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THE SUSTAINABILITY OF AMERICORPS*VISTA PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Executive Summary i

Chapter I: Introduction 1

A. Methodology 2

Table 1 -- Interview Response 4

B. Characteristics of the Sampled Agencies 5

Table 2 -- Determination of Survival Status 5

Chapter II: Post-VISTA Survival Roles 7

Table 3 -- Survival Status of VISTA Supported Projects 8
Table 4 -- Survival Status 9
Table 5 -- Pre and Post-VISTA Status of VISTA Supported Projects 11
Table 6 -- Impact of Pre Project Status of VISTA Supported Services on Post-VISTA Status 11

Chapter III: Impact of the VISTA Volunteers 13

Table 7 -- The Effect of Continuation Planning 14
Table 8 -- Continuation Planning 14
Table 9 -- Resource Development Activities of the VISTA Volunteers .. 16
Table 10 - Post-VISTA Sources of Funding 17
Table 11 - VISTA Volunteers' Role in Projects 18
Table 12 - Impact of the VISTA Volunteers 18
Table 13 - Use of Community Volunteers After VISTA Funding 19

Chapter IV: Summary and Conclusions 21

Executive Summary

An important concern for many federal agencies is whether community development and social service programs that are supported by federal funds or resources achieve long-term sustainability. The purpose of the AmeriCorps*VISTA sustainability study was to determine the proportion of VISTA supported activities that continued two and five-years after the VISTA volunteers (VISTAs) departed.

The two primary research goals of the VISTA sustainability study were to *estimate the post-VISTA sustainability rates across time* of service projects that had been supported by VISTAs and to *identify the main factors that influenced sustainability rates*. Specific objectives of the study included assessing (1) the impact of VISTAs on post-VISTA sustainability rates, (2) the role of the VISTAs in organizational capacity building, and (3) the role of national VISTA policies on survival outcomes.

In order to answer these questions attempts were made to contact and interview supervisory personnel from a sample of 240 VISTA supported projects that had closed two and five-years previous to April 1996. Of the 240 closed projects in the sample, 25 were found to be ineligible for the interview (the agency no longer existed, the project had VISTAs at the time of the study, or the project had never been initiated). Of the final sample of 215 eligible agencies, 119 completed a primary interview schedule, 82 completed a follow-up interview schedule, and 14 refused to be interviewed in any form, yielding a final response rate of 93.4 percent. The primary interview yielded information on all of the evaluation study questions. The follow-up interview was designed to determine if there were systematic differences between agencies that completed the primary interview and those that initially would not agree to be interviewed or could not be located. The follow-up interview yielded more limited information on the organizational characteristics of the VISTA supported agency, and the post project status of the VISTA supported activities.

Throughout the study, *a project was characterized as having continued or been sustained* if the VISTA supported activities continued to exist at the originally funded agency at the time of the interview (April 1996). VISTA supported project activities that continued to exist were further broken down into three categories: (1) activities that had *expanded*, (2) activities that were *maintained* at about the same level as when the VISTAs left, and (3) activities that had been *reduced* in scope. Projects that no longer carried out any of the activities supported by the VISTAs and had not transferred them to another agency were categorized as having been *terminated*. In the cases where projects had been transferred to another service provider the project was categorized as having been *transferred*.

Findings

The study had six major findings. They were:

1. **The baseline survival rates of VISTA supported projects are quite high.** Overall, nearly 68 percent (67.7%) of the VISTA supported programs continued to operate two and five-years after the VISTAs had completed their assignment. However, the post-project sustainability rate for programs in the two-year sample was considerably higher than for programs in the five-year sample. Of the programs in the two-year sample, 76.4 percent were sustained within the original, VISTA sponsored agency. This is in contrast to the five-year sample, where 60.7 percent continued to survive in some form at the time of the interview. In addition, 2.3 percent and 7.1 percent of the programs from the two and five-year samples respectively "survived" as transfers. The difference in the proportion of survivors between the two sample years is statistically significant, whether the transfer programs are included or not. *The difference was not just a consequence of the time that had passed since the VISTAs departed.* Projects from the five-year sample were more likely to have terminated within six months of the departure of the VISTAs (13.8%) than the two-year sample (8.3%). The five-year sample also had a higher annual termination rate (1.2 programs per year) than the two-year sample (0.5 programs per year). These differences also were statistically significant.

2. **The existence of a project prior to the arrival of the VISTAs did not influence post-VISTA sustainability rates when controlled for sample year and the initiation of continuation planning.** Nearly identical proportions of programs were sustained among the agencies from the two-year sample whether the program existed prior to the VISTAs coming on board or not. Over 87 percent of the programs that terminated after the VISTAs departed and which had no prior history in the agency came from the five-year sample. However, the key difference was how early the programs began planning for post VISTA continuation, not sample year. This is illustrated by the fact that while 95.0 percent of the two-year sample began continuation planning in the first year of the project, only 66.9 percent of the agencies in the five-year sample began continuation planning within a year of project start-up.

3. **An increased emphasis on VISTA volunteer involvement in organizational capacity building, particularly fundraising and resource development, affected the role that VISTAs played across the two sample years.** There was a significant increase in the involvement of VISTAs in locating post-VISTA funds and resources in the two-year sample in comparison to the five-year sample. Agencies in the two- year sample were likely to assign VISTAs to about 2.8 fundraising and resource mobilization activities, while the five-year sample, on average, assigned them to about 0.9 such activities. There also was a clear increase in the number of resources that provided post-VISTA funding and support between

the two sample years. The two-year sample reported nearly 3 sources of funding per project, while the five-year sample reported just under 1.3 sources.

4. **A clear shift in the agencies' perspective on the VISTAs across the two sample years can be discerned.** VISTAs were far more likely to have played a central role in the VISTA supported project in the two-year sample (68.3%) than in the five-year sample (29.8%). The VISTAs also were more likely to be credited with helping the project expand in the two-year sample than in the five-year sample (63.3% versus 32.8%). However, they were less likely to be credited with allowing a previously established program to survive (1.7% versus 31.6%). Finally, VISTAs were more likely to be hired by the sponsoring agency at the end of their service in the two-year sample than the five-year sample (63.3% versus 43.1%). The 20.2 percent increase in post-VISTA hiring of VISTAs bodes well for organizational stability and the earlier and more complete institutionalization of the affected programs.

5. **The sponsoring agencies were more likely to use VISTAs to recruit and train local community volunteers in the two-year sample than the five-year sample (90.0% versus 20.7%).** They were also far more likely to use community volunteers to support the program after the VISTAs left (88.2% versus 17.5%). These results represent an important resource gain for the local agencies. Increased contact with VISTAs and community volunteers also has the potential for producing gains in community awareness of, and possibly support for, VISTA funded projects.

6. **The agencies in the two-year sample indicated that they faced fewer problems raising funds and locating resources to continue the project after formal VISTA support ended.** Unlike agencies in the five-year sample, none of the agencies in the two-year sample failed to try and raise project continuation funds. Even when faced with the problem of scarce resources, they were more likely to succeed than the five-year sample.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that VISTA supported programs are robust and sustain themselves at high rates after the VISTAs leave. The evidence points strongly to the positive and effective role that VISTAs can and do play in building the capacity of the supported programs to sustain themselves. The data also point to the fact that the shift in emphasis toward sustainability and an increased role for VISTAs in organizational capacity building which occurred in VISTA during the years 1989-1991 led to significant improvements in the survival rates of VISTA supported projects and to the more visible role of VISTAs.

The results of the study point to a number of policy and management observations and recommendations. First, the baseline survival rates of VISTA supported projects are quite high. For VISTA supported projects that had ended five-years prior to the study, 67 percent continued to offer services. While national policies and management efforts improved the post-VISTA

survival rates, the impact of national policy appears to have been uneven, spectacular in some cases, less so in others. For example, the changes in national policies appear to have contributed to a dramatic shift in the way that VISTA supported projects used VISTA volunteers. The older projects were far less likely to have involved their VISTAs in community volunteer recruitment, training, and supervision than the newer projects (20.7% versus 90.0%). Finally, some issues appear to be beyond the reach of VISTA and may set natural boundaries on the impact of national policies. For example, a small but significant proportion of VISTA supported agencies appear to have ceased to exist (7.5%).

In the future, it is recommended that VISTA consolidate the current gains and then target select issues for improvement. It might be useful to establish a monitoring mechanism that permits AmeriCorps*VISTA to gather survival data on a regular basis. The survival scale that was developed for this study provides a solid basis for developing such a monitoring mechanism.

Chapter I
Introduction

An important concern of many federal agencies is whether community development and social service programs that are supported by federal funds achieve long-term sustainability. It is not unusual for funding agencies to require that immediate program outcomes be assessed. As a consequence, funding agencies often possess information on the impact of the funded programs on client outcomes. Funding agencies are less likely to require that program impact on infrastructure development and post-grant survival be measured. Except for anecdotally, agencies are less likely to have information on the impact of the grant or grant-in-aid on infrastructure development and post-VISTA survival.

The AmeriCorps*VISTA program provides full-time, AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteers (VISTAs) who receive a stipend, to community-based, social service organizations to support program activities. VISTA projects are approved annually and typically last three years. Under the program, the VISTAs provide organizational capacity building and direct and indirect programmatic support to the agencies in which they are placed. Since 1988-1989, VISTA has placed an increased emphasis on the role of the VISTAs in infrastructure development and post-VISTA sustainability. New training curricula and VISTA recruitment policies were put into place by the end of 1991, which enhanced these efforts. This shift in emphasis reflects the increasing focus of VISTA on sustainability and the role that VISTAs can play in increasing the likelihood of program survival.

The primary objective of the study was to assess the survival rates of the VISTA supported projects after the VISTAs had departed. The two secondary objectives of the study were to assess the impact of the VISTA volunteers and national VISTA policies on survival rates.

In order to achieve these study objectives, two random samples of VISTA supported projects that had ended two and five-years prior to April 1996 were selected for review. These two sample years bracketed the national policy changes. Projects in the five-year sample had not been influenced directly by the new policies; projects in the two-year sample had not started until the new policies were in place. The use of two different sample years also permitted an examination of the effects of time on long-term survival rates.

A. Methodology

As noted, the primary research goals of the study were to *identify the post-VISTA survival rates of VISTA supported projects* and *assess the impact of VISTA volunteers and VISTA policies on post-VISTA survival rates*. Specific research objectives of the study included assessing (1) the impact of VISTAs on post-VISTA survival rates, (2) the role of the VISTAs in organizational capacity building, and (3) the role of national VISTA policies on survival outcomes. Based on these goals and objectives, eight evaluation questions were developed which guided the study and the analysis. They were:

- What proportion of the VISTA supported programs survived after the VISTAs had departed?
- Were there differences in the proportion of projects that survived based on whether they closed two or five years before the interviews? And, if there were differences, were they a consequence of time or in the base rates of attrition?
- What role did national VISTA policies play, if any, in the post-VISTA survival rate of the VISTA supported activities?
- Did the point at which planning for post-VISTA continuation started impact on survival rates?
- What impact did prior experience with the project activities have on post-VISTA survival?
- Were the organizational capacity building activities of the VISTAs likely to influence the likelihood of post-VISTA survival?
- What role did the VISTAs play in recruiting, training, and supervising non-VISTA volunteers?
- What problems did the VISTA supported projects face in raising continuation funds and what impact did they have on post -VISTA survival rates?

In order to answer the evaluation questions, attempts were made to contact and interview supervisory personnel from random samples of 240 VISTA supported projects that had closed two and five years prior to April 1996. Of the 240 closed projects in the sample, 25 were found to be ineligible for the interview (the agency no longer existed, the project still continued, or the project had never been initiated). Of the final sample of 215 eligible agencies, 119 completed a primary interview schedule, 82 completed a follow-up interview schedule, and 14 refused to participate in the study, yielding an adjusted response rate of 93.4 percent (See Table 1). The

primary interview yielded information on (1) the characteristics of the VISTA supported agencies; (2) the goals, objectives, and activities of the project; (3) the budget of the project; (4) the pre and post-VISTA status of the VISTA supported activities; (5) the number and role of the VISTAs; (6) the post-VISTA status of the VISTAs; and (7) sources of support for post-VISTA continuation. These blocks of information were designed to answer the eight evaluation questions.

Responses to the primary interviews were relatively complete except to the budget questions. Between 112 and 118 valid responses were recorded for each item except the project budget items. Response rates for the budget items were low, ranging from 14.4 to 23.7 percent. Four reasons were given for non-responses to the budget questions: (1) the unavailability of budget records, (2) the inability to recall detailed budget data from memory, (3) no separate budget for the VISTA supported project or service had been maintained, or (4) the respondent never had access to budget information.

The follow-up interview was designed to determine if there were systematic differences between agencies who agreed to the primary interviews and those that did not. The follow-up interviews were conducted after three attempts had been made to reach an agency to complete the primary interview. The follow-up interview yielded limited data on (1) the characteristics of the VISTA supported agencies and (2) the pre and post-VISTA status of the VISTA supported activities. Because a number of the organizations in the follow-up pool no longer existed or lacked institutional memory of the VISTA project, some of the follow-up data was collected from Corporation state office personnel.

As a consequence of the differences in the interviews, the survival rates are based on data from both the primary and the follow-up interviews, while all other analyses are based on the primary interviews only.

Throughout the study, *survival* was defined in terms of two "states": (1) agency existence, and (2) project existence. An agency that had received VISTAs could exist at the time of the interview, or it could have closed its doors during the time between the end of the VISTA supported project and the interview. Within an agency, the former VISTA supported project, or related services, could continue to exist at the time of the interview, or have been terminated. Agency and project existence were conceived as binary states: either the agency or project continued to exist or it did not. Agencies that had merged with other organizations were categorized as continuing to exist. Projects or services that were transferred to another organization or agency also were classified as continuing to exist but not sustained at the originating agency. The *projects* were also classified according to two sustainability scales which took into account *level of existence.* The two sustainability scales are discussed below.

Table 1
Interview Response

Response Category	Number in Category	Percent in Category	Adjusted Response Rate [1]
Primary Interview Respondents	119	49.6%	55.3%
Follow- up Interview Respondents	82	34.2%	38.1%
Non-Respondents	14	5.8%	6.6%
Agency Terminated	18	7.5%	N/A.
Program Still Running	4	1.7%	N/A.
Program Terminated Early	3	1.3%	N/A.
Total	240	100.0%	100%

1. The adjusted response rate is based on 215 eligible respondents.

Surviving projects or related services might have been expanded, maintained, reduced, or transferred after the activities of the VISTAs ended. For the purposes of this study, these outcomes were considered to be mutually exclusive, although services that were transferred also could have been expanded, maintained, or reduced. Expansion, maintenance, and reduction were self-specified by the respondents. The scale that emerged from this development process was a five-point, rank order scale ranging from expansion to agency termination.

The "transfer" category presented some unique issues. Program expansion, maintenance, reduction, or termination could occur after the transfer. However, limitations on interview length and the size of the sample prevented a full exploration of the underlying dimensions of this category. For the purposes of this study, a transfer of a project to another agency was regarded as a form of program survival. Future studies should explore the natural history of projects transferred to another organization.

On completion of the interviews, the data were coded and entered into electronic data files for analysis. Each raw data set was transformed into a documented SPSS file. Post-VISTA survival rates were estimated using the data from both the primary and follow-up interviews. All other variables were estimated using data only from the primary interviews. Statistical analysis was confined to contingency tables. Significance tests were calculated using chi-square and t-test procedures. Multivariate techniques could not be applied with any confidence given the size of the sample.

B. Characteristics of the Sampled Agencies

Over 95 percent of the respondents who completed the primary interview provided sufficient information to determine the post-VISTA status of the VISTA supported project (Table 2). Of the agencies that completed the follow-up interview, 71.7 percent provided information on the post-VISTA status of the VISTA supported services or activities.

In order to assess further the differences between the two categories of respondents, agency mortality rates, geographic location, type of agency, and agency age at the time of project start-up were examined. An examination of the data indicates that agency mortality rates, geographic location, and agency age do not differ across the two respondent types. Agency type (whether the agency was public, private, profit, non-profit, etc.) did not make a significant difference and was not considered further in the analysis.

Table 2
Determination of Survival Status

Program Status Based on Respondent Recall	Two-Year Sample		Five-Year Sample		Combined Sample		Total for All Samples N=240
	Primary (N=60)	*Follow-up (N=43)*	*Primary (N=60)*	*Follow-up (N=77)*	*Primary (N=120)*	*Follow-up (N=120)*	
Project Status Determined	98.4%	69.7%	93.3%	72.8%	95.8%	71.7%	83.8%
Project Status Not Determined	1.7%	30.3%	6.7%	27.3%	4.2%	28.3%	16.3%

Percents are column percents (%). Columns may not add to 100.0 due to rounding error.

The vast majority of the agencies that ceased operations (17 of 18, see Table 1) were identified through the follow-up interview process. This was to be expected since the follow-up interviews involved agencies that could not be located during the primary interview phase; however, the number of agencies that had closed their doors was somewhat surprising. In order to assess the data further, the annual rate of agency terminations was calculated and standardized to terminations per 100 agencies. The two-year sample had an annual agency mortality rate of 2.9 agency terminations per year per 100 agencies. The five-year sample had a somewhat lower rate of 1.8 agency terminations per year per 100 agencies. The rates between the two sample years are significantly different, suggesting that underlying factors are at work that influence agency survival which are different from those that influence project sustainability.

One factor that was thought to influence project survival was agency age at the time of the VISTA project start-up. While there is no significant difference in the distribution of agencies by age across the two sample years, younger agencies were less likely to respond to the primary interview in the two-year sample than the five-year sample. This introduced an age bias in the two-year, primary interview sample which may have underestimated the likelihood of younger organizations terminating services after the VISTAs left.

Chapter II
Post-VISTA Survival Rates

In order to assess sustainability, initially a three-category scale was developed to measure the post-VISTA status of the VISTA supported services at the time of the interview (April/May 1996). A project was considered to have been "sustained" if it continued in some form at the original agency to which the VISTAs had been assigned. This category indicated if a project survived in some form, even a reduced form. It was found that the survival rate of projects *within the original host agencies* that responded to the primary interview format was quite high (76.5%). The survival rate was lower among those that only responded to the follow-up interview (55.8%).

The survival rates were calculated in two ways, using the combined data from the primary interview and from the follow-up data collection effort, and using only the data from the primary interview. In either case the survival rate was quite high for both sample years. For the two-year sample, the survival rate was 76.4 percent if the combined data was used, and 88.3 percent if only the primary interview data are used. For the five-year sample, the corresponding survival rates are 60.7 percent and 64.3 percent. If it is assumed that the combined data from both the primary and the follow-up data collection efforts provide the best estimate of post-VISTA survival rates, between three fifths and three quarters of all VISTA supported projects survive the departure of the VISTAs. These numbers are quite remarkable in light of the fact that many federally funded demonstration programs are regarded as successful if they achieve post funding survival rates of around 50 percent.

The data found in Table 3 indicate that there were important differences in the post-VISTA survival rates of the agencies found in the two and five-year samples. Within the two-year sample, 76.4 percent of the programs were sustained within the agency and another 2.3 percent were transferred. This compares to 60.7 percent of the programs which were sustained within the five-year sample, and 7.1 percent that were transferred. Looking at this from another perspective, 32.2 percent of the programs did not survive after VISTA support ended in the five-year sample whereas a smaller proportion, 21.3 percent, were terminated in the two-year sample.

Table 3
Survival Status of VISTA Supported Projects
(Includes Both Primary and Follow-up Data)

Program Status Based on Respondent Recall	Two-Year Sample (N=89)	Five-Year Sample (N=112)	Total for All Samples (N=201)
Sustained	76.4%	60.7%	67.7%
Transferred	2.3%	7.1%	5.1%
Terminated	21.3%	32.2%	27.2%

Statistically significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed test).

Below, the factors that improve the chances of post-VISTA survival are explored. Only the primary interview data are used in this analysis, since the follow-up interview format did not allow for the gathering of the kind of data necessary to explore the major background factors that influenced program survival. A review of the characteristics of the agencies that responded to the primary and follow-up interviews did not indicate any significant difference between them. It appears reasonable to assume that agencies that transferred or terminated a project and related services would be less likely to desire, or be able to respond to an interview.

In order to more fully explore the primary interview data, a fuller 5-point sustainability scale was developed. Within this scale a service was considered to have been *expanded* if it served more clients, served clients more intensely, and/or engaged more staff. A service was considered to have been *maintained* if it served the same number of clients at the same level of intensity, and/or maintained the same staff level. A service was considered to have been *reduced* if it served fewer clients or operated with less staff. A service was considered to have been *transferred* if all project functions had been delivered over to another agency or organization. Except for anecdotal information, data were not collected systematically on VISTA supported projects that were transferred. Finally, a project was considered to have been *terminated* if it was no longer offered, agency staff or volunteers were no longer assigned to it, and it had not been transferred to another agency.

As shown in Table 4, more than three quarters (76.5%) of the VISTA supported services within the primary interview samples continued to be offered by the sponsoring agency after the VISTAs departed. Nearly a fifth (17.4%) had terminated the VISTA supported service at the time of the interview. Another six percent (6.1%) had transferred the sponsored services to another agency or organization. A fairly significant proportion of the services had been expanded (24.3%). A relatively small percent of services had been reduced (8.7%).

Important differences exist between the two sample years, however, with respect to program survival. The two-year sample experienced far fewer program terminations. In fact, the five-year sample was more than two times as likely to have terminated a program or service. A quarter (25.0%) of the programs from the five-year sample had been terminated as opposed to only about one tenth (10.2%) of the programs from the two-year sample. On the opposite end of the spectrum, programs from the five-year sample were far more likely to have expanded their services than the two-year sample (37.5% vs. 11.9%). The programs from the two-year sample were more likely to have maintained the service than the five-year sample (69.5% vs. 16.5%). These are indications of strong, healthy outcomes.

Table 4
Survival Status
(Primary Data Only)

Post-VISTA Status Scale	Sample (2 and 5 Years)		
	Two-Year Sample *(N=59)*	*Five-Year Sample* *(N=56)*	*Combined Primary Samples* *(N=115)*
Expanded	11.9%	37.5%	24.3%
Maintained	69.5%	16.1%	43.5%
Reduced	6.8%	10.7%	8.7%
Terminated	10.2%	25.0%	17.4%
Transferred	1.5%	10.7%	6.1%

Statistically significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed test). Percents are column percents unless otherwise noted.

A detailed examination of the termination data indicates that programs in the five-year sample were significantly more likely to terminate the VISTA supported programs or services at the point of departure of the VISTAs (13.8%) than the two-year sample (8.3%). The five-year sample also lost programs at a greater annualized rate than the two-year sample (1.2 versus 0.5 programs per year). While the differences in the latter rates are not statistically significant, taken together with the transfer data, it appears that the agencies in the five-year sample were not as successful at institutionalizing their programs in the originating agency as were those in the two-year sample (64.3% versus 88.3%).

In half the cases (three of six) within the five-year sample, the transfers were planned; that is, the VISTAs were used to pilot or develop a program or service on behalf of a number of other cooperating agencies. In the other three cases, it appears that the transfers were carried out in order to protect or assure the continuance of the program.

This initial review of the data supports the hypothesis that the policy shift within the national VISTA program toward emphasizing sustainability in the years 1989-1991 led to an increase in the proportion of programs that were sustained. In order to evaluate this issue further, we examined two competing explanations: (1) that younger organizations were less likely to sustain programs than older organizations, and (2) that agencies that had previous experience with VISTA supported services would be more likely to sustain them than those that did not.

The age of the sponsoring agency did not significantly influence the post-VISTA sustainability of the program. In fact, to the extent that trends can be discerned, they go in the opposite direction of what was expected. The older organizations (those 10 years and older) in the combined sample are far more likely to have terminated a program or service than the younger agencies. The data from the primary interview do not make clear why younger organizations are so successful in maintaining services after the VISTAs leave. We speculate that the services may play a greater role in the life of smaller and younger agencies, and hence receive greater internal support and relatively more organizational resources. Older organizations may provide a wider range of services, and therefore, be more inclined to terminate a service that does not meet internal "efficiency" standards or which draws disproportionately heavily on organizational resources.

The pre-VISTA status of the VISTA supported program or service plays a more significant role in the sustainability of the program after the departure of the VISTAs than organizational age. VISTA supported services that existed prior to the VISTAs arriving were far more likely to survive their departure. Only 7.0 percent of the projects that had the service in place prior to VISTAs being assigned terminated at the end of VISTA support, whereas 27.6 percent of those that were initiated by the VISTAs closed.

A number of complex issues arise out of the data on the effects of the pre-VISTA status of the VISTA supported services. For existing services, the assignment of VISTAs provides the opportunity to maintain a service that might otherwise have been lost, or to expand an existing service which is in demand. For new services, the assignment of VISTAs opens the way for the sponsoring agency to meet unmet needs in the community. The risks associated with these two strategies are significantly different. For example, the demand for an existing service is usually far better known than for a new service. The nature of the fit between client needs and program services is better understood. As a consequence, the targeting of resources can be carried out more precisely.

On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to conclude that a 62.1 percent success rate (72.4% if transfers are included) for start-up programs is a very high rate (See Table 5). It must be kept in mind that these new programs bring needed services to populations and communities with low resources. The data suggest that VISTA has balanced the targeting of resources to both strategies (startup and maintenance/expansion) very evenly.

In order to evaluate whether the policy shift within VISTA which placed a greater emphasis on sustainability might have affected the relationship between project sustainability and prior existence, we re-assessed the data controlling for sample year. As can be seen from Table 6, there are substantial differences between the two samples. Start-up programs accounted for all of the terminations and transfers within the five-year sample. Within the two-year sample, start-ups fare the same as service maintenance or expansion programs. An additional difference which may be of some importance is the fact that there is almost an exact reversal in the mix of start-ups versus maintenance/expansion programs within the samples. Nearly three quarters (73.2%) of the programs in the five-year sample are start-ups, while just over a quarter (28.8%) are start-ups in the two-year sample.

Table 5
Pre and Post-VISTA Status of VISTA Supported Projects

Post-VISTA Status	Service Supported Prior to VISTA Project		
	Yes (N=57)	No (N=58)	Sample Total (N=115)
Sustained	91.2%	62.1%	76.5%
Terminated	7.0%	27.6%	17.4%
Transferred	1.8%	10.3%	6.1%

Statistically significant at the 0.01 level (Two-tailed test)

Table 6
Impact of Pre Project Status of VISTA Supported Services on Post-VISTA Status

Post Project Status	Service Supported Prior to VISTA Project (Y/N)			
	Two-Year Sample		*Five-Year Sample*	
	Yes (N=42)	No (N=17)	Yes (N=15)	No (N=41)
Sustained	88.1%	88.2%	100.0%	51.2%
Terminated	9.5%	11.8%	0.0%	34.1%
Transferred	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	14.6%

The data continue to support the hypothesis that changes in VISTA policies operated to increase the likelihood that a program would survive the departure of the volunteers; at least, the data do not contradict the hypothesis. The data also suggest that VISTA may have shifted its focus on the types of programs in which it invests resources, i.e. volunteers, from start-ups to existing programs across the sample periods.

Chapter III
Impact of the VISTA Volunteers

Up to this point, the analysis has focused solely on factors that were outside the control of the individual sponsoring agencies. The remainder of the analysis will focus on factors that were under the control of the sponsoring agencies.

Administrative and organizational specialists often point to early planning as a primary factor that influences later success. During the agency interviews, the respondents were asked when the agency first started planning for post-VISTA activities. A little more than 55 percent of the agencies indicated that they started planning either prior to the start of the project or immediately upon initiating it. The remaining 45 percent started their planning during the first year or thereafter. When the full five-point sustainability scale is used, the trends are not particularly clear. There is a slight tendency for the proportion of programs that terminate to go up the later the agencies start planning for continuation.

If both the post-VISTA status scale and the planning scale are collapsed, the trends become clearer (See Table 7). Programs that either expanded or maintained themselves were re-classified as having a positive post-VISTA experience; those that either reduced or terminated the service were seen as having a negative experience. Transfers remained as transfers. Within this schema, early planners (those that started before the end of the first year) do better than late planners (those who start in the second or third year). Those agencies that never planned for continuation either experienced a reduction in services, terminated the program, or transferred the program in better than 80 percent of the cases. These results clearly point to the importance of early planning. If planning begins before the end of the first year of the project, the agency has a good chance of expanding or maintaining the program. Agencies that begin planning in the second and third year are less likely to fare as well, but not necessarily disastrously so. Programs that fail to plan for continuation are not likely to survive the transition from VISTA support.

As noted above, VISTA national headquarters began to place greater emphasis on sustainability and early planning for continuation after 1991. As can be seen from Table 8, agencies in the two-year sample were significantly more likely to start planning for continuation prior to the end of the first project year than agencies in the five-year sample. In fact, all of the agencies that failed to plan for continuation were found in the five-year sample. These changes represent a significant behavioral shift by the sponsoring agencies that received VISTAs. Below, we review whether other shifts occurred that support sustainability.

Table 7
The Effect of Continuation Planning

Post-VISTA Status	When Continuation Planning Started			
	Pre-VISTA thru First Year (N=78)	*Second or Third Year (N=21)*	*Never (N=16)*	*Total (N=115)*
Expanded/ Maintained	79.5%	61.9%	18.8%	67.8%
Reduced/ Terminated	17.9%	28.6%	62.5%	18.3%
Transferred	2.6%	9.5%	18.8%	13.9%

Statistically significant at the 0.01 level (Two-tailed test). Percents are column percents unless otherwise noted.

Table 8
Continuation Planning

When Continuation Planning Strategy Started	Sample (2 and 5 Years)		Combined Sample (N=115)
	Two-Year Sample (N=57)	*Five-Year Sample (N=58)*	
Pre-VISTA thru First Year	95.0%	37.9%	66.9%
Second or Third Year	5.0%	32.8%	18.6%
Never	0.0%	29.3%	14.4%

Statistically significant at the 0.01 level (Two-tailed test). Percents are column percents unless otherwise noted.

Critical to the continuation of a program is securing a funding base. Assigning VISTAs to the task of securing continuation funding or other support resources represents one solution to locating continuation funding. The primary interviews probed the involvement of the VISTAs in resource mobilization through a series of queries that asked if the VISTAs had been involved in seeking continuation funds or resources.

As can be seen from Table 9, considerable differences exist between the two sample years in the matter of how the agencies used VISTAs to achieve fundraising and other resource mobilization

objectives. First, the two-year sample was significantly more likely to use VISTAs to carry out what might be regarded as traditional resource mobilization activities. Ninety percent of the two-year sample used VISTAs to recruit local community volunteers, increasing the "human" capital base of the agency. Only 20.7 percent of the agencies in the five-year sample assigned VISTAs to this task. Agencies in the two-year sample were significantly more likely to assign VISTAs, on average, to various fundraising activities (2.8 versus 0.9 activities). Similarly, a much larger proportion of the agencies in the two-year sample (73.3%) used VISTAs to seek in-kind donations than in the five-year sample (6.9%). Agencies from the two-year sample were also more likely to assign VISTAs to the task of writing funding proposals, whether directed at private or government sources (local, state, and federal).

Neither set of agencies was very likely to have assigned volunteers the task of mobilizing other resources or service provider partners. Although the differences were statistically significant, or nearly so (See Table 9), the agencies from the two-year sample were only slightly more likely to use VISTAs in the latter two capacities than agencies from the five-year sample. No differences were found between the behavior of the agencies in the two samples with regard to assigning VISTAs to the task of seeking cash donations. The data on VISTA volunteer activity in support of locating continuation funds and resources further strengthens the hypothesis that increased emphasis at the national level on sustainability and fundraising affected the behavior of VISTA volunteer sponsors at the local level. The increasing availability of nationally recruited volunteers may have further accelerated this trend.

An important question is whether the activities of the VISTAs led to an increase in funding and funding sources. As noted in the introduction, it was not possible to obtain accurate information about the project budgets. Post-VISTA funding success was measured by examining the number of sources of funding that supported the projects after the VISTAs left. Each agency was asked what their sources were for post-VISTA funding. As can be seen from Table 10, interesting differences and similarities exist between the two and five-year samples. The agencies from the two-year sample had garnered significantly more sources of post-VISTA support, on average, than the five-year sample (3.0 sources versus 1.3 sources). Diversity of support would suggest that the supported program is less vulnerable to future termination.

Both samples were supported equally in the post-VISTA environment by local governments and by the agency's own general funds. Very few of the projects received additional or repeat support from VISTA itself. The latter finding is in keeping with VISTA's mission of acting as a catalyst for initiating new projects or service expansions, rather than being an on-going support mechanism for social service projects.

Table 9
Resource Development Activities of the VISTA Volunteers

Fundraising Activity	Proportion of Agencies Who Used Volunteers for the Specified Activity		Statistical Significance of the Difference [1]
	Two-Year Sample (N=57)	*Five-Year Sample (N=58)*	
Sought Cash Donations	16.7%	15.5%	n.s. [2]
Sought In-Kind Donations	73.3%	6.9%	***
Wrote Proposal for Private Funding	18.3%	6.9%	*
Wrote Proposals for State and Local Government Funding	40.0%	12.1%	***
Wrote Proposals for Federal Funding	26.7%	0.0%	***
Recruited Community Volunteers	90.0%	20.7%	***
Sought Other Organizations as Partners	13.3%	3.4%	**
Mobilized Other Resources	5.0%	0.0%	*
Average Number of Fundraising Activities	2.83	0.90	*** [3]

[1] * statistically significant at the 0.10 level; ** at the 0.05 level; *** at the 0.01 level (Two-tailed chi-square test).

[2] Significance values above 0.10 are not shown.

[3] *P*-value based on an independent sample t-test.

Sample differences emerge around three areas. Agencies in the two-year sample were able to gain significantly greater support from state governments and the federal government. The two-year sample also was able to make considerably greater headway in finding "private" sources of funding. The two-year sample was particularly successful at gaining financial support from private sources (gifts and funds). They were also able to increase access to non-profit and corporate funds. At a time when government funds are shrinking (local, state and federal), it is of marked interest that the two-year sample was so successful in finding alternative sources of funding. The emphasis on early planning for continuation and the application of VISTAs to fundraising tasks appears to have paid off when measured by the diversity of funding sources that support the post-VISTA activities of the VISTA programs.

Table 10
Post-VISTA Sources of Funding

Financial Source	Proportion of Agencies Receiving Funding from Specified Source		Statistical Significance of the Difference [1]
	Two-Year Sample (N=57)	Five-Year Sample (N=58)	
Sponsoring Agency	25.0%	23.6%	n.s. 2
Local Government	33.3%	25.5%	n.s. 2
State	53.3%	29.1%	***
Federal Government	73.3%	23.6%	***
VISTA	0.0%	3.6%	n.s. 2
Non-Profit	36.7%	5.5%	***
Private Gift/Funds	63.3%	12.7%	***
Corporate	13.3%	1.8%	**
Local Volunteers	100.0%	7.3%	***
Average # Sources	3.0	1.3	*** 3

[1] * statistically significant at the 0.10 level; ** at the 0.05 level; *** at the 0.01 level (Two-tailed chi-square test).

[2] Significance values above 0.10 are not shown.

[3] Statistical significance calculated using an independent sample t-test.

The third area of difference between the two sample sets is the involvement of local volunteers. All of the agencies in the two-year sample that continued their VISTA project used local community volunteers to support the project. Less than 10 percent (7.3%) of the agencies from the five-year sample used local volunteers to continue project activities or services. While the extent of this difference is somewhat surprising, it is in keeping with what was found previously: the five-year sample did not routinely assign their VISTAs to the task of recruiting and training community volunteers.

The role that the VISTAs played in the projects and the impact of the VISTAs on the projects or services also were examined. It would be expected that the more central the role of the VISTAs, the greater the impact of their training and their implied mission. As can be seen from Table 11, there were sharp differences in the role that the VISTAs played in the project between the two and five-year samples. The VISTAs were far more likely to play a main role, as defined by the interview respondents, in the two-year sample than the five-year sample (68.3% versus 29.8%). These results are consistent with the changes in procedures that VISTA put into place and the

increase in the assignment of "national" VISTAs to sponsoring agencies. The nationally recruited volunteers may have been perceived as having better training and skills than the locally trained volunteers (whether true or not).

Table 11
VISTA Volunteers' Role in Projects

Role of VISTA Volunteers	Sample (2 and 5 Year)		Combined Sample (N=117)
	Two-Year Sample (N=60)	Five-Year Sample (N=57)	
Main	68.3%	29.8%	49.6%
Subordinate	31.7%	70.2%	50.4%

Statistically significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed test).

An examination of the impact of the VISTAs on the projects in which they worked lends support to the notion that the role played by the VISTAs might have had some different consequences. As can be seen from Table 12, the VISTAs were perceived as having helped improve services in nearly all cases. However, the VISTAs were more likely to contribute to an increase in the number of clients served by the project in the case of the two-year sample. This outcome fits with the fact that they were more likely to play a principal role in the two-year sample than in the five-year sample.

Table 12
Impact of the VISTA Volunteers

Impact Area	Sample (2 and 5 Years)		Significance (p-value) [1]
	Two-Year Sample (N=60)	*Five-Year Sample (N=57)*	
Led to Service Improvement	98.3%	96.6%	n.s. 2
Increased Number of Clients	63.3%	32.8%	***
Allowed Previous Program to Survive	1.7%	31.6%	***

[1] * is statistically significant at the 0.10 level; ** at the 0.05 level; *** at the 0.01 level(Two-tailed chi-square test).

[2] Significance values above 0.10 are not shown.

[3] Statistical significance calculated using an independent sample t-test.

Expectations about the skills of the VISTAs and the role that they might play in securing the future of the project appear not to have been very high in the five-year sample. The implementation of a re-worked, national training curriculum; the more frequent placement of nationally recruited volunteers; and the increased emphasis on the use of VISTAs to build organizational capacity and locate continuation funds apparently changed perceptions and led to an upgrade in the role that the volunteers played in the projects. Again we find strong support for the study hypothesis that the changes in policy that were put in place between 1989 and 1991 had the effect of increasing sustainability and maximizing the efficient use of the VISTAs in organizational capacity building.

Historically there has always been an expectation that a certain proportion of VISTAs will remain with the sponsoring agency in some capacity after their VISTA commitment. Organizational theory, as well as common sense, would suggest that staff retention rates play an important role in institutional stability. Organizations and firms that experience high staff turnovers are at higher risk for failure than those that have low turnover, all other factors being equal. In order to assess this issue, we examined post-VISTA, VISTA volunteer hiring rates by sample.

The two samples differed systematically in the rate at which they hired VISTAs in some capacity after the project ended. A little more than 60 percent (63.3%) of the agencies in the two-year sample hired one or more VISTAs, while only 40 percent (43.1%) of the five-year sample hired them.

In keeping with our earlier finding that agencies in the two-year sample were far more likely to use the VISTAs for recruitment and training of local volunteers to support the project, organizations in the two-year sample also were significantly more likely to continue to use local volunteers in support of the project after VISTA funding ended (See Table 13).

Table 13
Use of Community Volunteers After VISTA Funding

Supported by Community Volunteers	**Sample (2 and 5 Years)**		**Combined Sample N=118**
	Two-Year Sample (N=60)	***Five-Year Sample (N=58)***	
YES	88.3%	17.2%	53.4%
NO	11.7%	82.8%	46.6%

Statistically significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed test)

Emphasis areas represent the core services or activities that the VISTAs were assigned to support. In theory and practice, different emphasis areas place dissimilar administrative and resource demands on the agencies. Establishing and supporting a program to feed the homeless requires far different resources and skills than a program to rehabilitate drug abusers. In order to assess the impact of emphasis areas on sustainability, we assessed three issues: (1) the impact of program areas on sustainability, (2) the impact of using VISTAs to support multiple emphasis areas on the sustainability of the prime emphasis area, and (3) the impact of working with "traditional" versus "non-traditional" emphasis areas on sustainability. We were unable to detect any influence of emphasis areas on sustainability.

Chapter IV
Summary and Conclusions

The primary goal of the VISTA sustainability study was to estimate the post-VISTA survival rates of service projects that had been supported by VISTAs. Secondary goals included assessing the impact of VISTAs on post-VISTA survival rates, assessing the role of the VISTAs in organizational capacity building, and developing reliable measurement scales and instruments to carry out the assessment. A quasi-experimental, pre-post design was developed that focused on the impact of the VISTAs on post-VISTA survival. Flowing from the design were a number of questions that probed the environment and characteristics of the sampled VISTA sponsored agencies, the role of the VISTAs in the supported projects, and the post-VISTA status of the VISTA volunteer supported project services.

Throughout the study, *a project was characterized as having continued or been sustained* if the VISTA supported activities continued to exist at the originally funded agency at the time of the interview (April 1996). VISTA supported project activities that continued to exist were further broken down into three categories: (1) activities that had *expanded*, (2) activities that were *maintained* at about the same level as when the VISTAs left, and (3) activities that had been *reduced* in scope. Projects that no longer carried out any of the activities supported by the VISTAs and had not transferred them to another agency were categorized as having been *terminated*. In the cases where projects had been transferred to another service provider the project was categorized as having been *transferred*.

Findings

The study had six major findings. They were:

1. **The baseline survival rates of VISTA supported projects are quite high.** Overall, nearly 68 percent (67.7%) of the VISTA supported programs continued to operate two and five-years after the VISTAs had completed their assignment. However, the post-project sustainability rate for programs in the two-year sample was considerably higher than for programs in the five-year sample. Of the programs in the two-year sample, 76.4 percent were sustained within the original, VISTA sponsored agency. This is in contrast to the five-year sample, where 60.7 percent continued to survive in some form at the time of the interview. In addition, 2.3 percent and 7.1 percent of the programs from the two and five-year samples respectively "survived" as transfers. The difference in the proportion of survivors between the two sample years is statistically significant, whether the transfer programs are included or not. *The difference was not just a consequence of the time that had*

passed since the VISTAs departed. Projects from the five-year sample were more likely to have terminated within six months of the departure of the VISTAs (13.8%) than the two-year sample (8.3%). The five-year sample also had a higher annual termination rate (1.2 programs per year) than the two-year sample (0.5 programs per year). These differences also were statistically significant.

2. **The existence of a project prior to the arrival of the VISTAs did not influence post-VISTA sustainability rates when controlled for sample year and the initiation of continuation planning.** Nearly identical proportions of programs were sustained among the agencies from the two-year sample whether the program existed prior to the VISTAs coming on board or not. Over 87 percent of the programs that terminated after the VISTAs departed and which had no prior history in the agency came from the five-year sample. However, the key difference was how early the programs began planning for post VISTA continuation, not sample year. This is illustrated by the fact that while 95.0 percent of the two-year sample began continuation planning in the first year of the project, only 66.9 percent of the agencies in the five-year sample began continuation planning within a year of project start-up.

3. **An increased emphasis on VISTA volunteer involvement in organizational capacity building, particularly fundraising and resource development, affected the role that VISTAs played across the two sample years.** There was a significant increase in the involvement of VISTAs in locating post-VISTA funds and resources in the two-year sample in comparison to the five-year sample. Agencies in the two- year sample were likely to assign VISTAs to about 2.8 fundraising and resource mobilization activities, while the five-year sample, on average, assigned them to about 0.9 such activities. There also was a clear increase in the number of resources that provided post-VISTA funding and support between the two sample years. The two-year sample reported nearly 3 sources of funding per project, while the five-year sample reported just under 1.3 sources.

4. **A clear shift in the agencies' perspective on the VISTAs across the two sample years can be discerned.** VISTAs were far more likely to have played a central role in the VISTA supported project in the two-year sample (68.3%) than in the five-year sample (29.8%). The VISTAs also were more likely to be credited with helping the project expand in the two-year sample than in the five-year sample (63.3% versus 32.8%). However, they were less likely to be credited with allowing a previously established program to survive (1.7% versus 31.6%). Finally, VISTAs were more likely to be hired by the sponsoring agency at the end of their service in the two-year sample than the five-year sample (63.3% versus 43.1%). The 20.2 percent increase in post-VISTA hiring of VISTAs bodes well for organizational stability and the earlier and more complete institutionalization of the affected programs.

5. **The sponsoring agencies were more likely to use VISTAs to recruit and train local community volunteers in the two-year sample than the five-year sample (90.0% versus 20.7%).** They were also far more likely to use community volunteers to support the program after the VISTAs left (88.2% versus 17.5%). These results represent an important resource gain for the local agencies. Increased contact with VISTAs and community volunteers also has the potential for producing gains in community awareness of, and possibly support for, VISTA funded projects.

6. **The agencies in the two-year sample indicated that they faced fewer problems raising funds and locating resources to continue the project after formal VISTA support ended.** Unlike agencies in the five-year sample, none of the agencies in the two-year sample failed to try and raise project continuation funds. Even when faced with the problem of scarce resources, they were more likely to succeed than the five-year sample.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that VISTA supported programs are robust and sustain themselves at high rates after the VISTAs leave. The evidence points strongly to the positive and effective role that VISTAs can and do play in building the capacity of the supported programs to sustain themselves. The data also point to the fact that the shift in emphasis toward sustainability and an increased role for VISTAs in organizational capacity building which occurred in VISTA during the years 1989-1991 led to significant improvements in the survival rates of VISTA supported projects and to the more visible role of the VISTAs.

The results of the study point to a number of policy and management observations and recommendations. First, the baseline survival rates of VISTA supported projects are quite high. For VISTA supported projects that had ended five-years prior to the study, 67 percent continued to offer services. While national policies and management efforts improved the post-VISTA survival rates, the impact of national policy appears to have been uneven, spectacular in some cases, less so in others. For example, the changes in national policies appear to have contributed to a dramatic shift in the way that VISTA supported projects used VISTA volunteers. The older projects were far less likely to have involved their VISTAs in community volunteer recruitment, training, and supervision than the newer projects (20.7% versus 90.0%). Finally, some issues appear to be beyond the reach of VISTA and may set natural boundaries on the impact of national policies. For example, a small but significant proportion of VISTA supported agencies appear to have ceased to exist (7.5%).

In the future, it is recommended that VISTA consolidate the current gains and then target select issues for improvement. It might be useful to establish a monitoring mechanism that permits AmeriCorps*VISTA to gather survival data on a regular basis. The survival scale that was developed for this study provides a solid basis for developing such a monitoring mechanism.