

Fall 1993

Challenges of Replicating Success

Jay Altman

Tom Malarkey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen>

 Part of the [Service Learning Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Altman, Jay and Malarkey, Tom, "Challenges of Replicating Success" (1993). *Service Learning, General*. 52.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/52>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Service Learning, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Challenges of Replicating Success

National Information Center
for Service Learning
1954 Buford Ave, Room R290
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

Jay Altman & Tom Malarkey

Jay Altman is founding director and current executive director of New Orleans Summerbridge. Tom Malarkey, formerly co-director of San Francisco Summerbridge, directed a Summerbridge site in New Orleans during 1993, and is program officer with Summerbridge National.

Krishnamurti used to tell a story about Man walking along the shore of the sea of life looking for the shell of truth. God and the Devil are watching from atop the cliffs rising far above the sand and water. Man finds the shell of truth in the roaring surf and picks it up. God turns to the Devil and says, "I've got you now, for Man has discovered truth."

"I'm not worried," replies the Devil. "Just wait until he organizes it."

Although we hope no one would ever presume to have found the truth, most of us in the service field tend to cherish the bit of knowledge we have found in our own program—especially if it has met with success. This summer, the government gave funding to sixteen projects promoting youth service, New Orleans Summerbridge among them, and asked us all to organize our respective truths...and in some cases, to replicate them. As participants in the Summerbridge project, we're here to say that, yes, truths are out there—programs that are working. However, we must report also that the Devil is no fool—organizing programs to expand can be extremely difficult. As the national service program is gradually phased in, a large number of existing local projects will be faced with the same issues we dealt with this summer: how do you take a program that is working, add to it an infusion of federal money, and expand it to a much larger scale?

Answers may vary, but our experience this summer may offer a window into some of the extraordinary potential and challenges the national service program will face in its early growth.

*Much of
Summerbridge's
success lies in the*

**On the
National Agenda**

The promises of national service are great: meeting critical education, health, and environmental needs of local communities; giving young people skills and training in delivering public services; developing in participants a sense of responsibility for their communities and a commitment to public service; and providing financial assistance for post-secondary education to those who have served.

Now, with the impending large-scale buildup of national service programs, those of us associated with service program development are faced with the challenge of making it happen. The challenge will be seen on the national level as the Commission on National and Community Service merges with ACTION to form a new Corporation of National Service. It will be seen at the state level as states set up or expand existing service commissions. And it will be seen locally as new programs emerge and existing programs expand and replicate to meet the pressing needs of our communities.

How can we rapidly expand the scope of what we're doing? Many leaders and organizations are not comfortable with large-scale, federally funded expansion. But for those of us who engage in the task of building new programs or replicating existing ones, the opportunities must be met with a pragmatic idealism that draws upon the lessons already learned.

The advent of the Clinton Administration has brought back some of the promise of

*distinct culture of the
program—the norms
and expectations and
atmosphere, which
participants know as
“the way we do things
around here.”*

change of a generation ago, along with the idea that government can play a proactive role in addressing our country's social ills. However, the approach of this administration in the 1990s is markedly different from that of the Johnson Administration in the 1960s. No plans exist to launch a War on Poverty—replete with major government-created and -funded programs and their attendant bureaucracies. Rather, in its

effort to “reinvent government,” the current administration is attempting to act more as a catalyst and facilitator in helping states and local communities develop their own programs to address their needs.

The strength of the service movement has been its grassroots efforts, the thousands of local projects that have sprung up across the country. The federal government does well to recognize and build on this strength, yet in planning its national service program, it should make sure to take into account what is involved in expanding or replicating programs that have grown up on their own. Large-scale expansion is not easy for any enterprise, and local community service organizations may be particularly unprepared. The skills involved in expansion and replication are different from the ones needed to start a program. And involvement of the government may also create a different dynamic within the group. In its efforts to foster expansion, the government should look beyond how much money it will cost to consider some of the equally important

*We envisioned the
central office's role as
being enabling and*

questions of training, technical assistance, and support needed by groups it is funding.

A Working Model

Our own work at Summerbridge is a case study in replication and expansion. Summerbridge is a service program that started in San Francisco in 1978. Its aim is to prepare local middle-school students, with generally limited educational opportunities, to enter and thrive in rigorous college preparatory high school programs. It arranges for high school and college students to provide intensive summer instruction to small classes of students (four to seven in a class), giving teachers a great deal of support and training in innovative pedagogy. Responsibility for all teaching, curriculum development, advising and mentoring, as well as much of the program administration, is turned over to the talented young staff. The majority of the service volunteers go on to work in education after college. And their students have an exceptional success rate—92 percent have gone on to attend strong college preparatory high school programs.

In 1990, as a pilot replication, Summerbridge launched a New Orleans program, closely modeled on the success in San Francisco. The New Orleans program achieved similar results, leading to the creation of Summerbridge National in 1991, and the subsequent development of 25 Summerbridge programs in schools across the country. These

*supporting rather
than bureaucratic or
authoritative. We soon
found it to be a differ-
ent organizational
animal altogether—a
tiger that we rode all
summer, often in vain.*

programs form a collaborative network that shares ideas about teaching and learning, funding, and program development, as well as participating in a collective staff-hiring process.

This year, New Orleans Summerbridge received a Summer of Service (SOS) grant to expand its work dramatically—from 170 to 360 students, and from 65 to 125 young staff members. The grant offered us a truly exciting opportunity. We were in need of funding to continue the two

Summerbridge sites that had already started, and we were also eager to meet the growing demand for the program. And, although Summerbridge National has had extensive experience with replication over the last three years, before this no local Summerbridge programs had initiated their own replication within their communities. So, working closely with the office, we went on to launch two new sites in New Orleans. We quickly learned a number of lessons.

Give Programs Time

Nearly every aspect of a program is affected by the amount of planning time and the scope of its expansion. The Commission on National and Community Service did a laudable job of minimizing federal bureaucratic requirements for SOS programs. However, due to congressional hang-ups with Clinton's stimulus package in the spring, notification for the grants did not come through until late April, which

*While the key to
replication is main-
taining the quality*

gave programs just over a month to assemble their summer projects and be ready for their participants to arrive for training. This included finding sites, hiring administrators, recruiting and hiring staff, preparing materials, and setting up systems to handle federal money.

Though the normal time frame for establishing a new Summerbridge program is at least six months, we felt we had the infrastructure in New Orleans to launch the two new sites in the time available. We made a major error, however, in not scaling back and simplifying the new sites. We aimed to make these sites every bit as sophisticated as the two existing ones, and this led to overwhelming pressure. Ultimately, the workload and demands of the new sites wound up straining the resources of the two existing ones.

Programs need sufficient time to plan: cutting corners just diminishes their success. Given a limited time frame—as happens all too often—they should adjust the complexity of their operation to the time available and the scope of the expansion. It seems basic, but it's not always an easy rule to follow. Complexity has its own seductions that are hard to resist.

Focus on Program Culture

The transmission of program culture is as important as the replication of the outward aspects of the program model. It is imperative that programs develop a strong culture if they are not to become bureaucracies. Much of Summerbridge's success, nationally and in

*and integrity of the
original program, this
does not mean that
replication creates
identical programs.*

New Orleans, lies in the distinct culture of the program—the norms and expectations and atmosphere, which participants know as “the way we do things around here.” At Summerbridge, this culture engenders the extraordinary excitement about learning, willingness to take risks, and commitment to academic

excellence and personal growth that visitors to the program immediately notice in the students and young staff; it is definitely contagious. Transmitting this from year to year within one program is a challenge. Building it into a new program takes a lot of work.

This summer, though our programs were strong, things felt different. Our truly diverse staff had a harder time working together than other groups have. The job is always demanding—it's the kind of work participants sweat through, but leave feeling it was “the best thing I ever did.” This year it felt especially stressful. Those extra miles we always go for the kids seemed longer and tougher to trek. As administrators, having to scramble for basic program needs, we could not listen as closely to the concerns of young staff members, who were constantly pushed beyond their perceived limits. These were all painful new dimensions to a program that generally copes well with such issues.

Summerbridge looks good on paper, yet written materials or a blueprint alone never create the efficacy of the program. People are the key here. With the scope of the expansion this summer, our returning staff members and administrators were spread too thin. This made

*A dynamic young
service corps working
in highly demanding*

it difficult to orient new members to "Summerbridge ways," and created significant stress for the few returning staff at each site who struggled to communicate the ethos of the program. Again, time was a factor: we had just weeks to recruit, select, and train our many new staff. This meant we could not find out much about them, educate them enough about Summerbridge, and bring them gradually into the program's culture.

It is important to note that of the sixteen programs funded by SOS, Summerbridge had among the strongest existing program infrastructure (materials, processes, systems). A number of the SOS-funded programs were start-ups or new branches of existing projects. We already had a good deal in place, yet we felt the stress of expansion upon the culture of the program acutely. We can only imagine the difficulties faced elsewhere.

In expanding programs, time and attention must be given to developing experienced participants as leaders, and to recruiting and training new ones. If national service funding forces programs to be expedient in these areas, mediocrity will almost certainly begin to erode the effectiveness of service programs.

Provide Technical Support

Small programs that plan to undergo large expansion to multiple sites need technical support or administrators experienced at running large organizations. Expanding from a small to a large or medium-sized program requires the creation of new administrative systems and a new management structure. Many non-profit

*circumstances needs to
feel ownership and
much creative control
over its work.*

organizations are plagued by ineffective management because they are run by people skilled in the field, not in large-scale administration. We were a case in point, and soon found ourselves swimming in deep administrative waters.

Expanding to four sites necessitated the creation of a central office that could handle federal compliance, the distribution of funds and materials, the facilitation of public relations and whole-program events, and the coordination of much of the training. This placed NOSB's founding director, an educator at heart, at the helm of a new organization: a central office that was removed from the action at the sites. We envisioned its role (somewhat naively) as being enabling and supporting rather than bureaucratic or authoritative. We even dubbed it "Pizza to Go," downplaying its power and highlighting the services it would provide the sites. It seemed that this would not be too different from being a director of a program. We soon found it to be a different organizational animal altogether—a tiger that we rode all summer, often in vain.

This process of expansion and centralization is hardly unique. There are lessons everywhere, both in business and the non-profit arena, about how to do it well. Unfortunately, we did not avail ourselves of them as we might have. Here, technical support might help tremendously in the future. This could come in a variety of forms: organizational (deciding what should be centralized versus decentralized), fiscal (creating systems to comply with federal auditing standards and deliver

Many of the programs

work, in large part,

because they are small.

funds to sites in timely and uncomplicated fashion), and operational (developing communication/information flow systems and codifying routines and procedures that may have been informal in the past but now need to be formalized for a larger organization).

As organizational theory goes, the question of centralization is critical to the expansion of a program. How much autonomy can an individual site have? How much should it have? Who is accountable for quality control? We rapidly learned that Summerbridge programs require maximal autonomy—it is crucial that programs feel they are unique and not simply a cog in a larger wheel.

Unfortunately, as a central office is developed, it tends to make its sub-organizations less effective. It begins to develop its own needs, which constrain its satellites and require time and attention from people working in the field. In addition, the greater the perceived power of a central office, the less effective and less timely the response at the site level tends to be. If the executive director is several levels or miles removed from the staff, relationships and trust become more difficult.

Expansion also requires the definition of roles and the codification of procedures as new people are brought in while those who know the information are too busy to deal with all the questions. As we saw several times this summer, new people need to have a clear understanding of their roles, and of organizational procedures. Otherwise, they are forced to spend a great deal of time and energy learning and defining the basics rather than doing

How can we maintain the work.

their integrity as

they expand?

Here, too, programs such as Summerbridge would benefit tremendously from technical assistance in the area of how and what to centralize in

our program. Business leaders, managers, people with experience in larger non-profits might all have valuable insights.

And, beyond organizational concerns, programs such as ours, which have never handled federal grant money before, need assistance in setting up fiscal management systems. Though relatively simple, this can consume a great deal of administrative time if not done carefully from the beginning. Other systems—communication/information flow, purchasing, staff and participant support, and personnel procedures—need to be developed if they are not already in place. Technical support of this kind would help maximize the resources and the effectiveness of service programs' work.

Adapt, Don't Prescribe

Replication of local service projects should be adaptive not prescriptive. While the key to replication is maintaining the quality and integrity of the original program, this does not mean that replication creates identical programs. In fact, attempting to duplicate a successful, original program may very well undermine the project's success.

We erred on the side of prescription this summer by creating a master plan for all the programs to follow that, while not duplicative, specified events, a good deal of the training, and many processes. It was ambitious, and probably appropriate for a single experienced program, but the sites—especially the new

ones—found themselves overwhelmed trying to implement it all. Directors and staff often felt that instead of creating what was needed for their kids in their particular situations, too much of the summer was spent implementing a central plan.

On the national level of Summerbridge, our programs are actually quite different from city to city. Much of this is undoubtedly due to the program's philosophy, which emphasizes empowerment of its young staff as much as the students. We've found that a dynamic young service corps working in highly demanding circumstances needs to feel ownership and much creative control over its work; the experience of others can provide general boundaries, not preset solutions.

Looking Ahead

Ultimately, any problems we faced at Summerbridge this year were far overshadowed by the opportunities offered by participating in the Summer of Service. Our program—both nationally and in New Orleans—grew and benefited from our engagement with the federal government.

With the passage of National Service legislation this fall, the potential for the service movement is extraordinary. Over time, community service could make a significant impact on the role of nonprofits and the government in addressing our country's social ills, how we regard our youth, young people's capacity for affecting positive change, and how we define "serving one's country." Most importantly, it will have an impact on the lives of thousands of children with limited opportunities. However, all this is a best-case scenario. It is naive to think that national service alone will

solve our problems. Hopefully, it will be just a piece of an increasingly extensive net of services and organizations dedicated to making this country a truly kinder, gentler nation to live in.

As the idea and reality of national service comes of age, the question will loom ever more present: Do these kinds of programs work? Do they actually make a difference? For whom? Should federal and state government direct increasing amounts of money into them?

Many have voiced concerns over the possible bureaucratization of a dynamic grassroots movement, the lack of participant involvement in planning, and the vision behind national service. These questions will continue to be heatedly discussed—and rightly so, for the issues are extremely sensitive.

Our message lies in a somewhat different realm. After just a summer of national service, our feeling is that the government should definitely proceed—but with caution. Capitalizing on the success of local programs is a refreshing and good plan. However, the very successes of local projects could well be undermined by large-scale replication and expansion that jumps ahead of small service organizations' capacity to effectively carry it out. Many of the programs work, in large part, because they are small. How can we maintain their integrity as they expand? This should be a primary focus of the government as national service becomes a reality.