

Careers in Service: Exploring Nonprofit and Public Sector Opportunities

Introduction

Still serving

A report released in 2008 confirms what many in the field knew all along: AmeriCorps members don't just disappear when their term of service ends.

Still Serving: Measuring the Eight-Year Impact of AmeriCorps on Alumni, a report prepared by CNCS and Abt Associates, shows that AmeriCorps members are more likely to pursue careers in education, social work, public safety, government, or military service than their peers who did not serve.

[Click to download a pdf](#) of the CEO message that precedes the report.

Preparing members for a future in the nonprofit or public sector

When their service ends, AmeriCorps and VISTA members often:

- Take positions with their programs or sites
- Find work in similar fields
- Move on, but stay in the service sector

AmeriCorps and VISTA, as a whole, inspire members to continue in the service field.

As a supervisor, what can you do to support your members in choosing these paths?

Stories from the field

Angela Pinckard, coordinator of S.E.E. West Monroe AmeriCorps (West Monroe, LA) shares how she went from college to AmeriCorps and her next three steps:

When I graduated college, I had no idea what I was doing, I was just, *POOF* out there in the real world, so I heard about this AmeriCorps program, I think I saw a flyer somewhere, and decided to apply and of course did my full time year. So when I finished AmeriCorps I did the same thing, I went, "okay, now I'm done with this year, what am I supposed to do now?" – ya know? A bunch of my friends moved to Dallas and so I thought, "Hmm– that sounds good – I'll move to Dallas" and so I moved there and started looking for a job and since the only experience I really had was working in summer camps and afterschool programs through AmeriCorps, I started looking for jobs in that area which led me to the YMCA, the YMCA had their own AmeriCorps programs,

so that just kind of . . . I applied for their YMCA position as a program director there, got it and then through them started running another AmeriCorps program. And after I had done that for five years, I thought, "Okay, I'm ready to move, ready to do something else, and my program that I had started as a full time member in had an opening for someone to run that program and I thought how cool to be able go back and run that program that I was a member in?" So I came back – which was actually home, so I went back home and started running this program and I've been there for five years. But what's been cool about doing this and having this ten year experience is that what I finally figured out is that I like working with college students. And that's the age group that we have in our AmeriCorps program, and that I've worked with for these last ten years in the YMCA and back here now. So that has totally led me along my career path. I mean I really think that if I hadn't found this and seen these doors open, then I honestly don't know where I would have been, and so I give AmeriCorps all the credit, I really think that that's what's happened and NOW – and this is kind of sad to admit, but I've done my ten years and everything and I'm moving on to be a university instructor with college students, so it's all very – you know, it follows each other along.

Learning Objectives

There's no "bag of tricks" in guiding your members into service careers. It's more about thoughtful deliberation over where your members are going and how your program can help them get there.

With this resource:

1. You'll analyze elements of your program that encourage members to follow a "service" career path and brainstorm areas for possible improvement.
2. You'll learn about a Department of Education resource for pinpointing skills specific to the service field.
3. You'll look closely at reasons some members leave the service sector and come up with ideas to address these.

Good News! Americans who work at a nonprofit for ten years while making steady payments on their student loans can get the balance of their loans forgiven. Learn more about the [College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007](#) and share the word with your members!

Success of alumni

For ten years, Karen Zapp has served as the coordinator of Family Service Corps/AmeriCorps in Butler, PA. She describes the success of her alumni:

The fact that the hospital that I work for has 14 of my alumni working there, many of whom used their educational awards to get their nursing degree, pharmacology degree – whatever, phlebotomy - is a statement about my program, the success of my alumni. So that's what keeps me going back to work tomorrow.

New Approaches

What are the possibilities?

Mae, a former member, is the project processing assistant with the AmeriCorps Access Project in Greensboro, NC. She describes what she learned about herself while serving:

For me – I didn't realize that I could teach – and I – when I grew up I never thought that I would teach. But you know when I did my service I was teaching a class it makes me realize that I'm actually good at this and now I want to go and get my ESL teaching – I think they have like a certified certificate for you to teach ESL – and I'm thinking about doing that and so it sort of changed my life around.

After the end of their service terms, your members follow countless different directions. Here is a general list of common paths. Brainstorm some ideas on how you might address the needs of members following these paths.

Become AmeriCorps or VISTA program staff

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tips:

- Encourage professionalism and networking
- Focus on capacity-building and leadership skills in training
- Invite interested members to job shadow at your office

Become a national service/nonprofit trainer or consultant

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tips

- Provide opportunities for public speaking, peer training, and meeting facilitation
- Facilitate networking among members and staff of organizations who hire trainers/consultants
- Encourage members to collect training ideas in areas of interest/expertise

Get hired at the service site

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tips

- Encourage professionalism and networking
- Focus on capacity building and leadership skills in training
- Serve as a reference for members who apply for positions

Start a nonprofit

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tips

- Check out the [What's Next online tutorial](#) for advice on how AmeriCorps and VISTA grads can start a nonprofit
- Facilitate networking among members and staff of small start-up nonprofits who can provide guidance

Start new positions in a nonprofit or government agency

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tips

- Ask an HR representative to hold a résumé clinic
- Look for nonprofit and government job fairs and let your members know
- Encourage professionalism and networking
- Make sure VISTAs know about their [noncompetitive eligibility](#) for government jobs

Run for political office

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tips

- Spend a training day at the state capitol or local government offices and observe the legislative process
- Encourage networking and building a database of contacts
- Provide training in grassroots community organizing

Become a teacher/work in an educational setting

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tips

- Share information about [Teach for America](#)
- Encourage volunteering in schools or other educational settings
- Build networks with local schools of education for informational interviewing
- Check out teacher training programs at nearby colleges and universities

Join the military

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tip

- Ask a veteran to speak to your group about the benefits and opportunities military service provides

Join the Peace Corps

What are approaches to empower members who might follow this path?

Tips

- Ask a returning Peace Corps volunteer to speak to your group about the benefits and opportunities of Peace Corps
- Start a book club and read books by Peace Corps authors (for example, Tom Bissell and Ellen Urbani)

Tips from the Field

Learning from the experience of others

Encouraging members to pursue careers in service should always be a "soft sell." The idea is to foster an environment that facilitates increased awareness and to create avenues to these options.

The following are tips from the field for assisting members in their future pursuits in service:

1. See service as a stepping stone

One approach is to think of your program as a stepping stone to the service sectors.

- Jim Heffernan, executive director of the New York Campus Compact (Ithaca, NY) describes his approach:

In general we have such a poor profile in this country of nonprofit leadership and its involvement in citizen participation, volunteerism and such, and just almost as a personal commitment anything that can be done to show that there are other career tracks than the corporate, the more of that we can do the better. And to raise the idea to the level that it's a legitimate career, it's not that horrible phrase, "Well, if I can't do anything else I can always fall back on teaching," definitely makes me crazy; but that it's equally respectable and has a high status in society. We don't want to see the VISTA experience as a time to kind of think about what's going on and then head off to law school, you know the knee jerk reaction to follow a corporate path. Many of the young people particularly that come into VISTA are already 80% there in terms of the legitimacy and the importance of nonprofit careers. And now I'm going to sound like I'm contradicting myself, but we have to be careful that we don't bash the other opportunities or the other options-that we don't spend a lot of time saying that corporate life careers are somehow suspect and corrupt and to be avoided. Because I think there's a potential for a reaction to that on the part of mostly idealist individuals, just not to make that too complicated with students. Many of them I think are balancing. They're considering corporate careers, or academic careers, or nonprofit management careers. I just think it's important to portray them as equally attractive options but the nonprofit is kind of the one that they know less about, even though they may be more ready to do that.

- Consider how to create activities (and a program culture) that build bridges to future service field opportunities. A few ideas:
 - Start a book club with your team. This [Goodreads list](#) provides several samples of books related to pursuing nonprofit and public sector careers. You can vote for your favorite and add more titles!
 - Ask about career interests in initial interviews.
 - Incorporate job shadows, public service/education/government job fairs, and resume-writing in your trainings.
 - Build mentoring networks to increase members' exposure to role models in fields of interest.
- Angela Pinckard explains how exposure to the nonprofit environment helps members find jobs in that sector:

I didn't do enough volunteering to know the avenues to go into when I was in school, it just - that wasn't one of the things we did – there wasn't a big ethic of service in my college or even in my high school, so now I'm much more likely to be involved in volunteering stuff even if I'm not doing it as a job, and I think that's what's important about AmeriCorps is that it really puts people on the path and that it also opens them up to doing a lot of service.

2. Provide leadership training and opportunities

One approach is to provide leadership training to help your members develop hard skills, such as meeting facilitation, project planning, and public speaking. And build soft skills such as coaching, situational leadership, and conflict management. After introducing these skills, provide members with opportunities to apply them.

- Mark Wilson, a former VISTA leader with the Native American Youth & Family Center in Portland, OR, describes how the leadership skills he gained while serving continue to guide him:

I've been extremely fortunate in being able to attend a number of leadership opportunities and trainings throughout AmeriCorps. You can replicate these training experiences and take them out into the real world. As far as moving into the nonprofit, that question of I've learned all these great skills. I've learned how to lead groups. I've learned how to go from building up this ball of ideas where everyone has different ideas and then narrowing it down specifically to something that people can perhaps all agree on or at least all live with. Skills for coaching people one-on-one. Skills for intervening in difficult conversations. Skills for leading people at different points in their volunteer cycle. And all of these great skills, it's hard to imagine using them anywhere but to create change in the world. That is really the passion that drives me, and I know drives my peers, to go into the nonprofit world.

3. Networking, networking, networking

AmeriCorps members are exposed to many aspects of working directly in an organization and make contacts while they serve.

The more immersed your members are in the communities where they serve and the more contacts they make, the more likely they are to stay in the community and find new ways to serve.

- Ellen Kazary of RurAL CAP VISTA (Anchorage, AK) explains how generations of VISTA members in rural Alaska continue to serve in their community after the end of their term:

We're now talking to a lot of site supervisors who were VISTA and AmeriCorps members, and they're mentoring kind of this new generation coming through. And we're just wrapping up our VISTA Energy Program that finished in April, and right now six of the nine VISTA Energy Members have gone on to find full-time work as a direct result of their VISTA service. So I think that's a huge measure of success in an area where there are so few employment opportunities and a high poverty rate. Really, what we're doing is building the capacity and the professional skills of some rural people who then stay often in rural Alaska and then benefit their communities that way.

Skills

Focus areas to help members on their path

The Department of Education has created a resource called [O•NET](#) for job seekers. The site contains lists of skills, knowledge areas, contexts, and work styles, as well as wages and employment trend data for a vast array of careers.

The lists related to nonprofit, government and education jobs are particularly useful for identifying the skills a member may wish to develop or that programs might want to address through training.

O•NET resources

- [Social and Community Service Managers](#)
- [Directors, Religious Activities and Education](#)
- [Child, Family, and School Social Workers](#)

Other helpful government resources include:

- [Job and career information](#)
- [Career explorations](#)

Scenarios

What can you do for members who need support to stay in the service field?

You've heard stories of members who have gone on to continue making a difference in the community. But what about those who are confronting barriers to this path?

Here are two dilemmas with no easy answers. Reflect on these scenarios, and enhance your ability to handle similar cases in your own program.

Alicia: Weighing health insurance vs. happiness

When Alicia finished her VISTA term, she was offered a position at the nonprofit where she served. The job paid \$9 an hour but without benefits. Her other option was to go back to the coffee shop where she used to work, which also paid \$9 an hour but included health insurance.

If you were her program director/supervisor, what could you do to help her pursue a position in the nonprofit field?

Our Take

- Send her links to job listservs that feature nonprofit positions so that she can look for ones that include insurance
- Help her [translate her service experience into "job speak"](#) and prepare materials that can help her get a job above entry-level
- Suggest community college classes, free workshops, an unpaid internship she can undertake while working at the coffee shop so she can develop the skills she needs to get a nonprofit job with benefits

Neng: Balancing culture at home with career goals

As Neng neared the end of high school, his family wanted him to drop out and get a job, but he finished school anyway. Now a second-year member, Neng would like to go to college next year, though his parents object.

If you were Neng's program director/supervisor, what are ways you could help him pursue his path?

Our Take

When members are heavily influenced by their families or cultures, it's important to know when to step in and when to back off.

One idea in a case like Neng's is to seek out a mentor from his cultural community who can serve as a role model and give Neng tips on how to talk with his family about his ambition.

Members like Neng face difficult choices, and by providing a safe and supportive environment, you can help facilitate their decision-making processes.

Final Thoughts

In the opening pages of the [Still Serving report](#), former CNCS Chief Executive Officer David Eisner writes, “America is bracing for crisis-level workforce and leadership shortages in the nonprofit and government sectors.”

This is where you, your members, and your program come in. In helping build the enthusiasm, confidence, and skills of your VISTAs and AmeriCorps members, you are not just serving your community in the here and now. On their own, your members will find ways to continue to serve.

Advice to members

Hear the perspective of a former member who went on to join program staff.

Marea Hunter, program director of the Parasol Tahoe Community Foundation AmeriCorps program in Incline Village, NV, shares how she grew in service:

One of the things I really appreciate about AmeriCorps—I appreciated when I was a member and I appreciate for the people who are in it now—is that it really gives you a great opportunity to grow. I mean, yes, you’re given your position description, but you can add to that, you can do all sorts of different things. My year at Habitat I didn’t have the greatest site supervisor so I just started knocking on people’s doors and said, “What can I do for you?” and I ended up kind of working underneath the executive director. And, I think it’s almost like any other job in that if you show you’re responsible, you’ll be given more, but there’s even more flexibility than that. I mean, you can really do a lot with your term of service.

Our Experts

The following AmeriCorps and VISTA programs contributed to this tutorial:

- Jim Heffernan, executive director, New York Campus Compact, Ithaca, NY
- Marea Hunter, program director, Parasol Tahoe Community Foundation AmeriCorps program, Incline Village, NV
- Ellen Kazary, RurAL CAP VISTA, Anchorage, AK
- Angela Pinckard, coordinator, S.E.E. West Monroe AmeriCorps program, West Monroe, LA

- Khouan Rodriguez, project director, AmeriCorps ACCESS Project, Greensboro, NC
- Mark Wilson, former VISTA Leader, Native American Youth and Family Center, Portland, OR
- Mae Young, project processing assistant, AmeriCorps Access Project, Greensboro, NC
- Karen Zapp, coordinator, Family Service Corps/AmeriCorps, Butler, PA

Resources

Resources from this tutorial include:

- [Still Serving: Measuring the Eight-Year Impact of AmeriCorps on Alumni](#)
- [The College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007](#)
- [What's Next online tutorial](#)
- [VISTA noncompetitive eligibility for government jobs](#)
- [Teach for America](#)
- [O•NET OnLine](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor: Job and Career Information](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor: Career Explorations](#)