Background and Summary

LISC seeks to examine the effects of AmeriCorps service on the capacity of partners to achieve housing, employment, and volunteer engagement outcomes in both the shorter-term (one-year) and long-term (up to 25 years). Building on LISC’s extensive history supporting organizations and communities, the study will take advantage of accumulated practitioner knowledge, as well as survey and longitudinal administrative data. The study will examine the role of LISC AmeriCorps placements with partners, local LISC office strategy, and the ways in which these influence partner capacity growth. Lessons from the study will inform not just the stewardship of LISC AmeriCorps but will also speak to the broader literature on capacity-building strategies and organizational change.

This is the fourth in a series of external evaluations of the LISC AmeriCorps program. The first was conducted by Abt Associates and completed in 2012 (YR 16) and covered a similar topic. That study examined the effects of member placements on the capacity of placement partners. Ten years later, this study seeks to know the longer-term trajectory of capacity among partners. We envision that the evaluation will be important for the on-going discussion of the role of national service in strengthening the not-for-profit sector.

LISC AmeriCorps Theory of Change around Capacity Building

LISC’s AmeriCorps program uses national service as an opportunity to expose residents, especially residents of color, to the community development field while helping to build the capacity of sponsoring organizations and provide career experience in the not-for-profit sector. In attracting talent from the neighborhood to serve the neighborhood, members help LISC advance its own mission to improve the quality of life of under-resourced, low-income communities and expand economic opportunities for the people who live there. Involving community residents in collective efforts to change their own communities for the better is central to our program’s strategy.

Because we work primarily in low-income communities and communities of color – communities that have historically been subject to pressures from outside – we emphasize recruitment and selection of people into the program who themselves live in the communities they aim to serve. In addition to the community knowledge participants (members) are expected to bring to their placement, we also find that they are more likely to be trusted by community residents because of their background. The combination of expertise and trust is expected to lead to more effective volunteer mobilization efforts as well as other capacity-building benefits to organizations.

If the recruitment and selection process works as intended, the placement sites manage members well, and LISC delivers services to both members and placement partners effectively, we expect members will help grow the capacity of placement partners to achieve community outcomes. While we welcome the evaluator’s expertise in exploring additional mechanisms by which LISC AmeriCorps may contribute to capacity, there are at least two different pathways by which sustained AmeriCorps participation may contribute to organizational capacity over the long term.
Resources. Resource dependency theory\(^1\) describes the critical role that funding constraints play in organizational life, and how uncertainties related to funding can hamper organizational growth and development. Sustained participation in AmeriCorps alleviates this burden in several ways. It may provide additional person-power that allows more successful programming to occur, and through this demonstrated track record permit a group to attract additional funding. Participation may reduce strain on current staff, who are freed up to explore new programming and to fundraise accordingly. Finally, participation in LISC AmeriCorps may signal to local government and private philanthropy that an organization is worthy of additional investment. Any of these effects are likely cumulative and self-reinforcing over time, as having consistent support allows organizations to plan more effectively and take advantage of opportunities as they emerge.

Learning. Foundational research on organizational learning emphasizes the importance of feedback loops, which occur when groups take on new ventures, and then reflect upon their experiences.\(^2\) In this light, sustained participation in LISC AmeriCorps may contribute to a “virtuous cycle” of capacity growth. AmeriCorps members supplement and support a group’s traditional activities, contributing to new experiences and insights into new ways of doing business. Over time, this may lead to more effective and efficient practice, which in turn helps garner more resources. In addition, having a learning and mentoring orientation toward AmeriCorps members may allow groups to be open to internal improvements that can improve their operations, while AmeriCorps members may bring new perspectives, help groups see the work differently, and contribute to innovation.

Research Questions

This assessment will be designed to answer the primary question: “What capacity outcomes do placement organizations within the LISC operating site footprint gain from shorter and long term engagement with the LISC AmeriCorps program?” (Primarily quantitative assessment)

We anticipate the evaluation study to answer the primary question as well as the additional following questions:

1. By what mechanisms do placement generate these capacity benefits? For example, do placements help by fostering organizational learning, allow access to resources, or through the alumni service network? (Primarily qualitative assessment)

2. What types of placement organizations (for example, focusing on what kinds of services or programs) and which local contexts (for example, in what kinds of service or economic settings) benefit from the AmeriCorps program? (Mixed methods assessment)

3. How does LISC program management play a role in obtaining better capacity outcomes from long-term engagement in the program? (Primarily qualitative assessment)

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This will enable the program to discern how organizational context and programmatic focus plays a role— for example, whether smaller or larger organizations, or different regional contexts benefit most from AmeriCorps. The final question relates to how program management supports capacity, by finding good “fits” between AmeriCorps members and placement organization, or by providing guidance to partner organizations.

**Research Components**

Answering these questions will require a mixed-method, quasi-experimental design:

The **quantitative** component will use LISC’s administrative data to define a set of capacity outcome variables as well as explanatory variables for organizations participating in the AmeriCorps program. Capacity outcome variables will be based on yearly outputs, such as individuals served, or additional partnerships achieved. It will also include resources obtained as a measurement of organizational growth. The study will use LISC’s administrative data to identify a set of comparison organizations who did not receive AmeriCorps funding or that had their funding withdrawn within the study time-frame. The decision to adopt a comparative time series or a comparative interrupted time series will depend on the availability and integrity of LISC’s administrative data for the comparison organizations, and may be supplemented by survey data or by publicly-available data, such as organizational 990s. The evaluator may also propose a use of a survey.

The **qualitative** research will include conducting interviews or a series of focus groups with National and local program staff. In the beginning of the evaluation, a set of interviews with program staff will allow the development of more detailed hypotheses about the factors that promote organizational growth and change through participation in the AmeriCorps program. Following the quantitative analysis, a set of interviews and focus groups will give evaluators a deeper understanding of the context and factors shaping trends and capacity outcomes for different types of placement organizations and suggest adequate policy recommendations for CNCS.

CNCS requires a detailed evaluation design to be submitted as soon as possible, so the successful applicant will prioritize the operationalization of the primary research question above. CNCS also will require submission of an evaluation report before we can submit an application for our next three-year funding cycle, which we expect would be in January of 2022. We anticipate the study to measure the second year of the current grant (2020-2021). If a survey is employed, the evaluation partner can draw on Abt’s past survey on organizational capacity-building.

**Evaluator Qualifications**

Prospective evaluators must demonstrate expertise and experience in: (1) assessing capacity-building initiatives, including knowledge of the relevant literature and methodologies used; (2) developing and managing data collection efforts focused on program staff; (3) working with large datasets, with a premium to past experience in working with electronic surveys; and (4) evaluation methods, including research design, sampling, and statistical analysis, and (5) writing clear, accessible project reports. It is not necessary for the prospective evaluator to have familiarity with the AmeriCorps program, although this would be a plus.
Schedule and Budget

The evaluator will report to LISC’s Research Department, which together with the LISC national AmeriCorps program staff, will manage the process including but not limited to review of responses to this solicitation, as well as quality review and final approval of study components, including the research design, data collection methodologies, statistical tests, and especially, the quality of both the analysis and writing of the final report.

The estimated budget for the evaluation is $170,000. While it will have a longer-term view, the shorter-term evaluation will cover services provided in either Year 1 or 2 of the 2019 – 2021 three-year grant period. Because the evaluation must be submitted to CNS together with LISC’s application for the 2021 – 2020 grant cycle, the final report must be submitted to LISC no later than December 2021.

Project Deliverables

Project deliverables include:

Research Design outlining key concepts and data collection and analysis strategies for the full set of research questions. In addition, a detailed evaluation plan outlining research design, sampling methods, data collection and measurement tools, and analysis plan for the primary research question as well as project management procedures and timelines must be submitted for CNCS approval (OMB clearance will not be necessary.) Due July 15, 2020.

Draft Executive Summary, outlining the key findings of the analysis, and accompanied by an in-person or web-based presentation of any tables and charts needed to substantiate these findings. Due April 30, 2021.

Draft Report, containing an Executive Summary and the full report text, tables and graphics, as well as a description of any appendices to be included in the final report. Due August 31, 2021.

Final Report, due November 30, 2021, responsive to LISC comments (provided by September 30, 2021), and accompanied by data files in a mutually agreed upon format.

Contact Information and Deadline for Submissions

Submissions are due by 11:59 pm EST May 8, 2020. Proposals, and questions about the proposal, should be submitted via email to Stacey Grant, AmeriCorps Program Director at sgrant@lisc.org.

Please submit a proposal that includes a firm and detailed estimate of the fees to be charged and at least one but no more than two examples of a relevant study undertaken by the firm.

Submissions will be evaluated with the following criteria in mind:

- Experience in conducting evaluations
- Value and Pricing Structure
- Proposal Presentation
- Ability and Willingness to Comply with Funding Source Requirements
References may be requested during the review process. LISC will make a selection and begin contracting procedures in mid-May.

**Additional Considerations**

All contracts funded with federal funds have specific provisions. Those provisions can be provided upon request prior to submitting a proposal.

Any reports or other deliverables produced pursuant to a scope of work or contract will be the sole property of LISC (except to the extent rights are reserved by the applicable federal agency).

LISC and the LISC AmeriCorps program are committed to working with SBEs, MBEs, and WBEs, and encourages proposals from SBEs, MBEs, and WBEs.