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Making Volunteer Management Happen: A Proposal for AmeriCorps

By [Steve McCurley](#)

April
2004

From Susan: *Steve McCurley's reaction to the Urban Institute report and my March Hot Topic was too long for an ordinary response posting, but just right for keeping the discussion going through a new Hot Topic. Thank you, Steve—and maybe more site visitors will join in the conversation (since we know there is a lot of talk about this going on off-line).*

In last month's Hot Topic ("[A New Report to Praise, Criticize and Use](#)"), Susan discussed the new report from the Urban Institute on volunteer management capacity in nonprofits and congregations. In a section of that commentary pithily entitled "The Ugly," she discussed the implicit suggestion within the report that some of our shortcomings in volunteer management capacity could be addressed by assigning AmeriCorps members to act as short-term volunteer managers.

In the month since the release of the report, it has become clear that the Corporation for National and Community Service is taking the findings seriously. Based on recent conference presentations by Corporation leaders and in-house directives to staff, AmeriCorps is gearing up to focus its energies on building volunteer management infrastructure. Also note that the new youth volunteering scheme Gordon Brown has proposed in the UK (see society.guardian.co.uk/volunteering/story/0,8150,1151693,00.html) is openly modeling itself on the American operation, so the issue may quickly become an international one.

One thing in the Urban Institute report that can't be argued is the finding that most charities could use all the help with involving volunteers that they can get. So, if AmeriCorps members were assigned to work on volunteer involvement, what would make it more likely that this bold effort would achieve the desired results, especially given the limited one-year timeframe for AmeriCorps assignments?

Thinking Outside the Box: An Alternate Approach

I propose that the best way to actually make progress is to approach this effort in an entirely different way. Instead of placing individual AmeriCorps members into charities, I'd place a *team* of members in a community, working through a Volunteer Center or similar resource/technical assistance organization. Have them operate together as a consulting team to create volunteer management efforts in a number of designated agencies, focusing on a coordinated community-wide effort, not a single-agency effort. This alternate structure (call it the Consulting Corps Model) would, I think, work better because:

- The team would more likely possess the mix of skills necessary to be successful consultants. Team members would benefit from multiple perspectives, additional human resources, and all the other advantages of the team problem solving approach. Working as a member of a team would also be a lot less lonely for the volunteers than working as individuals.
- Agencies could be linked together to encourage progress. Under the Consulting Corps Model we can create agency "user groups" to discuss progress, and to provide a little competitive impetus.
- The focus would be shifted from a "subsidized body" to a "project." The intent is not to simply provide an agency with a short-term volunteer manager; instead it is to assist the agency in creating its own volunteer involvement system. The Consulting Corps Model makes this distinction clear – and more likely to happen.

You could also have some fun partnerships in this model. Imagine the potential for recruiting volunteer corporate employees to assist in the consulting process....

If We Stay in the Box

Whether or not the Corporation considers my proposal above, there will continue to be individual agency placements of AmeriCorps members. Making an organization "volunteer friendly" is not an easy task, and expecting frequently-inexperienced volunteers to be effective is almost insulting to our profession. I have three suggestions for creating a framework in the application and management system of AmeriCorps which could make a real difference in outcomes.

1. Require a strong agency commitment to the effort.

AmeriCorps members are usually assigned based on applications by agencies. These applications resemble those commonly utilized in grant proposals – a lot of promises about what is to be produced. These are fine, but it would be helpful to add a few items not normally included in the usual grant application. Here's a list:

- *Demonstration of Board commitment.*
This would include a formal endorsement by the Board of volunteer involvement, assignment of a Board member to report regularly on progress to the full Board, and a regular spot on the agenda of Board meetings for volunteer input. Since top management support is essential to

the success of volunteer involvement, there is no point in assigning AmeriCorps members to organizations where it doesn't exist. Expecting an AmeriCorps member to create such support while also building the volunteer program is simply unrealistic.

- *Assessment of any volunteer efforts.*

Some agencies will be new at involving volunteers, others will be working to re-build or re-vitalize existing volunteer programs. It will be nice to have some baseline data on what does exist, so require each applicant to provide data on their volunteer utilization, volunteer pool, and volunteer management practices. Give them tools such as those on suggested in the Energize Library in the [Evaluation/Program Assessment](#) section or use Susan's comprehensive [Volunteer Management Audit](#).

- *Endorsement of local partners.*

Each grant proposal should require endorsement letters from a sampling of the following: Volunteer Center, DOVIA, Corporate Volunteer Council, fraternal organizations, Chamber of Commerce, interfaith coalitions, college or university community service groups, etc. Give extra credit if all these groups are members of an Advisory Committee for the effort.

2. Provide pre-service training in two key skill areas.

Pre-service training will be invaluable in helping AmeriCorps members get started successfully, whether in one agency or as part of a Consulting Corps. There are actually two key areas for training content.

- *Training in volunteer involvement.*

AmeriCorps members will need to understand volunteer management, ranging from trends, to position design, to recruiting and placement, to supervision and recognition. It is crucial to provide this training directly, since it is not likely to be available from anyone within the organization. This is quite different from past placements, where the agency was likely to have in-house expertise it could provide through on-the-job training. Fortunately, training in volunteer management is something we have extensive practice with in this country, so much so that it is now even being exported to other countries.

- *Training in consulting skills.*

The role of the AmeriCorps member is not just to be a short-term volunteer program manager, it is also to assist the agency in setting up a volunteer management system – and this is a different skill set entirely. Members will essentially serve as consultants to their placement agencies, helping the agency identify and implement volunteer needs. The best example of teaching this I've ever seen was the effort in the early 1990's by the Paradigm Project of the Points of Light Foundation to involve teams of volunteers as consultants to volunteer-involving agencies. You can still order some of the material through their Catalog services unit.

3. Build a support system.

Volunteer program manager can be a lonely job, partially because you often have no counterpart within your organization with whom to talk. Fortunately we can create a support system in a number

of ways:

- *Recruit cyber mentors.*
Involve AVA and recruit current volunteer managers who will agree to volunteer as online mentors for AmeriCorps members. This would provide dedicated, experienced help ready to offer information, advice or solace as needed. You could even talk AVA into making all of these folks “adjunct” members, and possibly convincing them that a career in volunteer management might be fun.
- *Link members in existing support groups.*
Enroll each member in the local DOVIA and in online listservs such as CyberVPM. Don’t just involve them in AmeriCorps listservs because the range of help will be broader outside of that insular forum.
- *Provide a technical assistance kit.*
There isn’t much point in re-inventing volunteer management. There are templates, tools, handbooks and every other aspect of volunteer involvement readily available. One CD could contain more than anyone is ever likely to need.

Last Thoughts

Many of us remember when the volunteer management community in the US was a lot stronger than it is today. Part of the discomfort with the use of AmeriCorps members as temporary volunteer managers probably comes from remembering the “Good Old Days.” I can actually remember when there was a major conference of volunteer managers occurring practically every week of the year – each with well over a hundred attendees – and when successful DOVIAs numbered in the hundreds.

We don’t have that anymore and we’re not likely to have that until more charities realize the advantages of volunteer involvement. I’d support anything that moved us closer to that, and I believe that assigning AmeriCorps members to help build the volunteer management infrastructure within charities, while not the Great Leap Forward we’d all like, is at least a step in the right direction.

And, at the risk of offending at least someone, much of the concern I’ve heard voiced by the “professional” volunteer management community toward having these “amateur” AmeriCorps members involved in their highly skilled field strikes me as far too similar to paid staff gripes about involving volunteers for comfort. If the track record of AmeriCorps demonstrates anything, it is that the commitment of young people can produce amazing results, especially with a little help from friends.

Your Turn

Susan asks: So what’s your reaction to the ideas just presented?

1. If Steve’s framework were adopted, do you think the whole concept might work? Or do you still have major reservations (explain)?

2. What do you think of the concept of an AmeriCorps Consulting Team?
3. How might this re-direction of AmeriCorps strengthen or hinder the culture of volunteerism across the USA ?
4. What happens when the one-year term of the AmeriCorps volunteer VPM has ended? What practices could be included in Steve's "framework for success" that would help prevent the collapse of the volunteer program structure after the AmeriCorps "builder" has left?
5. What do those of you from outside the USA think about all of this?

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Submitted on 3 April 2005 anonymously

Wow... I hope the AmeriCorps people take your suggestions to heart. As a former AmeriCorps Volunteer Coordinator for a volunteer driven non-profit, I see a lot of value and truth in Steve's comments. With no background in volunteer management, no format to follow and little support from the leadership of the organization... I was constantly frustrated, one step forward and two steps back, most of the time. My 1st year was as a 1/2 time member, my 2nd year was full time. Most of my time was spent scrambling to get the required # of volunteers to the site each day. A model based on Steve's ideas would have helped our community tremendously!!

News Update, 11 June 2004, from Susan:

See the new *From Research to Action: A unified national response to the 2004 Volunteer Management Capacity Study* that has just been released "for distribution to the field for review and reaction." This updated set of eight proposed national strategies indeed integrates many of the suggestions made by the field, including the idea proposed by Steve in this Hot Topic. You can continue to submit comments at: www.volunteerinput.org/ - influence the next stage, too!

Submitted on 11 May 2004 by Derreth Duncan, Manager, Volunteer Services, Thirteen/WNE, New York, NY 10001

Volunteer Managers... The Next Generation

I have the same opinions on the AmeriCorps suggestion as the rest of our tribe but I want to make some additional observations. I have worked with hundreds of student leaders, many did AmeriCorps service before they entered public service. Despite their variety, their similarities are striking. Here's my list:

- They are highly efficient learners. They had to be to get into and out of the universities they attended.
- They are used to learning environments and organizations.
- They have specific skills – and experience – in project management, team building and leadership development.
- Their management – and leadership – style is often collaborative and non-hierarchical

- As the knowledge workers of the future, they have 21 st Century communications skills; proficient in both print media with its linear reading conventions and internet environments where information is accessed in multiple dimensions.
- They expect diversity in their lives and in their workplace.

How do our jobs match up with their needs, what kind of workplaces do we offer and... They may be better trained and more highly skilled than your current managers.

Are We Ready For Them?

We already know that bad volunteer management practice has consequences. When people have a bad experience, feel their time is wasted and their skills are misused they leave, they don't come back and they talk about it. Your reputation suffers. The consequences will be similar when we misuse AmeriCorps members but they will also be worse because we run a much graver risk of losing them from public service completely if we treat them badly. Why stay?

This could be a terrific opportunity to influence and mentor future leaders. But we need to think about it because it isn't a quick fix and it doesn't come for free.

Submitted on 28Apr2004 by Scott D. Ingram, Director of Programs, Volunteer Center of Southern Arizona

A brilliant, but alas, flawed concept! After several years recruiting, observing, supervising, training, cajoling, counseling up to 60 AmeriCorps members a year, I've determined that the vast variance in the raw material you have to work with and the limits of a one-year term conspire against success in this instance. What we want are "consultants" who have skills, motivation, and credibility. The author is absolutely correct in stating that pre-service training and linking the members to a Volunteer Center would be essential. However, experience shows that the ability to recruit members who want to do this (as opposed to say, direct service mentoring kids) and are qualified/trainable - think business graduates, is limited at best. Finally, what happens in year two? Now you start all over again, low on the left end of the learning curve and entering unknown territory with respect to motivation and credibility. The idea of a Volunteer Consultants group like, for instance, SCORE, is a much more viable in the long run.

Submitted on 15April 2004 by Jayne Cravens, United Nations Volunteers, Germany

I think Steve's idea of placing a team, and all of his other points, are a great idea. At UN Volunteers, we are trying to evolve from just a volunteer placement organization to a volunteer promotion organization -- but our UN Volunteers are experts in engineering, governance, preventing HIV/AIDs, agriculture and education -- not volunteerism or volunteer management. Like AmeriCorps volunteers, training is *desperately* needed if UN Volunteers can act as advocates for volunteerism.

My biggest frustration in reading Susan and Steve's comments -- and everyone else's -- is that I doubt anyone from the Corporation is really listening... what a shame.

Submitted on 12April2004 by Kathleen McCleskey, KM Consulting and Training Connection, Texas, USA

I have conducted training for VISTA and AmeriCorps members for many, many years. Several years ago a PSO (pre-service orientation) was developed for VISTA. There was not one word in it about how to manage volunteers. The EST (early service training) which took place several months into the VISTA's term of service did have a module on managing volunteers but it was in an "information discovery" format. As a long time advocate, volunteer, practitioner, trainer, and consultant, I did mention "how to's" about managing volunteers. I felt I had to because VISTA's were being sent into their communities to recruit volunteers without one word about how to even begin to accomplish that part of their time of service. When I conduct training for AmeriCorps, it is never about managing volunteers but other subject areas.

The preparation for VISTA and AmeriCorps members to set up a volunteer program much less manage one is lacking. Then to add to that many of the program directors have never had a volunteer in their agency and are unable to help these members at all. I have talked to many members and they often feel "set up for failure" unless they have been given resources outside their formal training. For example: join a DOVIA, attend any training they can afford to attend at the local level. Some Volunteer Centers maybe prepared for the role of training in the area of volunteer management and some may not. Then there is the issue of cost which is another article I am sure.

Submitted on 11April2004 by Rob Jackson, Volunteering Development Manager, RNIB, Lincolnshire, England

As Steve mentioned, here in the UK we look set to get BritCorps so enamored of Americorps is our Chancellor Gordon Brown. I think we therefore have an opportunity to learn from the lessons of AmeriCorps and Steve's observations seem, on my limited knowledge of the programme, to both accurately identify the faults and propose some useful improvements.

Our government has thrown £300million at making it easier for people to find out about volunteering but almost nothing into support for volunteer management. BritCorps could go some way to remedying that omission but only if we learn the lessons of AmeriCorps in the USA.

Submitted on 2April2004 by Marnie Goldenberg, Manager for Professional Development in the Voluntary Sector, Volunteer Vancouver British Columbia, Canada

As a person who is dedicated to building the capacity of the voluntary sector and its volunteer programs, I think Steve's idea is an excellent one for a number of reasons.

First, it acknowledges the need to create short term volunteer opportunities. Secondly, it recognizes the ability of young people to strengthen the sector. Third, it provides an engaging opportunity for people to use all their talents to build something that can have a lasting impact. This is not a one-off project -- future AmeriCorps participants can continue the consulting work, can evaluate the impact of the work, or can take the work in new directions. One year consultants could focus on volunteer program evaluation, the next

on board development. There is an unending supply of opportunity here! My only recommendation: the consulting team needs to set realistic goals when working with organizations over a short period of time. Create opportunities for success so that we build enthusiasm for more system development.

Submitted on 2April2004 by Cara Thenot, Director of Online Publishing, Energize, Inc., Pennsylvania USA

I truly appreciate the previous 2 entries which help dispel a false assumption that all AmeriCorps members are young adults with not very much experience in the field of volunteer management. Some of the concern about AmeriCorps members serving as volunteer managers may come from that assumption. I recently visited the AmeriCorps Web site and discovered that several AmeriCorps programs have no age limit for volunteer applicants.

That being said, the real concern should focus on experience rather than age, which AmeriCorps can address in recruitment policies for this particular assignment. On their Web site, AmeriCorps states, "Some programs have specific skill requests in certain areas, and others look for a bachelor's degree or a few years of related volunteer/job experience." I don't see the harm in requiring a certain amount of experience managing volunteers AS WELL AS using Steve's suggestions for training to ensure that a volunteer or team is prepared for the challenging task at hand.

Submitted on 2April2004 by Hillary Roberts, Pres., Project Linus NJ, Inc., NJ/USA

Last month's topic had me a bit frustrated for all NPO managers. You most certainly outline well thought out, idea provoking solutions. Consider me recruited.

Submitted on 2April2004 by Kathryn Pursch, Women in Community Service, Seattle, WA

Steve brings up some excellent points about the need for thoughtful structure and pre-service training on volunteer issues as essential components for Americorps members charged with the task of involving volunteers. If Americorps members are focused on sustainability and program development (as VISTAs already do) in addition to the direct service portion of their work as temporary VPMs, then the whole thing might just lend energy and new ideas to our field. I am an Americorps VISTA alum now working in Volunteer Management. . .my Americorps experience led me to my current career. I welcome the opportunity for more people to gain experience in the field, and am excited by Steve's ideas on structured support!

Submitted on 2April2004 by Janet Sharma, Executive Director, Volunteer Center of Bergen County, Hackensack, New Jersey - USA

Janet Sharma is former chair of the Volunteer Center National Network of 350 Volunteer Centers working in partnership with the Points of Light Foundation.

If indeed AmeriCorps members are going to delve full steam into the field of volunteer management, I really like the concept of a team of AmeriCorps members working with a Volunteer Center. The team members could benefit significantly not only from the existing relationships that the Volunteer Center has with a broad range of community and faith-based organizations, but also from the

expertise that many Volunteer Centers have in training volunteer program managers. It will be interesting to see how this plays out -- whether the Corporation for National and Community Service will attempt to 'reinvent the wheel' utilizing inexperienced AmeriCorps members in one-on-one situations, or whether CNCS will leverage existing expertise within Volunteer Centers to create a wealth of knowledge that can be nurtured and passed along as AmeriCorps members rotate in and out of the team.

Submitted on 2 April 2004 by Lois, Washington USA

I also am a mid-life AmeriCorps member. The strategies outlined in this article are excellent. From my AmeriCorps experience so far, I know that many VISTAs are already being asked to be temporary volunteer managers--without much direction and with even less preparation or training. I think the article applies to all of AmeriCorps, however. According to the VISTA manual, "The VISTA's role is focused toward mobilizing community resources and increasing the capacity of the target community to solve its own problems." As you can see, even if a VISTA's project is not specifically identified as "volunteer management," the full scope of the mission can only be accomplished through volunteers. We need all the help we can get!

Submitted on 1 April 2004 by Barbara. Volunteer Manager/Habitat for Humanity, MI

Absolutely! AmeriCorps members need training about volunteer management. That is a must. I started at a Habitat affiliate as a AmeriCorps member at the ripe age of 46. We are not all youth. Thank goodness, I had experience working with as well as being a volunteer myself. I had absolutely no training through AmeriCorps. I think a team of AmeriCorps members to promote volunteerism in a community as well as design a recruitment, retention and reward system is a great idea.

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