation and sometimes a more adversarial or political approach. An excerpt from the Hyman, Levine paper suggests that:

A 2007 report by the National Conference on Citizenship found that African Americans are the most philosophically committed to the kind of civic participation that is collaborative and involves discussion and planning as well as action.⁴ When offered a list of ways to address community needs, African Americans were the most likely to choose participating in community meetings (there was a 16-point differential on this question compared to whites), and gathering with other citizens to identify problems and solutions. This relatively political, process-oriented approach to engagement is not conventionally considered "volunteering."

Regardless whether it is defined as volunteering, involvement in community projects was validated in both our session (for all poor and people of color) and in the literature (among African-Americans) as the dominant mode of civic engagement within the populations about which we are concerned. This conclusion is a single and powerful point of convergence for our immersion learning exercise. It is a promising finding that should become a major tenet of future plans and strategies to engage more of the poor and people of color in volunteering and community service.

IV. CONCLUDING COMMENT

In concluding this report, it is important to take stock of the conferees' response to this session, *Engaging the Poor and People of Color...*, as part of an assessment of the conference's first-ever attempt to offer opportunities for in-depth exploration of priority topics in the field. From all available accounts, it appears that this session was very well received – with 300 conferees choosing to attend. Moreover, the level of audience participation was quite high and the exchanges and engagement between the panelists and attendees was very energetic.

⁴ National Conference on Citizenship in partnership with CIRCLE and the Saguaro Seminar, *America's Civic Health Index 2007*.

It was clear from the comments and questions that attendees were deeply committed to the challenge of engaging the poor and people of color in their work and programs and that they were hungry for opportunities to explore issues and strategies that might assist them in those efforts.

Well over one-third of our attendees (124) took time to complete the evaluation form for the session. Comments focused on several major themes:

- Attendees were pleased with the quality of the papers and presentations. The papers were informative and the presentations inspiring.
- Attendees wanted more time. Many commented that the session topic was sufficiently large and complex to warrant being the focus of its own full conference.
- Attendees felt the session was inspiring and most gave it high marks for providing new insights and for sensitizing them to the issue but they were eager for more information on the what- and how-to-dos of engaging the poor and people of color.
- Attendees wanted time for table discussion that would have permitted the kind of more in-depth and intimate exchanges that could lead to strategy formulation.
- Many respondents would like to see CNCS play a leadership role on helping them explore these issues further. There were many requests to continue these explorations in future annual conferences and/or in regional meetings.

We conclude from this session that the challenge of engaging the poor and people of color in organized service is an issue of major importance to many in the field – an issue around which they are willing to devote additional time and resources to pursue. With this report, we encourage major institutions in the field to respond.