As we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, we remember his clarion call to public service in his inaugural address: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." While Kennedy’s entreaty undoubtedly motivated many individuals to commit themselves to a greater degree of public service, we do not have inspiring figures like President Kennedy speaking to young people on a regular basis in order to motivate citizens, particularly younger Americans, to commit themselves to careers that assist others and build our communities and the nation. It is important to create programs and institutions that will encourage public service.

Kevin D. Ward has conducted a study titled “Cultivating Public Service Motivation through...”
As an individual who has continued a lifelong career in public service after completing an initial one-year fellowship in a developing country after law school, I would have hoped that the study would have revealed that a year of AmeriCorps service yields a greater impact. However, the study may have been compromised by the fact that people both in the active AmeriCorps group and in the nonparticipant group were all initially interested in public service. It would be more interesting to compare the responses of those who did not seek out the possibility of AmeriCorps service but rather contemplated a less public service-oriented future.

Ward’s study posits three hypotheses:

1. There will be a positive difference in public service motivation (PSM) between those who participated in AmeriCorps and a comparison group of people who expressed an interest in participating but did not do so.

2. The positive changes in PSM will be sustained seven years after AmeriCorps service ends.

3. PSM will decrease over the eight-year test period for those who did not participate in AmeriCorps.

Ward contends that his study supports these hypotheses. The results are demonstrated in three tables. While these tables do provide some validation for the hypotheses, they are disappointing in some respects. The chart showing a commitment to the public interest demonstrates a significantly greater commitment among those who joined AmeriCorps after a year of service. However, commitment to the public interest declined substantially for both groups after seven more years. While the commitment of AmeriCorps alumni declined more steeply than that of those who were not participants in the program, the level of commitment for AmeriCorps alumni remained higher.

With respect to civic awareness, the same pattern obtained. Even more disappointing, however, was the measure of attraction to public policy making. Such attraction grew for both groups in the first year after the baseline study but declined slightly for the AmeriCorps alumni and increased slightly for nonalumni.

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The author admits that there was selection bias “because both groups demonstrated an interest in joining an AmeriCorps program.” The author further notes that the study was “limited to those individuals who are either interested or engaged in service.”

The study certainly validates the fact that AmeriCorps provides a positive benefit in generating PSM. Unfortunately, the benefits seem to be somewhat limited in the long term. I found the actual description of the study and analysis of the study results both interesting and valuable. However, for the lay reader, Ward’s discussion of other studies and different methodologies is substantially opaque. A sentence reading, “Ward uses maximum likelihood goodness-of-fit indices—normed chi-square, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)—and Bayesian estimation methods to assess the fit of his hypothesized model” is difficult to understand.

It is undoubtedly important to research how we can motivate people to work for the common good. It also should be recognized that, aside from establishing PSM, the work done by AmeriCorps volunteers has considerable value in and of itself. Motivating people to join AmeriCorps for its intrinsic value may be more important than concern over whether participation enhances alumni PSM.