



During his campaign, President Elect Barack Obama made a commitment to strengthen and expand AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps. While we believe that these two important programs are essential components of any national service program, most of the participating programs “seek members with college degrees or at least three years of work experience.” (AmeriCorp.com) This limited focus often prevents non-college youth from gaining valuable skills and experience for future professional opportunities.

Additionally, while programs like Job Corps offer blue collar (and hopefully increasingly green collar) training opportunities for high school graduates, we have found that their limited scope and scarce resources often prevents them from recruiting and retaining individuals who are neither interested in a blue collar career nor ready for college. Yet, despite the limited opportunities, our experience has shown us that there are thousands of young leaders from the non-college community who are ready to become lifelong leaders.

That’s why we feel that the new administration needs to invest in nontraditional leadership programs that develop skills and foster civic responsibility amongst this important demographic. More specifically, scholars like William Cleveland highlight how leadership programs that incorporate art, culture and media creation have been effective in building skills amongst new leaders within this demographic, while also building infrastructure for struggling communities. More importantly, history shows us that programs like this often act as a stepping-stone for future career opportunities.

We envision a service program that incorporates life skills training, civic leadership development and the arts. This program would recruit and train non-college youth, youth of color and low-income youth to serve their communities. Trainees would develop skills, gain experience and build relationships while working on projects that address the challenges they face in their communities daily, such as poverty, crime and violence. Our vision is a creating pipeline of dynamic, visionary and ethical leaders in the communities that are in most need of them.

The life skills curriculum would focus on communication/interpersonal skills, decision making/critical thinking skills and coping/self-management skills. This section of the curriculum lays the foundation for responsible citizenship and healthy living. The civic leadership curriculum would focus on organizational leadership, community organizing, voter organizing, coalition building, public policy/government, issue advocacy, online organizing and political communication. This section of the curriculum focuses on the transformation from responsible citizenship to civic leadership. The arts curriculum would consist of creative art, performing art, media literacy and audio/video production. This section of the curriculum fosters creative thought and encourages artistic expression, which is known to enhance young people's attitudes about themselves and their futures. (www.artsusa.org)

Examples of these programs include:

- Appal Shop--Whitesburg, Kentucky
- Elementz--Cincinnati, Ohio
- Campaign Against Violence—Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- Juice- Los Angeles, California
- Detroit Summer- Detroit, Michigan

We believe the arts can provide a powerful tool to engage youth and stimulate their imagination and dedication; improve thinking and problem solving skills; establish high standards of excellence, success, and accomplishment; provide opportunities to make meaningful contributions to the group and the community and be recognized; promote constructive peer and mentor relations through teamwork and allow risk-taking in a safe and supportive environment. The arts open the door to self-contemplation and self-assertion. We thoroughly believe that an investment in nontraditional leadership programs that incorporate art, culture and media creation will not only prepare more non-college youth to become 21st Century leaders, but they will also ensure that struggling communities are building the necessary intellectual capital to compete in these increasingly difficult economic times.