



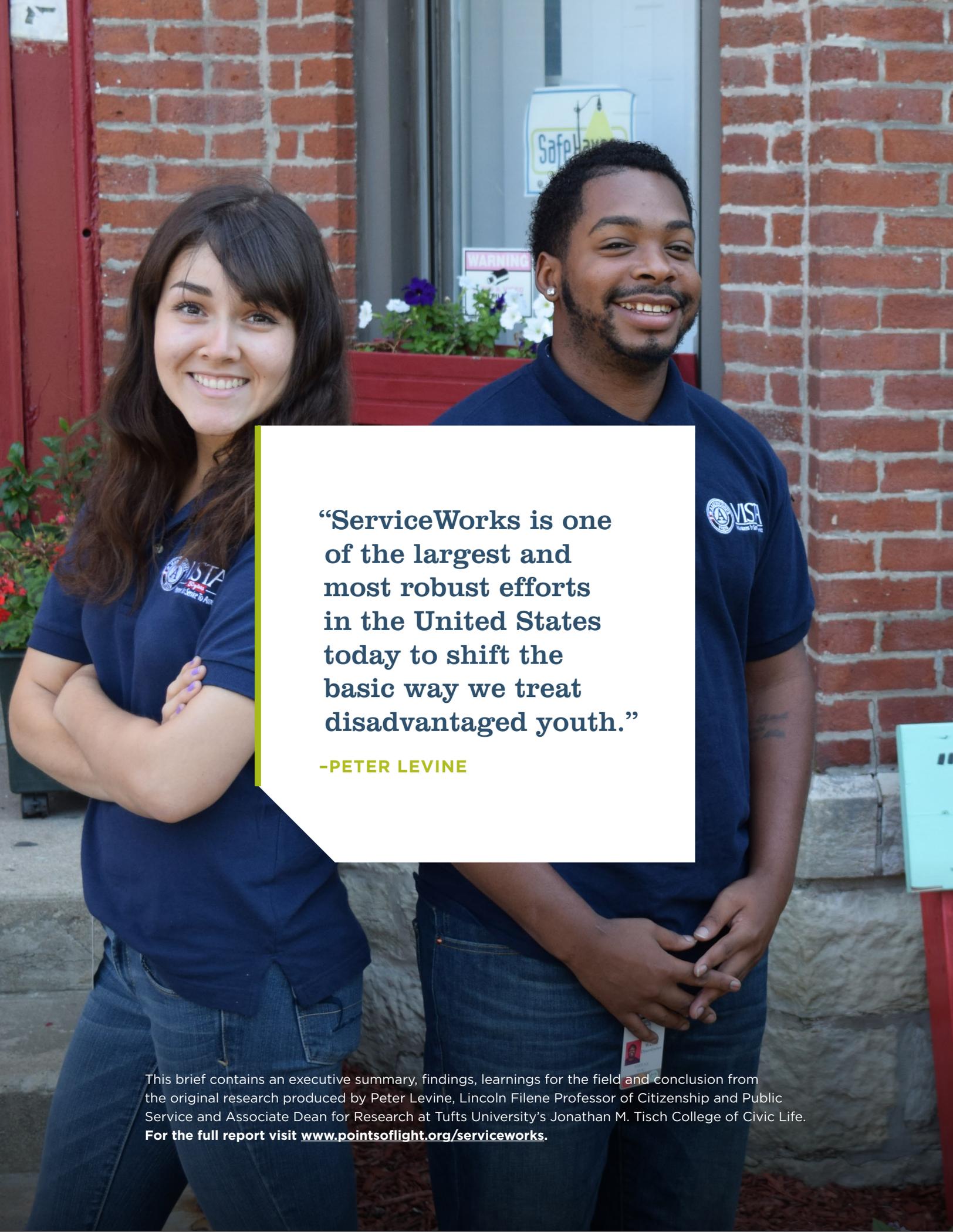
# Does Service Work?

Lessons from the  
ServiceWorks Program

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

**SERVICEWORKS**

Powered by AmeriCorps, the Citi Foundation, and Points of Light



**“ServiceWorks is one of the largest and most robust efforts in the United States today to shift the basic way we treat disadvantaged youth.”**

**-PETER LEVINE**

This brief contains an executive summary, findings, learnings for the field and conclusion from the original research produced by Peter Levine, Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship and Public Service and Associate Dean for Research at Tufts University’s Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. **For the full report visit [www.pointsoflight.org/serviceworks](http://www.pointsoflight.org/serviceworks).**

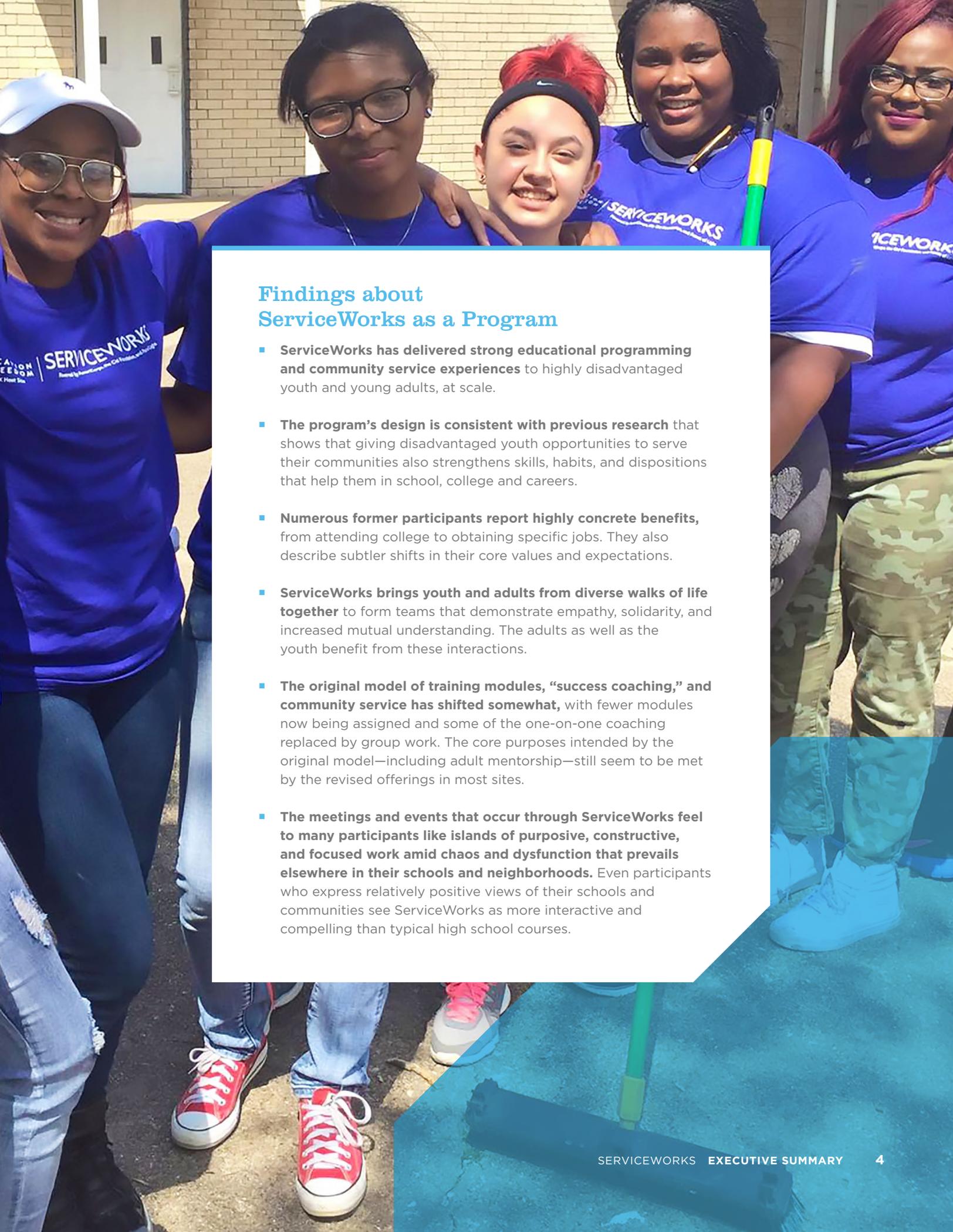


# Executive Summary

**Points of Light’s ServiceWorks program engages thousands of disadvantaged teenagers and young adults across the United States.** The participants, known as “Scholars,” participate in a series of about five educational modules designed to enhance their skills for work and higher education. They receive support from AmeriCorps VISTAs (Volunteers in Service to America), other adult volunteers, and/or professional program staff and teachers. They conduct community service projects, including a capstone project that they choose and design. At each site, the program is administered by a local nonprofit that typically offers a range of other services to youth. Programs vary somewhat in their methods of recruitment, settings, and target populations, but all use a similar curriculum for service-learning and leadership-development and the same measurement tools.

ServiceWorks is part of Citi Foundation’s Pathways to Progress initiative. First launched in 2014, Pathways to Progress aimed to help low-income 16- to 24-year-olds develop the “workplace skills and leadership experience necessary to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.” Points of Light received one of the grants as part of the initiative specifically to create the ServiceWorks program. Its goal was to provide 25,000 low-income youth with “community engagement and volunteer service” opportunities “to develop the skills to prepare for college and careers” (Equal Measure, 2016).

In 2017, I conducted this review, based on my assessment of data and documents provided by Points of Light and interviews with participants and stakeholders. This evaluation has certain limitations, including my dependence on evidence from individuals who had successfully completed the program. Despite some methodological limitations, I have reached the following conclusions.



## Findings about ServiceWorks as a Program

- **ServiceWorks has delivered strong educational programming and community service experiences** to highly disadvantaged youth and young adults, at scale.
- **The program's design is consistent with previous research** that shows that giving disadvantaged youth opportunities to serve their communities also strengthens skills, habits, and dispositions that help them in school, college and careers.
- **Numerous former participants report highly concrete benefits**, from attending college to obtaining specific jobs. They also describe subtler shifts in their core values and expectations.
- **ServiceWorks brings youth and adults from diverse walks of life together** to form teams that demonstrate empathy, solidarity, and increased mutual understanding. The adults as well as the youth benefit from these interactions.
- **The original model of training modules, “success coaching,” and community service has shifted somewhat**, with fewer modules now being assigned and some of the one-on-one coaching replaced by group work. The core purposes intended by the original model—including adult mentorship—still seem to be met by the revised offerings in most sites.
- **The meetings and events that occur through ServiceWorks feel to many participants like islands of purposive, constructive, and focused work amid chaos and dysfunction that prevails elsewhere in their schools and neighborhoods.** Even participants who express relatively positive views of their schools and communities see ServiceWorks as more interactive and compelling than typical high school courses.



# Learnings for the Field

The following points are less recommendations for improvements in ServiceWorks than issues for the whole field of youth development to consider. They emerge from the experience of this large demonstration project.

## **ADJUSTING THE BALANCE BETWEEN YOUTH VOICE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT:**

**Disadvantaged youth are likely to choose highly challenging issues to address, such as homicide or police violence.** They may then struggle to identify activities that they can design and conduct within the span of the program that will make a significant difference. A national staffer told me that this challenge is more prevalent in school sites than in community-based organizations that offer other service projects that youth can plug into.

One solution may be careful and extensive reflection after the service that allows the Scholars to explore their authentic feelings about what they accomplished and consider next steps. We do not have evidence at this point to know whether such reflection is effective.

Another solution is to guide Scholars toward manageable topics. However, that response conflicts with giving youth maximum voice and choice. A site

supervisor I interviewed said her program gives the Scholars “some topics to go off of, but ultimately it’s their choice.”

A third approach is to encourage each group of Scholars to build on previous Scholars’ work, because efforts sustained over time have a greater chance of changing communities. That approach would also limit youth voice somewhat, but Scholars would mainly be constrained by previous decisions also made by youth. A site supervisor told me there is a “certain comfort in knowing that you can repeat something and build on it,” but “it’s always important to encourage creativity.” A national staffer echoed this “balance between ‘What do the kids want?’ and what’s already shaking in the community.” This is a genuine trade-off.

Another aspect of youth voice is participants’ influence on the ServiceWorks program as a whole. Points of Light has been diligent about collecting

data from participants, including open-ended opinion questions. Site supervisors appear attuned to feedback from their Scholars. However, it is not clear that youth really have a role in assessing and modifying the program. A Citi Foundation executive reflected that “youth should be at the center,” and it’s important never to “lose the youth voice.” She wondered whether the partnership of the Citi Foundation, Points of Light, and AmeriCorps should have done more to include youth voice in its deliberations.

**INCORPORATING POLICY ADVOCACY:**

**In a Capstone project related to anti-homicide, the students identified public policies as a cause of the problem, but their service project addressed students’ empathy, not policy.** A Scholar alumna from a different site told me that she wished ServiceWorks would create opportunities to meet members of the city council.

These examples raise the general question of whether and how Scholars can analyze and address policy and policymakers, whether in government or in the private sector. A recent movement—although it draws on precedents going back to the early 1900s—is Action Civics (Gingold, 2013). In typical Action Civics programs, as in ServiceWorks, students discuss social problems, choose a problem to address with their

own efforts, implement their plan, and reflect. Action Civics thus overlaps in practice with service-learning. But Action Civics proposes that youth should develop identities as citizens (people who have rights and powers in relation to institutions) not as volunteers or servers. Since ServiceWorks Scholars understand the relevance of policy, it may be worth drawing on some of the experiences of Action Civics.

**FOCUSING ON COMMUNICATIONS:**

**Many Scholars’ service projects involved elements of communications or awareness-raising: Scholars organized or produced school assemblies, videos, murals, and forums for invited speakers.** A national staff member estimated that communications was an aspect of about half of all the capstone projects nationwide. Perhaps the most consistent form of growth noted in my interviews with Scholars was increased confidence in speaking publicly.

Since youth have considerable power as communicators, and since effective communication requires skills that are highly relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace, it may be worth focusing more attention on communications. ServiceWorks could be connected to the burgeoning fields of youth media production and media literacy, which now emphasize social media as well as traditional modes of communication.

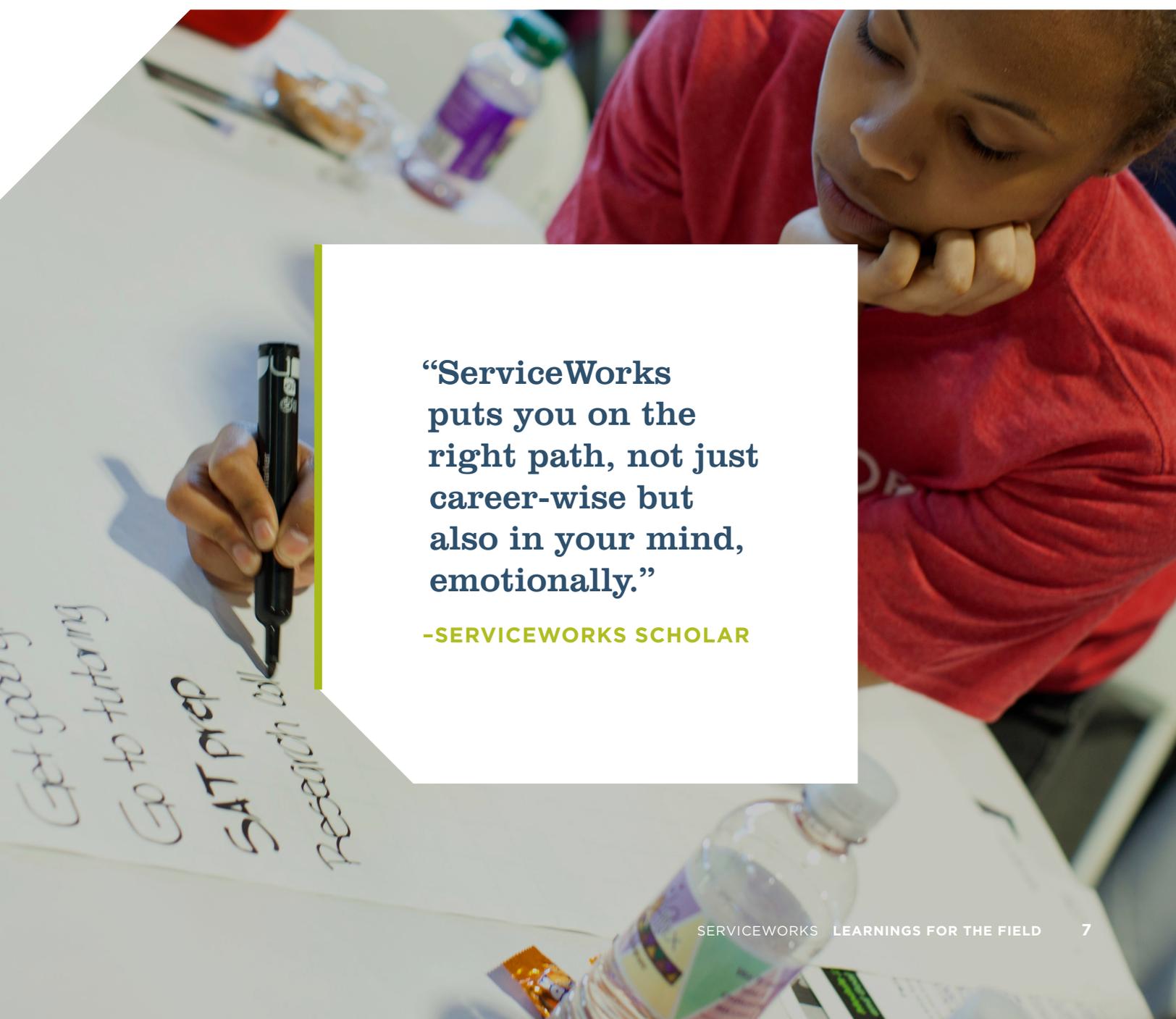
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**CAPTURING VALUE FOR THE LABOR MARKET:**  
Both previous research on service as preparation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce and the evidence collected for this evaluation suggest that Scholars are learning concrete skills that have value in the labor market.

However, prospective employers may not recognize that Scholar alumni have these skills. Employers still use educational credentials and previous jobs as the main indicators of qualifications. If a disadvantaged young adult demonstrates

exceptional communications skills in ServiceWorks, this will not be evident on a résumé unless employers come to believe that completing ServiceWorks reliably produces such outcomes for all participants. A solution is to develop rigorous, portable signifiers of specific skills—“badges” or “microcredentials”—and award them to youth who demonstrate capacity (Sullivan, 2013). This solution would require ongoing partnerships between youth-serving NGOs, such as Points of Light, and major employers in the for-profit and public sectors.



**“ServiceWorks puts you on the right path, not just career-wise but also in your mind, emotionally.”**

**-SERVICEWORKS SCHOLAR**



# Conclusion

**ServiceWorks is one of the largest and most robust efforts in the United States today to shift the basic way we treat disadvantaged youth.** A deficit model remains prevalent, in which low-income youth, youth from poorly resourced schools and communities, and urban youth of color are treated as “at risk” of harming themselves or society. They are often separated from adult society in schools or prisons, and offered a mix of surveillance, discipline, and remedial education aimed at getting them through the transition to adulthood without crises. Whether or not this approach to adolescence was acceptable at a time when most young people could find employment in farms and factories, it is clearly failing today. The large body of research on Opportunity Youth, on the 21<sup>st</sup> century labor market, and on youth development suggest that the deficit model is misguided. Young people should be treated as assets who can contribute distinctive value to society, especially when they are integrated into their communities and encouraged to work together with adults to improve the world. This is how ServiceWorks relates to tens of thousands of disadvantaged American young people, mostly urban youth of color. Consistent with the research, ServiceWorks helps a considerable number of these young people to exercise voice and agency, to serve their communities, and to put themselves on better trajectories. It is a model that should be sustained, strengthened, and imitated.



**“When I figured  
out I could help,  
that’s when I  
gave my best.”**

**-SERVICEWORKS  
SCHOLAR**



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