Washington State SERVICE CORPS

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WASHINGTON READING CORPS

AMERICORPS NATIONAL SERVICE

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INTRODUCTION

Like all volunteers, AmeriCorps members are dedicated to making the world a better place to live. However, as many of them quickly realize, difficult environments coupled with limited resources can lead to frustrating situations in which our members strive to move mountains, but sometimes move rocks. It is extremely important to recognize the great efforts of our AmeriCorps members no matter how big or small. Whether it's a mid-year awards luncheon, or your celebration of service at the end of the year, our members have a real impact on the people and communities they serve and deserve to be recognized for their efforts.

As site supervisors, you each have your own style of conducting award ceremonies and/or celebrations. Some may be formal while others consist of a barbecue and softball game. In either case, it's a great way to show your appreciation for a job well done.

This packet was originally designed to serve as a reference guide to use when planning your "end of year" celebration activities, but quickly realized that the focus should be on recognizing volunteers as well. As a result, this handbook has been generalized to include a variety of topics surrounding both activities.

This information is informal and designed to offer new ideas and thoughts on the significance of award ceremonies, volunteer recognition activities, and end-of-the-year celebrations. Some of the information discusses the differences between perceived "ideal or best case celebration activities" with the more realistic circumstances of planning actual events. There is some discussion surrounding the positives and negatives of holding a large grandstand event versus a smaller, private ceremony. With the idea that celebration activities and graduation ceremonies can be customized to the needs of your members, some information about basic motivational theory is included. A "brainstormed" list of past and present activities conducted by our teams in the Washington Service Corps (WSC) is also included. In most cases this information has been gleaned from tried and true activities accomplished over the last several program years. Also included are some basic tips on sending letters to elected officials in case any of you have fostered thoughts on contacting your city mayor, local legislator, or even Governor Locke. There are some web site addresses for more information as well. Finally, attached is "A Guide to Working with the Media." This handbook is printed by the Corporation for National Service and provides some excellent technical information for advertising your events to a wider audience.

As you read through this information, remember that it is not an exhaustive list. Many projects continue to develop new ideas and exciting recognition activities. You are encouraged to continually expand upon the exciting programs you already have in place.

If you have any questions or comments feel free to contact us. Our e-mail address is wsc@esd.wa.gov and our toll free phone number is 1-888-713-6080. Thank you.

BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS

Examining Your Current Celebrations and Traditions

Experience tells us that every site has developed unique ceremonies and events. For some of us, these events are fairly routine and traditional, and there is nothing wrong with this. However, recent studies have examined subjects like "volunteer recognition" and the roles of "award ceremonies" and have determined that supervisors and managers can do more to improve the experiences of their workers and/or volunteers. There are no right or wrong ways of doing this, but it never hurts to examine your current practices.

As stated in Sue Vineyards "Creative Ways to Recognize Volunteers," here are some questions to ask yourself:

- How do we celebrate our members' accomplishments? (e.g., completion of term of service.)
- Do we do the same thing every year?
- Have you noticed that some members really enjoy your award ceremonies and others try to avoid it? (In other words – why some really look forward to it and others could care less?)
- Do you wonder if there are more productive or effective ways in approaching these events?

The "Ideal" Recognition Ceremony?

Here is a great example from last year's Springfield team. With the program year coming to an end, Bart (the energetic young AmeriCorps supervisor) was busy planning the biggest and best party he could muster with his limited time and resources. As he began to realize the large scope of such an important event, he decided to work closely with his team leader, Lisa, to ensure that every detail would be taken care of. As Bart and Lisa began to plan, they imagined that planning this grand event would be easy. However, they quickly realized their event was going to take some real hard work. They decided to break the event down into smaller, more manageable parts. They really wanted a memorable event to impress their members and friends. As a result, they decided to pull a few strings and rent the top of the Space Needle. In addition, they would have the restaurant cater their every whim. Nothing would be left to the imagination. After that was taken care of, they decided it would be extremely important to send out announcements and invitations to everyone they could think of. They developed some snazzy press releases and forwarded them to the Seattle *Times*, Tacoma *News Tribune* and Everett *Herald*, as well as the local television and radio stations in the area. Next, they sent out personal invitations to all of the elected officials in the area, including the governor and mayor of Seattle. They even sent an invitation to Bill Gates and family. They then had to figure out what types of awards to present their members for their year of service. Bart and Lisa decided that first year members would get a silver statue while second-year members would get a gold watch. Bart and Lisa then wanted to develop standardized speeches for each member to recite as they picked up their awards. An articulate speech template was developed to praise each member for their outstanding services in conjunction with the tremendous everlasting differences they made to completely eradicate all of the illiteracy problems in our public schools, while thanking the

community as a whole for unconditionally supporting the project. All they had to do now was to verify the dollars left in their budget. Wow, this was going to be the best AmeriCorps event ever….

A Realistic Approach

So how should you really get started? It may be easier than you think. If you take a proactive approach in establishing clear personnel goals, the foundations will be in place. Some of the most effective recognition celebrations are the result of several specific activities that concentrate heavily in the personnel and human relations aspects of your program. Money is not necessarily a factor.

For example, as project supervisors, establish the importance of:

- keeping up-to-date journals and/or yearbooks for each member
- encouraging members and staff to take plenty of picture and/or videos
- completing strong written reflection activities after every service project
- completing thorough individualized Member Development Plans
- completing meaningful, thorough, and objective member evaluations
- encouraging honest member feedback throughout the program year
- holding site sponsor meetings on a regular basis
- involving non-AmeriCorps volunteers (the community) in all aspects of your project

None of these items should be a surprise to any of you. However, as you will see, these factors may be the most important to focus on when planning and developing a celebration or awards program that will be appreciated by all.

PLANNING YOUR BIG EVENT

A GRAND CELEBRATION or Small Get Together?

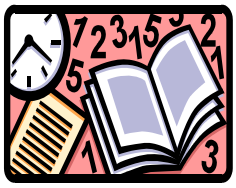
Based on the information provided so far, it should be fairly obvious that one size does not fit all when it comes to planning and implementing recognition and award ceremonies. Within groups of a large program, like the WSC, a variety of ideas will be generated. The WSC would encourage all supervisors to continually review current traditions. For example, if you look at some of the current graduation and/or celebration of service activities of our teams (see page 10), you might see that some sites prefer a very quiet and private ceremony while others invite the entire community to attend. The reasons for this are numerous and are usually tied to the ultimate goals of a project. For example, if a project focuses on the needs of a specific localized population, they may choose to hold a small ceremony among themselves and constituents. However, if a project is a large community-based organization that serves in a variety of capacities, they may choose to invite the whole city. There are advantages and disadvantages to both scenarios. For example, a larger celebration is an excellent marketing tool for the program. Larger ceremonies may garner more attention. A smaller ceremony may be safer and more personal in nature. Members at a smaller ceremony may feel more comfortable in their reflection activities like sharing intimate stories to the group. Whatever course you decide to take, keep in mind that it is extremely important to ensure that your project achieves the maximum impact possible. In this context, I mean making your events desirable to your members, beneficial to your organizationm and interesting to your constituents, including elected officials and the media.

Taking One Step at a Time

The success of any organized event can be attributed to the sum of many parts. When planning a celebration and/or recognition event, break it down into smaller parts. By approaching these parts individually, you may be able to create a more effective celebration for all involved. Let's look at five distinguishable aspects of any recognition ceremony.

1. Time and Place

This is the backbone of any event. While it is obvious to hold an event at a place and time convenient for a strong turnout, make an effort to choose a place that not only rewards your members for their service but is also conducive to optimal physical and spiritual closing activities. This may be a place where members collaborated for a highly successful service project or maybe a fun geographical location like a lake or special park in which members could spend some quality time before moving on to the next phase of their lives.



2. Member Recognition Needs

While certificates, plaques, pins, etc., are generally accepted as standard fare for all members upon their completion of service, you may have the opportunity to do better. In other words, a project director or supervisor cannot spend 10 minutes setting up a quick ceremony with each member receiving a neat little certificate and expect everyone to feel satisfied. This might work for a

few folks, but you can bet that a certain number of individuals will simply toss their certificates in the trash. The ideal situation is to personally develop awards that are tailored to the member's specific needs. This is not as difficult as it may seem, as it could simply mean giving a special pin to one member while giving a special "letter of commendation" to another. (See page 7 for information on Motivational Theory.)

3. Size and Type of Audience

When planning recognition events, it is important to identify who your target audience should be. This may be related to the size and scope of the event that you wish to hold. It never hurts to gain as much exposure for your project as possible. As a result, you should invite everyone who was associated with your program throughout the year. This, of course, does not guarantee a large audience. However, this is a time for celebration and reflection and it is important to give all of your supporters a chance to get involved. In addition, consider using this opportunity to market your project to a wider audience such as elected officials, school superintendents, city or county officials, State Commission members, and Washington Service Corps staff, just to name a few. You should also consider sending press releases to local media sources in your area. In general, these folks are extremely supportive of these events and your members will appreciate the increased attention, along with the perceived importance of your event. For your convenience, I have attached a copy of the Corporation's Guide to working with the Media.

4. Message to the Group

Although this is a good opportunity to rekindle those thoughts of "changing the world from within," it may be just as important to use this time to remind your audience and members about the importance of your project in the community. Don't be afraid to brag. The dialog you present in the opening precession, as well as final thoughts, should give those in attendance a good working knowledge of what your project is about as well as its accomplishments and goals for the past, present, and future.

5. Reflections of the Year (Visions for the Future)

Although this is sometimes overlooked, the most effective closing activities are those that can relate and portray a sense of accomplishment over the program year. Because of the nature of the AmeriCorps program in general, in which members are sometimes subject to insurmountable hardships, hostile environments, skeptical partnership, and limited resources, it is extremely important to thoroughly spell out positive influences and project-wide changes, no matter how big or small, that each member has made. In addition, discuss member plans for the future, as it is important to view their time in the AmeriCorps program as a stepping stone to bigger and better things. If you spend the appropriate amount of time managing the human relations aspect of your program, you will excel in this category.

QUICK INTRODUCTION TO MOTIVATIONAL THEORY

Based on the information provided in basic motivational theory, people volunteer to serve for a variety of reasons. If you are able to learn these underlying motivators, you should be able to award members more appropriately. The information listed below sheds a little light on the whole idea of "motivational theory."

This short article was copied from the CharityVillage Web site at www.charityvillage.com. This information is based partly upon McClelland and Atkinson's "Motivational Theory."

Matching the "Thank You" to the Volunteer

June 30, 1998; *Canadian FundRaiser*

Many people believe that the best way to recognize volunteers is to throw them a party or hold a similar recognition event during National Volunteer Week (or at the end of the year in this context). However, your efforts may be ineffective if you don't say "thank you" in a way that your members and/or volunteers can relate to.

To truly show your appreciation, it is far better to customize your recognition to the individual volunteer. To do this, you must first understand why people volunteer. According to Nan Hawthorne of Sound Volunteer Management in Seattle, Washington, there are four typical motivators for volunteers. These include:

1. Praise

This is effective for volunteers who:

- enjoy recognition for their talents and accomplishments

- like being thanked, given gifts, and singled out for achievement
- find situations where there is little or no feedback frustrating
- enjoy a volunteer program where others readily see the results of their efforts

2. Affiliation

This is an important factor for volunteers who:

- enjoy being part of an organization, club or team
- enjoy opportunities to get together with others with similar beliefs, backgrounds, goals, and being associated with a well-known cause or group
- don't find working alone or for an obscure organization very satisfying

3. Accomplishment

These volunteers:

- enjoy seeing concrete evidence of their work, such as piles of finished paperwork or names checked off on a list
- like practical, tangible projects
- don't like working on projects where abstract goals are pursued or achievements are hard-won

Power and Influence

Some volunteers:

- like persuading people to see or do things their way, or enjoy showing people a better, easier way of accomplishing an objective
- don’t want to be in an insignificant position, but like positions where they help make decisions or train people

Once you have discovered what motivates your volunteers, either by observation or by asking them directly, you can choose which recognition items will make them feel most appreciated. Here are some suggestions for how to say thank you to each type of volunteer.

1. Praise

Recognize volunteers by offering small gifts, a recognition spot on your web site or in your newsletter or public recognition at an event. They will often also appreciate a letter thanking their boss, teacher, family, etc., for their help and/or a reference letter for a job or another volunteer position.

In addition, personal notes from supervisor, supervisor remembering birthday, anniversary, etc., unexpected awards or gifts,” employee of the month” plaque on wall.

2. Affiliation

You can thank these volunteers through social get-togethers, organization t-shirts, name-badges, or posting a list of all organization volunteers in a public area.

In addition, a special award named for them for "people-related" accomplishments, opportunities to work with a variety of people.

3. Accomplishment

You can volunteers certificates of accomplishment at specific stages in their work, continuing education or credential credits, or a special place to put completed projects.

In addition, job assignments that offer increased responsibilities, opportunities for advancement, regular and honest evaluations, letters of commendation.

Power and Influence

Volunteers will appreciate titles or rank insignia, a special parking spot for the month, or involvement as a speaker at organization workshops.

In addition, job assignments that let them interact with the highest authorities, opportunities to negotiate, opportunities to work with the media.

Next time, aim to thank your volunteers individually and in a way that matters most to them.

FOOD, BEVERAGES AND CERTIFICATES — WHAT'S ALLOWABLE?

When it comes to purchasing supplies (e.g., food, beverages, certificates) for your events, there have been several questions concerning "what is appropriate?" and more importantly "what is allowable?" This is important, as we need to be aware of potentially unallowable costs that are charged to our grants. Because the Federal Government sponsors the AmeriCorps program, we must look at the Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for the specific rules governing such purchases.

This information can be found in several places, including the Internet. The information presented here was specifically found under the OMB Circular A-122. A complete description of the Circular, along with others, can be found at www.whitehouse.gov/OMB/circulars/index.html.

According to this circular, expenses associated with recognition ceremonies fall under the category of employee morale and are thus allowable in general. However, it is important to read the entire description for a full understanding. In short, employee morale *includes* the costs of employee newsletters, non-monetary awards, and recognition ceremonies. The cost of reasonable refreshments such as donuts and coffee are allowable at such ceremonies, but *the cost of a meal is not allowable.* Employee morale *does not include* the costs associated with employee parties, picnics, and the like, which are not allowable.

As you can see in the italicized excerpt, there is some potential confusion in interpreting the meaning of a meal. In general, the Washington Service Corps would recommend that projects take a reasonable and conservative approach in interpreting these statements. Look for creative ideas that do not require large amounts of money and, better yet, encourage the use of in- kind donations when possible. It is extremely important that you safeguard your funding sources in order to be strictly accountable in the public's eye. In other words, when planning the details of your events, picture, if you will, a television camera at your side. If you would feel comfortable sharing the details with the public, then you are probably okay.

GREAT EXAMPLES FROM THE WASHINGTON SERVICE CORPS

The information listed below is based upon the feedback received from our sites.

Celebration Activities

Celebrate with other teams in the area
Celebrate as an individual team
Summer cookout/potluck
Barbecue
Service project
Slide show put to music
Private luncheon
Bonfire into the night
Picnic at a lake
Complete final reflection/exit paperwork
Share funny stories
Create and show video of year's activities
Team retreat Ceremony in the woods Time capsule
Candle ceremony
Validation web
Formal sit down meal
Team-only get together to reflect on new friendships
Picture boards for reflection
Formal graduation ceremony followed by luncheon
Yearbook signing
Celebration with a theme
Each member gives a public reflection to group
Discuss options for the future

Awards

Special books/books of remembrance
Certificates
Creative funny/personal awards
Year books
AmeriCorps stuff—watches/key chains, etc.
Journal

Who was invited

Mayor
School board members
District director
City council members
WSC Director & LAC
AmeriCorps member trainers
Participating school principals
Teachers
AmeriCorps members families
Board members
Other AmeriCorps teams
City officials
Federal and state officials
School superintendent
County officials/employees
All beneficiaries who received service
Governor's office
Notice in paper inviting community members
Local civic organizations
Commission staff

TIPS FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE LETTERS TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

- Use plain white paper. Make sure that the writer's complete name and street address appear on the letter.
- Letters may be typed or written in longhand. Keep in mind that letters written in longhand are every bit as effective, if not more so, than typed letters, as long as they are legible.
- Remember to keep your writing brief and polite. Ask a friend to proofread your letter for spelling and grammar before you send it.
- The purpose of the letter must be clearly stated. The best letters are concise, direct, and straightforward. Do not beat around the bush.
- Above all, be polite. Never threaten or attempt to intimidate. Kindness and tact pay off big.
- Never fail to say, "Thank you for your time and attention."
- The correct letter closing for all correspondence is "Sincerely yours."

Example of a good letter →

Your Program's Letterhead

Today's Date

My Name
My Program
My Address

The Honorable (Name of Official)
(Title of Official)
P O Box ----
City, State Zip Code

Dear Mr./Mrs. (Last Name),

I am writing this letter to request your presence — that you please consider — to inform you about etc.

Do not forget to explain the importance and relevance of the event in a concise format.

Thank you for your time and attention to my request.

Sincerely yours,

Signature

Printed Name & Title

WEB SITES FOR MORE INFORMATION

These links will start your launch into a wide universe of related topics, interesting subjects, and other tips supporting the importance of volunteer recognition and celebration activities. Have fun!

Electronic Gazette for Volunteerism
http://www.volunteertoday.com/

Retaining Volunteers/Keeping Volunteers Motivated
http://www.serviceleader.org/manage/retain.html

Recognition Plus
http://www.recognition-plus.com/

Some other books/manuals on Volunteer Recognition:
http://www.nps.gov/volunteer/biblio.htm

Volunteer Recognition Ideas from Energize, Inc.:
http://www.energizeinc.com/ideas.html

Volunteer Recognition Ideas from CyberVPM:
http://www.cybervpm.com/recog.htm

Retaining Volunteers
http://www.tenet.edu/volunteer/manage/retain.html

Points of Light Volunteer Marketplace
http://www.pointsoflight.org