The VISTA Program Assessment

Final Report

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Prepared by Westat
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Executive Summary

1.   Overview of the Study

AmeriCorps*VISTA (Volunteers In Service to America) provides full-time volunteers to nonprofit organizations and local agencies that provide services to low-income communities. The program's purpose, as defined by law, is to strengthen efforts to eliminate poverty by encouraging people from all walks of life to engage in meaningful volunteer service. The law describes three main objectives through which the program achieves its purpose:

- To encourage volunteer service at the local level,

- To generate the commitment of private sector resources, and

- To support the efforts of local organizations to build sustainable anti poverty programs.

VISTA has been able to collect data that demonstrates program success in meeting the first two objectives. The program has, however, lacked a systematic way to evaluate the extent to which it achieves its goal of helping organizations build and sustain anti-poverty programs. To this end, the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that administers the VISTA program, contracted with Westat Inc., to answer key questions that would help VISTA develop an understanding of its performance in this area.

These key questions included:

1. What are the most common ways VISTAs strengthen organizations to help them develop anti-poverty programs?

2. What percentage of VISTA projects continued to operate successfully two or more years after the last VISTA left the project?

3. What percentage of VISTA projects achieved their stated goals?

4. What are the common factors that contribute to project success, or hamper project success?

To answer these questions, Westat conducted telephone interviews with 279 VISTA projects that had been closed for at least two years. Forty of these closed projects (half of them still in operation, and half discontinued), were visited to supplement information from the telephone interviews.

These data were compiled and analyzed not only to answer the research questions, but also to develop a model to predict which projects are most likely to achieve their goals and to continue on their own, without ongoing VISTA support.

Finally, brief telephone interviews were conducted with Corporation State Office (CSO) staff concerning ongoing or "active" projects to test the models.

2. Key Findings
The VISTA program was extremely successful, according to the measures captured in this evaluation.

- Eighty-four percent of VISTA projects continued in some form up to two years after the last VISTA had finished working on the project (see Table S-1).

Table S-1.   Project continuation

Project continuation	Weighted number	Percent
Continued	1,248	84.0
Did not continue	238	16.0
Total	1,487	100.0

- Over 90 percent of projects completely or partly achieved at least one of their three most important goals (see Figure S-1).

Figure S-1.   Extent to which three most important goals were achieved
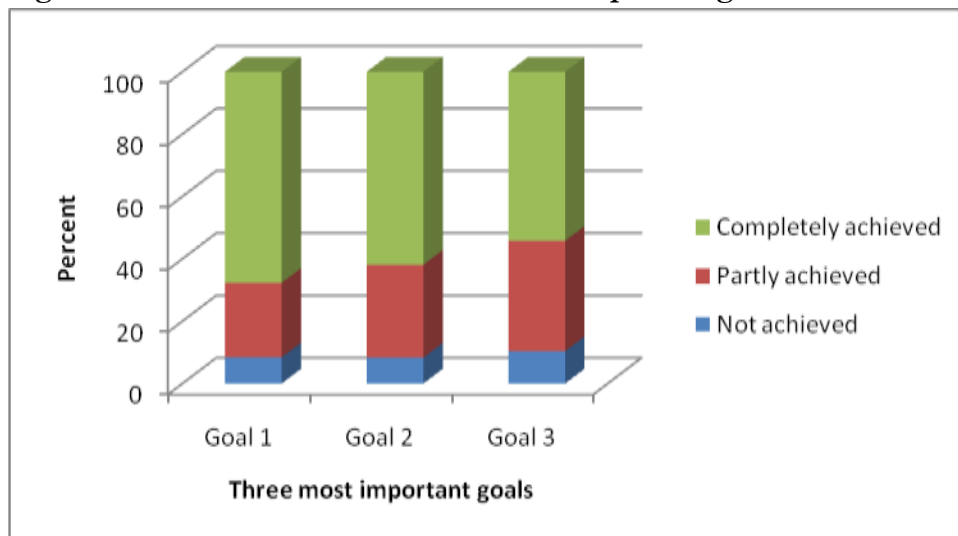
- Organizations cited strong support from their organization (87%), the training they provided to the VISTAs (80%), and the efforts of the VISTAs themselves (77%) as the primary reasons why they were successful.

Organizations participating in the VISTA program are mostly small, but have been in existence for a considerable length of time.
- Close to half have been working in low-income communities for at least 20 years; only 16 percent are relatively new(less than 10 years old).
- All focused on poverty-related issues in the community including illiteracy, homelessness, health care, disability, child care, assistance to refugees, and economic development.
- Almost 60 percent had 10 or fewer employees at the time of the interview, and somewhat more than 20 percent had more than 30 employees.

Organizations reported some experience with the activities of the VISTA project.
- Over one quarter (27 percent) had "very extensive experience" with activities of the VISTA project (see Figure S-2).
- Only 15.9 percent of respondents said that their organization had "no experience."

Figure S-2.   Experience of sponsoring organization with key activities of VISTA project
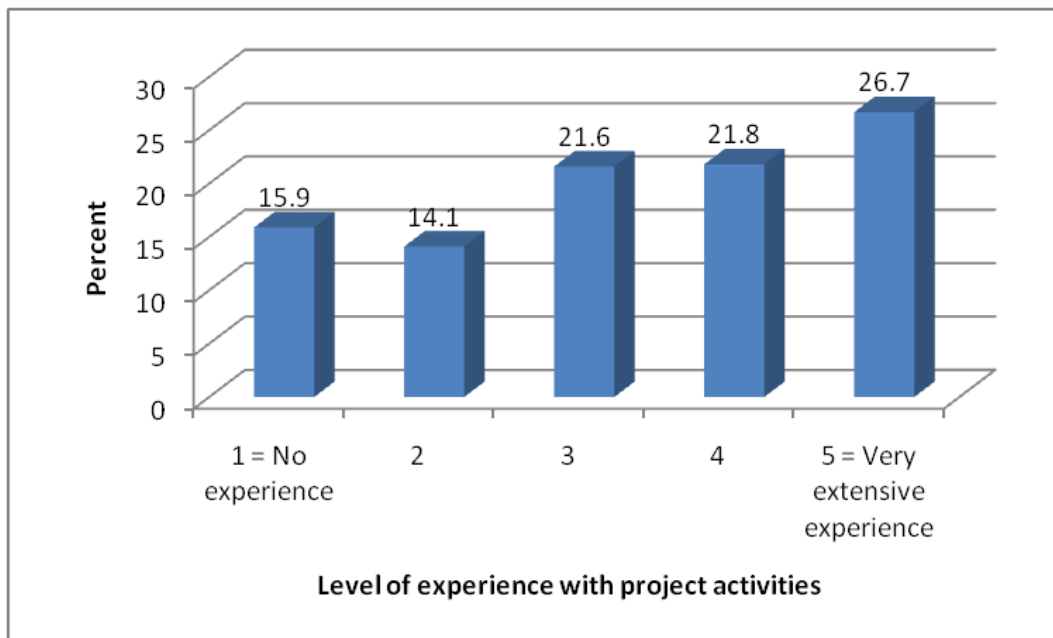
Organizations tended to have goals that were central to their mission.

- More than 99 percent of organizations had goals that were very or somewhat central to their mission.

Most projects operated with only one or two VISTAs at a time.
- About two thirds (66 percent) of VISTA projects were awarded only one or two VISTA positions (see Figure S-3).

Figure S-3.   Number of VISTA positions
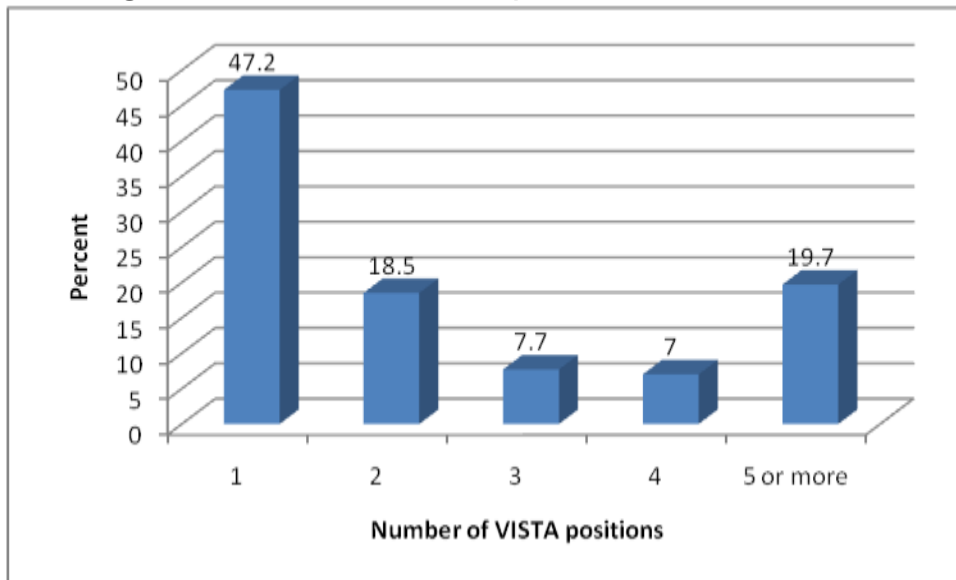
VISTA members played an important role in most organizations.
- Over 90 percent of respondents said that the VISTAs were critical or helpful in achieving each of the three most important goals.

- The most successful VISTAs, according to the organizations we visited, were willing to work hard, had good communication skills, were creative, and perhaps most important, were committed to the social justice issues the organization was addressing. They typically had a passion for serving members of the target population.

Although most VISTAs brought strong skills, some had shortcomings.
- Some VISTAs did not know the ground rules of the work place, such as the importance of arriving on time or calling in when sick, avoiding gossip, and working as a member of a team (taking account of others' ideas rather than always promoting their own**).** There were also complaints that VISTAs, even young ones, were not "computer savvy" enough, especially in using graphics programs.

- While relatively infrequent, some VISTAs presented with mental health problems, including severe depression, anorexia, or substance abuse. These VISTAs were an unexpected challenge, causing significant disruptions to the organization's operations.

Some projects changed goals during the project, but the circumstances surrounding changing goals was usually positive.

- About 16 percent of projects changed goals (see table S-2).

Table S-2. Change in project goals

Goal stability	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Maintained goals	1,265	83.2
Changed goals	256	16.8
Total	1,522	100.0

- Among projects that changed goals, the most frequent reason was that needs expanded or changed (64%), followed by "the goals were achieved" (15%) and "the goals became more focused" (10%).

Poor management and lack of resources headed the list of reasons why organizations said that projects failed to achieve goals or to continue.

- Of the projects that did not continue (16%), 46 percent cited poor management as the reason for not continuing. Poor management included failing to fill out paperwork, changes in staffing, lack of appropriate supervision of VISTAs, and lack of compliance with rules set by the Corporation (see Figure S-4).

Figure S-4.   Reasons projects did not continue
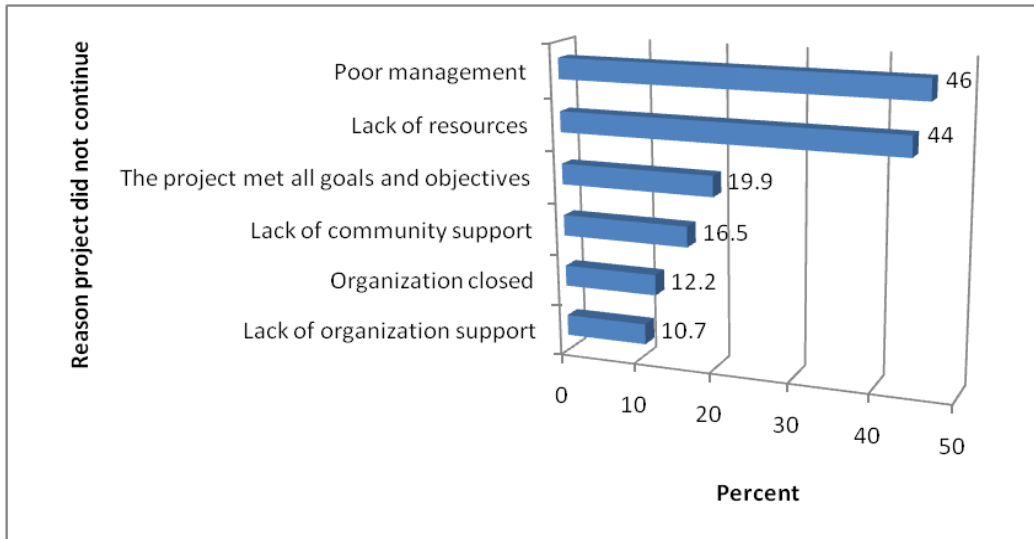
Although many organizations with ambitious goals did not accomplish all of their goals, they were often able to make lasting differences for the organization or the community. Such accomplishments included expanding an entrepreneurship program from one small area of the city to the entire metropolitan area, building a strong base of volunteers, and developing connections with funding sources to provide long-term support for the organization.

CSOs helped to overcome challenges and provided support to projects.

- More than one third of projects received technical assistance from the Corporation in some form nearly every month.
- More than 80 percent of respondents said that the CSO was very helpful or helpful in addressing challenges or supporting project activities.

While most projects continued, several factors distinguish those that did not continue from those that did:

When variables were considered together in a multivariate model, several factors proved to be dominant. Projects that continued:

- Were sponsored by younger organizations;
- Were managed by organizations with more experience in the activities required for the VISTA project;
- Achieved their goals, but were flexible enough to change them, as needed;
- Had VISTAs for a longer time —generally the full 3 years or more (during site visits we learned that abrupt budget cuts caused some projects to end early); and
- Received extensive support from the community.

Most ongoing projects were found to have a high probability of continuing.

Telephone interviews were conducted with Corporation State Offices regarding 151 ongoing VISTA projects. CSOs were questioned about 6 factors that seemed to be making a difference, according to preliminary analyses, in whether or not a project was likely to continue. These were:

- Presence of a key project staff member throughout the project;
- The organization's experience with project activities;
- Community support for the project;
- Whether the project's goals changed;
- Length of the project;
- Whether the goals, so far, were being achieved.

Nearly two-thirds of on-going projects had a predictive probability of continuing of between .9 and 1.0. Only four of the projects had a predictive probability of continuing of less than .5 (see Figure S-5). The accuracy of these predictions remains to be seen in a follow-up study.

Figure S-5. Frequency of predicted probability of project continuation
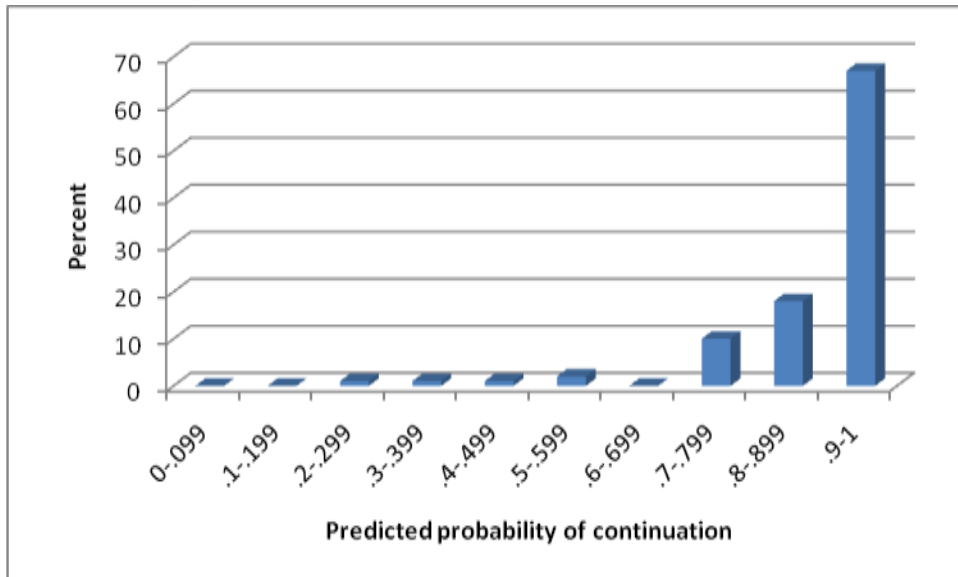
3.   Methodology

The study was designed to answer questions regarding project goals and outcomes, activities of the VISTAs, and other factors contributing to success or failure in sustaining a project at least 2 years beyond the tenure of the VISTAs. The research involved a sequential series of steps:

- Abstracts of project applications and progress reports for 250 "closed" projects that had been completed for three or more years, and for 250 ongoing projects, to identify goals and activities;
- Telephone surveys of a random sample of organizations that sponsored the 250 closed projects to learn how projects were carried out;
- Site visits to 40 closed projects, 20 of which were reported to have continued to operate after the VISTA(s) left, and 20 of which were not continued, to obtain in-depth descriptions of project achievements and challenges;
- Development of a model to predict sustainability and goal achievement; and
- Interviews with Corporation State Offices regarding a sample of the ongoing projects to assess the likelihood that they would be sustained, to provide a preliminary test of key elements of the model.

4.   Recommendations

The findings suggest several areas where VISTA might want to examine the current program in more detail, or conduct additional research:

- More information is needed on which recruiting techniques are most effective in ensuring a good fit between the VISTA member(s) and the mission of the organization and project goals.
- The Corporation might want to review the current training program for VISTA members to ensure that the training maximizes VISTAs' effectiveness for the organizations they serve. Such training might incorporate a module on workplace fundamentals and etiquette.
- The Corporation might wish to provide organizations with more information to enable them to effectively manage VISTA members. One such strategy may be to foster networking among VISTA organizations so that they can learn from each other's experiences with common problems.
- Additional research might examine other potential predictors of project success, including characteristics of VISTA members, and financial resources of sponsoring organizations.
- Based on the data collected for this study, "profiles" can be developed of sponsoring organizations to better target resources for project monitoring.
- Test the model developed for this study on current projects, and further refine it.

Introduction 1

AmeriCorps*VISTA (Volunteers In Service to America) was created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 as the "domestic Peace Corps," calling upon civic-minded individuals from all walks of life to give a year of full-time service to help organizations and communities fight poverty. In 1973, VISTA was reauthorized under the Domestic Volunteer Service Act and merged with other programs into a new agency, ACTION. The 1984 amendments to the act expanded the program with an objective "to generate the commitment of private sector resources, to encourage volunteer service at the local level, and to strengthen local agencies and organizations" to carry out their work fighting poverty. The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 created the Corporation for National and Community Service and housed VISTA under the AmeriCorps network of service programs.

AmeriCorps*VISTA is a federally funded anti-poverty program that provides full-time volunteers to nonprofit organizations and local agencies that serve low-income communities. The program's purpose, as defined by law, is to strengthen efforts to eliminate poverty by encouraging people from all walks of life to engage in meaningful volunteer service. The law describes three main objectives through which the program achieves its purpose:

- To encourage volunteer service at the local level,

- To generate the commitment of private sector resources, and

- To support the efforts of local organizations to build sustainable anti-poverty programs.

A VISTA member does not provide direct services but rather acts as a brain trust, catalyst, or architect within the organization.

VISTA has been able to collect data that demonstrate program success in meeting the first two objectives. The program, however, has lacked a systematic way to evaluate the extent to which it achieves its goal of helping organizations build and sustain anti-poverty programs. To this end, the Corporation for National and Community Service contracted with Westat to answer key questions that would help VISTA develop an understanding of its performance in this area.

These key questions included:

1. What are the most common ways VISTAs strengthen organizations to help them develop anti-poverty programs?

2. What percentage of VISTA projects continue to operate successfully two or more years after the last VISTA left the project?

3. What percentage of VISTA projects achieved their stated goals?

4. What are the common factors that contribute to project success, or hamper project success?

Westat developed a systematic approach to assess how well local organizations with the benefit of full-time VISTA members have been able to sustain projects over the long term. Because VISTA members support a wide range of programs, it was a challenge to develop common outcome measures and a rigorous plan for a representative, nationwide evaluation to measure success.

This report describes an assessment of the contributions of the VISTA program in strengthening local organizations that serve low-income communities. One outcome of this assessment is the development of a predictive model that can serve as a foundation for additional studies in the future.

1.1   Overview of the Design

Our study design was aimed at collecting detailed information on relevant characteristics of 250 randomly selected closed projects, and a smaller set of data elements for 250 randomly selected ongoing projects in their third year of programming. Closed projects were defined as projects that no longer had active VISTA members, although at least some aspects of the project might have continued without VISTA support. A sequential data collection effort was conducted to compile a complete portrait of each project containing all of the variables and related descriptive material needed for the analysis.

As shown in Figure 1-1, we first obtained information about each project from the sample frame. We then abstracted key data items from project documents, such as applications and progress reports. Telephone interviews added more information to each project profile and also validated information collected through the document abstraction process.

Figure 1-1.   Study components
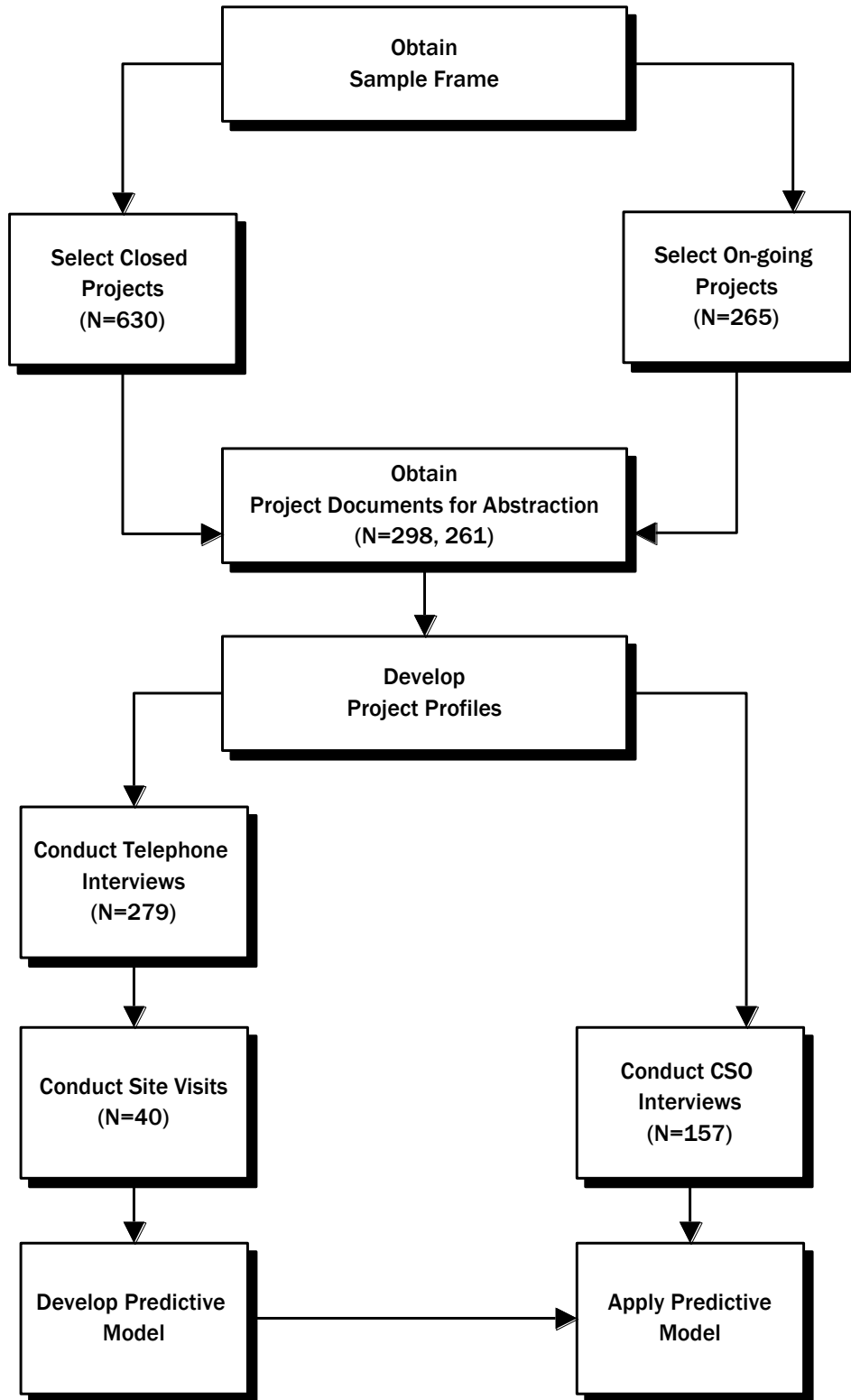
The next step was to conduct site visits to 40 closed VISTA projects, half of which were reported to have been successful in sustaining key project activities, and half of which were not sustained, regardless of whether the project was able to achieve some or all of its goals. The purpose of these site visits was to obtain information about how the projects operated, in an effort to learn why some projects continued after the last VISTA left and why other projects did not.

These data were compiled and analyzed not only to answer the research questions, but also to develop a model to predict which projects would be most likely to achieve their goals and to continue on their own, without ongoing VISTA support.

Using the data from the assessment, we interviewed Corporation State Office (CSO) staff about characteristics of ongoing or "active" projects to get their input on key variables identified through the data analysis and the predictive model as likely to lead to success.

As noted above, this study consisted of several components: A sample frame to draw the sample, review of documents and abstraction of information and development of a project profile for each project, telephone interviews with 279 closed projects, site visits to 40 closed projects, development of a predictive model, and telephone interviews with CSO staff. The specific components of the assessment are discussed below and summarized in Figure 1-1:

- **Sample Frame.** The sample frame database contained basic characteristics of projects (project status whether active or closed, sponsoring organization, contact name, address of organization, phone number, and e-mail address), project start and end dates, and the number of VISTA members supporting projects over time.

- **Documents.** We reviewed baseline information from project applications and early progress reports as well as the final progress reports (where available) to obtain information on the evolution of the project. We abstracted relevant data and developed profiles for projects that had no VISTAs for at least two years and for ongoing projects.

- **Project Profiles.** Using the above data sources, we developed a profile for each project (closed and ongoing). This profile included the contact information for the sponsoring organization, project start and end dates, the goals of the project (original goals and changes if any), activities, challenges faced by the project, information related to sustainability of the project and any comments the abstractors felt would be useful for the interviewers.

- **Telephone Interviews with Closed Projects.** After reviewing documents, we collected additional information through telephone interviews with knowledgeable sources within the sponsoring organization about whether closed projects were continued after the VISTA members completed their service, the circumstances related

to carrying out the project, and the contributions of the state offices and the VISTA members. During the document review process we identified more than 30 "umbrella" projects that included more than one project, each with separate goals. We systematically selected some of these subprojects for interviews, as described in Chapter 5.

- **Site Visits to Closed Projects.** We conducted site visits to the sponsoring organizations of 40 closed projects. Twenty of these projects reported during the telephone interview that they had continued operations beyond the project end date. The other 20 projects reportedly had been unable to meet their goals or were terminated after the last VISTA left. During the site visits, we examined in-depth several factors to better understand successful achievement of goals and the continuation of projects, including background and contextual information.

- **Predictive Models.** Based on what we learned about the closed projects, we developed multiple regression models to examine factors predictive of goal achievement and project continuation. These predictive models can be refined in future evaluations and can suggest key areas for program development.

- **Telephone Interview with Corporation State Office Staff About Ongoing Projects.** Another component of the project design was an interview with the CSO staff who supervised the ongoing VISTA projects. We identified six questions to ask of a sample of currently active projects. The questions represent variables in the preliminary analyses that contributed to predicting whether the ongoing projects would continue to exist in some form after the last VISTA left. We used their responses to predict the probability that they would be sustained beyond their third year of programming, after the VISTA members are no longer present.

1.2   Conceptual Framework

Figure 1-2 outlines the main elements of the general conceptual framework that served as the basis for constructing research questions and indicators. The elements of the framework included resources, outputs, intermediate outcomes, and end outcomes. The most important components of the framework for this evaluation were the resources and the end outcomes. The end outcomes were the achievement of the goals and the continuation of a project after the last VISTA left the project. This general framework served as an organizing focus for the development of the research questions and related measures.

Figure 1-2.   Conceptual framework
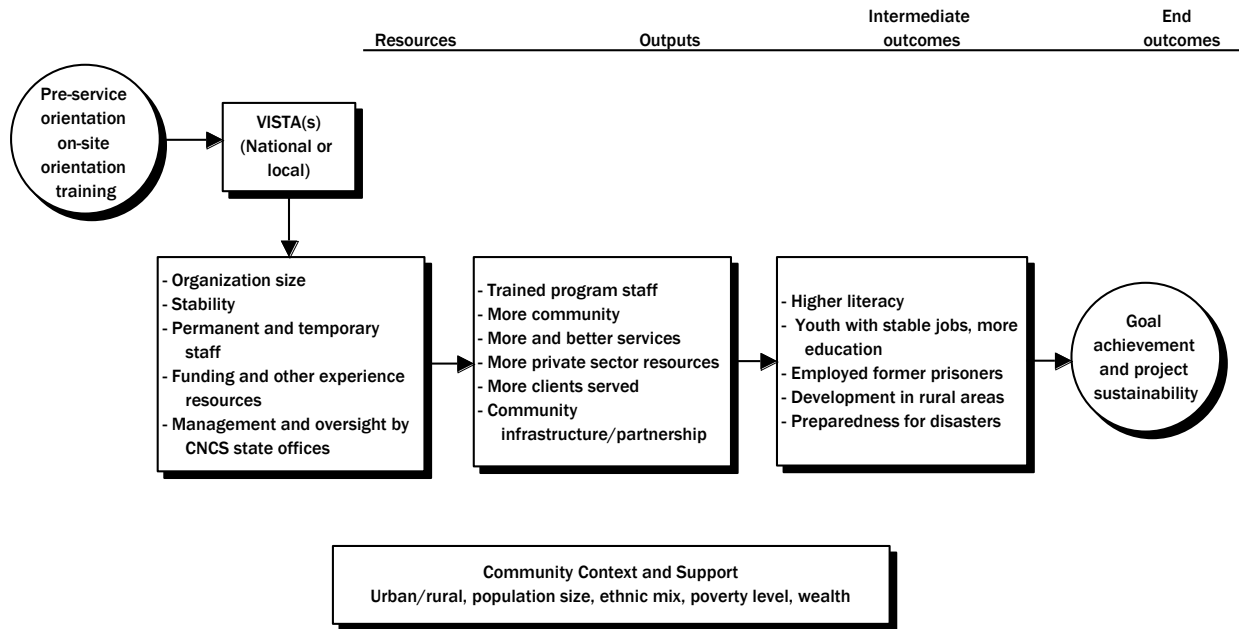
This report consists of 6 chapters and 5 appendices. The main body of the report—the next five chapters—discusses findings from the surveys and site visits, the predictive models, and the research methods including sample selection, questionnaire development, interviewer training, and data collection, followed by a summary and recommendations.

Results from the Survey of Closed VISTA Projects 2

This chapter presents the results of the telephone interview conducted with 279 "closed" AmeriCorps*VISTA projects.[1] These sampled projects are representative of 984 VISTA projects that had been closed for at least two years by January 18, 2008. The list of projects was supplied by VISTA as a sampling frame.[2]

Section 2.1 provides information on the characteristics of project staff interviewed. Section 2.2 describes the characteristics of sponsoring organizations and their VISTA projects. Section 2.3 discusses the achievement of goals and project continuation.

2.1   Characteristics of Project Staff

Telephone interviews were conducted with former project directors or with others who had direct experience with the project. Information was collected from respondents about their position within the organization and their involvement with all phases of the VISTA project. Approximately 7 percent of interviewees identified to us as most knowledgeable had left the organization at the time of our interview, but agreed to answer our questions.

The staff members we interviewed seemed to be knowledgeable about the VISTA projects. Nearly 80 percent of respondents held executive or managerial positions within the organization. Only 5.7 percent held "other" positions, including program officers and administrative assistants. Another 14.3 percent of interviews were conducted with directors of Corporation State Offices (CSOs). See Table 2-1. CSOs were interviewed when an organization no longer existed or the staff had moved on.

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[1] "Closed" VISTA projects no longer have active VISTA members, although they still may be continuing without VISTA support. The sampled projects had not had a VISTA member for at least two years.

[2] All descriptive analyses are weighted. The weight number of organizations is 1,522 due to the existence of umbrella organizations. In some cases, the weight number is less than 1,522 because some respondents did not answer some questions.

Table 2-1. Position of respondent within sponsoring organization

Position	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Executive Director, President, COO, CEO, or School Superintendent	115	41.2
Managerial	108	38.7
Other	16	5.7
CSO interview	40	14.3
Total	279	100.0

A majority of project staff interviewees were working for the organization during each phase of the VISTA project. About three quarters (74.0%) of interviewees were with the organization when the VISTA project was planned, 80.3 percent were there when the VISTA project was implemented, and more than 93.9 percent were present when the last VISTA left. See Figure 2-1.

Figure 2-1. History of respondent with sponsoring organization
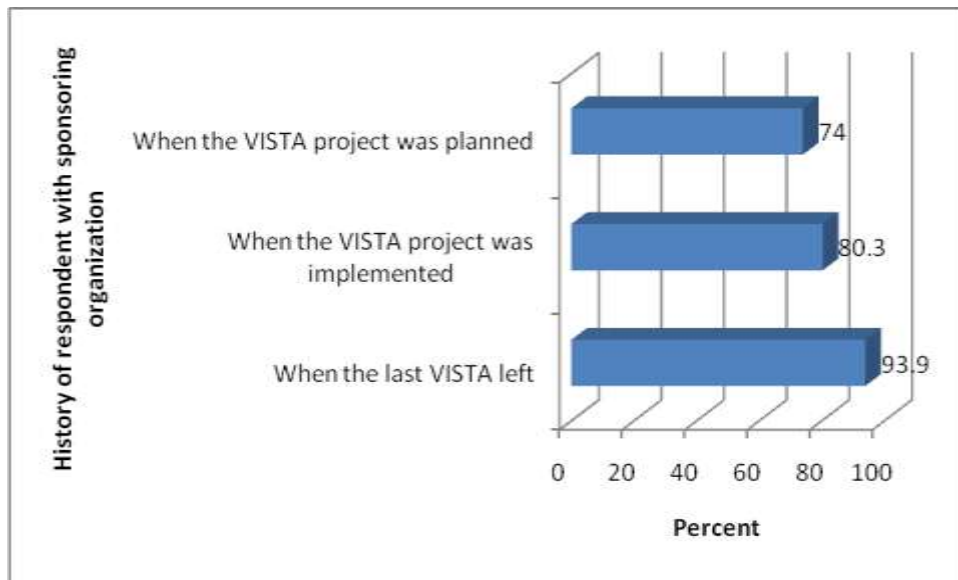
A majority of project staff interviewed participated in key activities of the VISTA project. For example, about three in four interviewees supervised VISTA members (75.9%), conducted project activities (78.7%), and evaluated project work or progress (78.8%). Another 60.2 percent developed project goals, and 63.0 percent trained or oriented VISTA members. See Table 2-2.

Table 2-2.   Participation of interviewees in VISTA project activities

VISTA project activity	Yes	No	Total
Development of a concept paper	54.6	45.4	100.0
Development of the VISTA application	55.0	45.0	100.0
Development of the project goals	60.2	39.8	100.0
Establishing ways to measure achievement of goals	59.9	40.1	100.0
Maintaining contact with the VISTA state office staff	64.8	35.2	100.0
Recruiting VISTA members	56.0	44.0	100.0
Training or orienting VISTA members	63.0	37.0	100.0
Supervising VISTA members	75.9	24.1	100.0
Conducting project activities	78.7	21.3	100.0
Preparing and/or submitting project reports	61.1	38.9	100.0
Evaluating project work or progress	78.8	21.2	100.0
Other	12.4	87.6	100.0

2.2   Characteristics of Sponsoring Organizations and Projects

2.2.1 Organizational Background

Slightly less than one third (29.8%) of sponsoring organizations had been in existence for 11 to 20 years, and another 25.4 percent for 21 to 30 years. About 16 percent of sponsoring organizations were no more than 10 years old, and only 2.3 percent of them were 50 or more years old. The median age was 25 years. See Table 2-3.

Table 2-3.   Age of sponsoring organizations

Age	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
10 years or younger	215	15.8
11 to 20 years	404	29.8
21 to 30 years	345	25.4
31 to 40 years	176	13.0
41 to 50 years	185	13.6
50 years or older	31	2.3
Total	1,355	100.0
Median Age		25 years

Most sponsoring organizations were small in size, as measured by the number of employees. About 60 percent of them had 10 or fewer employees. See Table 2-4.

Table 2-4.   Number of employees at sponsoring organizations

Number of employees	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
10 or fewer	795	59.1
11 to 20	155	11.5
21 to 30	77	5.7
More than 30	318	23.6
Total	1346	100.0

Most of the sponsoring organizations did not have any prior experience with VISTAs. More than three fourths (79.7%) of them had never had a VISTA. Another 7.4 percent had one previous VISTA project, and 12.9 percent had had two or more VISTA projects. See Table 2-5.

Table 2-5.   Previous VISTA projects sponsored by organization

Prior VISTA project	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
None	1,028	79.7
One other	95	7.4
Two or more	166	12.9
Total	1,289	100.0

The survey asked respondents about the organization's previous experience with the activities of the VISTA project. Respondents were asked to rate the organization's experiences from "1," for no experience, to "5" for very extensive experience. Generally, sponsoring organizations reported some experience with the activities of the VISTA project. The most common response (26.7%) was "very extensive experience." Another 21.8 percent rated their level of experience as a "4" on a scale of 1 to 5, and 21.6 percent rated it as a "3." However, 15.9 percent of respondents said their organization had no experience with activities of the VISTA project. See Figure 2-2.

2.2.2 Project Goals

Although many projects had a considerable number of goals, we asked interviewees to identify the three most important. Survey results indicate that sponsoring organizations tended to have goals that were central to their mission. More than 99 percent of organizations had goals that were very or somewhat central to their mission. Less than 1 percent of organizations had goals that were not central to their mission. See Figure 2-3.

Figure 2-2.   Experience of sponsoring organization with key activities of VISTA project
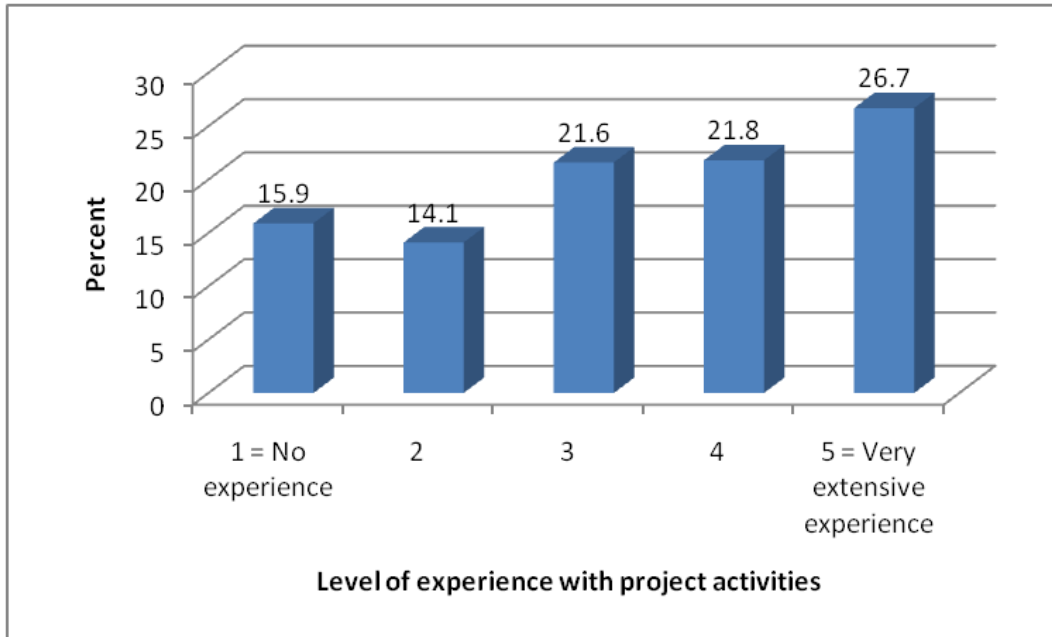
Figure 2-3.   Centrality of goals to organization's mission
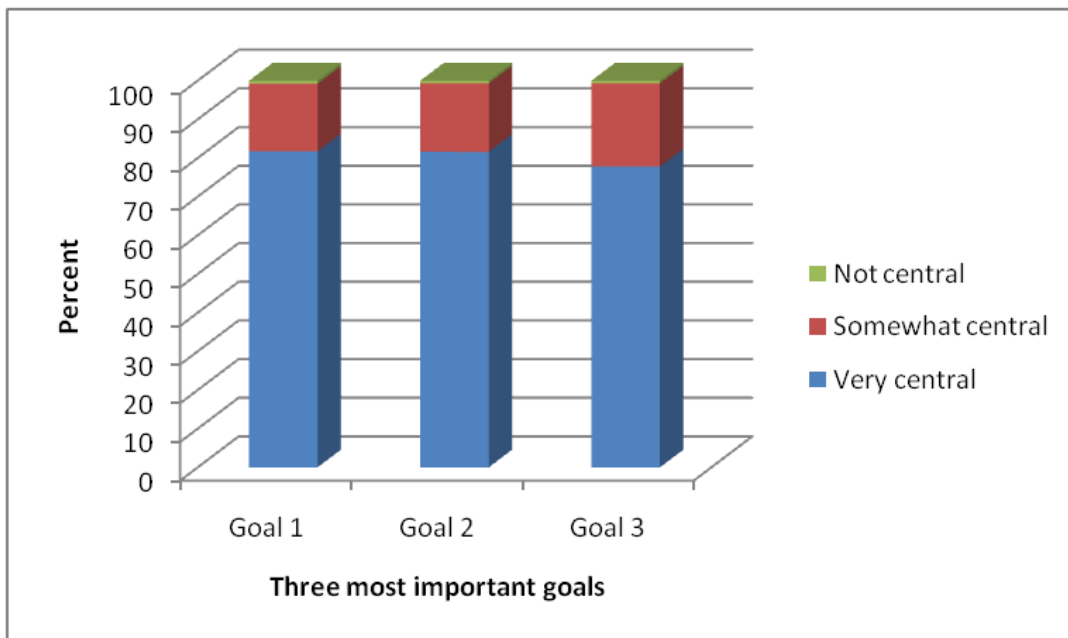
Nearly 85.0 percent of projects maintained their original goals over time. Only 16.8 percent of projects changed their goals. See Table 2-6.

Table 2-6.   Change in project goals

Goal stability	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Maintained goals	1,265	83.2
Changed goals	256	16.8
Total	1,522	100.0

Among the 17 percent of projects where goals changed, the most frequent reason for changing goals was that needs expanded or changed (64.0%). Fifteen percent of respondents reported that goals changed because the original ones were achieved, while about 21 percent reported that the reason for the change was either that goals became more focused or had to change to accommodate the number and skills of the VISTAs. See Table 2-7.

Table 2-7.   Reason for change in project goals

Reasons	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Needs expanded/needs changed/responded to community needs/state thought goals should be changed	132	64.0
Achieved what was planned and looked for what was needed	31	15.1
Goals were more focused	22	10.7
Changed goals to accommodate number and skills of VISTAs	21	10.2
Total	206	100.0

Among organizations that changed goals, 86.5 percent of respondents said that they discussed the change of goals with the CSO, and the CSO gave ideas, guidance, or supported the change. About 13 percent said that the CSO was not involved in the decision to change goals, or was not helpful in the process of changing goals. See Table 2-8.

Table 2-8.   How the CSO was involved in the decision process of changing goals

CSO involvement	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Discussed with CSO/CSO gave ideas/advice/guidance/supported change CSO approved changes	145	86.5
CSO not involved or not at all helpful	22	13.4
Total	167	100.0

2.2.3 VISTA Members

A majority (65.7%) of VISTA projects in the sample were awarded only one or two VISTA positions. Most frequently, projects were given only one VISTA (47.2%). However, 19.7 percent of VISTA projects had five or more positions. See Figure 2-4.

Figure 2-4.   Number of VISTA positions
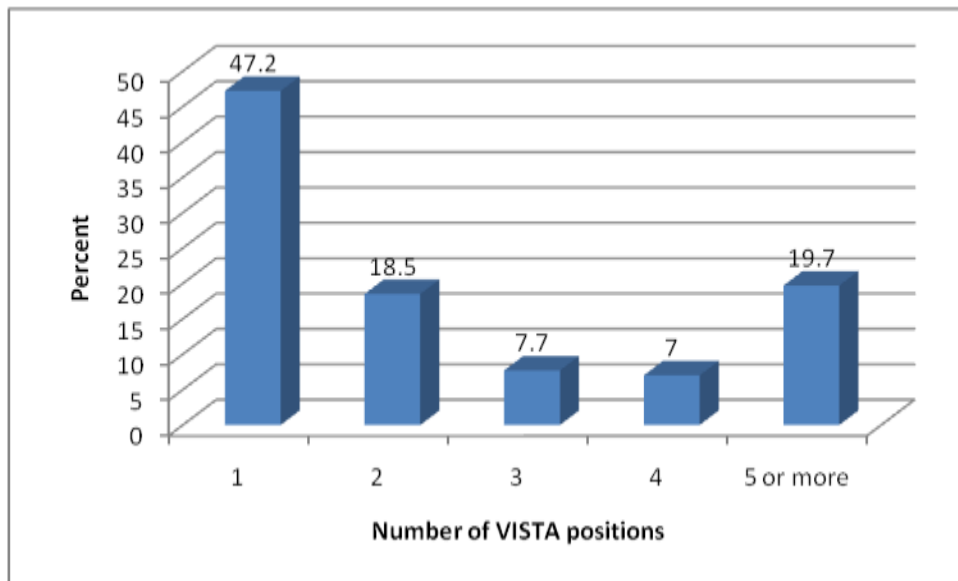
Only 8.2 percent of project representatives said that it was very difficult to fill the VISTA positions. About 44 percent said that it was somewhat difficult, and 48 percent said that it was not at all difficult. See Table 2-9.

Table 2-9.   Difficulty filling VISTA positions

Difficulty	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Very difficult	105	8.2
Somewhat difficult	564	44.2
Not at all difficult	608	47.6
Total	1,277	100.0

Respondents were asked to rate how much supervision the VISTAs required on a scale from "1" (no supervision) to "5" (very extensive supervision). Only 8.4 percent of organizations indicated that VISTAs needed no supervision. At the same time, 14.8 percent said that VISTAs needed "very

extensive supervision." Most typically, VISTAs needed a moderate amount of supervision (a score of "3"). See Figure 2-5.

Figure 2-5.   Level of supervision needed by VISTAs
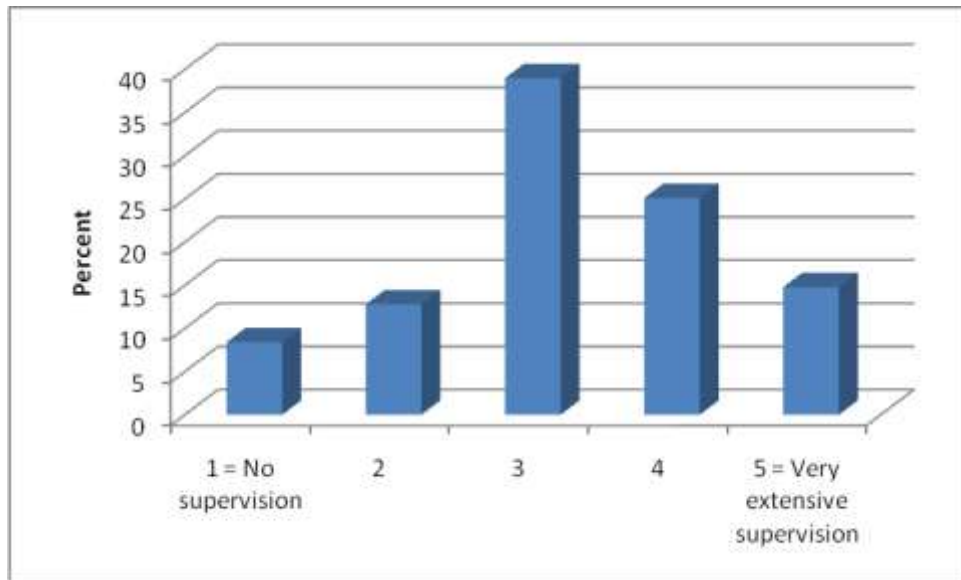
About 60 percent of respondents said that the VISTAs were critical in achieving each of the three most important project goals. Another 33 percent said that they were helpful or somewhat helpful. Less than 6 percent found VISTAs to be unhelpful. See Figure 2-6.

Figure 2-6.   Helpfulness of VISTAs in achieving project goals
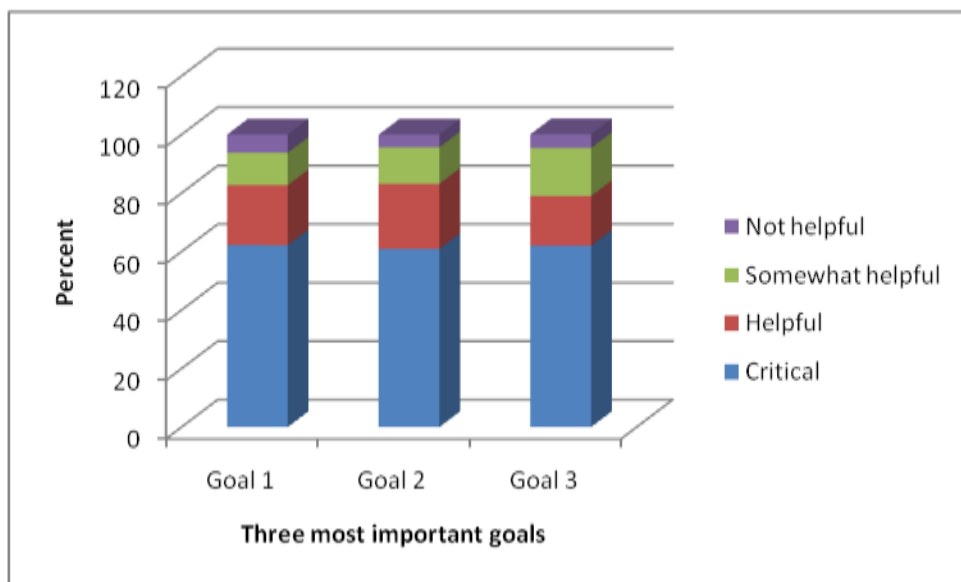
2.2.4 VISTA Project Activities and Support

This section describes characteristics of project activities and support for project activities. About half (49.9%) of VISTA projects lasted less than 3 years. Seven percent ended after less than 1 year, 16 percent ended between 1 and 2 years, and 26.9 percent ended between 2 and 3 years. About one in five (21.6%) of VISTA projects continued for 4 or more years. See Figure 2-7.

Figure 2-7.   Length of VISTA project
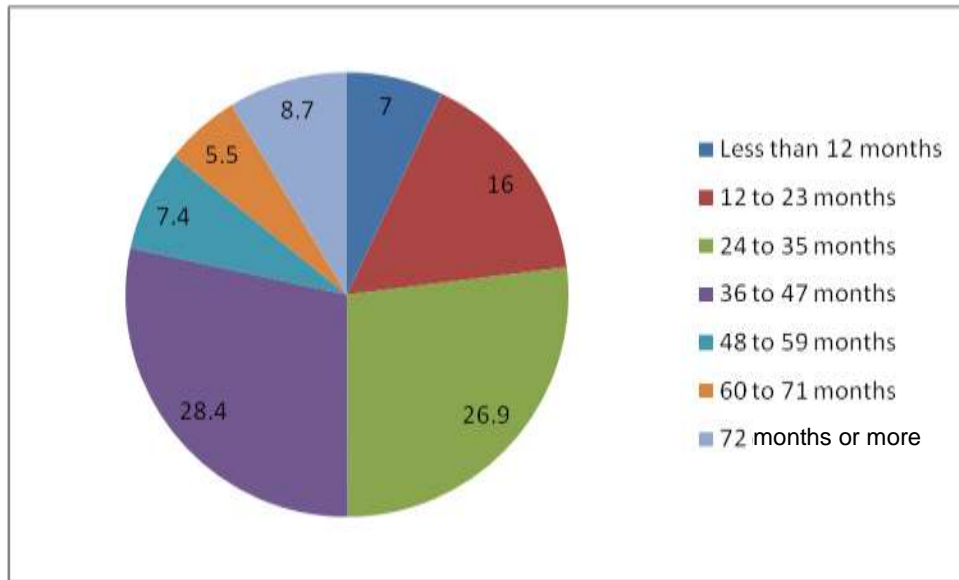
One in five (20.6%) interviewees said that project activities evolved over time to be significantly different from the activities described in the VISTA application. See Table 2-10. We determined both how activities evolved (Table 2-11) and then why (Table 2-12).

Table 2-10.   Activities evolved significantly over time

Activities evolved	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Yes	296	20.6
No	1,139	79.4
Total	1,435	100.0

Among the 20 percent of projects in which activities evolved, most often the scope of the project had expanded. The second most common way was that the focus shifted, although the scope of the project remained the same. Few respondents reported that the scope of the project was reduced.

Table 2-11.   Ways in which project activities evolved

How activities evolved	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Expanded scope of the project	139	54.1
Shift of focus	68	26.4
Reduced scope of project	24	9.4
Not clear/no change	26	10.1
Total	257	100.0

Among projects in which activities evolved, the most common *reason* was because community needs changed. Another common reason was that excellent VISTA performance or skills resulted in changes. Few respondents said that the VISTAs were unqualified or unable to proceed with the original work plan.

Table 2-12.   Reasons for evolution of project activities

Reasons	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Community needs changed	119	49.1
Excellent VISTA performance/skills	44	18.2
Not clear	43	17.8
VISTA not qualified/prepared/able to proceed with original plan	23	9.5
Initial project goals met	13	5.4
Total	243	100.0

Respondents were also asked what challenges they faced in implementing the project's activities. They could select more than one challenge. The most frequently cited challenge was insufficient monetary or in-kind support (42.3%). Other commonly cited challenges included inability to recruit qualified candidates to serve as VISTAs (29.5%),[3] unprepared VISTAs (27.5%), and challenges inherent in accomplishing the mission or goals (19.2%). (The category "challenges inherent in

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[3] It is surprising that 29.5 percent of respondents reported an inability to recruit qualified candidates to serve as VISTAs given the earlier finding that only 8.2 percent reported that filling the VISTA positions was "very difficult." One possible explanation may be differences in how respondents interpreted the two questions. Specifically, respondents may have interpreted the second question as asking more about the qualifications of the VISTAs than about difficulties recruiting the VISTAs. While an organization may have had little or no difficulty filling the VISTA positions, once project activities began, they may have discovered that the VISTAs were unqualified.

accomplishing the mission" included the following answers: challenges were too ambitious, unwillingness of the population to be served, and a rural location.) See Figure 2-8.

Figure 2-8.   Main challenges faced by projects in implementing activities
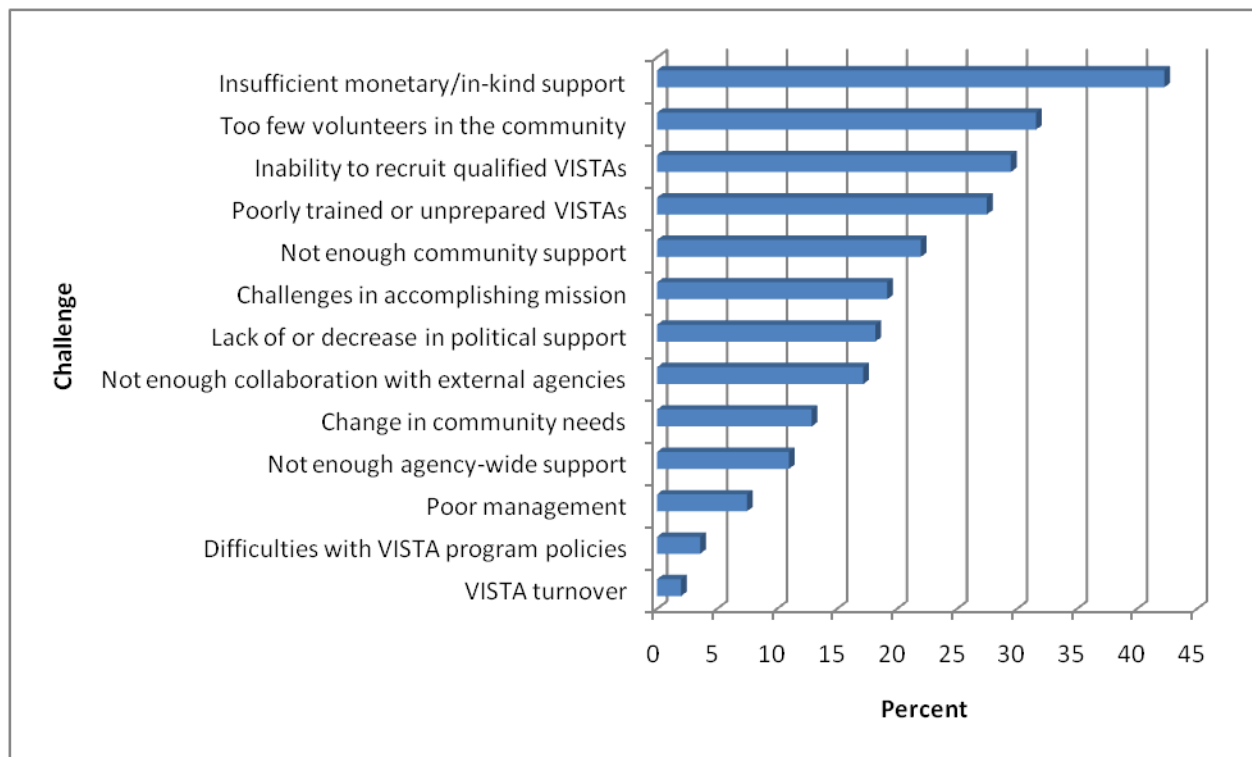
More than 80 percent of respondents said that the CSO was very helpful or helpful in addressing challenges or supporting project activities. About half (48.9%) of respondents said that the CSO was very helpful and one third (33.1%) said that the CSO was helpful. Only 18.1 percent described the CSO as not very helpful. See Table 2-13.

Table 2-13.   Helpfulness of CSO in addressing challenges or supporting activities

Helpfulness	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Very helpful	515	48.9
Helpful	349	33.1
Not very helpful	190	18.1
Total	1,054	100.0

To better understand how the Corporation headquarters or the CSOs were supportive, the survey asked respondents about the specific technical assistance and training they received. A majority of organizations received technical assistance, attended conferences, meetings or trainings, and used

online materials, such as toolkits, manuals, tip sheets, and sample forms. Only 11.4 percent received e-courses or webinars. One possible reason for the relatively low percentage of respondents who reported receiving e-courses or webinars may be that many of the projects closed before such forms of training became more widely available.

Most forms of technical assistance or training were requested relatively infrequently (once every six months or less), although there were some differences by type of support. More than one third (38.2%) of respondents reported requesting and receiving technical assistance once a month. About one fifth (19.5%) reported utilizing online materials once a month, and 42.1 percent said they used them more than once a month.

Survey respondents' ratings of the helpfulness of the different types of technical assistance and training were very positive. For each type of technical assistance or training, more than 90 percent of respondents said the assistance or training was very helpful or somewhat helpful. See Table 2-14.

Table 2-14.   Technical assistance and training provided by VISTA

Type of technical assistance or training	Received? (%)	How often			Helpfulness		
		More than once a month (%)	Once a month (%)	Every 6 months or less (%)	Very helpful (%)	Somewhat helpful (%)	Not at all helpful (%)
Technical assistance from Corporation	74.6	9.6	38.2	52.2	65.4	30.1	4.4
Assistance from the Corporation's national training providers	56.6	0.9	2.0	97.1	44.7	48.5	6.8
Conferences, meetings, or trainings	83.6	11.1	1.8	87.1	45.7	49.0	5.3
Online materials	64.9	42.1	19.5	38.5	66.6	31.0	2.4
e-courses or webinars	11.4	0	4.0	96.0	69.7	30.3	0

Respondents generally indicated that their organizations supported the projects. "Very extensive support" was the most typical response. Nearly two thirds (62.3%) chose this response. Another 14.8 percent rated their organization's support as a "4" on a scale of 1 to 5. No one said they received no support for the project from their organization. See Figure 2-9.

Figure 2-9.   Support from organization
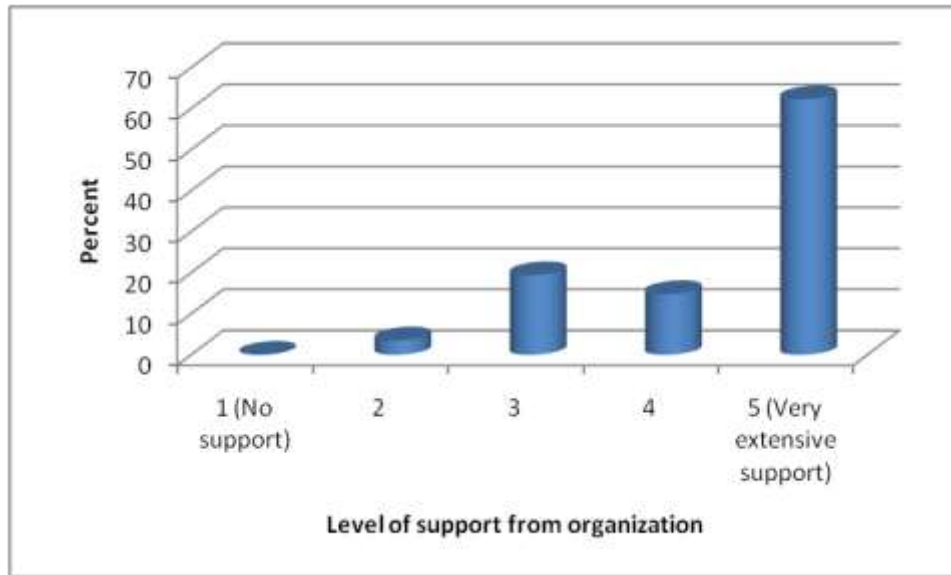
Respondents were asked to rate community support for the project on a scale of 1 to 5, with "1" being almost no support, and "5" being very extensive support. Organizations reported varying levels of support from the community for the project. One third (33.0%) reported that the community gave them "very extensive support" (a "5" on the scale). Another one third rated the community support as "4," and about one quarter (24.0%) rated the community support as "3." While there was variability, the community generally was considered to be supportive. Only 4.2 percent and 5.0 percent rated the community as "1" (almost no support) or "2." See Figure 2-10.

Figure 2-10.   Support from the community for VISTA project
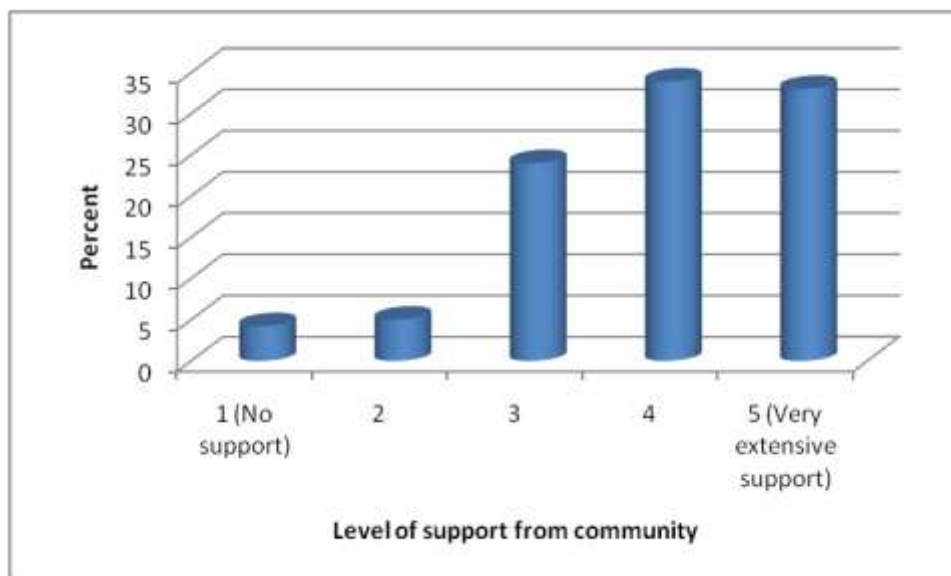
2.3   Success of VISTA Projects

2.3.1 Achievement of Goals

The telephone survey included two measures of VISTA project success: (1) the extent to which projects achieved their goals, and (2) whether at least some aspects of the project continued to exist after the last VISTA left the organization.

Figure 2-11 shows the extent of goal achievement among closed projects for the three most important goals identified by each respondent to the survey.[4] For each goal, respondents were asked whether the goal was completely achieved, partly achieved, or not achieved. All goals were reported as completely or partly achieved by 90 percent or more of the projects. Only 10 percent or less of projects reported that they did not achieve any of the three goals. (Only 8.4% did not achieve Goal 1, 8.3% did not achieve Goal 2, and 10.4% did not achieve Goal 3.)

Figure 2-11.   Extent to which the three most important goals were achieved
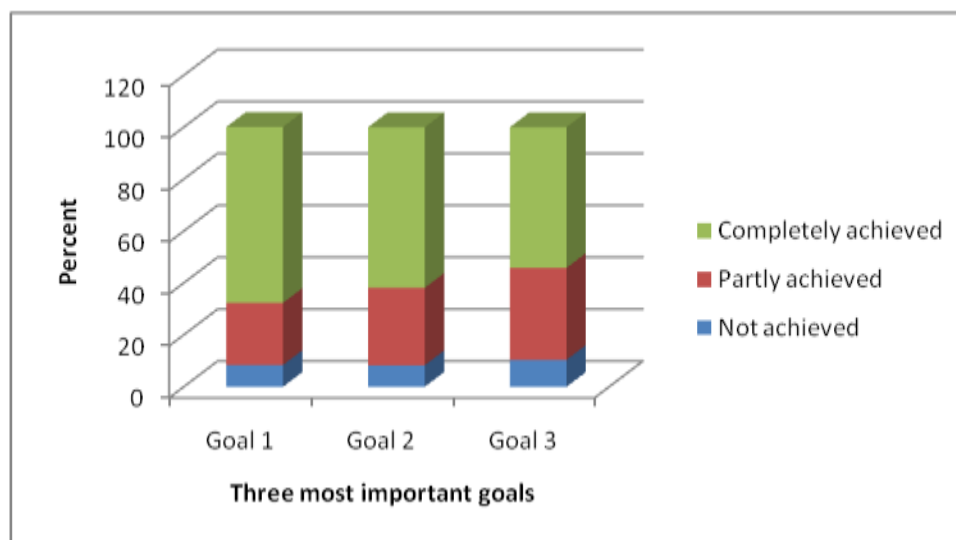
For projects that completely or partly achieved at least one goal, respondents were asked during the telephone interview which factors they believed influenced the project's ability to achieve its goals. Respondents could choose more than one reason. It is important to note that these answers represent respondents' opinions, in retrospect, about influences on project success, given a particular set of choices. The reasons given are not necessarily the underlying causes of goal achievement. (We turn to a more detailed analysis of factors associated with project success later in this report.)

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[4] Most projects had three or fewer goals. When a project had more than three goals, the respondent was asked to choose the three most important ones. However, they were not asked to rank goals according to their importance.

The most influential factor was support from the organization, which 87 percent of "successful" projects said was very influential. More than three quarters said that training of the VISTAs by the organization (77.9%) and individual efforts of the VISTAs (77.5%) had "a lot" of influence. Nearly two thirds (64.4%) reported that good program design was influential. Political support had influence on success in achieving goals according to 42 percent of respondents. See Table 2-15.

Table 2-15.   How much influence did (item) have on completely or partly achieving goals?

Item	A lot (%)	Some (%)	None (%)
Support from your organization	87.0	11.4	1.6
Training of the VISTAs by your organization	77.9	18.3	3.8
Individual efforts of VISTAs	77.5	20.2	2.3
Good project design	64.4	34.3	1.2
Collaboration with other agencies	58.5	35.6	5.9
Involvement of volunteers other than VISTAs	57.0	32.9	10.2
Community support	54.1	43.9	2.0
Monetary or in-kind support	38.7	47.0	14.3
Training of the VISTAs by the Corporation	33.6	52.1	14.2
Political support	21.7	36.1	42.2

Among the 10 percent of projects that did not accomplish goals, respondents were asked about the most important factors that hindered the achievement of each goal. The majority indicated that the most important reason was that the VISTA lacked skills or did not perform as expected. In some cases, respondents reported that the VISTA lacked specific capabilities required for the project (such as writing ability). Other respondents cited not knowing how to interact with others in the workplace, or not having the right attitude. Failing to meet performance expectations included being unreliable, quitting or being fired, and being unable to work independently. Lack of support was also reported as an impediment to goal achievement, including both funding and support from the community. See Figure 2-12.

Figure 2-12. Factors hindering goal achievement
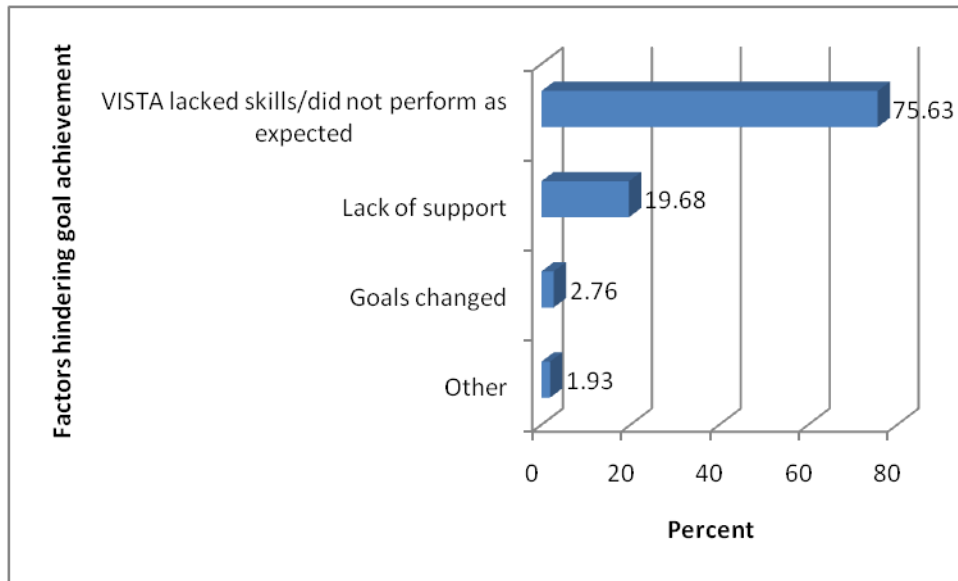
2.3.2 Project Continuation

One measure of project success is whether a project achieves its goals. A second measure is whether a project continues to exist in some form after the last VISTA leaves the organization. Table 2-16 shows that 84.0 percent of VISTA projects continued in some form up to two years after the last VISTA had finished working on the project.

Table 2-16. Project continuation

Project continuation	Organizations (weighted number)	Percent
Continued	1,248	84.0
Did not continue	238	16.0
Total	1,487	100.0

Seventy-eight percent of the respondents reported that at least some aspect of the project continued inside the organization as opposed to being taken on by some other organization. Generally, we do not know whether staff was hired to continue project activities after the last VISTA left, or whether existing staff carried on the project. However, about 12 percent reported that they hired the VISTA or someone else to work for the organization, presumably to continue the project. Only 9.8 percent reported that the program continued, but under the direction of a different organization. See Figure 2-13.

Figure 2-13. Ways in which project activities continued
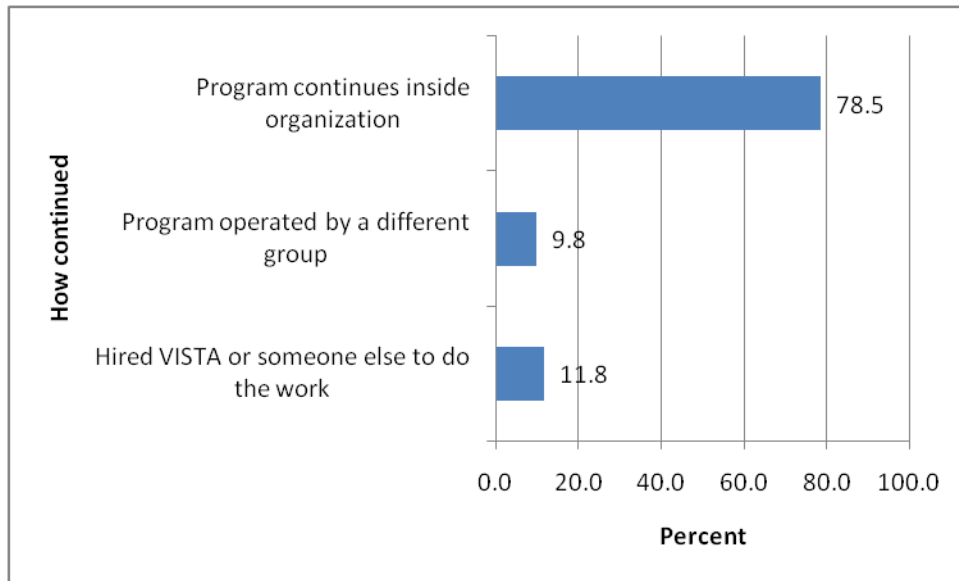
We also examined *why* certain projects did not continue. These reasons are presented in Figure 2-14. Projects could choose more than one reason for not continuing. As can be seen, VISTA projects reported a wide array of reasons for not continuing. However, the most common reasons were a lack of resources and poor management (44.0 and 46.0%, respectively). Poor management included failing to fill out paperwork, changes in staffing, lack of appropriate supervision of VISTAs, and lack of compliance with rules set by the Corporation. Nearly 20 percent of projects ended because they met all of their goals and objectives, and 16.5 percent cited lack of community support as the primary reason they did not continue. It is interesting to note that poor management was more likely to be given as a reason for a project not continuing in interviews conducted with a CSO than with a sponsoring organization. This difference suggests that CSOs and sponsoring organizations may have different perceptions about the difficulties projects face.

Figure 2-14.   Reason project did not continue

Figure 2-14. Reason project did not continue
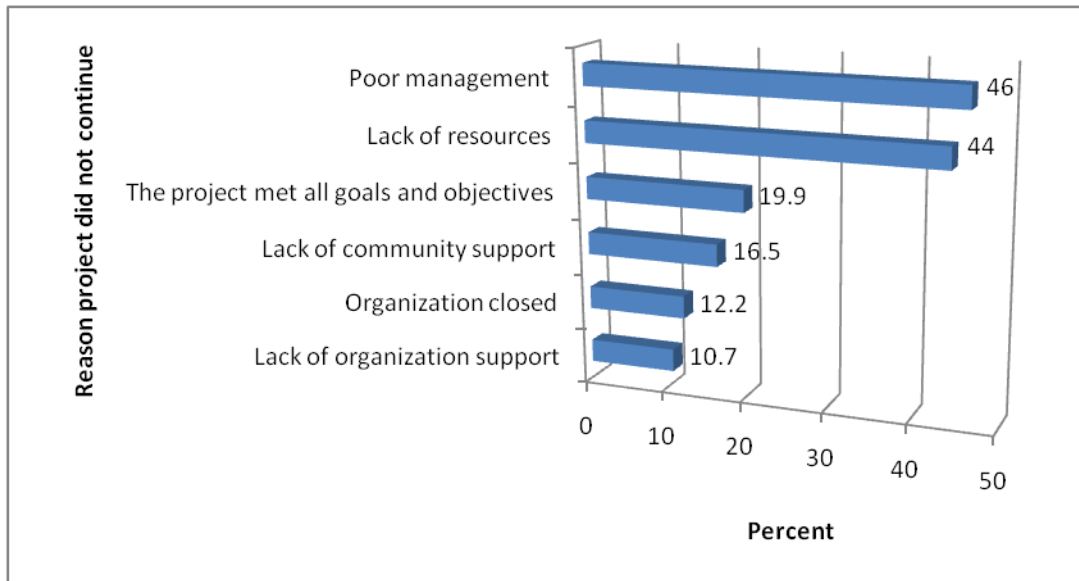
Summary

This chapter reports on the results of a telephone interview conducted with 279 closed VISTA projects. Because of their positions within the sponsoring organization, history with the organization, and participation in activities of the VISTA projects, the staff members interviewed seemed to be the appropriate respondents about VISTA characteristics and project goals, activities, and success.

The results of the survey point to a "profile" of organizations that sponsor VISTA projects. Sponsoring organizations tended to be on average 25 years old, with 10 or fewer employees, and generally had no previous VISTA project.

The survey also paints a picture of VISTA projects themselves. The majority of projects had goals that were closely aligned with the sponsoring organization's mission. However, goals sometimes changed during the course of the project. Such a change of goals was often a response to changing needs, indicating flexibility on the part of the organizations.

Most projects were awarded only one or two VISTA positions. Slightly more than half of organizations reported some difficulty filling the VISTA position(s). Although VISTAs required a

moderate amount of supervision, they were generally viewed as critical or helpful in achieving goals for the vast majority of projects.

In some projects, project activities evolved over time to be significantly different from what was originally planned. In most cases, the reasons for change in activities had to do with expanding the scope of the project or shifting the focus. Few projects changed activities because the scope was reduced.

However, most projects faced some difficulties in implementing their activities. The most common difficulty was insufficient monetary support, although difficulties finding volunteers, deficiencies in the skills of VISTAs, and a lack of community support were not uncommon. The CSO was generally viewed as very helpful or helpful in addressing difficulties. Projects also reported high levels of support from their organization, although the level of support from the community was more variable.

Most projects were successful in achieving their goals. Many projects attributed their success to support from the organization and individual efforts of the VISTAs. Moreover, more than 80 percent of projects continued in some form after the last VISTA left. In some of these cases, the project continued inside the organization, and in some cases the VISTA was hired as a permanent employee. For those projects that did not continue, poor management and lack of resources were the most frequently cited reasons.

The overwhelming success of organizations in achieving their goals and maintaining their projects in some form clearly warranted more detailed investigations of the factors behind such successes, as well as the reasons for lack of success in the much smaller number of projects that were not sustained. In particular, we sought more information about the role played by the VISTAs—continuity, characteristics, and accomplishments, as well as other sources of support (or lack thereof) for the organization's efforts. Therefore, we visited organizations and conducted in-depth interviews about forty individual closed projects to obtain richer and more detailed information about how organizations actually managed their VISTA projects. The findings from the telephone interview, in conjunction with the site visits, were intended to enhance the development of predictive models of goal achievement and project continuation. Findings from the site visits are discussed in the next chapter, and predictive models are developed in Chapter 4.

Findings from Site Visits | 3

The overwhelming success of the organizations in continuing at least some aspects of their projects, which we learned about from the telephone interviews, clearly warranted more detailed investigations of the factors behind such successes, as well as the reasons the much smaller number of projects were not sustained. In particular, we sought more information about the role played by the VISTAs—continuity, characteristics, and accomplishments, as well as other sources of support (or lack thereof) for the organization's efforts. Therefore we visited sponsoring organizations and conducted in-depth interviews to obtain richer and more detailed information about how organizations actually managed their VISTA projects. These site visits were intended to enhance the development of a predictive model.

Site Selection Process

Our first step in selecting projects for the site visits was to identify all of the closed projects that reportedly had not continued after the VISTA members' departure. Thirty-four unique projects were identified. From these, we eliminated from consideration those projects for which the sponsoring organization had no staff remaining that were knowledgeable about the VISTA project. This narrowed the field to 25 projects. To ensure the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of this facet of data collection, we marked all 25 of these projects on a national map, and then located any nearby closed projects where the work had been sustained since the project closed. This process also allowed us to create a schedule whereby site visitors could work from a central location, and conduct multiple interviews on one trip.

Because the site selection was purposeful, the 40 sites visited by the Westat team were not necessarily representative of the overall sample of 279 closed projects. Nevertheless, as intended, the site visits provided a richness of detail that could not be obtained from the survey data alone. See Table 3-1 for a summary of the locations of the sites.

Table 3-1.   Distribution of sites visited, by region

Region	Number of states	Number of projects
Northeast	2	6
South (including territories)	6	15
Midwest	1	2
West	7	17
Total	16	40

Findings

Site visits revealed sponsoring organizations that were deeply committed to addressing poverty within their local communities, VISTA projects that were designed to support the organizations' anti-poverty goals, and VISTA volunteers who worked hard and were dedicated to issues of social justice. In sum, most of the projects appeared to fully embrace the Corporation's vision of how the VISTA program can contribute to local communities.

In the following pages, we discuss the characteristics that were shared by many of the sponsoring organizations, and offer examples of how VISTA projects facilitated their missions. We also describe the VISTA volunteers who worked in these forty organizations, pointing out various positive characteristics shared by many of the VISTAs, as well as several unique traits that proved critical to project success. We also discuss some challenges that were presented by VISTAs in more than one site, suggesting that these issues may be common enough that they can be addressed by the Corporation in some manner.

3.1   Relationship Between Activities of the Sponsor and Goals of the VISTA Project

There are four core principles on which the AmeriCorps*VISTA program operates:

- **"Anti-Poverty Focus.** VISTA supports community efforts to overcome poverty. Any nonprofit organization, educational institution, or tribal or public agency with a project explicitly designed to alleviate poverty may sponsor a VISTA.

- **"Community Empowerment.** VISTA values the inherent strengths and resources of the community. VISTA expects project sponsors to involve residents of the community in planning, developing, and implementing the VISTA project. This approach allows low-income individuals the freedom to speak for themselves in determining the projects that suit their specific needs.

- **"Capacity Building.** VISTA expands the ability of sponsor organizations to fight poverty. Rather than providing services to low-income individuals and communities, VISTAs strengthen and support organizations by building infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, coordinating training for participants, and much more.

- **"Sustainable Solutions.** VISTAs serve as a short-term resource to help sponsoring organizations achieve lasting solutions to poverty."[5]

From our telephone interviews and background reviews of each organization, we learned that all forty of these organizations are dedicated to addressing poverty's antecedents (e.g., disability, lack of educational resources) and/or its effects (e.g., limited access to housing, health care) within their local communities. As discussed in Chapter 2, analysis of the survey data suggests an important connection between the work performed by these organizations and the goals and objectives of the VISTA projects: Virtually all survey respondents classified their goals as being "very central" to the organization's mission [Chapter 2, Figure 2-3]. The following are mission statements for just a few of the organizations that participated in this study:

- *"Advancing nurse-led health care through policy, consultation, programs, and applied research to reduce health disparities and meet people's primary care and wellness needs."*

- *"To provide early care and education through resources and referrals to parents and childcare providers. We locate childcare and guide parents to get alternative payment resources."*

- *"To assist and prepare homeless or near-homeless adults and families for self-sufficiency and independent living."*

- *"To improve lives of people by creating quality affordable housing, providing essential support services, and serving as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization."*

- *"To restore the lives of people displaced by war and conflict."*

- *"To serve as a voice for youth and improve the quality of life of area children. To engage youth as leaders and resources to improve the health and vitality of families, schools, neighborhoods, and the economy."*

- *"To prevent disease, disability and premature death; to promote healthy lifestyles; and to protect the health and quality of the environment."*

- *"To achieve economic development through historic preservation, heritage tourism, outdoor recreation, community stewardship, education, youth advancement, and the arts."*

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[5] Core Principles obtained from "*VISTA: Overcoming Poverty, Building Capacity*," report to the Corporation for National and Community Service, October, 2008. http://www.americorps.gov/pdf/08_1210_ac_vista_report.pdf - accessed 1.11.10.

The site visits provided additional insights into how the VISTA projects aimed to expand the capacity of the sponsors so that they could establish long-term solutions to poverty in their local communities. For example, among the 40 projects there was a delimited set of target populations: Some projects focused specifically on groups of individuals already struggling with the challenges of poverty, such as homeless individuals and families or the local community itself, which was defined as "low-income." Other projects specifically targeted persons who were at a high risk of poverty because of characteristics of the population—individuals with disabilities and their families; youth; senior citizens; immigrants; and refugees.

Moreover, projects sought to address issues that generally are regarded as contributors to the prevention of poverty, including: literacy and education (e.g., reading, English-language skills); employment and job training; broad skills training (leadership, conflict resolution); public health issues (e.g., child abuse awareness, access to health care); and access to safe, decent, and affordable housing. Sponsoring organizations also developed VISTA projects that both advocated and created opportunities for vulnerable populations, including developing self-help resource lists for members of the target population, generating volunteer opportunities for residents of low-income communities, and enlisting the local population in a variety of community revitalization efforts.

As shown in Table 3-2, some issues were critical for several different populations: organizations addressed housing for individuals with disabilities, people who were homeless, seniors, refugees, and migrant workers; literacy was addressed with youth, their parents, and refugees; and employment/job training were important issues for low-income communities, individuals with disabilities, migrant workers, and refugees, among others.

Table 3-2. Populations and issues targeted by VISTA projects

Population	Issues								
	Housing	Community revitalization	Advocacy	Self-help resources	Literacy/education	Employment	Skills training	Volunteer opportunities	Health
Homeless individuals/families	X		X	X	X				
Low-income community	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Individuals with disabilities	X		X	X		X	X		
Youth					X	X	X		X
Seniors	X			X				X	
General public								X	X
Migrant workers	X		X	X	X	X	X		
Refugees	X		X	X	X	X	X		

3.2 Support from Community Partners

Agencies that take on such enormous social challenges very often work with other entities in the community that share similar social commitments. The survey data indicate that the majority of organizations (approximately 66 percent) felt they had support from their local communities in carrying out the VISTA projects. The site visits reinforced this finding; sponsoring organizations demonstrated the importance of a community-wide approach by listing their partnerships with numerous other agencies and organizations in their local communities. Partnering agencies ran the gamut, and included *non-profit organizations*, such as Boys & Girls Clubs, the United Way, Goodwill Industries, Salvation Army, and Senior Centers; *faith-based organizations* and *local communities of worship; universities and colleges; government agencies*, such as State and Federal Departments of Education, Labor, Welfare, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development (HUD); and *local business interests*, including Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, local businesses (e.g., restaurants, grocery stores), *international businesses with a local presence* (e.g., Costco, Wal-mart, PepsiCo, BP America, AT&T, Food Lion), and *local hospitals and health care providers*. Importantly, some of the organizations had partnerships numbering in the hundreds—testimony either to the severity of the issue being addressed or, just as likely, the depth and breadth of the sponsoring organization's linkage to the local community.

In addition to presenting a united front against the forces of poverty, these partnerships generate the in-kind resources that are critical for sustaining the work of the organization. For the sponsoring organizations in the study sample, in-kind donations included space for holding planning meetings, VISTA programs, and workspace for the VISTAs; volunteers to provide direct services (e.g., reading tutors), manage fundraising activities, and the like; cash or item donations; and individuals who could serve in advisory and/or advocacy capacities for the VISTA project.

3.3   Resource Limitations

While all organizations had in common both a commitment to social justice and extended networks of community support, they also shared a specific challenge: Namely, all had significant resource limitations. Survey responses suggested just how pervasive this challenge is—when respondents were asked about the main challenges they faced in implementing project activities, the most frequently cited challenge was insufficient monetary or in-kind support (see Chapter 2, Figure 2-8). Interviewees during site visits were equally candid in this regard. For example, they often noted the financial challenges faced by their organizations. This is somewhat ironic given that these are the entities trying to address issues related to poverty. Said one interviewee, whose organization provides shelter services for homeless persons, "We were on a shoe-string budget. We wrote grants, begged and borrowed, we even collected cans at the flea markets."

In addition, and importantly for this study, many of these agencies faced major shortfalls in human capital. On average, each organization we visited had 36 employees, with a range from 1 employee to 125.[6] Yet fifteen of the organizations had 20 or fewer employees, which is a relatively limited number of available hands when one considers the extensive social issues these organizations are trying to address. During the site visit, as we learned about the heavy reliance these organizations placed on volunteer support to meet their goals.

While volunteer labor can be quite successful, this strategy has the intrinsic burden of constant recruiting and training of volunteers; the organization must have sufficient (and available) staff to generate additional volunteers. In addition, many volunteers come with strings attached: One interviewee noted that the agency had been using Jesuit "volunteers" to help meet the labor needs of

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[6] The data for one sponsoring county have not been included in this calculation because they constitute an outlier (3,000 employees reported).

the organization, but that ended when the agency could no longer afford to make financial contributions to the church.

It is this combination of financial and staffing limitations that often drives organizations to apply for VISTA projects and the resources that VISTA volunteers bring to the organization.

3.4   VISTA Volunteer Activities

Clearly, VISTAs are an important addition to organizations that are often short-handed. Unlike AmeriCorps members, who may provide direct services to the target population (e.g., tutoring, employment training), VISTAs must be used by sponsors to enhance the organization's operations. Furthermore, in contrast to typical volunteers, VISTAs are full time, and guarantee their services for at least a year, making it possible to plan their activities over the long term.

The following summary from a site visit report suggests the value these volunteers add to the sponsoring organization:

> *"The VISTA members provided manpower. They did things such as outreach and resources development that the organization cannot get outside funding to support. Staff had found it very difficult to [conduct the outreach activities that the VISTA members took over], and then turn around and teach life skills. With VISTA members to deal with these activities, staff were freed up to focus on … life skills training and advocacy."*

Common infrastructure development activities for which VISTAs were recruited included:

- **Grant Writing and Fundraising.** Sponsoring organizations need adequate financial resources to meet their anti-poverty missions;

- **Recruiting and Training Volunteers.** Human capital is one of the driving forces behind social services, yet many organizations were limited in this critical resource. Where possible, VISTAs were "leverage volunteers," using their time to recruit volunteers from the local community to ensure adequate labor-power for the sponsoring organization to meet community members' needs;

- **Conducting Outreach to Potential Community Partners.** In-kind resources from partners range from monetary donations to the provision of workspace for the VISTAs. Organizations rely upon these community partnerships to carry out their missions; VISTAs often became the "face" of the sponsor in meetings with these partners.

- **Providing Vision and Labor to Start Up New Service Programs.** In numerous instances, sponsors expressed a desire to start a new community-based program (e.g., life skills training for refugee women), but lacked the staff to put the program elements in place. VISTAs were often brought in to create such programs, including locating space, developing program curricula, conducting outreach/advertising to the target population, and recruiting and training volunteers to run the program.

- **Assessing the Effectiveness of New or Existing Programs.** VISTAs were instrumental in developing and/or modifying data collection strategies or systems so that sponsor organizations could assess the effectiveness of their anti-poverty programs. These assessments help organizations to strengthen those programs or elements that are effective, modify or eliminate those that are not, and demonstrate their community impacts to potential funding agencies.

- **Developing Resource Guides for Target Population, Staff, and/or Community.** In several instances, sponsoring organizations reported that resources were available to meet the needs of the target population, but the latter did not always know how to access these resources. VISTAs often created resource guides to help community members locate the services they need. These guides often function as a form of outreach—they can extend the reach of the organization, and thus move one step closer to achieving their stated missions.

The following descriptions provide illustrative examples of specific ways in which VISTA projects support the missions of their sponsoring organizations.

- **Youth Literacy Project**

    A county-based Department of Human Assistance applied for VISTAs to help launch "City Reads," a Project of National Significance that sought to recruit 25 reading volunteers for every school in the county. Because City Reads needed so many volunteers to support the literacy project, the organization needed additional help for the recruitment efforts. They applied for a VISTA project, through which VISTA volunteers would become the leverage for volunteer recruitment. In addition to their community outreach efforts, VISTAs refined brochures for the program, designed outreach materials, and wrote a First Book grant that enabled the project to obtain 9,000 books. VISTAs were seen as the key to launching and expanding the project— "They [took] our work so much farther in one year [than we could have on our own]."

- **Refugee Support Services**

    A faith-based organization that historically provided a range of services to vulnerable families and children began to concentrate on serving the local refugee population. Their aim was to make refugees independent and self-sufficient by providing them with a place to live, a job, English language skills, and child care. In the area of the country where the organization is located, however, support for refugees was "inadequate." With the service need clearly defined, but their own staff numbers limited, the organization applied for a VISTA project. The availability of VISTAs allowed the staff

to run the organization—specifically, provide the direct services to refugees—while the VISTAs conducted outreach to both the faith-based and secular communities to obtain volunteers and other in-kind supports. By speaking to churches and defining co-sponsors for the refugee resettlement effort, VISTAs recruited more than 200 volunteers to assist with providing the services needed by the refugee community.

■   **Community Revitalization Through the Arts**

A young nonprofit organization was dedicated to enriching communities by promoting the expression of arts, education, and opportunities for economic development. By promoting artistic endeavors at its Center, located in an economically distressed part of town, staff hoped to obtain positive media coverage of their events so that companies might see the area as providing a favorable business environment. The organization applied for VISTA volunteers to support these goals. The project was envisioned as providing additional outreach to the community (primarily through local educational institutions) and increasing awareness of the organization and its mission. The VISTAs nearly doubled the size of the staff, and were critical to the success of the opening activities of the Center, bringing in nearly 400 community volunteers to support the organization's efforts.

3.5   VISTA Volunteer Characteristics

3.5.1 Strengths

During the site visits, we discovered that VISTAs on these projects were a very diverse group of volunteers. They were single mothers in their mid- to late 30s, retirees, and members of the target population in the community. Some of the volunteers had graduate degrees, others had 4-year college degrees, but many had no college education at all. They had varying levels of work experience, from retired school teachers, lawyers, and paraprofessionals, to individuals who had no workplace experience at all.

An equally important finding from the visits was that, from the perspective of the sponsoring organizations, these demographic characteristics were *not* predictive of whether or not the VISTA "worked out well" for the organization. In general, strong VISTAs were those who worked hard, got along well with others, had good communication skills, and were creative. The better the basic work skills, the less time the assigned supervisor had to spend managing these volunteers. Additionally,

and noted by interviewees, an important characteristic was that the VISTAs shared a commitment to the social justice issue on which the organization focused, as in the following examples:

- ■ (Creating opportunities for at-risk youth): "All of the VISTAs shared a passion for helping kids, although from different perspectives."

- ■ (Establishing local child abuse prevention councils): "A willingness to serve (and) an interest in children and family issues…"

- ■ (Teaching student leadership and conflict resolution skills): "Some [of the VISTAs] had backgrounds in education or counseling, but not all of them. They all liked working with youth and had strong communication skills."

- ■ (Promoting independent living for people with disabilities): "All [VISTAs] had a passion for the disability community. One had a disability, and all of them had family members with disabilities. As VISTA members, they outreached to people in their own generation. For example, the older adults looked to the organizations they belonged to, and the college student took responsibility for the 5K fundraiser."

- ■ (Developing a reading program): "The VISTA was in her 50s and had experience working with kids and literacy. She had worked with mentally challenged individuals before she became the VISTA…She was very good working with kids of all ages."

The strong work ethic, combined with this "goodness of fit," meant that VISTA volunteers could truly be valuable to the sponsoring organizations: Staff assigned to the VISTA project did not have to spend time supervising, which could otherwise have been spent doing their own work, and the VISTAs brought needed skills, vision, and enthusiasm to the goals and objectives of the organization.

3.5.2 Challenges

VISTAs who reportedly did not work out as well for organizations presented almost the reverse profile: For example, several were described as lacking basic social skills. Said one respondent, "They hadn't learned how to work with others. Most of them were intent on putting forth their own ideas about what should be done, whereas the most important task was to listen and elicit the ideas of others." Indeed, when asked about the main challenges they faced in implementing project activities, 27.5 percent of the telephone interview respondents indicated that "poorly trained or unprepared VISTAs" was a major challenge faced by their organizations (see Chapter 2, Figure 2-8). While some sponsors were able to overcome this particular challenge, it is indeed a daunting issue for an agency

that is stretched thin and is hoping that the VISTAs will expand staff capabilities, not place further demands on them.

Additionally, and to the concern of several respondents, some VISTAs had serious behavioral health problems, including anorexia, severe depression, and substance abuse disorders. In cases where the VISTA supervisor tried to manage the troublesome behavior, the volunteer's issues took significant amounts of the supervisor's time and energy, leaving little in reserve for the other VISTAs or the project itself. In other cases, however, the VISTAs left voluntarily or were dismissed from the organization. The departure absolved the sponsor of having to spend inordinate amounts of time dealing with the disruptive behaviors, but also left the organization down one volunteer for a period of time.

In addition, some VISTAs had little experience with or interest in the target population of the VISTA project. In one project, the interviewee indicated that the VISTA "was more concerned with how she could take advantage of the individual benefits of being a VISTA rather than on how she could contribute to the community." In another project, the respondent said the VISTAs "used the position and the community connections they were able to make to look for higher-paying jobs."

During the site visit interviews, perhaps the most commonly cited concern about the VISTAs who did not work out as well for the organizations was the volunteers' lack of basic workplace skills, including both technical savvy and what several respondents called "soft skills." The following are a few examples of where the voids were apparent:

- "Most of the VISTAs needed a better sense of the work ethic, that is, being on time, putting 100 percent into their efforts, and avoiding internal backbiting."

- "The VISTAs had trouble using the phones. The interviewee expressed surprise and disappointment that the VISTAs who graduated from the [high-ranking] University had extremely poor writing skills. …She also mentioned a lack of soft skills as a very serious problem. For example, one VISTA did not know that she was supposed to call in if she was not coming to work."

- "Some exaggerated the skills they had during the interviews so it was hit or miss. … We had some who avoided work, did not focus or work hard. …The good ones were curious, the weaker ones were ambivalent. Some were actually lazy, slackers, unprepared, and needed so much supervision. Some had poor job skills…they were lost souls, and had no direction or ambition. …Many of the recent college grads were not ready to be in a workplace and needed more help."

In most of these cases, supervisors were able to modify the tasks given to the volunteers so that they could make some contribution to the organization. Indeed, only two of the site visit organizations said that their overall experience with their VISTAs was so bad that they would never again apply for a VISTA project. On the whole, however, interviewees reported that their experiences with VISTA were positive and that the volunteers were helpful to their organizations' goals and missions.

Despite the very limited number of discontented sponsors, we believe these findings provide some insights into steps the Corporation can take to reduce the discontent even further. Specifically, including a session on "workplace fundamentals" in the VISTA training may help to ensure that volunteers have a common foundation about workplace etiquette. Additionally, there may be steps the Corporation can put into place to help VISTAs with behavioral health problems get the support they need. Finally, we believe the findings suggest ways in which organizations may more fully participate in the recruitment of VISTA volunteers to ensure a better fit between the VISTA's skill set and the organization's needs. These issues will be reviewed in more detail in Chapter 6.

3.6   Assessment of Project Success

There are two elements that we believe make up what can be called "VISTA project success": First, the project's ability to achieve its stated goals; and, secondly, the sponsoring organization being able to sustain some aspect of the project—a database, a curriculum, a funding stream—after the last VISTA has left the organization. All aspects of the study design sought to obtain information on the factors that contribute to each element of success. The telephone interview respondents (see previous chapter) indicated several factors that they perceived to be critical to *goal achievement*. The four most frequently cited factors (see Chapter 2, Table 2-15) were:

- Support for the VISTA project from within the sponsoring organization;

- Training of the VISTAs by the sponsoring organization;

- Individual efforts of the VISTA volunteers; and

- Good project design.

What were the most significant *barriers to goal achievement*? Telephone respondents commonly indicated the VISTA members themselves: members who lacked either the needed skills for the project or the basic interpersonal skills critical to workplace success.

In terms of sustainability, the survey data indicate that more than four out of five sampled projects continued in some form two years after the last VISTA left the organization (see Chapter 2, Table 2-16). For the 16 percent of projects that were not sustained, however, the data suggest "lack of resources" to be the most significant factor contributing to this negative outcome. The second most-frequently-mentioned factor, however, is that the "project met all of its goals and objectives." In short, these projects apparently *were* successful in terms of goal achievement, but, for reasons not captured on the survey, were unable to sustain the projects over time. How do we explain this?

We provide illustrative examples of the ways in which the onsite interviews enriched our understanding of the VISTA projects. We describe the specific ways in which VISTAs were said to have made significant contributions to a project's success, providing or generating additional resources, and bringing creativity and energy to sponsoring organizations. We also give examples of how the design of a project is critical for *both* goal attainment *and* continuation. Specifically, the goals that are achieved are generally those that are clearly articulated by the sponsor, central to the organization's mission, and appropriate to the skills and experience of the VISTAs. Important for continuation, however, is that these goals also *must reflect a future vision if the project is to be sustained*. We provide two examples of projects whose goals were clearly written, central to the organization, and appropriate to the VISTAs where the project was sustained; one example where goals were met although the project was not sustained; and two examples where goals were not achieved and the project was not sustained.

3.6.1 Project Goals Met, Project Sustained

We identified several projects that were very successful and that had a large impact on both the sponsoring organizations and their communities. In each instance, the project met all of its goals (which, notably, were in concert with the Corporation's aims for VISTA) and the project continued to serve the organization even after the last VISTA left.

Youth Literacy Project. In one organization, the VISTA project was proposed as a means to improve the sponsoring organization's ability to provide reading tutorial services to youth in schools throughout the state. VISTA volunteers had at least three clearly defined goals for this project:

- Develop a work plan to implement the America Reads tutorial program. This included deciding how best to recruit, train, and coordinate volunteers in each community;

- Create a communication system to report on the project to the community, thereby increasing the community's awareness of the efforts; and

- Collaborate with school administrators to develop an evaluation instrument to determine reading improvements among youth participating in the program.

All three goals were described by the interviewee as "completely achieved." For the first goal, the respondent noted that the VISTAs completed quarterly reports reflecting the number of volunteers who were committing one hour per week to each community school, as well as how many children were being served by the reading program. The second goal focused on linking the community with the organization's efforts. This was accomplished by VISTAs sending quarterly newsletters to the community, including County Commissioners, the PTA, and faith-based organizations, as appropriate to each locale. Finally (third goal), the VISTAs worked closely with the schools to develop an evaluation system that would allow them to gauge each child's progress, but without compromising the identity of the youth.

The interviewee also stated that the project has continued in locations throughout the state. In many communities, the schools hired the VISTAs; others were able to locate funding to hire a coordinator for the program. In those areas without additional financial resources, volunteers were trained to coordinate the program.

The facets of the project identified by the respondent as particularly important in contributing to their success included having numerous VISTAs with degrees and backgrounds in education. She also said that they worked closely with their Corporate State Office (CSO) to develop a training that was not "generic," but was specific to their project's needs.

Rural Health Project. In this project, the sponsoring organization was a rural health district that applied for a VISTA project to support their mission of promoting healthy lifestyles in their area of the state. VISTAs had two goals:

- Conduct community outreach to increase the awareness of teen pregnancy and, in concert, the teen pregnancy prevention program that was being run by the sponsor; and

- Support the agency's efforts to lower the smoking rate in the district.

Both goals were described by the respondent as having been "completely achieved." Particularly telling in this regard was the VISTAs' efforts to reduce tobacco use. They conducted a public education campaign that focused on tobacco companies' tactics to encourage smoking. In addition, they worked with youth to change public opinion and policy. In one campaign, the youth—under

the guidance of the VISTAs—staged sit-ins in the smoking areas of restaurants. They filled up the seats in these sections so that the smokers were left to sit in the nonsmoking areas; and they reportedly left big tips for the waitresses after they finished their meals. Ultimately, as a result of their efforts, the tobacco laws were changed for this state.

Contributors to the success of this project as identified by the interviewee included the VISTAs themselves. Although the respondent indicated that some members needed better interpersonal skills, all of them brought a high level of energy and enthusiasm to the endeavor. In addition, and closely related to the strengths of these volunteers, the interviewee said the organization put a lot of effort into screening for the best possible candidates. Some of the interview questions asked of the applicant included "What experiences have you had that make you suited for this position?" and "What are you willing to give back to the community?" Applicants were also given examples of potential problems they might encounter on the job, and were asked how they would handle the situations. Importantly, she noted that her organization could choose its VISTAs because they had such a large number of candidates for the positions—i.e., bad applicants were eliminated from the pool of potential volunteers.

Summary of Goals Met, Project Sustained. In both of these examples, goal achievement was attributed by the interviewees to individual efforts of experienced VISTAs and to organization-specific training of these volunteers. Both of these factors were identified in the survey data analysis as important to the organizations meeting their goals. Additionally, in both cases, the projects were sustained because the goals were clearly oriented toward ongoing work. In the first example, the communication channels with community partners that were established by the VISTAs will carry on well beyond the life of the project. Their contribution to the development of evaluation tools also has longevity. In the second example, VISTA members contributed to an information campaign and, ultimately, state-level policy change, both of which will carry on into the future. Thus, in each of these examples, the success of the project was attributed by interviewees to well-trained, hard-working VISTAs; careful screening and/or organization-specific training; and, importantly, a good project design that ensured the project would continue to serve the community in the future.

3.6.2 Project Goals Met, But Project Not Sustained

As noted above, and described in the previous chapter, for some of the (very few) projects that were not sustained, survey respondents indicated this was because "the project met all its goals and

objectives." The site visitors came upon one project that could be so classified. The findings from this visit provide important insights into what, exactly, that survey response might have meant.

Housing for Farm Workers. The sponsor of this project was a nonprofit organization whose mission was to improve the lives of migrant farm workers and their families. Services provided by the organization and its employees included job training oriented toward year-round employment, literacy and early childhood education, as well as locating temporary or permanent housing for these individuals. The organization applied for a VISTA project to address migrant workers' need for safe and decent housing, and wrote two specific goals for the project:

- VISTA members were to write a successful grant to obtain the monies to build the houses; and

- Six houses would be constructed.

The interviewee said that both of these goals were "completely achieved." The VISTAs wrote a grant that brought in money for housing construction. In addition, the six housing units were built with the support of student volunteers from the local college (the *alma mater* of the VISTAs). In short, the VISTAs were able to make important contributions to a resource-limited organization by bringing in both money and volunteer labor. In this respect, the project goals were fully aligned with the intent of the VISTA program, and the goals were completely achieved. Indeed, the interviewee attributed the success of the project to the skills and efforts of the VISTA members.

In reviewing how the goals are worded, though, it becomes clear that once the construction was completed, the project itself was completed. That is, the grant was a success and the houses were built for a local grower to use, but there was no product from this project that was generative in nature. We hypothesize that those survey respondents who offered "goal completion" as an explanation for why their projects did not continue may have had goals that were similarly "closed-ended."

3.6.3 Project Goals Not Met, Project Not Sustained

Unprepared VISTAs. The survey asked respondents whose projects were less than successful what factors they believed contributed to their lack of success. Two findings from the previous chapter are important here: First is that there were very few projects that were completely unable to meet their goals and thus sustain their projects; and secondly, that in those cases, respondents

overwhelmingly called out the lack of skills, experience, or effort on the part of their VISTA members.

The site visits provided important details to round out our understanding of the survey data findings. In two instances where we visited sponsoring organizations whose projects had been unsuccessful, interviewees identified challenges with the VISTAs as the primary cause. Specific difficulties included:

- Poor work habits – Members were "resistant to work out of an office," displayed an "unwillingness to work set hours," and often failed to call in if they were ill and not going to make it into work that day;

- Limited technical skills – One interviewee said of her organization's VISTAs, "They did not have, or at least showed no evidence of, the web development skills they claimed to have." She also said that despite having graduated from a very good university, "[the members] had extremely poor writing skills;"

- Lack of "soft skills" – Interviewees noted that members lacked some fundamental skills critical to workplace success, including difficulties getting along with others, a tendency to engage in "backbiting" of coworkers, and the like.

In both of these instances, the interviewees reported that the assigned supervisor had to spend far more time managing the VISTA members. In community organizations in which staff members are "already overloaded," the VISTAs were not value-added, but actually consumed extant staff members' already overburdened time and efforts. As one interviewee concluded, "There was simply not enough capacity for supervision and training of the VISTAs."

These challenges merit attention, for a few of the VISTAs are creating a burden on human service organizations that are already thin in terms of staffing. It is an issue that we believe can be addressed, at least in part, through training; this will be discussed in greater detail in the "Discussion" chapter. In the next chapter, we revisit the data from the telephone interview in an attempt to more formally test some of these hypotheses by developing predictive models of goal achievement and project sustainability.

Predicting VISTA Project Success 4

This chapter presents the findings from multivariate models, first, to predict the likelihood that projects will be able to achieve the goals they set for themselves and, second, to predict whether projects will continue after the VISTAs complete their service. We sought to identify characteristics of organizations and projects that are important for goal achievement and project continuation. Potential predictors were identified through findings from the telephone survey of closed projects presented in Chapter 2 as well as from the site visits discussed in Chapter 3. We applied some components of the models to ongoing projects to predict the likelihood that they would be sustained.

4.1 Goal Achievement

We examined the factors that predicted achievement of project goals among closed projects. Because projects often had more than one goal, a measure of project goal achievement was constructed averaging three Likert scales indicating the extent to which a project achieved each of up to three goals (0 = "did not achieve"; 1 = "partly achieved"; 2 = "completely achieved").

Linear regression analysis was used to predict goal achievement because the goal achievement measure was continuous. The model can be written:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \cdots + \beta_k x_k + \varepsilon$$

where y_i is average level of goal achievement for project i; β_0 is the intercept, and β_1 through β_k are the coefficients for the independent variables X_1 through X_k, which represent characteristics of organizations and projects. The coefficients give the change in average goal achievement corresponding to a one-unit change in the predictor variable. Coefficients that are statistically significant indicate that the variable predicts goal achievement.

Four different linear regression models were built and tested based upon the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 1. Each model adds "blocks" or groups of variables hypothesized to be

important for goal achievement, one block at a time. Variables were operationalized based on the conceptual framework and by inspecting the distribution of the various items. The first block of variables captures **resources** available to the sponsoring organization that may foster project success. A variable for the *organization's age* was coded "1" if the organization existed for at least 10 years; and "0" otherwise. Second, a *size* variable was coded "1" if an organization had at least five employees; and "0" otherwise. We also included a Likert scale indicating whether the project had any *experience with project activities*. *Continuity of staff* is a measure coded "1" if the interviewee was present when the VISTA project was planned, implemented, and ended; "0" otherwise. Finally, *prior VISTA* is coded "1" if the organization had a previous VISTA project.

The second block captures the appropriateness and flexibility of **project goals**. *Centrality of goals* is the mean response to three Likert response scales gauging the centrality to the organization's mission of up to three goals (1 = "not central"; 2 = "somewhat central" and 3 = "very central")[7] *Change in goals* is an indicator of whether a project's original goals changed according to project profiles and the telephone interview.

Variables tapping the **effectiveness of VISTA members** are included in the third block. *VISTA positions* was an indicator of whether a project had two or more VISTA positions compared to only one VISTA position. *Difficulty recruiting VISTAs* was coded "1" for "very difficult" and "0" otherwise. *Poorly trained or unqualified VISTAs* is an indicator of whether poorly trained or unqualified VISTAs was a challenge faced by the project in implementing its activities. *Amount of supervision needed* is a Likert response scale indicating how much supervision the VISTA(s) required (1 = "no supervision"; 5 = "Very extensive supervision"). *Helpfulness of VISTAs* was the mean of three Likert scales indicating how helpful the VISTAs were in achieving up to three goals (1 = "not helpful"; 2 = "somewhat helpful"; 3 = "helpful"; and 4 = "critical").

The fourth block of variables contains information on the **implementation of project activities**, including support for the activities. *Full-term project* is an indicator of whether a project lasted at least 36 months. *Activities evolved* is an indicator of whether any of the project activities changed over time to be significantly different from the activities initially planned as part of the VISTA application.

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[7] For projects with only one goal, centrality of goals is the response to a single Likert scale. For projects with two goals, centrality of goals is the average of two Likert scales.

Challenges overcome is an indicator of whether the project was able to overcome challenges faced in implementing project activities.[8]

Three variables tapped support for project activities. *Organization support* is the response to a Likert scale rating the support for the project from the sponsoring organization (1 = "no support"; 5 = "very extensive support"). *Community support* was also measured on a Likert scale, rating support for the project from the community (1 = "no support"; 5 = "very extensive support"). Finally, *helpfulness of Corporation* was coded "1" for "very helpful" or "helpful" and 0 for "not very helpful." See Table 4-1 for a description of all variables used in the regressions.

Not all of the 279 sampled projects were included in the regression analysis. Specifically, eight projects had to be excluded from the analysis because respondents "did not know" whether the project had continued.[9] The analyses presented here are therefore based on the 271 projects for which we had valid data on project continuation status.

While rates of missing data on predictor variables were not high for any one variable, the exclusion of projects with missing data on at least one predictor variable would have resulted in unacceptable sample loss. In order to retain cases with missing data on predictor variables, we imputed missing values.[10]

4.1.1 Unadjusted Comparisons

Before presenting results from models that include multiple predictors, this chapter first presents results from a series of bivariate models that include each predictor separately. These analyses are intended to show whether and how each factor is associated or correlated with goal achievement without taking other factors into account. These results are presented in Table 4-2. Thus, each row

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[8] The rationale for this variable is that projects that took active steps toward overcoming challenges would be more likely to continue than projects that did not take any steps toward overcoming challenges. Projects that did not report facing any challenges were coded as "0." Fifty-five projects did not report having any challenges.

[9] The interview was conducted with a Corporation State Office (CSO) staff member for the eight projects that did not have information on project continuation.

[10] Missing data on predictor variables was "filled in" or imputed using multiple imputation techniques (Allison 2002). Multiple imputation improves on conventional imputation methods by deliberately introducing random variation into the imputation process. Missing values are essentially drawn at random from a distribution of potential values. All of the variables used in the model were also used in the imputation process, including the dependent variable. Each missing value was imputed with five plausible values, producing five imputed data sets. It should be noted that imputed values could fall outside the range of plausible values (e.g., missing data on a scale of 1 to 5 could be imputed with a 1.5). These five data sets were then used to estimate each model five times—one for each imputed data set—and combined to produce the results. This involved averaging the coefficients and correcting the standard errors to account for the random variation introduced into the imputed values. Model fit statistics, including r-squares and chi-squares, were averaged across the five models.

in the table represents a different linear regression model. Since other factors are not controlled, the findings cannot address the issue of whether a particular factor is causally related to goal achievement.

As can be seen, none of the *resources* of the organizations are significantly related to project goal achievement. Organizations seem able to attain goals regardless of size and previous experience with activities of the VISTA project.

Table 4-1.   Descriptions of variables included in regression analyses

Variable	Description
Outcomes	
Goal achievement	Average achievement of up to three goals (not achieved = 0; partly achieved = 1; completely achieved = 2
Project continuation	Project continued = 1; project did not continue = 0
Organization Resources	
Existed for at least 10 years	Existed for at least 10 years = 1; existed for 9 years or less = 0
At least five employees	Five or more employees = 1; less than five employees = 0
Experience with project activities	No experience = 1 to Very extensive experience = 5
Continuity of staff	Interviewee was there when project was planned, implemented, and ended = 1; otherwise = 0
Had prior VISTA project	Yes = 1; no = 0
Project Resources	
Centrality of goals	Average of up to three goal centrality items (not central = 0; somewhat central = 1; very central = 2)
Goals changed	Goals changed = 1; goal maintained = 0
Effectiveness of VISTAs	
Two or more VISTA positions	Two or more VISTA positions = 1; one VISTA position = 0
Difficulty recruiting VISTAs	Very difficult = 1; 0 otherwise
Unprepared or unqualified VISTAs	Yes = 1; no = 0
Amount of supervision needed	No supervision = 1 to very extensive supervision = 5
Helpfulness of VISTAs in achieving goals	Average of up to three helpfulness items (not at all helpful = 0;
Implementation and support for project activities	
Activities evolved over time	Yes = 1; no = 0
Challenges overcome	Yes = 1; no = 0
Full-term project	Yes = 1; no = 0
Support from organization	Almost no support = 1; very extensive support = 5
Support from community	Almost no support = 1; very extensive support = 5
Helpfulness of Corporation	Helpful or very helpful = 1; not very helpful = 0

Table 4-2. Bivariate linear regression models predicting achievement of goals

Variable groups	Variable	Coefficient
Organizational resources	Existed for at least 10 years	0.155 (-0.049, 0.360)
	At least five employees	0.030 (-0.115, 0.176)
	Experience with project activities	0.041 (-0.019, 0.101)
	Continuity of staff	0.031 (-0.136, 0.197)
	Had prior VISTA project	0.110 (-0.013, 0.233)
Project goals	Centrality of goals to mission	0.398** (0.247, 0.549)
	Goals changed	0.036 (-0.086, 0.158)
VISTA effectiveness	Two or more VISTA positions	0.192* (0.042, 0.341)
	Difficulty recruiting VISTAs	-0.155 (-0.320, 0.010)
	Unprepared or unqualified VISTAs	-0.264** (-0.427, -0.100)
	Amount of supervision needed	-0.135** (-0.218, -0.052)
	Helpfulness of VISTAs in achieving goals	0.349** (0.282, 0.416)
Implementation and support for project activities	Activities evolved over time	0.093 (-0.048, 0.233)
	Challenges overcome	0.353** (0.238, 0.469)
	Full-term project	0.218** (0.111, 0.325)
	Support from organization	0.167** (0.084, 0.250)
	Support from community	0.202** (0.148, 0.255)
	Corporation was supportive	0.267** (0.132, 0.402)
	Number of organizations	271

**p<.01, *p<.05
Note: Confidence intervals (95%) are given in parentheses below coefficients.

Among characteristics of the goals, centrality of goals to the organization's mission is highly predictive of achieving goals. A one unit increase in the centrality of goals scale increases the average level of goal achievement by .4, whereas changing goals has no bearing on achievement of goals.

Several of the characteristics of the VISTAS are significantly associated with achievement of goals. Having two or more VISTA positions and VISTAs who were helpful in achieving goals are both related to an increasing level of goal achievement, whereas having poorly trained VISTAs and VISTAs who need a lot of supervision is related to decreases in goal achievement.

Implementation and support for project activities was also related to attaining goals. Projects that overcome challenges, full-term projects, and projects that receive more support from the community, organization, or Corporation are more likely to achieve their goals.

4.1.2 Considering Predictors of Goal Achievement Simultaneously

While such bivariate comparisons are informative, they are limited in that they do not demonstrate which specific factors are independently important for goal achievement. While many of the factors examined are likely to be *associated* with goal achievement, only a few factors may have *independent or unique* effects on goal achievement when all factors are considered simultaneously.

The next four models (see Table 4-3) are multivariate models—each controlling for a different but substantively important set of factors. Model 1 includes only organization resources. In model 1, as in the bivariate comparisons, none of the organization resources are statistically significant.

Model 2 adds the measures of flexibility and appropriateness of project goals. As in the previous comparison, centrality of goals to the organization's mission increases the extent of goal achievement. The r-squared for this model is .14, indicating the combination of organization resources and appropriateness and flexibility of goals explains only 14 percent of the variation in goal achievement.

Model 3 includes measures of the effectiveness of VISTA members. In model 3, only helpfulness of the VISTA members in achieving goals is predictive of goal achievement. The addition of the VISTA member effectiveness variables substantially increases the r-squared to .35, indicating that the characteristics of organizations, goals, and VISTA members explains 35 percent of the variation among projects in goal achievement.

Table 4-3.   Multiple linear regression models predicting achievement of goals

Variable groups	Variable	Model 1: Organization resources	Model 2: Project goals	Model 3: VISTA effectiveness	Model 4: Project activities
Organizational resources	Intercept	1.613** (1.173, 2.052)	0.986** (0.622, 1.349)	0.474* (0.008, 0.939)	-0.046 (-0.463, 0.371)
	Existed for at least 10 years	0.129 (-0.077, 0.335)	0.142 (-0.053, 0.338)	0.133 (-0.044, 0.309)	0.191 (-0.006, 0.388)
	At least five employees	0.028 (-0.110, 0.165)	0.003 (-0.141, 0.146)	0.055 (-0.067, 0.177)	0.059 (-0.054, 0.172)
	Experience with project activities	0.030 (-0.039, 0.098)	0.006 (-0.063, 0.075)	0.010 (-0.057, 0.076)	-0.005 (-0.073, 0.063)
	Continuity of staff	0.008 (-0.186, 0.201)	0.014 (-0.169, 0.197)	0.051 (-0.110, 0.212)	0.036 (-0.141, 0.213)
	Had prior VISTA project	0.088 (-0.041, 0.216)	0.108 (-0.014, 0.230)	0.049 (-0.059, 0.157)	0.084 (-0.027, 0.194)
Project goals	Centrality of goals to mission		0.393** (0.229, 0.557)	0.238** (0.080, 0.396)	0.180* (0.015, 0.344)
	Goals changed		0.029 (-0.091, 0.150)	-0.018 (-0.125, 0.089)	-0.123* (-0.230, -0.016)
VISTA effectiveness	Two or more VISTA positions			0.117 (-0.012, 0.246)	0.054 (-0.086, 0.195)
	Difficulty recruiting VISTAs			0.082 (-0.099, 0.262)	0.139 (-0.031, 0.310)
	Unprepared or unqualified			0.008 (-0.143, 0.159)	-0.044 (-0.182, 0.094)
	Amount of supervision			-0.028 (-0.103, 0.047)	-0.016 (-0.102, 0.070)
	Helpfulness of VISTAs			0.317** (0.238, 0.395)	0.243** (0.158, 0.329)
Implementation and support for project activities	Activities evolved over time				0.041 (-0.079, 0.161)
	Challenges overcome				0.263** (0.157, 0.369)
	Full-term project				0.100* (0.001, 0.200)
	Support from organization				0.043 (-0.045, 0.131)
	Support from community				0.095** (0.043, 0.146)
	Corporation was supportive				0.037 (-0.108, 0.182)
R-squared		.08	.14	.35	.44
Number of organizations		271	271	271	271

**p<.01, *p<.05
Note: Confidence intervals (95%) are given in parentheses below coefficients.

Model 4 is the full model, which adds variables capturing the implementation and support for project activities. Project length is statistically significant, indicating that full-term projects are more likely to achieve their goals. Overcoming project challenges also increases goal achievement. One interesting finding is that while support from the organization, the Corporation, and the community were significantly related to achieving goals in the unadjusted comparisons, only community support retains its significance once all three sources of support and other characteristics are considered simultaneously.

In sum, findings from the predictive model indicate that the following factors increase goal achievement:

- Having goals that are central to the organization's mission;

- Having VISTA members who are helpful;

- Overcoming challenges in implementing project activities;

- Support from the community; and

- Being a full-term project.

The full model, which included organization resources, appropriateness and flexibility of goals, effectiveness of VISTA members, and successful implementation of project activities explained 44 percent of the variation in goal achievement across projects.

4.2   Project Continuation

This chapter now turns to factors predictive of a second measure of VISTA project success— whether a project continued after the last VISTA left. Given the binary nature of the project continuation variable (1=yes; 0=no), we used logistic regression analysis to predict the probability that a project would continue based on factors outlined in the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 1. The basic logistic regression model is given as follows:

$$\log(p_i / p_i - 1) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + ... + \beta_k x_k$$

where $\log(p_i/p_i\text{-}1)$ is the estimated logit or log odds of project continuation for project i; β_0 is the intercept, and β_1 through β_k are the coefficients for the independent variables X_1 through X_k,

respectively. The coefficients give the change in the log odds of project continuation for a one-unit change in the predictor variable. Since the meaning of a change in log odds is not intuitive, we calculated estimated odds ratios by exponentiation (e^{β}). Odds ratios equal to or close to 1 indicate parity; odds ratios greater than 1 indicate an increase in the odds; odds ratios less than 1 indicate a decrease in the odds. The percent change in the odds can be calculated by taking (e^{β}-1)*100.

In addition to odds ratios, 95 percent confidence intervals for odds ratios are also presented. The confidence interval provides the range of values within which the true odds ratio is estimated to fall.[11]

The logistic regressions predicting project continuation include all of the variables in the models of goal achievement. In addition, average goal achievement is used as a predictor of project continuation.

4.2.1 Unadjusted Comparisons

Table 4-4 presents the results from bivariate logistic regression models predicting project continuation, that is, with each predictor considered separately. Experience with the activities of the VISTA project is significantly related to project continuation. More experienced organizations are more likely to have projects that continue. A one unit increase in experience with the activities of the VISTA project increases the odds of project continuation by 34.8 percent. In addition, organizations where the project director was present during the development, implementation, and conclusion of the project were more likely to continue.

The appropriateness, flexibility, and achievement of project goals are all significantly correlated with project continuation. Projects with goals that are central to the organization's mission are more likely to continue. A one unit increase in centrality of goals increases the odds of continuation by a factor of nearly 2.5. Changing project goals is strongly correlated with an increased likelihood of continuation. Changing goals is associated with nearly a 3.5 fold increase in the odds of continuation. Finally, projects that achieve their goals are more likely to continue. A one unit increase in goal achievement more than triples the odds of continuation.

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[11] Due to a large variation in the weights (see Appendix B), the regression analyses in this chapter were performed on unweighted data. However, in an effort to take sampling design into account, all models include controls for variables used in the creation of the weights, including dummy variables for the sampling strata and umbrella organizations.

Table 4-4. Bivariate logistic regression models predicting project continuation

Variable groups	Variable	Odds ratio
Organization resources	Existed for at least 10 years	0.659 (0.257, 1.693)
	At least five employees	1.960 (0.988, 3.886)
	Experience with project activities	1.348* (1.070, 1.698)
	Continuity of staff	1.960* (1.004, 3.825)
	Had prior VISTA project	1.691 (0.896, 3.192)
Project goals	Centrality of goals to mission	2.428** (1.418, 4.157)
	Goals changed	3.409** (1.870, 6.212)
	Goals were achieved	3.444** (2.361, 5.023)
VISTA effectiveness	Two or more VISTA positions	2.996** (1.728, 5.194)
	Difficulty recruiting VISTAs	0.779 (0.387, 1.567)
	Unprepared or unqualified VISTAs	0.571* (0.328, 0.995)
	Amount of supervision needed	0.739* (0.572, 0.956)
	Helpfulness of VISTAs in achieving goals	1.608** (1.239, 2.087)
Implementation and support for project activities	Activities evolved over time	2.510* (1.046, 6.020)
	Challenges overcome	3.487** (2.086, 5.829)
	Full-term project	2.670** (0.518,1.446)
	Support from organization	1.483* (1.059, 2.076)
	Support from community	2.014** (1.587, 2.555)
	CSO was supportive	2.152** (1.251, 3.700)
	Number of organizations	271

**p<.01, *p<.05
Note: Confidence intervals (95%) are given in parentheses below coefficients.

Effectiveness of the VISTA is also related to continuation. Projects with two or more VISTA positions compared to only one VISTA position are more likely to continue. Projects that have poorly trained or unqualified VISTAs or VISTAs that need a great deal of supervision are less likely to continue. Projects in which the VISTAs are helpful are more likely to continue.

Finally, several characteristics of project activities and support are significantly related to the likelihood of project continuation. Being able to overcome challenges increases the odds of project continuation by a factor of 3.5. Length of project is also statistically significant, with full-term projects being more likely to continue. All three sources of support—from the organization, the community, and the Corporation—are significantly related to continuation.

4.2.2 Developing a Predictive Model

Table 4-5 presents the results of four logistic regression models predicting project continuation that increasingly add more predictors. Model 1 includes only the organization's resources. When all background characteristics of the organization are considered together, experience with project activities has an independent effect on project continuation. Each one unit increase in experience with project activities increases the odds of continuation by 37.7 percent. In addition, organizations with at least five employees are more likely to have projects that continue.

Model 2 includes all of the information on the organization's resources but adds variables capturing the appropriateness, flexibility, and achievement of project goals. As in the bivariate comparisons, both changing goals and achieving goals are highly predictive of project continuation, independent of organization resources. Changing goals increases the odds of continuation by a factor of more than four, and each one unit increase in goal achievement increases the odds by a factor of more than three. However, centrality of goals to the organization's mission is not predictive of continuation once the organization's resources and achievement of goals is included. This is because projects that have more central goals are more likely to achieve them.

Model 3 adds variables capturing the effectiveness of VISTAs. The only variable that is significant is the number of VISTA positions. Projects with two or more VISTA positions have odds of project continuation that are more than double those of projects with only one VISTA position, controlling for organization resources and aspects of project goals. Based on the likelihood ratio test, addition of information on VISTA characteristics does not improve the fit of the model.

Table 4-5.   Multiple logistic regression models predicting project continuation

Variable groups	Variable	Model 1: Organization resources	Model 2: Project goals	Model 3: VISTA effectiveness	Model 4: Project activities
Organization resources	Intercept	7.736** (2.179, 27.460)	0.852 (0.152, 4.772)	0.651 (0.078, 5.401)	0.107 (0.008, 1.500)
	Existed for at least 10 years	0.429 (0.168, 1.098)	0.195** (0.058, 0.658)	0.206** (0.063, 0.669)	0.311* (0.099, 0.976)
	At least five employees	2.215* (1.172, 4.186)	2.252* (1.147, 4.424)	2.301* (1.168, 4.533)	2.275* (1.128, 4.590)
	Experience with project activities	1.377** (1.090, 1.739)	1.389** (1.087, 1.776)	1.372* (1.036, 1.816)	1.385* (1.015, 1.889)
	Continuity of staff	1.699 (0.872, 3.310)	2.002* (1.011, 3.966)	2.199* (1.064, 4.544)	2.367* (1.124, 4.981)
	Had prior VISTA project	1.271 (0.580, 2.785)	1.319 (0.564, 3.083)	1.181 (0.472, 2.956)	1.481 (0.577, 3.805)
Project goals	Centrality of goals to mission		1.385 (0.702, 2.731)	1.352 (0.670, 2.727)	1.394 (0.631, 3.082)
	Goals changed		4.845* (2.397, 9.794)	4.504** (2.192, 9.253)	3.007** (1.394, 6.483)
	Goals were achieved		3.660* (2.304, 5.814)	3.265** (1.913, 5.570)	2.097* (1.147, 3.833)
VISTA effectiveness	Two or more VISTA positions			2.267* (1.164, 4.418)	2.060* (1.017, 4.172)
	Difficulty recruiting VISTAs			1.090 (0.335, 3.544)	1.252 (0.348, 4.508)
	Unprepared or unqualified VISTAs			0.623 (0.256, 1.515)	0.640 (0.249, 1.643)
	Amount of supervision needed			0.993 (0.668, 1.477)	1.096 (0.748, 1.606)
	Helpfulness of VISTAs in achieving goals			1.002 (0.659, 1.522)	1.047 (0.666, 1.644)
Implementation and support for project activities	Activities evolved over time				1.655 (0.385, 7.124)
	Challenges overcome				2.011* (1.055, 3.832)
	Full-term project				1.996* (1.077, 3.700)
	Support from organization				0.892 (0.539, 1.475)
	Support from community				1.528** (1.121, 2.083)
	Corporation was supportive				0.937 (0.434, 2.023)
Pseudo r-squared		.15	.32	.35	.40
Likelihood ratio Chi-square		28.668	36.615**	4.813	14.132*
Number of organizations		271	271	271	271

**p<.01, *p<.05

Model 4 is the full model, which adds information on implementation of project activities and support. Three aspects of implementation and support for activities are significant predictors of continuation. The odds of continuation for full-term projects are nearly twice those of projects that end earlier than 36 months. While all three sources of support (organization, community, and Corporate State Office [CSO]) were correlated with project continuation, only community support is predictive of continuation when considering all three sources of support simultaneously. Each one unit increase in community support increases the odds of continuation by 52.8 percent.

Community support explains the relationship between both organizational support and project continuation. It is possible that lack of organization support reduces community support, which in turn affects project continuation. Additional information on implementation of, and support for project activities, substantially improves the fit of the model.

In sum, in the full model, the following factors increase the probability of project continuation:

- Sponsorship by an organization that is relatively new (less than 10 years);

- Having at least five employees;

- Continuity in project staff;

- Experience with project activities prior to the start of the project;

- Changing goals;

- Achieving goals;

- Having been awarded two or more VISTA positions;

- Overcoming challenges to implementing project activities;

- Being full-term; and

- Having community support.

4.3   Project Continuation among Ongoing VISTA Projects

This section presents the results of efforts to predict the likelihood that ongoing VISTA projects will continue. During December 2009 and January 2010, interviews were conducted with CSO staff

about 157 ongoing VISTA projects. Interviews were not completed for projects identified by CSOs as umbrella projects. Interviewers collected information on selected factors identified in the multivariate statistical models found to be predictive of VISTA project sustainability. Specifically, the following information was collected:

- The extent of the organization's experience with project activities;

- Continuity of staff;

- Whether goals changed;

- The extent to which goals were being achieved; and

- The extent of community support for the project.

4.3.1 Description of Ongoing Projects

More than three fourths (76.5%) of respondents reported that the project had the same director when it was planned and implemented. See Table 4-6.

Table 4-6.   Continuity of project direction

Same project director when planned and implemented	Number of projects	Percent
Yes	114	76.5
No	35	23.5
Total	149	100.0

According to the respondents, most ongoing projects had prior experience with project activities. The modal response at 31.2 percent was "5" (very extensive experience). Only 8.4 percent of respondents chose "1" (no experience). See Figure 4-1.

Figure 4-1.   Experience with project activities
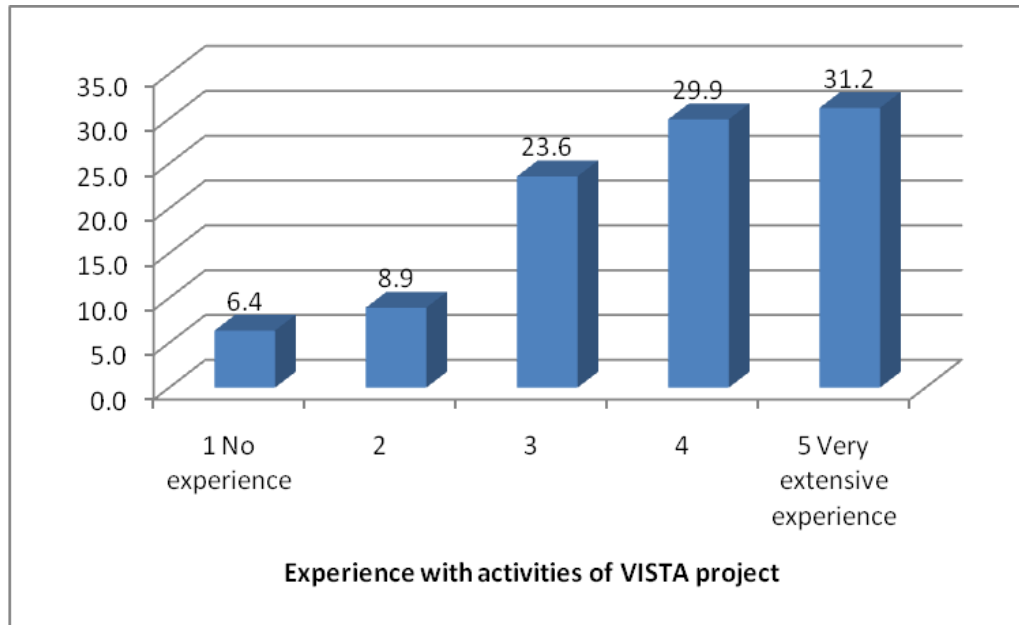
More than one third (39.5%) of ongoing projects had changed their original goals so far; 60.5 percent had maintained them. See Table 4-7.

Table 4-7.   Continuity of goals

Continuity	Number of projects	Percent
Maintained goals	95	60.5
Changed goals	62	39.5
Total	157	100.0

The most common reason for changing goals was that circumstances changed (77.4%). Changing circumstances most often included a change in community needs. The second most common reason was that the goals were not realistic (25.8%). Less than 20 percent said the goals changed because they were achieved. Only 8.2 percent said that it was because the VISTAs were not a good match for the goals. See Table 4-8.

Table 4-8.   Reason for changing goals

	Yes	No	Total
Reason	Percent		
Circumstances changed	77.4	22.9	100.0
Goals were not realistic	25.8	74.2	100.0
Goals were achieved	19.7	80.3	100.0
VISTA(s) was/were not a good match for the goals	8.2	91.8	100.0

The vast majority of ongoing projects were achieving their goals. Nearly 100 percent of respondents said that ongoing projects were partly or completely achieving their goals. Only 2.6 percent of respondents said that ongoing projects were not achieving their goals. See Figure 4-2.

Figure 4-2. Achievement of goals among ongoing projects
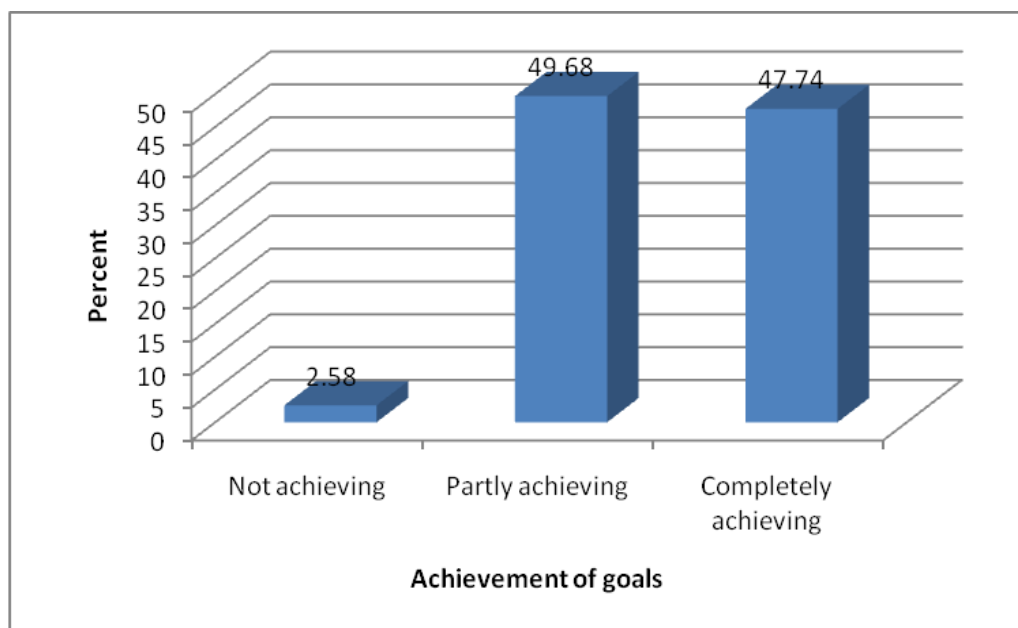
A majority of respondents (62.2%) felt that the VISTAs were suitable for the project. However, 33.9 percent said that some VISTAs were a good fit and some VISTAs were not a good fit. Only 3.9 percent of respondents said that all VISTAs were not a good fit for the project. See Table 4-9.

Table 4-9. Suitability of VISTAs

Suitability	Number of projects	Percent
VISTAs were a good match	97	62.2
VISTAs were not a good match	6	3.9
Some good, some not	53	33.9
Total	156	100.0

Most ongoing projects were receiving some level of community support. The modal response was "4" (37.2%) on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being "very extensive support." Only 1.3 percent of CSOs reported that ongoing projects received almost no support. See Figure 4-3.

Figure 4-3. **Community support for project**
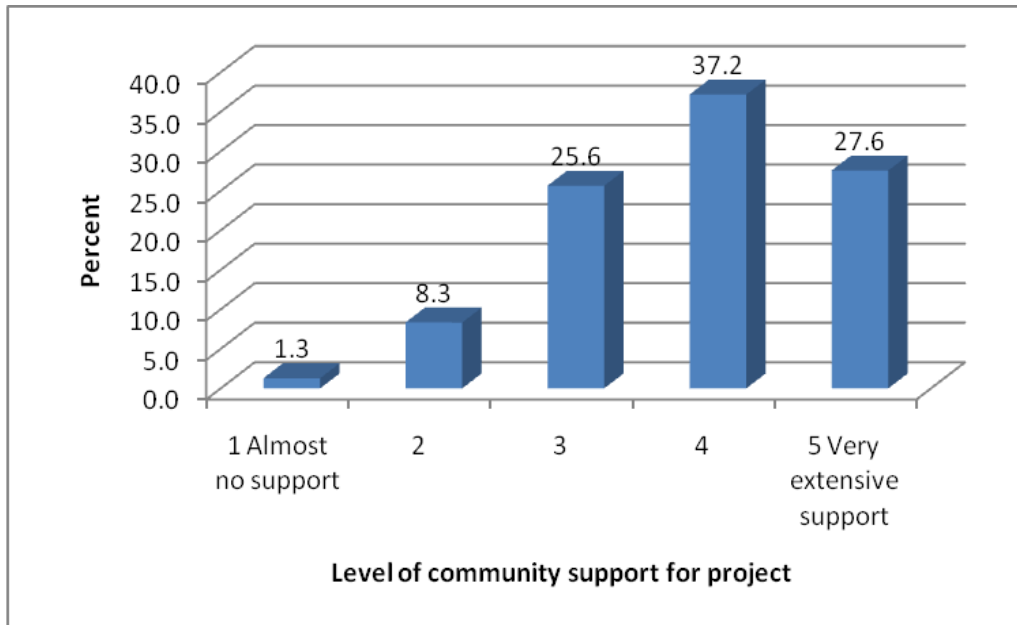
4.3.2 Predicting Project Sustainability

The final multivariate logistic regression model (Model 4) predicting project continuation was applied to the data from ongoing projects collected from CSOs to predict the probability that they will continue their activities in some form up to 2 years after the last VISTA leaves. Information from ongoing projects on experience with project activities, project director turnover, goals, and community support was "plugged into" the multivariate model.

Probabilities were generated for 146 ongoing projects. Respondents for 11 projects were not able to provide information on one or more of the key factors used to predict project continuation. These projects were excluded, since important information about them was missing.

To minimize respondent burden, the CSO interview collected data on only the most important predictors of project continuation. Ongoing projects were given mean values for closed projects on variables included in the model but for which information was not available from the CSO interview. As a result, the predicted values from the regressions give the values for a project with a

particular combination of the five key predictors that is "average" on all other factors included in the model.[12]

Most ongoing projects have a high probability of continuing based on their performance on five key factors predicting project continuation. (Predicted probabilities fall in the range of 0 to 1.00.) The average probability of continuation is .89. More than two thirds (67%) of ongoing projects have predicted probabilities of .90 or higher. Another 18 percent have probabilities of continuation between .8 and .899, and 10 percent have probabilities between .7 and .799. Only four projects have predicted probabilities of continuing of less than .5. See Table 4-10.

Table 4-10. **Frequency of predicted probability of project continuation**

| | Predicted probability of continuation | | | | | | | | | |
	0-.099	.1-.199	.2-.299	.3-.399	.4-.499	.5-.599	.6-.699	.7-.799	.8-.899	.9-1
Percent	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	10	18	67
Number of projects	0	0	1	1	2	3	0	14	27	98

The goal of this chapter was to develop predictive models of the two key aspects of VISTA project success – the extent to which projects achieved their goals and whether they continued up to two years after the last VISTA left, using data from the telephone interview. The model explained a large portion of the variation in project success (44%). We then applied the model to data collected in the CSO interviews to predict the probability that ongoing projects will be sustained.

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[12] Since some "ongoing" projects had ended by the time of the CSO interview, information on project length was known. If known, actual project length was used to obtain the probability of continuation. For projects that were still active, the average project length for closed projects was used.

Methods 5

This methodology chapter is divided into seven sections. We discuss the sample design, the weighting process and then the finite population correction. The next few sections discuss questionnaire development, training of interviewers, the data collection process and the response rates.

5.1   Sample Design

Initial Sample Design

To examine issues related to sustainability, the following two groups of projects featured prominently in the VISTA Assessment sample design: (1) active VISTA projects in at least their third year of programming; and (2) projects that had been closed for at least 2 years. A project's start date was defined as the month and year of the project's Master Agreement (MA). A project's end date was defined as the last month and year in which a VISTA was active in the project.

Specifically, active projects were eligible for the study if and only if their start date was more than 2 years (2x365 days) prior to the chosen reference date of January 18, 2008. Closed projects were eligible for the study only if their end date was at least 2 years (2x365 days) and at most 5 years (5x365 days) prior to the reference date. Based on the eligibility criteria, the final sampling frame contained 396 entries representing active projects and 984 entries representing closed projects.

A stratified sample design was used to ensure that the sample of projects was nationally representative with respect to project status, size, and location. Project status—active or closed—was used as the primary stratification variable. Within each of the two major strata, 10 substrata were initially defined based on the cross-classification of the five Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) clusters (Atlantic, North Central, Pacific, Southwest, Southern) and two project-size groupings. Size of project was determined by the average number of active VISTAs per year. For active projects, the two project-size groupings were at most 12 or more than 12 average number of VISTAs active per year. For closed projects, the two project-size groupings were at most six or more than six average number of VISTAs active per year. The number of projects on the

sampling frame was not sufficient to support the use of additional explicit substrata. Therefore, implicit stratification was used by taking a systematic sample of projects ordered according to their duration within each of the 20 initial strata. Duration was defined as the length of time between the project's start and end dates (for closed projects) or between the start and reference dates (for active projects). The initial samples were allocated to the strata using proportional allocation.

To accommodate the types of analyses proposed for the VISTA Assessment study, the design was intended to produce a responding sample size of 250 active projects and 250 closed projects. The size of the samples initially selected was adjusted to compensate for expected losses due to nonresponse, inability to contact project personnel, and missing or problematic administrative data. Active projects were oversampled by approximately 6 percent (corresponding to an initial sample size of 265), while closed projects were oversampled by approximately 16 percent (i.e., an initial sample of 290 projects was selected). The assumed response rates were determined in consultation with CNCS.

Final Sample Design

After attempts were made to obtain data from the initial sample of closed projects, we discovered that many project documents required for the study had been destroyed, archived, or could not be located. We therefore determined that a supplemental sample of closed projects would be needed to meet the targeted yield of 250 projects. An examination of response rates by length of time since the project had closed revealed that the likelihood of obtaining usable data was highest among projects that had been closed the shortest amount of time. A supplemental sample of 340 closed projects was drawn in a way that would maximize yield and accommodate the initial sample design. Specifically, all projects that had been closed between 2 and 3½ years (as of the study reference date), and that were not selected in the initial sample, were included in the supplemental sample. Thus, the final sample design consists of 30 strata, 10 of which are certainty strata. Details of the final sampling strata are shown in Table 5-1.

Existence of "Umbrella Organizations"

"Umbrella organizations" are listings on the sampling frame that actually represent more than one VISTA project. The definition of an umbrella organization for this study was: "One organization that requests VISTAs for multiple projects that are unrelated."

Table 5-1. Final strata definitions, frame, and sample sizes*

Project status	CNCS cluster	Average number of active VISTAs per year	Number of years between project close and reference date	Number of projects on frame*	Number of projects selected from frame*
Active	AT	0-12		93	62
Active	AT	> 12		22	15
Active	NC	0-12		67	45
Active	NC	> 12		21	14
Active	PC	0-12		65	43
Active	PC	> 12		13	9
Active	SW	0-12		39	26
Active	SW	> 12		10	7
Active	SN	0-12		44	29
Active	SN	> 12		22	15
Total - Active				396	265
Closed	AT	0-6	2-3½	95	95
Closed	AT	0-6	> 3½	80	26
Closed	AT	> 6	2-3½	15	15
Closed	AT	> 6	> 3½	19	4
Closed	NC	0-6	2-3½	51	51
Closed	NC	0-6	> 3½	76	24
Closed	NC	> 6	2-3½	11	11
Closed	NC	> 6	> 3½	9	2
Closed	PC	0-6	2-3½	75	75
Closed	PC	0-6	> 3½	72	23
Closed	PC	> 6	2-3½	10	10
Closed	PC	> 6	> 3½	21	6
Closed	SW	0-6	2-3½	116	116
Closed	SW	0-6	> 3½	97	28
Closed	SW	> 6	2-3½	21	21
Closed	SW	> 6	> 3½	21	6
Closed	SN	0-6	2-3½	71	71
Closed	SN	0-6	> 3½	97	29
Closed	SN	> 6	2-3½	13	13
Closed	SN	> 6	> 3½	14	4
Total - Closed				984	630
Total				1,380	895

*Note that the counts of projects in Table 5-1 are not completely accurate due to the existence of "umbrella organizations" on the sampling frame. These are frame listings that actually represent more than one VISTA project. Umbrella organizations are discussed in further detail at the end of Section 5.1.

Rules were developed for randomly subsampling projects when an umbrella organization was encountered at the telephone interview phase of data collection. Telephone interviewers were instructed to list all projects that were part of the umbrella project. If the organization identified four or fewer projects, and had been closed between 2 and 3½ years, they sampled one project using a random numbers table; if the project had been closed for more than 3½ years, all the projects identified became part of the sample for the telephone interview. If the organization identified five or more projects and had been closed between 2 and 3½ years, two projects were sampled; up to four projects were sampled if the project was closed for more than 3½ years. See Appendix A for the questions the interviewers asked to identify an umbrella organization.

As a result of the umbrella projects, the sample size of closed projects was more than 630. We identified 31 organizations as umbrella organizations, which yielded 54 projects for the telephone interview. Thus the total number of eligible projects for the interview increased to 315 projects.

5.2   Weighting Process

A weighting process was applied only to closed projects. Since umbrella organizations were identified only among the sampled projects, and not in the entire frame, makes it necessary to perform a two-stage weighting process; especially, a nonresponse weighting adjustment at the first stage, so that weighted survey totals reflect the existence of umbrella organizations among the nonsampled projects.

At the first stage, a sampled project was treated as "responding" if telephone interview data were obtained; umbrella organizations were considered "responding" if such data were obtained for at least one sampled subproject.

The second stage weighting adjustment was for umbrella projects. The level of nonresponse among the selected umbrella projects was quite low and therefore a combined weighting adjustment factor was computed, mainly reflecting the subproject selection rates.

A trimming technique was applied at the end to minimize weight variation. However, some amount of weight variation is due to the survey design and cannot be as easily controlled as variation due to

nonresponse adjustments, for example. The aspects of the design that led to a large overall design effect are

- Heavy oversampling of projects that closed "recently"; and

- The existence of umbrella organizations on the sampling frame and resulting subsampling of subprojects from an umbrella organization at the telephone interviewing stage.

See Appendix B for a more detailed description of weighting.

5.3   Finite Population Correction

Because the sample of closed projects was drawn from a small population (sampling rates were above 50% in some strata), a finite sampling population correction (fpc) was used in the regression analyses to adjust the standard errors. The fpc is defined as the term (1-f), where f=n/N is the sampling fraction (the ratio of the sample size to the population size). The fpc term is used in the calculation of variances of survey estimates to account for the fact that the survey population is finite in size. Standard statistical theory, including expressions for standard errors of estimates that serve as the basis of statistical significance tests, is based on the premise of an infinite population, or sampling with replacement.

The fpc factor may be negligible if the sampling fraction for a particular survey is small; otherwise, the fpc factor should be applied in the calculation of the variance of the sample mean, for example, to adjust the variance estimate to account for sampling without replacement. The adjusted variance is then changed to (1-f) times the variance of the sample mean under the assumption of sampling from an infinite population. With stratification, a separate fpc is computed for each stratum and applied to the stratum-level variance.

For the VISTA project, the fpc factor, 1-f, was applied to the analysis of closed projects. The first stage sampling fraction (f) of the VISTA project was calculated as the number of respondents divided by the population size within each stratum, before multiple projects under one umbrella organization were considered. The sampling fractions among the closed projects range from 0.07 to 0.72. As a result, the within-stratum variance of the mean is reduced by factors of 0.28 to 0.93 times the variance, based on a calculation assuming an infinite population size.

5.4 Questionnaires, Forms, and Interview Protocols

Accessing information from the sources described in Chapter 1 required several different data collection instruments. Specifically, we developed a document abstraction form to collect information from the project applications and reports. Two instruments were developed to collect information from staff in sponsoring organizations: a structured telephone interview guide to collect standard data from a sample of projects closed at least 2 years prior to this study, and an unstructured site visit protocol for use with a smaller sample of sponsoring organizations to better understand how VISTA projects were managed and why they were or were not sustained. The site visit protocol focused on key topics rather than structured questions and was tailored to follow up on the telephone interviews. A much shorter telephone interview guide was developed to gather information from Corporate Staff Office (CSO) staff about the active projects. Below we describe each instrument in more detail.

Data Abstraction Form. The data abstraction form was designed to record pertinent information from project applications and reports, for use in interviews, and in the analysis. This form was designed to record contact information for the sponsoring organization, a brief description of the project, and the original and changed project goals and key activities. The form had sections on challenges faced by the projects, issues related to sustainability, and any other information thought to be important for understanding the project. Documents for the active projects were available electronically. As a result, abstractors were able to copy and paste pertinent information. Hard copies of the first application and final progress reports for the closed projects were sent by CSOs. The abstractors typed the pertinent information into the abstract form. Information was not consistently available for all projects.

Sponsoring Organization Telephone Interview. As noted above, a telephone interview was administered to the person most knowledgeable about the sampled VISTA project in each sponsoring organization. When no knowledgeable person could be located, a staff member was interviewed from the CSO. The survey instrument contained questions about the respondent's involvement in the project, reasons for implementing the project, goals and activities, success in attaining goals and perceived reasons for success, and the extent to which significant successful activities were continued. Other topics covered in the interview included the organization's support for the project, training and technical assistance, community support for the project, project

activities, background information about the sponsoring organization, and supervision of VISTAs. The telephone interview took about 30 minutes to complete. The sponsoring organization telephone interview is in Appendix C.

Sponsoring Organization Site Visit Protocol. A site visit protocol was developed for the 40 in-person interviews with sponsoring organizations. This protocol focused on key topics rather than structured questions and was intended to supplement the information collected during the structured telephone interview. The first section of the site visit protocol confirmed some of the information obtained during the telephone interview and expanded on that information. Topics for the site visit interviews included reasons for implementing a VISTA project, factors that were perceived to have affected a project's level of success, including CSO support, quality and utility of training and technical assistance, reasons for changes in goals and relevant activities, and the longer term effects of the project on the organization and community. The site visit interview took up to 2 hours to complete. The question domains included in the site visit protocol are provided in Appendix D.

Corporation State Office Interview Protocol. A short telephone interview was conducted with CSO staff for a sample of active or ongoing projects. Any particular CSO was interviewed about a maximum of five projects. Projects were randomly selected from among the 256 eligible projects. The protocol focused on key items identified as important predictors of project continuation. To minimize the burden on busy CSOs, only six questions were asked about each project:

- Whether the same project director was involved with the project both when the VISTA project was planned and when the project was implemented;

- The sponsoring organization's prior experience with the key activities of the VISTA project;

- Community support for the project;

- Changes in the original project goals during the project period and the reasons for change;

- Their opinion on whether the project was likely to achieve its goals; and

- Whether the VISTAs who served on the project were a good match for the project.

These interviews took 5 to 10 minutes to complete. The CSO telephone interview is provided in Appendix E.

Pretest of the Instruments

As part of the questionnaire development process, we pretested the sponsoring organization telephone interview and the site visit protocol to evaluate whether the questions were clear and understandable, whether the question flow was straightforward and intuitive for the respondents, and whether the instruments were efficient and usable for the interviewers.

VISTA headquarters helped us identify nine organizations (not part of the sample for the main study) from among sponsoring organizations with completed VISTA projects to pretest the survey instruments. During the pretest, we followed all steps planned for the actual survey such as sending out letters, scheduling interviews, etc. The instruments over all worked extremely well and gave us a wealth of information. We made minor changes to the instrument after the pretest.

5.5   Telephone Interviewers for Data Collection

Four telephone interviewers were selected from among experienced Westat research staff rather than from a telephone interviewing pool. Staff members were selected who could think quickly during a telephone conversation and ask appropriate probing questions.

Training took place in February 2009. During a full day of active involvement, trainees were provided with background information on the VISTA program, an overview of the purpose of the study, and samples of the advance letters and pretest findings.

Interviewers were instructed on procedures for contacting respondents, confidentiality issues, and general interviewing techniques. In addition, they were given question-by-question specifications, and were provided with examples of the project profiles developed from the abstracted project applications and reports. The interviewers were instructed to review the profile carefully before contacting a respondent. They were given two versions of the profiles:

- Profiles sent out to the projects with contact information and goals only; and

- Profiles for interviewers with a description of the project as well as the contact information, goals, activities, challenges faced by the project, and comments recorded by the abstractor to provide additional insight.

Interviewers were instructed to focus on the project description and goals when they reviewed the profile and to note the start and end dates for the project. It was important to pay attention to the dates because some organizations had had more than one VISTA project.

Interviewers were trained to identify umbrella projects, and instructed in how to sample one or more of them for an interview. If a project was judged to be an umbrella, the interviewer was instructed to list all associated projects. Following a protocol, interviewers were to select one or more projects for interviews as discussed above.

The steps in the interviewing process are listed in Exhibit 5-1.

Exhibit 5-1.   Steps in conducting the interview

■　　　　VISTA headquarters conducted conference calls to inform all CSO staff about the VISTA Program Assessment and that Westat would be contacting them to obtain project documentation for the sampled projects.
■　　　　Westat contacted the CSOs requesting project documents such as the VISTA application, and the first and final project progress reports.
■　　　　Westat project staff abstracted data and developed profiles for each project.
■　　　　CSOs informed the projects that Westat would be contacting them and requested that they help with this important study*.
■　　　　Westat sent a letter to the sponsoring organization describing the telephone interview along with a copy of the abbreviated project profile. This letter asked the sponsoring organization to review the profile and identify the most knowledgeable person to respond to the interview.
■　　　　An interviewer contacted the sponsoring organization to set up a time for the interview.
■　　　　The telephone interview was conducted at the appointed time with the person most knowledgeable about the VISTA project.

* Although CSOs were aware of which projects were sampled for interviews, they were not aware of the responses given
   by the organizations.

Site Visitor Training

Five senior staff members were selected and trained as site visitors. The objective of the training was to ensure that each site visitor would be able to obtain similar information for every project, steering the conversation and probing as needed. Several methods were used to train the site visitors. These included:

   ■   **Traditional Lecture.** This instruction method was used to introduce the study and
        present the background information and purpose of the site visits.

- **Interactive Lecture.** This technique was used to explain the concepts of conducting the in-person interviews. The trainer led the trainees through the questions by calling on each trainee to assume the role of an interviewer. The trainer played the role of the participant and responded to the questions from a prepared script. This process gave the trainees practice in reading the questions, recording responses, and probing. During the interactive lecture, the trainer corrected errors and stressed the points in the script. The scripts became successively more complex and used more difficult responses as the training progressed. During these sessions trainees were encouraged to ask questions and identify areas of confusion.

- **Role Play.** Role plays were conducted with each interviewer after the training to simulate interaction between the site visitor and the respondent.

5.6 Response Rates for the Telephone Interview

As described in Section 5.1, we sampled 630 projects, from 984 closed projects, for the telephone interview. Of these 630 projects, the CSOs were able to provide the relevant documentation (first application, progress reports, and final applications) for only 298 projects. These 298 formed the sample for the telephone survey. When we attempted to contact the organizations for the telephone interview, we found that six organizations did not exist any longer, and therefore, the eligible number of projects was reduced to 292. We identified 31 organizations as umbrellas when they were contacted for the telephone interview. The sampling procedures for selecting subprojects from umbrella organizations yielded 54 projects. Thus, we had 261 non-umbrella projects from non-umbrella organizations, and 54 umbrella projects from umbrellas for a total of 315 projects eligible for the telephone survey.

Five projects refused to participate in the study. There was no longer a person in the organization who knew anything about 31 projects, and the CSOs were not familiar with them either. Therefore, we could not complete interviews for 36 projects. We successfully completed 239 interviews with project staff, and 40 interviews with CSOs when we were not able to find a knowledgeable person within the organization to respond to the survey, yielding a total of 279 interviews. Therefore, the response rate for the telephone interviews was (279/284) or 98.2 percent.

Taking account of projects that were eliminated because project applications and reports were not available, and accounting for umbrellas, the sample yield was 279/(351+[54-31])=279/374= 74.5 percent.

Table 5-2 summarizes the response rates.

Table 5-2.   Sample disposition

Sample disposition	
Original Sample of Projects	630
Number of projects eligible for the telephone interview	298
Ineligible/organization closed	-6
Total of eligible closed projects for telephone interview	292
Umbrellas (multiple projects)	31
Non-umbrellas (single projects)	261
Projects sampled from umbrellas	54
Eligible non-umbrella projects	261
Target Sample	315
Refusals	5
No knowledgeable person	31
Interviews completed by	
Projects	239
CSOs	40
Total number of completed interviews	279
Response rate:	
(315-31)=284	
279/284=	98.2%
Sample yield:	
Potentially eligible: (351+ [(54-31=23]=374	
Completed: 279/374 =	74.5%

5.7   Summary

Telephone interviews were conducted with 279 closed VISTA projects. We then visited 40 closed projects, half of them still in operation, and half discontinued, to supplement information from the telephone interviews. Together, data from these interviews formed the basis of models designed to predict goal achievement and sustainability of current and future VISTA projects. Finally, we conducted brief telephone interviews with CSO staff concerning ongoing projects to test the models.

Summary and Conclusions 6

Overall, the VISTA program was extremely successful, according to the measures captured in this evaluation. Nearly 85 percent of the organizations we interviewed by telephone told us that the VISTA project had continued in some form after the last VISTA left. We were told that lack of resources and poor management were the top reasons for failing to continue a project.

Among the top three goals we asked about, virtually all organizations completely or partly achieved at least one of them and indicated that the VISTAs were critical to the process. Typically, only one or two VISTAs served the organization at a time. Approximately one in five of the organizations had had VISTAs before; during site visits, these organizations seemed especially savvy about managing and getting the most out of their VISTAs. Most organizations chose goals that they described as very central to their missions. (We limited our discussions to the three most important goals, since some projects had up to a dozen or more goals, an unwieldy number to talk about.)

The organizations themselves were relatively young, most of them having been around for less than half the time of the VISTA program itself. They were also relatively small, with more than one third having 10 or fewer employees. Their mission statements covered a wide range of anti-poverty activities, in fields as diverse as promoting the arts, serving clients with disabilities, and homelessness.

The Corporation and the Corporation State Offices often played important roles in giving advice and assistance throughout a project. More than one third of projects received technical assistance from the Corporation in some form nearly every month. Half the organizations said during the telephone interview that the CSOs were very helpful to them when they faced challenges in carrying out their projects. Less than 20 percent indicated that the CSOs were not helpful. There was less enthusiasm, however, for the National Training Sessions. Since under half of the organizations thought these sessions were helpful, we followed up during the site visits to obtain more information. Typically, VISTAs and project managers attended the same meeting, but different sessions. Most project managers felt that they learned very little other than how to complete forms and, in some cases, a review of the rules of the program. Some suggested topics that might be

covered in such meetings. We understand that the Corporation already may have revamped this training program since the time period covered by this study.

We examined reasons for goal achievement and for project continuation using multivariate regression models to control simultaneously for a set of possible explanations, to find out which were most important. Table 6-1 summarizes the result of the models predicting goal achievement and project continuation.

Table 6-1.   Summary of results from predictive models of goal achievement and project continuation

Predictor	Achievement of goals	Project continuation
Organization resources		
Existed for at least 10 years	NS	-
At least five employees	NS	+
Experience with project activities	NS	+
Continuity of staff	NS	+
Had a prior VISTA project	NS	NS
Project goals		
Centrality of goals to organization's mission	+	NS
Goals changed	-	+
Achievement of goals	NA	+
VISTA effectiveness		
Awarded two or more VISTA positions	NS	+
Difficulty recruiting VISTAs	NS	NS
Unqualified VISTAs	NS	NS
Amount of supervision needed	NS	NS
Helpfulness of VISTAs in achieving goals	+	NS
Implementation and support for project activities		
Activities evolved over time	NS	NS
Challenges overcome	+	+
Full-term project	+	+
Support from organization	NS	NS
Support from community	+	+
Corporation was supportive	NS	NS
Number of significant predictors	6	10

Note: + = positive and statistically significant; − = negative and statistically significant; NS = not significant; NA = Not applicable.

Analysis indicates that one particular characteristic of the VISTAs was not central to goal attainment: the project's assessment of their helpfulness. Goals were more likely to be achieved when they were central to the mission of the project, when the project lasted longer, when challenges were successfully overcome, and the community provided support. While this model was

only a first step toward understanding the factors that influence the success of VISTA projects, it explained more than 40 percent of the variation in goal achievement. As such, this model should provide a solid foundation for future research and evaluation.

Remembering that most projects did continue in some form after the last VISTA left, there still were some distinguishing factors separating those that continued from those that did not. The more "solid" organizations were more likely to be able to sustain project activities over time. These organizations had continuity in project leadership throughout the project, and had five or more employees; although often they were no more than 10 years old. They also had previous experience with the activities of the project, and had full-term projects. (As noted, some projects were not given VISTAs for the entire period as planned, due to decisions by the CSOs, often said to be related to budget shortfalls.) Continuing projects also had strong community support. Goal achievement and flexibility in adapting goals to changing circumstances were two other important reasons that projects continued.

The analyses presented in this report represent a first and significant step in identifying what it takes to conduct a VISTA project successfully, achieving the goals that were set and continuing on after the last VISTA leaves. We were able to conduct a preliminary assessment of the likelihood that a sample of ongoing projects would continue; the VISTA program might want to follow up on these projects when they have been completed and determine how well the model predicted the outcomes.

Future research might consider other potential predictors of project success that were not included in this study. Although we focused on the three most important goals established by a project, and found that achieving these goals was important to a project's continuation over the long term, we do not know about the outcomes of the other goals if there were more than three. We noticed during the abstraction process that some projects had such a large number of goals that it seemed likely they would have difficulty pursuing them all and tracking their achievement. Future research might focus on the development of goals and whether those that are more focused and clearly formulated are more likely to lead to successful outcomes.

Other factors that might be associated with success, based on discussions during the site visits, might be formulated as variables in future data collection efforts, including more detailed measures of the financial resources of sponsoring organizations, or of the characteristics of VISTA members. Such variables might add to the ability of the models to explain goal achievement and project continuation.

In addition, more analyses could be conducted using the data we have already. It might be possible to develop "profiles" of organizations that sponsor VISTA projects—combinations of characteristics that lead to achievement of goals and project continuation, as opposed to single characteristics as formulated in the current models. Research could then examine how the success of VISTA projects and factors predictive of success vary by type of organization. Finally, future research might consider measures of project success that go beyond the two considered here, such as impact on the community or on the populations they serve.

The findings also suggest several areas where VISTA might want to examine the current program in more detail. First, more information is needed on which recruiting techniques are most effective in ensuring a good fit between the VISTA member(s) and the mission of the organization and project goals. Second, the Corporation might wish to offer training for VISTA members that maximize their effectiveness for the organization. Such training might include a module on workplace fundamentals and etiquette. Finally, the Corporation might wish to provide organizations with more information to enable them to effectively manage VISTA members. One such strategy may be to foster networking among VISTA organizations so that they can learn from each other's experiences with common problems.