

JANUARY 2020

THE READING PARTNERS EXPERIENCE

REPORT 1: Alumni reflections on their service year(s)

Leslie M. Anderson
Julie Meredith
Jeanine Hildreth

THE READING PARTNERS EXPERIENCE: Alumni Reflections on their Service Year(s)

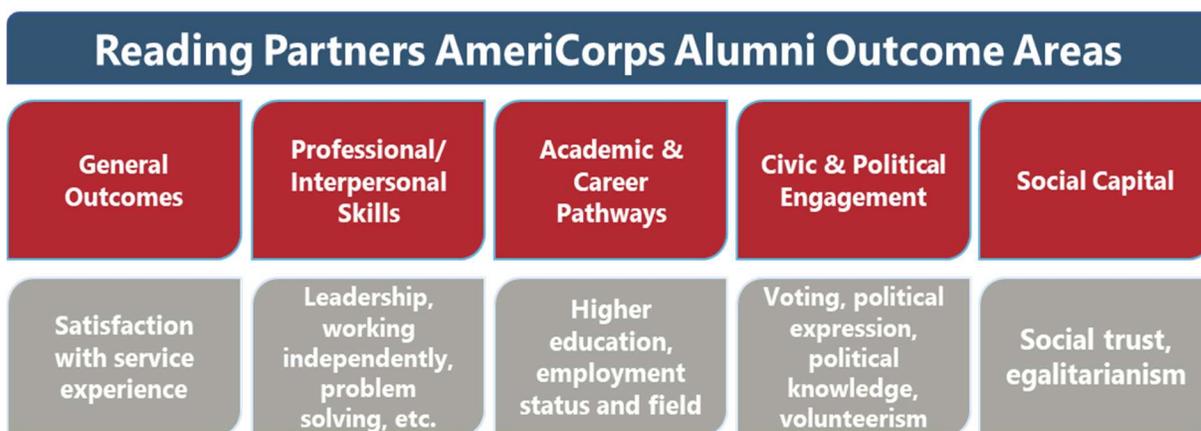
Program & Study Overview

Reading Partners is a national literacy nonprofit that partners with under-resourced schools and engages community volunteers as tutors. Trained volunteers work one-on-one with students for 45 minutes twice a week, following a structured, research-based curriculum. AmeriCorps and VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) members are instrumental in delivering the Reading Partners program and serve in five different roles in the organization:

- **AmeriCorps Site Coordinators (SCs) & AmeriCorps Regional Site Coordinators (RSCs)** coordinate and lead all site-based activities of the program at reading centers.
 - SCs manage all site-based operations, administer literacy assessments, and provide individualized coaching to volunteer tutors.
 - RSCs, unlike SCs, are not assigned to a particular school but instead rotate among larger schools with the greatest need and provide additional direct service support.
- **AmeriCorps Volunteer Coordinators (VCs)** recruit volunteers to provide individualized instruction to students who are struggling with reading. VCs prepare volunteers for tutoring by providing orientations, managing background checks, and setting expectations.
- **AmeriCorps Literacy Leads (LL)** are placed at schools where it is more challenging to recruit volunteers and deliver tutoring sessions in tandem with volunteers.
- **AmeriCorps VISTA** members build organizational capacity toward the ultimate goal of ending poverty. VISTA members serve in various contexts at the national and regional levels to build systems and strengthen Reading Partners' ability to serve students and communities.

Reading Partners' theory of change asserts that, as members serve in these roles, they develop important professional and leadership skills. Moreover, Reading Partners believes that member experiences in the communities where they serve will influence their educational and career

pathways as well as their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs related to civic engagement. Reading Partners' AmeriCorps program is designed to impact members during and after their service terms. While in service, members cultivate in-depth relationships and witness the impact they have on students, while also engaging in a year-long training schedule that provides opportunity for civic reflection and exposure to other national service networks. In spring 2018, Reading Partners contracted with Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to design and conduct the Reading Partners AmeriCorps Alumni Study, intended to deepen the organization's understanding of the quality of the Reading Partners AmeriCorps service experience and its effects on the civic engagement and educational and career pathways of their AmeriCorps and VISTA alumni. The outcome areas of interest are summarized in the figure below.



Specifically, the study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What outcomes do Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni attribute to their Reading Partners experience? Do these alumni perceive that serving as a Reading Partners AmeriCorps member helped them develop professional and interpersonal skills or influenced or change their career and/or academic pathways?
 - a. *In what ways, if any, do perceived member outcomes vary by member characteristics, including age, race/ethnicity, educational background, years of service with Reading Partners, role with Reading Partners, geographic region where they served, prior service with another AmeriCorps program, cohort year, or early vs. late cohorts?*
2. Controlling for other factors, do Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni demonstrate stronger professional and interpersonal skills and/or greater levels of civic engagement than similarly situated members of the national population?

The study analyzed patterns among respondents overall, as well as by key characteristics, including race/ethnicity, educational attainment, age when Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni began their service, number of service years completed, or region of the country (i.e., east coast, west coast, central U.S.). Where differences by subgroup were observed, they are highlighted throughout.

The study used a two-part mixed-methods design that included surveys and focus groups conducted with Reading Partners AmeriCorps and VISTA alumni.¹ We also conducted comparative analyses using data from (1) a 2015 AmeriCorps alumni survey conducted for the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) (Cardazone et al., 2015)², and (2) a statistically matched comparison group of similarly situated members of the national population. (See the text box on the following page and Appendix A for additional details about the study methodology.)



Findings from the study are described in a series of three reports, plus a technical appendix. This report, the first in the series, focuses on describing alumni experiences and reflections on their service year. It begins by providing a profile of the common characteristics of Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni and then describes the extent to which alumni believed that their Reading Partners experience affected their attitudes, beliefs, skills, and abilities. In particular, this report uses the focus group interviews to provide illustrative examples of the influence their service experiences had on their overall life perspective.

Where possible, responses from Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni are placed in context with results from a 2015 Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) AmeriCorps alumni study.

¹ Throughout this report, the term “Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni” includes alumni who were members of VISTA.

² Cardazone, G., Farrar, A., Frazier, R., Gabbard, S., Hernandez, T., Houston, S., LaTaillade, J., Lovegrove, P., Pratt, D., Vicinanza, N., and Willey, J. (2015). AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes: Summary Report. Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service.

Methodology

Online survey: 526 alumni responses/59 percent response rate

The study surveyed 898 Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni who completed their service term between 2010 and 2018. The survey asked Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni about their service experiences and whether they believed those experiences influenced their subsequent educational and career pathways as well as their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors toward community and civic engagement.

Focus groups: 50 respondents

To collect illustrative examples of the experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni, the study team conducted 12 focus group interviews with a sample of 50 such alumni (i.e., on average, each focus group included 4-5 participants) who represent the variation in alumni characteristics and experiences. Interviewers asked Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni to elaborate on their services experiences, as well as their educational, employment, and civic experiences in the years following their completion of the program.

Comparison groups: To put the Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni findings into context, the study compared the survey responses of Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni with those of the following similar groups:

CNCS alumni. The study compared the responses of Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni with responses of AmeriCorps alumni who participated in the 2015 CNCS AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes study. CNCS surveyed a nationally representative sample of AmeriCorps alumni whose service experience ended in 2012, 2009, or 2004.

National cohorts. To better understand what Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni's experiences, attitudes, and behaviors would have been had they not participated in the Reading Partners program, the study used publicly available, national data sets, including the American National Election Study (ANES) and the General Social Survey (GSS) to create a synthetic comparison group very similar to the Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni population in terms of age, race/ethnicity, income, marital status, educational background, and other factors associated with their propensity to serve (e.g., volunteerism and religiosity). The extent to which there are measurable differences in the attitudes, behaviors, and life experiences of Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni compared with those of a statistically matched comparison group is one indicator of the program's impact.

Limitations: Key limitations of the study design are (1) the data collected through the Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni survey and focus group interviews reflect only the perspectives of individuals who served in the Reading Partners program and who were willing to participate in the study, so the results may not represent the views of all Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni; (2) the results of the quasi-experimental design comparing the career pathways and civic engagement of Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni with a "statistically matched" comparison group should be interpreted with caution because the design does not include a baseline equivalency measure nor is it a true random assignment and thereby does not allow us to infer with certainty what would have happened to Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni had they not participated in the Reading Partners program. Nevertheless, this analytic strategy provides a useful comparison with similar non-participants, puts their career pathways and civic engagement in useful comparative perspective, and provides insight into the potential impact of the Reading Partners program.

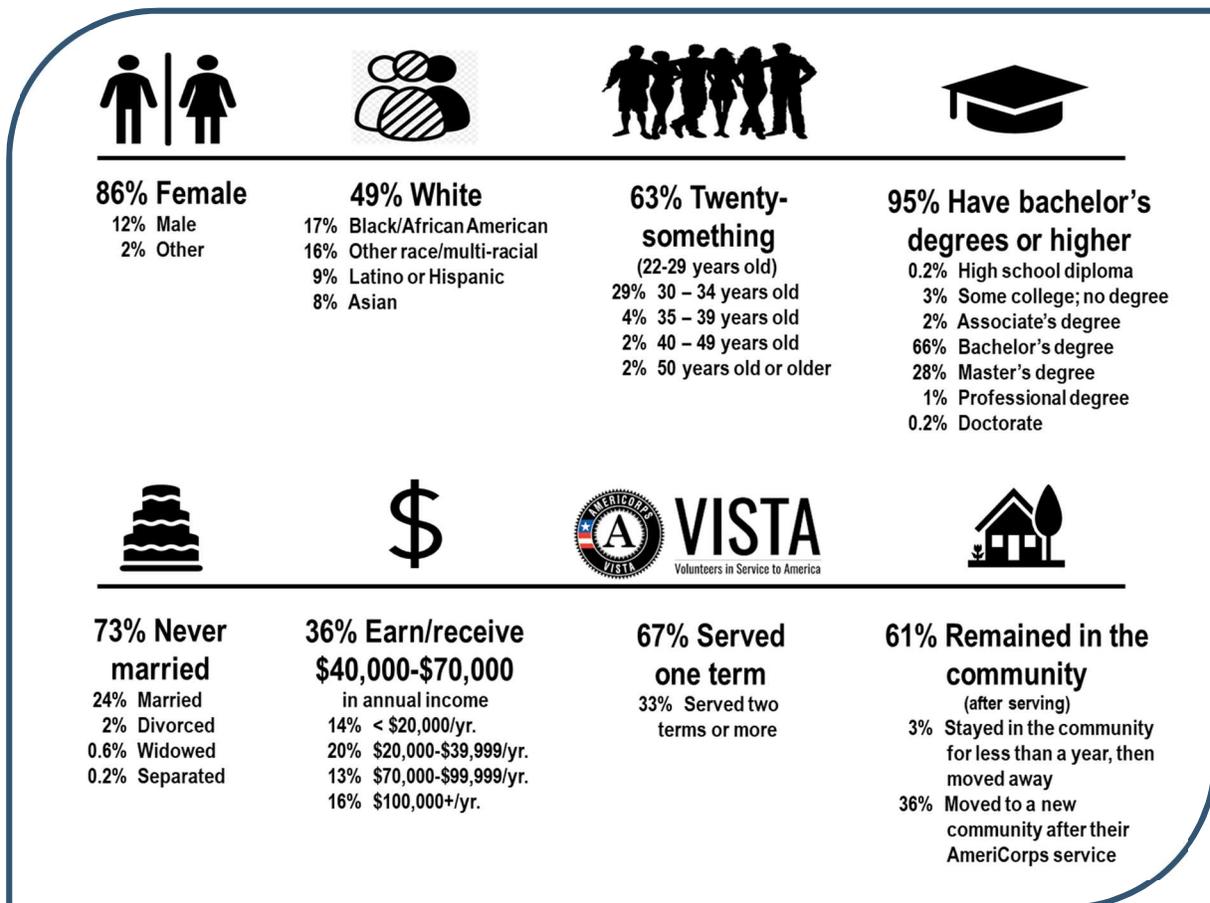
Key findings:

- Almost all (87 percent) Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni were satisfied with their Reading Partners service experience and were more likely to report their service as satisfying or very satisfying than were AmeriCorps alumni who participated in the 2015 CNCS study.
- A majority (>60 percent) of alumni agreed that their Reading Partners AmeriCorps service experience caused them to re-examine their beliefs about themselves or about other people (65 percent); about two-thirds reported that they did things during their service year(s) that they never thought they could do.
- At least 90 percent of alumni agreed that their Reading Partners AmeriCorps service experience helped them feel as though they made a contribution to the community where they served, and that they made a difference in the life of at least one person (95 percent); Reading Partners alumni were more likely to agree with these statements than were AmeriCorps alumni who participated in the 2015 CNCS study.
- At least 80 percent of alumni agreed that their service experience helped them gain an understanding of the community where they served and exposed them to new ideas and ways of seeing the world.
- Most (>50 percent) Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni said that their service experience helped them figure out their next steps in terms of their career and professional goals; slightly more than half said the same about their educational goals.

Reading Partners Alumni Profile

Most of the 526 Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni who responded to the survey were female; about half were persons of color; and the vast majority were between the ages of 22 and 34. As of early 2019 when the survey was administered, almost all responding alumni reported having a bachelor's degree or higher (95 percent). Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) had never married; 36 percent reported annual income between \$40,000 and \$70,000; and 61 percent reported having remained in the community in which they served after completing their service (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: Characteristics of Reading Partners AmeriCorps and VISTA alumni



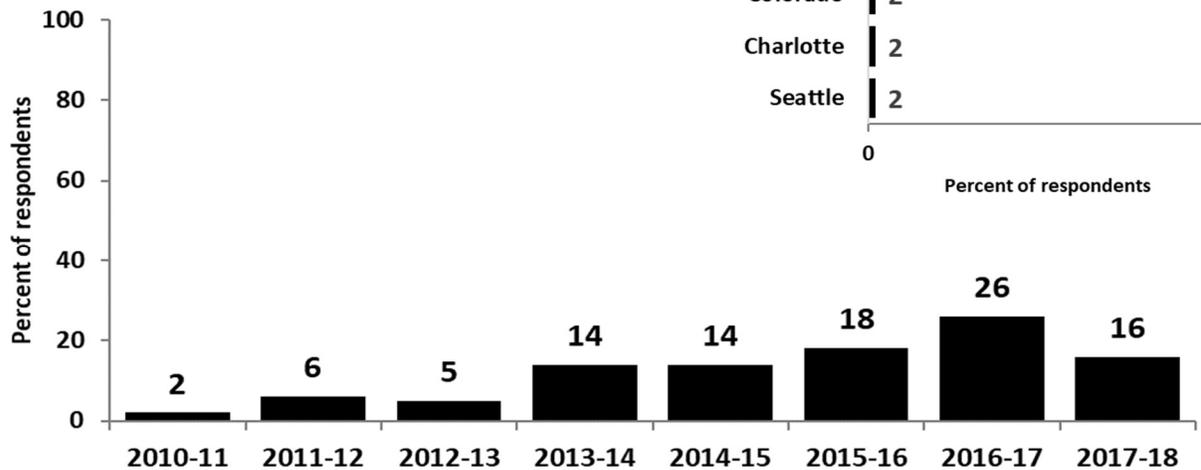
Based on 526 of 898 completed or partially completed surveys administered to Reading Partners alumni (response rate: 59 percent).
Source: Reading Partners AmeriCorps Alumni Survey (2019).

Alumni who responded to the online survey were well-distributed across Reading Partners region and service year (from 2010-11 to 2017-18), as shown in Exhibits 2A and 2B. Further, the distribution of survey respondents by sites and service years was very similar to that of the overall population of Reading Partners alumni, as described in detail in the Appendix.

Exhibit 2A. Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni, by region



Exhibit 2B. Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni, by service year



Based on 526 of 898 completed or partially completed surveys administered to Reading Partners alumni (response rate: 59 percent).
Source: Reading Partners AmeriCorps Alumni Survey (2019).

The Reading Partners Service Experience

Almost all (87percent) Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni were satisfied with their Reading Partners service experience.

The vast majority of Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their service experience. Moreover, Reading Partners alumni were more likely to report their service as satisfying than were AmeriCorps alumni who participated in the 2015 CNCS alumni study (87 percent versus 84 percent), and this difference was statistically significant.

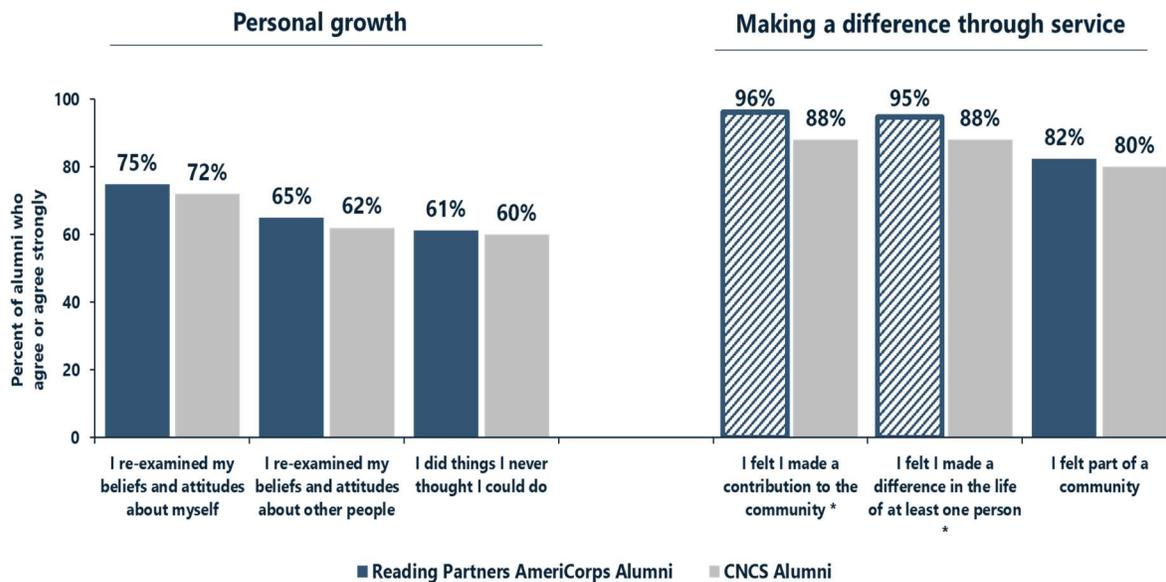
Alumni agreed that their service experience caused them to re-examine their beliefs and attitudes about themselves and others.

A majority of alumni agreed or agreed strongly that their service experience caused them to re-examine their beliefs about themselves (75 percent) or about other people (65 percent). In addition, around two-thirds (61 percent) said they did things during their service year(s) that they never thought they could do, suggesting that their courage and sense of self-efficacy was enhanced through their service experience with Reading Partners (Exhibit 3).

Alumni felt that they made a difference through their service experience.

A majority of alumni agreed or agreed strongly that their Reading Partners AmeriCorps service experience helped them feel as though they made a contribution to the community where they served (96 percent), and that they made a difference in the life of at least one person (95 percent). In addition, 82 percent of alumni reported that their service experience made them feel as though they were part of a community (Exhibit 3). Moreover, survey results suggest that the Reading Partners service experience may have been more rewarding than other AmeriCorps service experiences. That is, compared to AmeriCorps alumni included in the 2015 CNCS study, Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni were more likely to agree that they felt they made a contribution to the community and that they made a difference in the life of at least one person (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3: Whether alumni experienced personal growth and felt they made a difference through service, by Reading Partners AmeriCorps vs. CNCS AmeriCorps alumni



*Difference is statistically significant, $p \leq 0.05$.

Sources: Reading Partners AmeriCorps Alumni survey (2019); CNCS 2015 alumni survey.

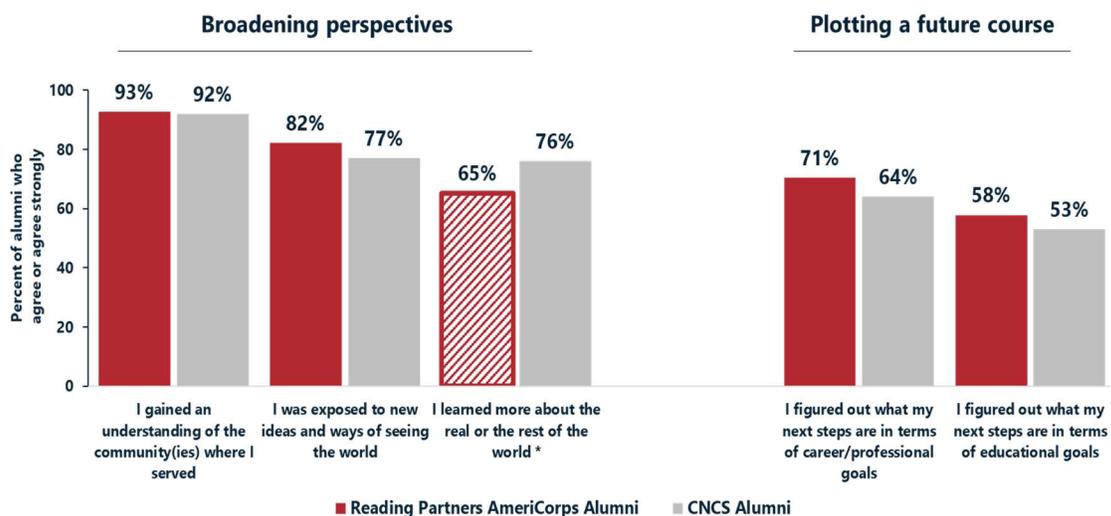
Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni agreed that their service experience had helped broaden their perspective on their community and the world.

Most Reading Partners alumni agreed that their service experience helped them gain an understanding of the community where they served (93 percent), and exposed them to new ideas and ways of seeing the world (82 percent). In addition, about two-thirds of alumni (65 percent) reported that their service experience helped them learn more about the “real” world or “the rest” of the world. When compared with alumni in the 2015 CNCS study, Reading Partners alumni were less likely to agree that they had learned more about the “real” world or the rest of the world from their service experience (76 percent vs. 65 percent) and the difference was statistically significant (Exhibit 4).

Most alumni reported that their service experience helped them figure out their next steps in terms of their career and professional goals; slightly more than half said the same about their educational goals.

Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni generally agreed that their service experience had helped them identify next steps in terms of their career or professional goals (71 percent). Slightly more than half the alumni (58 percent) reported that their service experience had helped them determine next steps in terms of their educational goals (Exhibit 4). When compared with alumni in the 2015 CNCS study, Reading Partners alumni were slightly more likely to agree that their service experience had helped them plot a future course in their careers or educational goals, but these differences were not statistically significant.

Exhibit 4: Alumni who believed service helped them broaden their perspective and plot their future course, by Reading Partners AmeriCorps vs. CNCS AmeriCorps alumni



*Difference is statistically significant, $p \leq 0.05$.

Sources: Reading Partners AmeriCorps Alumni survey (2019); CNCS 2015 alumni survey.

In their Own Words

What alumni say about their service experience

In focus group interviews and open-ended survey responses, alumni described an overall satisfying service experience that provided valuable training, as well as significant opportunities to develop

leadership and professional skills and chart a course for their future. The following quotes illustrate some of the Reading Partners service experiences

AmeriCorps alumni valued:

- *I liked the fact that once the school year started, we just had to do it; there wasn't anyone holding our hand along the way, which I appreciated. I definitely stumbled a lot at first, but at the same time, the support was always there.*
- *I had an opportunity through Reading Partners to work one-on-one with students, write behavior plans, work with community members, and do progress monitoring to help students improve. All these very specific things directly translated to the counseling profession that I'm going into now.*
- *I oversee a team of AmeriCorps members with a different non-profit [now] and I had such a great experience with Reading Partners; that helped me lead the team I'm currently leading now.*
- *I learned that I really had to be proactive and intentional about building relationships and establish goodwill. I think those [skills] are really important in various job settings. If I see something coming down the pipeline that could be a problem, rather than just waiting for something to happen—I [try] to get out ahead of it.*

Reading Partners made me feel more empowered to act; [to know] what I could do as an individual. Reading Partners showed me that I could be a real part of the action being taken.

Summary

Most Reading Partners AmeriCorps alumni reported that they were satisfied with their service experience. In addition, most alumni agreed that their service experience caused them to re-examine their beliefs and attitudes about themselves and others; a majority felt that they made a difference in the life of at least one person as well as contributed to the community where they served. In addition, most alumni agreed that their service experience helped broaden their perspective on their community and the world. Finally, most Reading Partners alumni reported that their Reading Partners service experience helped them decide on next steps for their career and professional goals. In focus group interviews and open-ended survey responses, alumni described an overall satisfying service experience that provided valuable training, significant opportunities for leadership and professional skills development, and that helped them chart a course for their future.

