

From Common Purpose to Common Practice: National Service & the Rebuilding of Civic Infrastructure for the 21st Century

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This essay explores how renewed investment in national service can help restore the civic, social, and economic pathways that once made the American Dream attainable. It argues that a year of paid, full-time service offers a bridge between opportunity and belonging at a time when higher education and the workforce struggle to meet the needs of young Americans. In making service years a more common expectation and opportunity, we can move closer to attaining the vision laid out in Our Common Purpose of a citizenry emboldened to act with greater responsibility to one another and a commitment to our shared future.

The American Dream exists as an enduring symbol of prosperity. In *The Epic of America*, historian James Truslow Adams, the originator of this premise that Americans hold dear, defines it as something deeper and more demanding.¹ He explains a vision for a moral social order, describing a “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”² With that, Adams set forth a vision for America that rewards hard work and contributions to society with the commensurate support needed to thrive.

That promise is vanishing. The pathways that once guided our civic and economic life toward that American Dream are not functioning as designed. As a result, over 70 percent of Americans feel the American Dream is out of reach or was never within reach.³

When the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences issued the *Our Common Purpose* report in 2020, it argued that “improvement of our civic culture and of our institutions must go hand in hand. Each is necessary; neither on its own is sufficient.”⁴ The Commission challenged us to achieve significant progress by our nation’s 250th anniversary. That moment is now upon us and on reflection, the strategies and recommendations in

Our Common Purpose remain valid and urgent, but they are not self-executing. What is missing is the connective tissue between aspiration and infrastructure. We lack a bridge between the vision the Commission articulated in its report and the civic culture capable of sustaining it. National service through programs like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps is that connective tissue, and new evidence demands we treat it as such.

Amid the fresh backdrop of our semiquincentennial, strains within key institutions are increasingly visible, threatening not just the financial future of the next generation, but also the civic foundations of American life. If allowed to persist, these *civic failures* risk America's 275th anniversary bearing the hallmarks of more entrenched polarization, disconnection, and distrust in our shared future.

Beginning in the classroom, the current model of K–12 education is struggling to prepare students for a rapidly shifting economy. The World Economic Forum estimates that two-thirds of today's students will work in jobs that do not yet exist.⁵ Higher education, meanwhile, risks alienating younger generations as both financially prohibitive and misaligned with workforce demands, contributing to declining public confidence. The Lumina-Gallup 2026 *State of Higher Education* study finds that the one-in-five Americans who express low confidence in higher education cite both the failure to teach job-relevant skills and the cost burden.⁶

Once beyond secondary and postsecondary education, young people encounter an evolving and increasingly diminished early-career landscape.⁷ Advances in artificial intelligence are fundamentally reshaping the employment landscape. According to labor research firm Revelio Labs, postings for U.S. entry-level jobs have declined 35 percent since January 2023, driven in large part by AI.⁸ A landmark Stanford study reinforces this picture: young workers aged twenty-two to twenty-five in the occupations most exposed to AI experienced a 6 percent decline in employment between late 2022 and September 2025, while older workers in the same fields saw 6 percent or greater growth.⁹

The human consequences of these failures are increasingly visible across multiple indicators of well-being. One of the most recent editions of the Harvard Youth Poll describes a generation marked by “deep economic insecurity, eroding trust in democratic institutions, and growing social fragmentation.”¹⁰ Eight-in-ten members of Generation Z reported feelings of loneliness in the past year, a crisis that the U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 advisory linked to the 70 percent decline in in-person social interaction among young people aged fifteen to twenty-four.¹¹

While the ascent of technologies including smartphones and social media may contribute to these dynamics, they coincide with broader institutional shifts that shape how young people experience education, work, and community. What is lacking, even more so than when the strategies and recommendations from *Our*

Common Purpose were proposed six years ago, are shared experiences that foster a sense of collective purpose and mutual responsibility – experiences that reinforce our social fabric and, in return, equip an active citizenry with the skills, mindsets, and abilities to thrive.

National service is not a new or novel idea. It has been deployed in the United States at moments of great uncertainty and opportunity. The Civilian Conservation Corps put over three million men to work amid the Great Depression. The Peace Corps was established to extend the goodwill of American soft power abroad at the height of the Cold War. Since 1993, national service has most directly been implemented by AmeriCorps, deploying Americans to local communities across the country to confront our most entrenched challenges. Different from volunteerism, a year of national service is a paid, structured opportunity to build real-world skills through hands-on experience while contributing to community needs.

National service addresses what K–12 education, higher education, and our workforce have struggled to achieve independently: the integration of skill building, purpose finding, and community connection. It is happening every day in every state across the country. Young people are tutoring children in underresourced schools, responding to natural disasters, building affordable housing, and staffing community health clinics.

In 2025, Service Year Alliance, the organization I lead, surveyed more than two thousand alumni of national service programs for our *State of Alums* report. Our research reveals that 87 percent of national service alumni report gaining workforce-ready competencies including adaptability, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, credentials that prepared them for future employment.¹² In an economy that is rapidly automating the tasks that once necessitated entry-level hiring, these skills are not supplementary; they are a competitive advantage.

The results speak for themselves. In an era when entry-level jobs are increasingly hard to secure, nearly two-thirds of alumni found full-time employment within six months of completing their service year, surpassing the national average for recent college graduates.¹³ Nearly seven-in-ten national service alumni who entered service with only a high school diploma or GED went on to earn additional degrees upon completing service, 17 percentage points higher than the national average.¹⁴ For many young Americans, particularly those who enter without a college degree, it is a malleable and accessible on-ramp into higher education and professional life.

The economic case for national service is compelling, but for a generation defined by loneliness, the more urgent case is the ability of national service to give the next generation somewhere to belong. Embracing this form of service as a common expectation for this generation may be our most credible response to today's crisis of loneliness. It is also the most direct path to realizing the Commission's

vision of a civic culture grounded in mutual respect, willingness to compromise, and shared responsibility.

National service also has the power to rebuild what current polarization is eroding: the ability to connect across lines of difference. Nearly four out of every five service year alums reported being likely to engage in fruitful conversations with people they disagree with, compared to just 52 percent before their service began.¹⁵ Even during the fraught 2024 presidential election cycle, as national polarization was on the rise, our research found that individuals involved in service years were resilient to these external trends. Perhaps most telling: 91 percent of service year alums vote regularly, compared to 64 percent of the general population.¹⁶

What emerges from a year of service is civic infrastructure in the most literal sense: *people* who have learned, through shared experience, what it means to belong to something larger than themselves and show up to work together for it every day.

The question before us is not whether national service works; it is whether we have the will to scale what is already working and invest in a new era of service that is unique to this moment. An honest reckoning with where we stand in 2026 requires acknowledging what has *not* happened: the bold federal investment called for by the Commission has not materialized, and in spring 2025, unprecedented federal funding decisions resulted in interrupted service for tens of thousands of AmeriCorps members who were demobilized and sent home without warning.¹⁷

Progress requires a bipartisan effort to make national service a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans. As federal action in the near term remains unlikely to advance this movement, the work must happen at the state, local, and community levels – building proof points that a bold national expansion of service will require. The expansion of non–federally funded service corps since the publication of *Our Common Purpose* offers a roadmap to scale service years in concert with national service at the federal level.

The American Dream promises a country that meets effort with opportunity. The Commission called on us all to build a civic culture capable of sustaining it. National service, and the civic leaders it cultivates, is how we fulfill that promise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen Bennett is CEO of Service Year Alliance and a leader in reimagining how young people transition into adulthood. With nearly twenty years at the forefront of national service, she has partnered with governments, nonprofits, and philanthropy to design national and state-level strategies that expand service year opportunities

and pioneer new models for funding and implementation. A sought-after voice on youth engagement and civic innovation, her insights on creating a new social contract for the twenty-first century emphasize that the systems we've relied on to guide young people into successful adulthood are broken, and that service years offer a proven solution. Her writing has been published in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *The Fulcrum*, and the *New York Daily News*, and her work has been cited in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *NPR*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *The Washington Post*. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of America's Service Commissions and the Commission on Opportunities After High School at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

ENDNOTES

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¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

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¹⁷ Hannah Fingerhut, “AmeriCorps Must Restore Grant Funding and Members to States That Sued over Cuts, Federal Judge Rules,” AP News, June 5, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/ameri-corps-trump-doge-lawsuit-f88fb92ffb93dbb5a942f8570412ba3f>.