

Life After AmeriCorps Day 2006: A Case Study of One Large-Scale Event

Each year, several large and small organizations in metropolitan Portland (Oregon) band together to present a day-long conference that helps transitioning members answer the question, “What next?” Seven people serve on the planning committee; they meet about four or five times a year. Once they decide on the topics for conference sessions—based on pre-surveys of members and evaluations from the last conference, they divide up the work and take responsibility for recruiting speakers. Typically, speakers are people they know in the community, with whom they have a working relationship. They try to recruit some former AmeriCorps members as presenters; all speakers volunteer their time and are not paid.

Another option: Community Youth Services—a smaller AmeriCorps program, with fewer outside resources—takes a different approach to finding speakers for their LAA conference. They see if members would like to present on topics they have expertise in. “We got a great response when we asked members if they wanted to lead workshops,” says Beth Meyer. “It’s an opportunity to take some risks and talk to peers about what they know. For example, one member who had been to grad school talked about his experience.”

At the June 2006 conference in Portland—the ninth annual “Life After AmeriCorps Day”—a couple hundred members filled a large lecture hall at Portland State University. (The space was donated, centrally located, and easily accessible by mass transit—all important factors in choosing a venue.) Members had a chance to network with each other and enjoy coffee and pastries before a brief welcome by an Oregon Commission member.

Margo and Christine, members who will be leaving service in six months, were typical of the attendees: in their early 20s, from a small environmentally focused program, and unsure of their future plans. “I’m here to get resources for job opportunities and information about graduate school,” said Margo. Another member, Angela, knows she wants to enter the public sector when she completes her service in two months. “I’m looking for information on public outreach. We’ve had a lot of trainings [in the past] and most were geared toward youth and the environment; I wish there had been more variety and more on building organizational capacity.”

The three women had 15 different sessions to choose from (one was repeated twice). The hour-long sessions—mostly panels, but some involving hands-on exercises with one presenter—covered the gamut from job search skills to using your Ed Award to visioning. There were also four different opportunities to get your resume critiqued. The five most popular sessions, in order of attendance, were International Work and Service, Making Plans for Your Ed Award, Networking and Informational Interviewing, Traveling and Living Abroad on a Budget, and Applying to Graduate School.

Of those participants who turned in evaluations (about half the people attending), 80 percent rated the whole day as very good or excellent. The “most valuable aspect” overwhelmingly was the information on the Ed Award and the resume reviews. “It was great to meet people from the field in person,” remarked one member. Another appreciated “the good, concise handouts” and “getting advice from people with a variety of backgrounds.” One evaluation

applauded the “non-threatening environment to ask questions” while others commented favorably on the fact that the conference was not mandatory, that sessions lasted only one hour, and that there was a lot of diversity in the offerings. Among the suggestions for improving the conference in the future, members wanted to hear from more AmeriCorps alumni—especially personal stories on their transition after service. Also, several people noted that speakers should postpone question and answer periods until the end, allowing more time for presentation of more generic material.

Anne, an older attendee who is a VISTA, was pleasantly surprised by the conference. “I wasn’t expecting to get a whole lot out of it because I’ve already done plenty of resumes and job searches, but I learned some things in the networking session,” she admitted. “I also was inspired by the panel on following your passion in the arts.”

Remember: not all members are starting from the same place, so be sure to include information that will be helpful to people at different stages in their lives and careers.

More than a month after the event, the conference planners got together for a debriefing session. Based on the member feedback and their own observations at the sessions, here are some of the things that the planners decided to change:

- Ask members in the pre-planning survey if they’re planning to stay in the area or move away after service. This will guide how “local” the sessions are.
- Add a box at the resume sign-up so people who don’t get an appointment for a one-to-one review can still leave their resumes and get written feedback after the conference.
- Organize a cookies and coffee reception by AmeriCorps alums at the end of the conference to provide “closure” and allow for networking. The alums could use this as a recruitment opportunity. Also it could be a fundraiser if alums want to include a job fair and charge employers/organizations for booths.
- Ensure more diversity of speakers and encourage them to present first and then answer members’ questions later. Speakers should be provided with a list of questions to guide their presentations, including what was your path; what educational background and qualifications are needed for your position; what are the challenges and rewards.
- Add a session on “becoming an entrepreneur.”
- Allow presenters to share their Web site and/or contact information as part of the printed program.

As the last order of business, the committee picked a date for next year’s conference—giving them a running start on reserving a venue and blocking out their calendars!