

Training and Retaining AmeriCorps Members

Welcome

Thanks, everyone, for joining us today. My name is Don Pratt and I work for JBS International. We are the training and technical assistance provider for tribal grantees. Today we will share ideas about training and retaining AmeriCorps members. We will also hear from two guest speakers that have extensive experience running AmeriCorps programs in American Indian Communities.

Reminders

First, some quick reminders:

- Please note we are recording this call for playback. We will temporarily mute all phones after we finish introductions. We will unmute at the end of the call for questions. We will not record the Q&A portion.
- Please jot down any questions you may think of and we'll address them during the question-and-answer segment at the end. You can also use the "chat" function in WebEx to send questions to me during the session, and I will answer those either on the spot or during the Q&A.
- If you have a bad phone connection, the best way to clear it up is to hang up and dial back in.
- If you are having trouble accessing WebEx just follow along with the slides we emailed to you yesterday.
- This session is an introduction and overview to member training and retention. These topics can be explored in greater detail using additional resources provided at the end of this session.

Introductions

I'm your facilitator today. I've worked with national service programs of all types since 2000, with a particular emphasis on performance measurement.

We are also very fortunate to have Gail Boe and Brian King joining us today.

Gail operates an AmeriCorps program with the Osage Nation.

Brian operated one of the first AmeriCorps programs for the Blackfeet Nation back in the 1990's, and has since gone on to provide training and technical assistance to many tribal grantees. He is currently Associate Director of CO-OP at Montana State University. (CO-OP = Caring for Our Own)

Now let's see who else we have on the call. I'll go through the list on WebEx and ask each of you to just say your name, your tribal affiliation, and the name of your AmeriCorps program.

Agenda

This is our agenda for today.

First, we will review key aspects of member orientation and training, including why training is important and what it's supposed to accomplish.

Next, we will discuss some strategies for ensuring members stay with your program and have a fulfilling service experience. This will include looking at what you told us about member training and retention in the online poll, as well as some tips and pointers on member retention.

Finally, we will consider additional resources and set aside time for discussion and questions.

Why Train Members?

So, why do we train members? It seems like such an obvious question that it sounds almost ridiculous. However, it is important to remember there are several reasons for member training.

- First, to equip members with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to perform effective services
- Second, to promote members' personal growth as a benefit to them of serving with AmeriCorps
- It's helpful to keep both these reasons in mind when planning training and when explaining to members why they're participating in training. You will often find that these two reasons for training overlap. For example, learning how to manage one's time or resolve conflicts can be useful for conducting service, but these are also skills that members can use throughout their lives personally and professionally.
- It is important to make training meaningful for members. This means reminding them how specific pieces of their training equip them for service and give them skills they will value for the rest of their lives.
- Training is also important for member retention. Members that are well-trained and prepared for service are more likely to be satisfied with the service experience. Members that are not well-prepared for service are more likely to become frustrated and lose interest.

Overview of Orientation and Training

So what should you typically cover in orientation and training?

- Basic orientation, policies and procedures, and position- or site-specific training

Position- or site-specific training refers to training to support the specific activities members will do. These activities should be described in the position descriptions for members at each site. For example, if position descriptions for an environmental restoration program say that your members will remove invasive species, then training will include learning how to

differentiate native and non-native plant species and proper techniques for removing invasive species.

Consider alternatives to the "classroom approach" that will make training more interesting and relevant.

- For example, you can let members attend staff meetings. That can be a good way for them to get a handle on how things are run and why it's important to do things in particular ways.
- Job shadowing is another good way for members to learn roles, responsibility, and tasks by observing how they're actually done.

Member Orientation

Orientation should familiarize new members with the following:

- National service and AmeriCorps: This includes the history and culture of national service and AmeriCorps in particular. It is important for members to understand they are part of a nationwide organization and effort.
- Difference between service and a job: It is not uncommon for new members mistake their service assignment for a "job" and their stipend as a "wage". However, what differentiates AmeriCorps from an ordinary job is that AmeriCorps is about changing lives and communities. It is important to instill in new members the idea that service is about helping others and meeting critical needs in the community.
- Locally, members need to learn about your specific program and sponsor organization, and the community needs they will address. Explain your organization's mission and how your AmeriCorps program contributes to this mission. Members also should understand what will be expected of them specifically at the site where they will serve.
- Orientation will, of course, include coverage of rules and regulations as described in the member handbook.
- And, orientation will need to cover member benefits and the living allowance.

At a minimum, orientation should help members understand what they will be doing, where they will serve, how to document service and hours, rights, responsibilities, and benefits.

Keys to Effective Orientation & Training

Let's consider some keys to developing effective member orientation and training.

- Develop a training calendar to organize and plan training throughout the year.
- As a service to everyone on this call, I would ask that you email me your training calendars, and then I will share them with the group. That way we can learn from each other's examples. You can email your training calendar by replying to the webinar reminder I sent you yesterday. I will collect them all and send to the group.
- Identify someone who is responsible for training members. Determine whether you need to engage multiple people to participate as trainers. This is something to think

about when organizing your training calendar. You may need to confer with others involved in training to make sure they're available on the days when you need them to do a particular training.

- Incorporate adult learning principles into training. This includes involving members in the learning process and asking for their input on planning and implementing learning activities. Members will be more receptive to learning if they feel their own needs – as identified through feedback – are taken into account.
- Reflection activities, both as an individual and a group exercise, can further enhance learning. We will examine in more detail later on.
- Another key to effective orientation and training is to warm up members with ice breakers. We will look at this in more detail on the next slide. Using games and group exercises can also promote teamwork and cooperation. If members can solve problems successfully in a training setting then they will be more likely to succeed in the field.

Warm-ups and Ice Breakers

Use warm-ups and ice breakers to engage new members and to get them ready to learn.

The purpose of warm-ups and ice breakers is to get members out of their shell so they can engage with each other and begin to learn and identify as a group.

One type of exercise involve sharing information about oneself with the group, such as sharing your name and how you acquired that name.

Another type of exercise involves sharing how one feels about something (such as their upcoming service) so members can work through their feeling about starting something new and develop group cohesion.

Yet another type of exercise may involve group problem-solving, such as using unusual materials to construct a bridge or a tower as part of a team.

It's a good idea to use a warm-up or ice breaker each time you bring members together for training. It's a good way to re-acquaint members with each other and get them in the right frame of mind for learning.

Training is a year-round activity

Training is a year-round activity. Of course, the biggest chunk of training occurs at the beginning of the program year. However, we don't want to overwhelm new members by trying to train them on everything right away. This means limiting new member training to "the basics" and whatever members need to know to get started on their service.

Spreading training out over the year also creates opportunities to bring everyone together as a group. This can be an opportunity for fun as well as learning. Getting members together for training periodically during the year is a great way to check in on members and see how their doing. It can also be used for team building and to provide welcome breaks in the weekly routine.

It is also important to plan for the possibility that you'll need to provide orientation and training for members who come onboard during the year. This may involve training individuals or small groups of newly enrolled members during off-cycle times. Make sure you have a good plan in place for this.

What you told us about training and retaining members

Now let's look at what you told us about member training and retention.

First, we asked what methods you use to engage and support AmeriCorps members.

- The two most common responses are that you like to engage and support members by:
 - Finding ways to remind them why their service matters, and by
 - Giving them a voice in deciding service activities and projects.
- These are two very important ways to engage and support members. The first one involves talking about what you're trying to "Get Things Done" for, in other words, why they're doing the service (and what all the sweat and effort is about).
- The second one is also very important because it encourages a sense of "ownership" and inclusion. Basically, you're telling members they aren't just an appendage of your program; they're the core of it! (No pun intended)
- The other responses are also good ways to engage and support members.
 - Social gatherings can be something for members to look forward to and an opportunity for them to reconnect as a group.
 - Member recognition events, featuring members in publications, and encouraging reflection are also important.

Next, we asked what methods you've thought of using to engage and support AmeriCorps members.

The two most common responses were:

- Encouraging members to engage in personal or group reflection about their service, and
- Giving members a voice in deciding service activities and projects

What's interesting about this is that "giving members a voice" was also a commonly used approach, so many of you have either used it or at least thought of using it. We will talk more about both these approaches later on.

Supporting and Retaining Members

So, let's look at some keys to supporting and retaining those members you've worked so hard to recruit and train. One key to retention is to make sure members are engaged in service that's a good fit with their skills.

- This process starts by learning something about each member's skills, experience, and background to identify skills they already have and which skills they don't have. New skills can be learned, existing skills can be enhanced.

Skills include both "soft skills" and "hard skills".

- Soft skills are "people skills" such as communication, patience, time management, flexibility, and teamwork.
- Hard skills are skills that members use to carry out particular tasks, such as knowing how to operate a chainsaw or a computer.
- Members typically need some training in each of these skill areas to succeed and find fulfillment through service. Enhancing existing skills, e.g., in the area of oral and written communication, may come through presentations, journaling, and writing reports.

If your members are supervised by someone other than you, then ask yourself if these supervisors are adequately trained to support your members.

- One of the most important relationships a member may have is with their supervisor. This person needs to be adequately trained to understand both the program and their role and expectations as a supervisor.

In building an effective program, it's useful to take advantage of your members' diversity, which translates into a wealth of knowledge, skills, talents, and experience.

- Due to their different backgrounds and experience, some members may be good at organizing while others may have artistic talent to develop materials. Identify what members like to do and are good at. Use this information to assign members to different roles and tasks.

By the same token, helping members grow and develop means getting them outside their comfort zone. Ask members to try new or unfamiliar things. This can be challenging but also stimulating and rewarding. Be sure to provide support and guidance to members trying something new, so they don't get discouraged.

Periodically review member placements to keep track of how members are doing and to ensure they are engaged in challenged and fulfilling service. Dissatisfied members will eventually vote with their feet by leaving. Don't wait for this to happen before addressing their needs.

- Ask staff that supervise members to provide monthly or quarterly written summaries of what each member has done and how they've performed. Then, use these reports to review member placements and make changes.
- Discuss placements with members and supervisors. Members need to feel included in the discussion.

Another way to promote member growth and engagement is to give them a sense of program ownership.

- This can be done in a number of ways, including creating a system of self-governance for members, allowing them to vote for a team leader or representative, having a say in the choice of activities, and involving them in project planning. You don't need to give up

control of your program, but you can get them involved in a way that makes them feel like they belong.

Getting members to talk about the program to others is another great way to get them to identify with the program and feel like they have a stake in it.

- A fairly easy way to start is to get members to stand up and talk about their work with the membership and program staff.
- Once members become comfortable talking about the program to an internal audience, you can ask them to speak about the program with external audiences, such as community members, other departments/agencies/organizations in the community, and even tribal government representatives.

Reflection can be done through personal journals to encourage individual growth. These journals can be kept private by the member.

- Reflection can also be done as a group discussion (such as talking circles) to promote team and community building. Individuals can reflect on their own first (e.g., through journaling) and then come together to share their perceptions and ideas.
- Group reflection can be guided by a staff person or trusted team leader to ensure that reflection occurs without passing judgment or creating division. Handled appropriately, reflection can relieve tension and re-energize members.
- Reflection should be for a goal, such as to build team spirit, promote critical thinking, or acknowledge the contributions of members.

Include history, language, arts and crafts in member activities

- Provide tribal and non-tribal members an opportunity to learn about the rich cultural traditions of the tribe.
- As representatives of your program, and possibly by extension your tribal government, it is important for members to know the culture of the community where they serve.

Spotlight a member and their work in the tribal newspaper. If you're not comfortable with putting individual members in the spotlight—or you feel this might make them uncomfortable—then spotlight the work of a group of members.

- Thank members for their contributions and commitment. The thank-you can come from you. Sometimes it can also come from someone else in the community, such as a member of tribal government. Another way to say "thank you" is by organizing no-pressure social gatherings for members.

Make service meaningful and offer variety. Part of the incentive for members to stay is the knowledge that their service makes a difference.

- Members may not always be able to see a direct connection between what they do and a benefit to the community. It's up to you to explain exactly how their service supports

important outcomes for individuals and the community. Remind members whose lives their service impacts and how.

- Another way to keep things fresh and interesting for members is to give them a chance to try different tasks and roles. This also helps to develop a broader array of skills and deepen existing skills. Even if your program is set up so that most members do the same thing (e.g., tutoring), you can give them a chance to serve in a different classroom, tutor different subjects, or tutor different students.

Find regular opportunities to celebrate accomplishments and milestones to instill a sense of achievement and to show them their service matters.

- Use periodic trainings or other get-togethers as an opportunity to celebrate accomplishments and give members a chance to talk about their service.
- Consider awarding certificates for completing training, or distributing small prizes for accomplishing a milestone.

Offer ongoing support and be proactive in addressing members' needs and problems.

- Identify individuals with problems quickly and offer support. Stay in regular contact with site supervisors who will be the first to know when problems arise.
- At the same time, members need to know that they have a responsibility to the program and must be accountable. Require that members make up missed time, even if it's just a day or an hour.
- Holding everyone to the same standard is also important, so enforce policies consistently. Remember, the other members are watching.
- Be supportive of members who are having difficulties fulfilling their obligations. Try to determine the underlying reasons for these difficulties and help them connect to support in the community.
- Identify individuals in the program and the community who can mentor members who need help.

Additional resources

If you haven't already, please take a look around the national service website for examples that may help you with your member training and retention. Even though they may not specifically say they are for tribal programs, many of the materials can be adapted to fit your program so you don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Here is a list of some helpful resources at the national service website.

- Training and Development Topics, <http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/member-and-volunteer-development/encorps/training-and-development-topics>
- Member Orientation
Orientation: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/member-and-volunteer-development/encorps/member-orientation>
Checklists: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/member-and-volunteer->

Webinar: "Training and Retaining AmeriCorps Members"

[development/encorps/orientation-checklists](#)

Ice breakers: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/member-and-volunteer-development/encorps/warm-activities-ice-breakers>

- Reflection Resources,
Reflection by Design,
<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/resource/reflectionbydesign.pdf>
Service Reflection Toolkit,
<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/resource/reflectiontoolkit.pdf>