



# **Strengthening America Together: A Vision for a New 21<sup>st</sup> Century Corps Movement**

*Report to the National Commission on Military,  
National, and Public Service*

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**The Corps Network**  
[www.corpsnetwork.org](http://www.corpsnetwork.org)  
1275 K St NW – Ste 1050 Washington, DC 20005

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## Executive Summary

On behalf of the nation's 130 Service & Conservation Corps (Corps), The Corps Network welcomes the opportunity to offer the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (commission) our collective ideas and comments on increasing participation in military, national, and public service. We appreciate the commission's efforts to gather input from diverse geographic regions, and are happy to offer similarly diverse comments from our member-Corps, which annually enroll over 25,000 young adults and veterans (Corpsmembers) in service across every state, Washington, DC, and US Territories.

Corps descend from the highly successful Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the Great Depression. America's first non-federal Corps began in the 1950s. Since then, we have grown the Corps-model to where we are today: addressing some of America's most pressing challenges by "putting service to work" through partnerships with all levels of government, private businesses, and foundations across the country. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Service and Conservation Corps have also evolved to engage an extremely diverse group of Corpsmembers: nearly half of all enrollees are women, and half identify as persons of color.

Modern Corps work on important projects in urban and rural communities and on our nation's public lands and waters. Projects include disaster response and recovery; conservation of fish and wildlife habitat, and landscapes; wildfire remediation; recreation, water, and multi-use transportation infrastructure enhancement; recycling; energy efficiency and solar installation; GIS mapping and environmental monitoring; and historic preservation. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Corps also focus on building career pathways and helping Corpsmembers develop in-demand skills and attain credentials. Additionally, modern Corps ensure populations that are often overlooked have the opportunity to serve. This includes Opportunity Youth, native and court-involved youth, and our nation's veterans.

More needs to be done to encourage a greater ethos of service to country and community. There also needs to be a dedicated effort to increase both the quality and quantity of opportunities to serve. This is why we conducted a survey of our members Corps, soliciting input into the critical questions raised by the commission. Our recommendations to the commission are as follows:

- 1. Establish a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps:** Establish a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps via existing and new Corps in every state and major city throughout the US and territories to address community and public lands infrastructure, conservation, forestry, alternative energy, and disaster response and resiliency needs. The vision is to effectively engage at least 100,000 new young adults, Opportunity Youth, and veterans in these opportunities, helping young people build respect for hard work through service, and helping veterans leverage their skills for service-oriented civilian careers.

- 2. Create a Presidential-Level Council on the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps:** A council comprised of representatives from the federal departments and states would develop public-private partnerships between Corps and the federal and state governments. This council would help relevant agencies use existing programs and funding to engage Corps in meeting their missions in urban and rural areas and on public lands and waters. The council would help develop infrastructure to support an increase of work-based service opportunities during another economic downturn or major natural disasters. It would also support a reserve-Corps of skilled service alumni, and help provide ongoing opportunities for those who are able to serve to contribute to their community and earn a living allowance.
- 3. Putting Service to Work:** So youth from all backgrounds can serve, the value proposition for service should be enhanced through post-secondary credit and recognition of service, as well as increased living allowances to keep up with increasing costs. While ensuring projects are aligned with national and community priorities, federal and state governments should coordinate with Corps to also align projects with career pathways and the hiring needs of businesses. Additionally, Corps, government, and business should collaborate to develop new apprenticeship models and identify civilian careers pathways for transitioning veterans.

America's Corps stand ready to assist the commission. We are here to provide further feedback in moving these ideas to reality, and can support other ideas submitted to, or generated by, the commission. On behalf of our nation's 130 Corps, we thank you for the opportunity to provide this feedback and applaud your commitment to this work and an inclusive process for developing your report.

With hopes of further contributing to your report and important mission, we developed a briefing for the commission, as follows, on the history of Corps and our vision for the future of service.

Sincerely,



Mary Ellen Sprengel  
President & CEO  
The Corps Network

## **A New 21st Century Corps Movement**

*“Performing service to others is a powerful gateway to learning empathy, and for building a sense of community beyond oneself and one’s immediate circle of family and friends. Everyone should spend some time doing things that don’t benefit themselves directly.”*

*NANCY WEIL, Colorado Youth Corps Association*

With a multitude of issues facing today’s youth and our nation – including declining social bonds amongst peers, sedentary lifestyles and the negative health effects, unprecedented amounts of student loan debt, a long recovery from the Great Recession, increased drug abuse, crumbling infrastructure, and the rancorous political discourse to name a few – America is in need of a bold vision for national unity and pride. A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Corps movement can help inspire more Americans to serve and can address pressing community and national needs while developing a sense of unity, as well as a sense of respect for hard work and values.

With the commission, we believe there is an opportunity to think boldly and develop plans to provide opportunities to engage hundreds of thousands of additional young adults and veterans in high-quality work-based service experiences. There is an opportunity to develop the infrastructure to quickly scale-up national service programs to support Americans during another large economic downturn or a major natural disaster, and to help provide opportunities for those who are able to work to contribute to their community and earn a living allowance.

As the economy shifts to the service sector and automation, and as middle-skill jobs increasingly require two-year or four-year degrees, there are fewer opportunities for young people to gain the essential “first-job skills” to be successful and start on a path to a career or additional education. In addition, we see a lack of community and national cohesion, a growing lack of trust in institutions, and increasing polarization around socio-economic and ethnic divides. We also have multiple generations affected by the Great Recession, which left massive unemployment and financial setbacks in its wake. There is a perception that we cannot tackle major challenges as a nation anymore.

Corps have a proven ability to help young people develop in-demand skills. Corps also foster unity among people from all walks of life by engaging them in a shared mission of completing projects important to communities and our nation. By supporting and promoting a bold vision for a new generation of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Corps, we can provide more opportunities for young citizens and returning veterans to be a part of something larger than themselves. We can fundamentally change what it means to serve one’s country.

## **The Vision for a 21st Century Conservation Service Corps**

*“Service needs to be an option for all Americans who want to serve,  
not just those who can afford to serve.”*

*CHRIS WARNER, Director of Development, Great Basin Institute*

### **Recommendations to Expand Corps to Strengthen America**

By supporting the expansion of existing Corps, developing new Corps in priority areas, and increasing the value proposition of service opportunities, we could have a Corps in every state and major community ready to address our nation’s most pressing challenges:

1. **Establish a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps:** Establish a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps via existing and new Corps in every state and major city throughout the US and territories to address community and public lands infrastructure, conservation, forestry, alternative energy, and disaster response and resiliency needs and effectively engage 100,000 new young adults, Opportunity Youth, and veterans in these opportunities to build respect for hard work through service.
2. **Create a Presidential-Level Council on the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps:** A council comprised of representatives from the federal departments and states would develop public-private partnerships between Corps and government. This council would help relevant agencies use existing programs and funding to engage Corps in meeting agency missions in urban and rural areas and on public lands and waters. The council would help develop infrastructure to support an increase of work-based service opportunities during another economic downturn or major natural disasters. It would also help provide ongoing opportunities for those who are able to serve to contribute to their community and earn a living allowance.
3. **Putting Service to Work:** So youth from all backgrounds can serve, the value proposition for service should be enhanced through post-secondary credit and recognition of service, as well as increased living allowances to keep up with increasing costs. While ensuring projects are aligned with national and community priorities, federal and state governments should coordinate with Corps to also align projects with career pathways and the hiring needs of businesses. Additionally, Corps, government, and business should collaborate to develop new apprenticeship models and identify civilian careers pathways for transitioning veterans.

## Survey on Increasing Participation in Military, National, and Public Service

The Corps Network surveyed our 130 Service and Conservation Corps, which collectively enroll more than 25,000 youth and veterans annually. Our survey questions were based directly on the commission’s request for feedback. We provided a range of answers for each of the following five questions:

### **1 - How should the United States increase participation in military, national, and public service by individuals with skills critical to address the national security and other public service needs of the nation? (Pick as many as you like)**

<b>79%</b>	support more federal investment in domestic service
<b>79%</b>	support college credit for service
<b>71%</b>	believe we need to reinvigorate a National Conservation Corps (of new and existing programs)

*Other responses included:* Increase the Living Allowance (68%); An Expectation of a Service Year after High School (62%); Industry Recognized Credentials Aligned with Career Paths (47%) Aligning Service with Major National Needs (47%); and Better Information Resources (21%)

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### **2 - What are the barriers to participation in military, national, or public service?**

<b>91%</b>	said the living allowance or pay is a barrier
<b>74%</b>	said a lack of understanding of opportunities is a barrier
<b>53%</b>	said pressure to go to school or work is a barrier

*Other responses included:* Housing Costs (50%); Not Enough Service Opportunities (38%); Unclear Benefits (29%); Costs of Service in Expensive Cities (27%); Lack of Transportation in Rural Areas (18%); and Lack of Time (12%)

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### **3 - Does service have inherent value, and, if so, what is it?**

*100% indicated service has inherent value. Below are cited reasons why service is valuable:*

<b>71%</b>	cited personal development & leadership
<b>71%</b>	cited improving the community
<b>68%</b>	cited work-based learning



*Other responses included:*

Breaking Down Cultural Barriers (56%); Value of Service to Others & Philanthropy (38%); Attractive for Resume (35%); In-Demand Skills Development (32%); Breaking Down Economic Barriers (27%); Industry Recognized Credentials (27%); Shared Mission and Values (24%); Developing National Identity (9%)

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**4 - Is a mandatory service requirement for all Americans necessary, valuable, and feasible?**

*56% think mandatory service is not necessary, valuable, or feasible. Reasons why include:*

(44%)	put's domestic service in the wrong light
(29%)	too restrictive
(21%)	too big for government to effectively manage
(21%)	seems to stand in opposition to the idea of "liberty"
(9%)	could eliminate non-profits/private sector support
(6%)	participants will give less effort

*41% believe mandatory service is necessary, valuable, or feasible. Reasons why include:*

(35%)	shared sacrifice & value
(32%)	could expand non-profits & private sector role
(32%)	comprehensively address national needs
(27%)	helps instill national pride
(21%)	evens out the selective service gender imbalance
(9%)	better decision making by elected officials
(6%)	better military readiness

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**5 - How does the United States increase the propensity for Americans, particularly young Americans, to serve?**

<b>82%</b>	said more federal investment in domestic service
<b>79%</b>	said an increase to the living allowance
<b>68%</b>	said college credit for service

*Other responses included:*

Reinvigorate a National Conservation Corps (62%); Value in Service for Career Prospects (53%); Supporting the Community and Social Needs (53%); National Service Year Campaign (44%); Aligning Service with Major National Needs (38%); Education Awards for Service (38%); Support from Media and Social Media for Service (32%); More Quality Summer Service Opportunities (32%); Universal Service Requirement (24%); Better Information Resources (18%); Ensuring Parental Involvement and Encouragement (12%); and Safety and Risk Management (3%).





# The Corps Network

Strengthening America through  
service and conservation

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## **The Early Days of Corps**

### **The Civilian Conservation Corps**

Modern Service and Conservation Corps (Corps) have a rich lineage traced back to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) – a Depression-era program created as part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal. Today’s Corps, most of which are nonprofits and are no longer federally run, provide work-based service opportunities for many of the same populations as the CCC, including military service veterans from all branches. The CCC was an enormously successful program. During its operation from 1933 to 1942, the program enrolled over 3.4 million persons, including over 25,000 veterans.

### **As Service Should be Today - Strengthen the Individual to Build a Team**

Those who joined the CCC found an opportunity to better their lives in a variety of ways. Many learned how to read, while others developed trade skills essential to the scope of project work. With Depression-level poverty came a lack of financial security to provide basic needs; many families could not afford adequate food. The rigors of outdoor labor demanded this nourishment. The CCC helped keep America’s young men healthy, fit, and capable of performing the intense work the program demanded, but it also helped keep them military ready.

The CCC helped sustain a population whose physical fitness would be critical when called up to assist with the war effort abroad. To prepare today’s Corpsmembers for the rigorous labor that conservation, infrastructure, and disaster response work often requires, many Corps incorporate physical training into their program. The benefits are numerous, including instilling discipline and respect for hard work; promoting physical and mental health; and furthering a sense of team cohesion.

### **Building Off the Success of the CCC**

Much of the park infrastructure built by the CCC is still used by millions of visitors to today. The legacy of the CCC continues to grow as Corps programs have evolved and as federal funding priorities have shifted to where modern Corps don’t receive any dedicated federal funding. The result has been the adoption of a more cooperative approach to funding Corps that includes an expanding role for various levels of government and the private sector (including philanthropic sources, businesses, community partners, and non-profit partners).

While the CCC was officially disbanded in 1942, the concept lived on and formed the basis for a national Corps movement. The Corps model was revived in the 1950s, when the Student Conservation Association (SCA) placed its first college students as volunteers in national parks and forests. Just over a decade later, Senator Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson created the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC). At its height, the YCC was funded at a level of \$60 million and enrolled some 32,000 young people with federal land management partners. Late in the 1970s, the Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) was launched, with an annual appropriation of

\$260 million. The YACC provided young people with year-round conservation-related employment and education opportunities at the federal and state levels.

### **The First Wave - State Conservation Corps:**

Both the YCC and the YACC were virtually eliminated in 1981 due to dramatic federal budget reductions. By that time, however, the value of Corps had been proven and many states had already begun to support these programs directly. California became the first when Governor Jerry Brown launched the California Conservation Corps in 1976. By the end of the decade, state-supported Conservation Corps were operating in Iowa and Ohio, and during the first half of the 1980s in several other states, including Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin.

### **The Second Wave - Urban Conservation and Service Corps:**

In 1983, the Corps movement took a new twist with the birth of the first Urban Conservation Corps programs in Marin County, San Francisco and Oakland (East Bay), plus eight more in subsequent years. The California local Corps were strengthened by passage of the California Bottle Act in 1985, which earmarked funding for local Corps' recycling projects. Just a year later, New York City established the City Volunteer Corps and added a new dimension to the Corps model by engaging young people in the delivery of human services as well as conservation work.

### **The Third Wave: Urban Corps Expansion Project (UCEP):**

Late in the 1980s, with support from several large foundations (Ford, Kellogg, Hewlett, Mott, Rockefeller, and the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, among others), The Corps Network (formerly known as NASCC – the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps) and Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) sponsored a national demonstration to create and evaluate Urban Corps in 10 cities across the country, using the best practices gleaned from the established Corps programs. The first of these new Corps became operational in the fall of 1990.

### **The Fourth Wave: Federal National and Community Service Funds for Corps:**

In 1992, the Corps movement saw the first targeted federal funding in more than a decade, when the Commission on National and Community Service awarded approximately \$22.5 million in grants to 23 states, the District of Columbia, the Los Angeles Conservation Corps (for disaster relief projects) and five Indian tribes, doubling the number of Corps. In 1993, the National and Community Service Trust Act became law, which created the AmeriCorps program to expand funding to more service organizations beyond Corps and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

Corps involvement in AmeriCorps remains strong today with the majority of Corps' 25,000 Corpsmembers also being AmeriCorps members, whether through national grants (multi-state) or through state-based grants, the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) and the AmeriCorps VISTA program.



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## **Modern-Day 21st Century Conservation Service Corps**

Today's Corps provide young adults and veterans the opportunity to serve their country, advance their education and obtain in-demand skills. Serving in crews and individual placements, Corpsmembers address some of America's most pressing challenges by performing conservation, recreation, infrastructure, wildfire, disaster response, and community development service projects on public lands and in rural and urban communities.

### **Corps Leverage Public-Private Partnerships**

Corps primarily work through public-private (non-profit) partnerships with federal, state, county, and local government to complete priority projects and provide work-based service opportunities. On the federal level, Corps programs are authorized through the Public Lands Corps Act of 1993 (16 USC, Subchapter 37 Title II), and have additional federal authorities included in the National and Community Service Law (42 USC Chapter 129); the Urban Youth Corps (42 USC Section 12656); the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act: Section 1101 – Youth Service & Conservation Corps Organizations (33 USC 2339); and the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21): Section 1524 – Use of Youth Service & Conservation Corps (PL112-141). Corps additionally work through state legislature-developed authorities, and local contracts and agreements.

### **Corps Conserve Resources, Improve Infrastructure, and Increase Access to the Outdoors**

Resource management and municipal agencies face billions of dollars in backlogged projects. Corps partner with agencies to address public land's needs, and work with all levels of government on community development and infrastructure projects in water and energy efficiency. Projects Corps complete, such as those that improve habitats and public lands access, support the \$887 billion outdoor economy. A study by the National Park Service demonstrated Corps can reduce project expenses by 50 percent or more. Plus, studies show 99.6% of land management employees would work with Corps again.

In 2017, Corps produced the following Conservation, Recreation, and Environmental Outcomes: 311,378 acres of habitat restored; 150,300 acres of invasive species & hazardous fire fuels treated; 2,551 miles of waterways restored; 42,804 acres of erosion and flood control; 13,284 miles of multi-use trails constructed/improved; 31,440,000 pounds of waste collected and recycled; 1,663,143 trees planted; 14,230 low-income homes audited and/or retrofitted to improve resource efficiency; 566 disasters responded to, including fires, floods & storms.

## **Corps Respond to Disasters and Build Resilience**

Disaster resiliency is no longer an afterthought, but a major consideration at all levels of government. Corpsmembers not only respond to disasters, but complete community and resource resiliency projects. When fires, storms and floods occur, Corps help communities recover by managing volunteers, removing debris, mucking and gutting buildings, and conducting site remediation. Corps also partner with municipalities to visit public buildings and low-income homes to conduct audits and install energy, water and money-saving retrofits. Some Corps have installed solar panels on public buildings and painted roofs white, all in an effort to save energy and public dollars.

The Corporation for National and Community Service's Disaster Services Unit administers the AmeriCorps Disaster Response Team (A-DRT) program, serving as the coordinating entity for all deployments and ensuring appropriate integration into the Incident Command Structure (ICS). A-DRT's are a nationally deployable asset that engage in critical activities in all phases of the disaster cycle. Over 80% of these programs are operated by Corps of The Corps Network.

Many Corps also work on public lands to help remediate wildfires and address invasive species that can make lands more prone to wildfires. These projects are done in coordination with land management agencies – including at the federal, state, and local level – to reduce wildfire risk through brush and debris clearance, removal of trees and other fire fuel. Some Corps also help respond to wildfires and manage response operations, including supporting fire camps.

Corps also help restore damaged natural resources, including replanting trees for erosion control. Corps have been on the front lines of recent disasters, including Hurricanes Harvey, Maria and Irma, and wildfires throughout the West. In 2017, Corps responded to 566 disasters, including fires, floods & storms.

## **Corps Strengthen Rural and Urban Economies by Leveraging the Talents of Young Adults and Veterans**

Through service, Corpsmembers gain work experience and develop in-demand skills in leadership, problem solving, and entrepreneurship. By offering certifications and partnering with local businesses, schools, and training organizations, Corps create a pathway to employment. Corps offer a hand-up, not a hand-out; alumni understand the value of a hard day's work. There are currently 5.5 million youth out of work and school. These young people are referred to as "opportunity youth," reflecting their enormous potential if given the chance to get back on track. Returning veterans also may struggle to leverage their talents. Corps participants train for careers while also experiencing the sense of community and mission that comes with service.

### Opportunity Youth Engagement

*“Speaking from the urban experience, there is a real disconnect from service due to long-standing barriers for disadvantaged populations.”*

*EDDE JONES, Program Director, Greencorps Chicago*

Since the fall of 2013, The Corps Network has operated the Opportunity Youth Service Initiative (OYSI), an AmeriCorps program made possible through the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). Participating Corps engage youth from disadvantaged backgrounds in environmental service and education. Participating in a Corps gives a young person structure, stability, positive mentors and the chance to explore career options. Most Corps that engage opportunity youth operate charter schools or partner with local educational institutions to help Corpsmembers earn their GED, high school diploma, and/or postsecondary degree while they complete their term of service.

### Veteran Engagement

*“It was never a question of finding another career; it was finding something that I love doing again.”*

*DARRIN GRANT, alumnus of Mt. Adams Institute VetsWork program*

The transition from service member to civilian is not always an easy path for our nation’s veterans. Many experience a lack of purpose, a lack of job confidence, and feel they no longer have the level of peer support they had while serving. [Veterans Conservation Corps](#) are particularly adept at addressing these challenges by allowing veterans to build on their military experience and ethic of service by training for careers in resource management. The Corps model benefits veterans in a range of ways: it provides a similar structure and sense of purpose as the military; offers the therapeutic benefits of getting outdoors and working with fellow veterans; and helps participants transition back to civilian life through skills development and other supportive services.

### **Promising Steps to Move Corps Forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In 2010, the America’s Great Outdoors initiative was announced with a goal of crafting a 21<sup>st</sup> Century conservation agenda and fostering a renewed connection to our history of stewardship of our natural spaces. This culminated in “[America’s Great Outdoors: A Promise to Future Generations](#)” – a report with input gained from 51 listening sessions, 10,000 in-person participants, and more than 105,000 written comments.



The first recommendation of the report, as a way to “Provide Quality Jobs, Career Pathways, and Service Opportunities,” was the development of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC), whose purpose would be to engage young Americans in the restoration of public lands and waters. Building off the AGO’s recommendation, a federal advisory committee was formed, which resulted in the development of a multi-federal agency MOU to support the 21CSC, and the development of a bold goal of engaging 100,000 youth and veterans in conservation service. To help achieve this goal, the Partnership for the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (P-21CSC) was formed to help support the development and implementation of the 21CSC. The Partnership’s members include key federal, state, local and non-profit leaders and stakeholders of the 21CSC.

We’re privileged to have the support of the past five most recent Secretaries of the Interior – two Republicans and three Democrats – Secretaries Gale Norton, Bruce Babbitt, Sally Jewell, Ken Salazar, and Dirk Kempthorne respectively. Army General (Ret.) Stanley McChrystal and President Bush’s Domestic Policy Advisor John Bridgeland are also key supporters of 21CSC. Through the P-21CSC, we’ve also developed bipartisan legislation to expand service opportunities for young adults and veterans, and expand the ability of Corps to enter into public-private partnerships with federal departments and agencies.

The 21CSC Act was introduced in the United States House of Representatives and Senate ([S.1403](#) & [HR 2987](#)) on June 21, 2017. The bill was introduced in the Senate by Sens. John McCain (R-AZ), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and Tom Udall (D-NM). It was introduced in the House by Reps. Martha McSally (R-AZ), Seth Moulton (D-MA), Scott Tipton (R-CO), and Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ). Additional cosponsors have since joined in both the House and Senate. The 21CSC Act passed in the House Committee on Natural Resources in [January 2018](#).

**Conclusion:** America’s Corps stand ready to assist the commission with developing plans and providing further feedback in moving these ideas to reality, and supporting other ideas submitted to or generated by the commission. On behalf of our nation’s 130 Corps, we thank you for the opportunity to provide this feedback and applaud your commitment to this work and an inclusive process for developing your report.