

EnCorps: Training Tips From a Veteran

Neil Schulman of Northwest Service Academy (NWSA) in Portland, Oregon, shared some of his in-the-trenches knowledge about planning a training (both orientation and on specialized topics and skills) and working with outside experts to deliver training to AmeriCorps members and staff.

Neil is the Training and Member Development Coordinator for NWSA's Lower Columbia Center, with 120 members serving in Oregon, predominately in the Portland metropolitan area. Members work for sponsors at various sites in individual placements or on teams on projects to preserve and restore the natural environment.

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Planning a Member Orientation

Here is a brief look at the process Neil Schulman uses in welcoming a new class of members and getting them ready for the field. Neil offers two succinct bits of advice:

- Start early
- Document your process to make planning easier in the future

A Step-by-Step Planning Process

These are the specific steps Neil's program follows. Many of the steps can be taken simultaneously, and you may wish to adapt them to meet your own specific needs.

Step 1. Begin the planning six months in advance.

For October trainings, Neil begins planning and delegating responsibilities in March. Even if your documentation is just notes stuck in a "planning" file, you'll be glad next year that you wrote down what you did and when, who you called, and materials you needed.

Step 2. Find a suitable training space.

Without a space, nothing else can move forward. For NWSA's Member Orientation, Neil needs a venue for six days during the week with free parking and access to public transit. He looks for a hall big enough

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to hold his group, three to six breakout spaces, and ideally, a lawn area for icebreakers and other activities.

Churches are a potential venue. Other spaces to consider include community meeting halls, library meeting rooms, park facilities, or office complexes with vacant units. Ideally, the venue should be ADA-compliant.

Step 3. Draft an early agenda and map out the critical pieces.

Six months prior to an orientation, Neil begins drafting the agenda. According to Neil, it will be full of holes at first, but will serve as a guide in your process. (For agenda samples, please visit http://encorps.nationalserviceresources.org/mo_agenda.php).

Neil maps out critical pieces first (for example, if key presenters are available only on certain dates, the rest of the schedule must work around them).

Step 4. Create a task-delegation schedule.

Because of the many pieces involved in planning a six-day orientation, Neil oversees the contributions of a number of staff members with specific responsibilities. The program uses a task-delegation schedule that looks like this:

Task	Who's Responsible	When Due	Notes (Dependencies, Others' Involvement)	Current Status	Date Accomplished

One staff member, the “timekeeper,” updates the document weekly. Ideally that person “nags” individuals to keep them on top of upcoming deadlines and asks for quick progress reports, which go in the “current status” column.

Step 5. Check in regularly.

Neil checks in with staff members regularly on their tasks, so that their orientation assignments don't get forgotten in the wake of day-to-day commitments and constraints. Neil admits that all the bumps haven't been smoothed out of this process, but it generally works.

Step 6. Tap into the AmeriCorps and VISTA network.

Neil stresses the importance of tapping into the regional AmeriCorps network, which has a wealth of knowledge and ideas to share about orientation and running a program in general.

Deciding on Orientation Topics

For orientation, Neil says that there are so many required topics that trying to decide what to cover isn't an issue. A collection of items required by CNCS in member orientations can be found at http://encorps.nationalserviceresources.org/mo_elements.php. Required items derive from:

1. AmeriCorps, which requires members to learn its policies and procedures.

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2. Host organizations, which may require first aid/CPR training, workplace harassment training, etc.
3. Essential information for your program. For NWSA, it's topics such as tool safety or driver training.

Tips for Success

Because each of these topics are multilayered, they make for a full orientation slate. Here are some of Neil's tips to make orientations a success:

- If an hour block of time opens up as the schedule is created, Neil looks for a local expert to fill it.
- It's not always possible for members to remember all the information. Providing members with a handbook that covers the same material presented during the orientation ensures that members can access the information they need weeks and months later.
- Build in some fun icebreakers and energizers to keep up your audience's enthusiasm.
- Schedule a longer day than you think you'll need. For example, tell members the training will end at 4:30 but aim to finish earlier. This will help keep your audience focused.

Planning a Specific Topics/Skills Training

1. Choose topics.

Choosing topics and skills for specific training is fairly straightforward, depending on the goals of your program. Neil looks at the position descriptions for the various members who will attend the training, seeking common themes and training needs. He then schedules topics that will suit the needs of the greatest number. For members whose needs aren't met in the group training, Neil encourages them to seek out additional more specialized trainings. The same is true for members who may already have extensive experience in any given training topic.

2. Know your members' needs.

Neil uses member development surveys and frequent contact with team leaders to maintain a sense of the members' needs. He believes the key is to stay hands-on, and not get caught up in the beauty of a training topic that has limited relevance to the greatest number. As Neil says, "Sometimes more is more; sometimes it's not. Be in tune with members."

3. Schedule trainings strategically.

Several factors affect a program's training calendar. These include:

- The work plans of program staff. Scheduling trainings when responsible staff members are already overwhelmed with work is not the best idea.

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- Coordination with site sponsors. With individual placements, the sites are responsible for scheduling the members' day-to-day activities. Make sure you schedule trainings on days that accommodate the needs of the placement site.
- Keep your members in mind. Attempt to schedule trainings around their busy service schedules.
- Neil recommends four hours as an ideal time for most skill trainings. Additionally, smaller groups of participants work best.

How the AmeriCorps Culture Affects Training

Under the category of "Things I Wish I'd Known When I Started," Neil considers a few of the components of the AmeriCorps culture that can be quite different from working with similar groups outside of national service. Here are some tips:

1. AmeriCorps members are often willing to explore a topic without requiring that it be resolved by the end of the session.
2. Though it's not appropriate for all topic and skill sessions, an active, hands-on training approach often works best.
3. Offer options as often as possible, so members can choose their individual trainings.
4. Members are often more enthusiastic than competent when beginning a project. Neil's training goal is ultimately to lead members to a stage where their enthusiasm matches their new skills, which have become second nature. One approach is to create scenarios-based training to mimic situations members will see in the field. An ongoing challenge, Neil says, is the varying levels of knowledge members bring to their service.

Recruiting Local Trainers

Neil brings in experts to teach members specific skills such as trail building, invasive species ecology, and hydrology, among other topics. Creating relationships with your presenters, not just when you need their help, will make your life easier: it's more likely past presenters will present for you next year, which means one less training to start from scratch. Here are a few places to begin:

1. Your site sponsor. They know what the training needs to cover, and they can include training as part of their in-kind commitment.
2. Local universities and colleges. Call the department chair of the field related to your program's mission.
3. Like-minded agencies. For environmental programs, this means state and local park districts, state natural resource divisions, local and national community-based nonprofits, or federal agencies.
4. Former AmeriCorps member now employed with agencies or organizations with similar goals.
5. Professional meetings. Attend them regularly to network with people in your program's field.

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What to Look for in a Trainer

For an AmeriCorps training, you're looking for experts, Neil says, "who have both topical knowledge and an affinity for training and working with groups."

If you don't already know the trainers, ask others for their opinion of them.

If you get good reviews, consider doing an Internet search on the trainers to learn more about their specific expertise.

Then, make the contact.

Explaining "AmeriCorps" to Community Trainers

When making your initial contact, start by letting the person know that you are looking for an expert to work for a morning (day or afternoon) with a group of AmeriCorps members.

Discuss AmeriCorps and your program's mission; explain exactly what you are looking for (i.e., a four-hour training on trail-building), and how that person's contribution will enable your program to succeed. Let the person know this is an opportunity to work with an idealistic and dedicated group of people, the sort of people he or she may even want to hire down the road! Make it a mutually beneficial proposition.

Once the individual agrees to provide a training, supply information such as a good description of the audience and their training needs on the chosen topic. The more successful the trainer is, the more likely he or she will want to come back next year!

Working With a Trainer

After a local expert has agreed to work with you, here are some considerations.

- During your initial conversation, ask open-ended questions about the training topic, so you can get a sense of the trainer's ability to convey information and enthusiasm for providing training. Neil notes, "While many trainers have both topical knowledge and the ability to train down, sometimes your role is to help close the gap between trainers' topical knowledge and their ability to effectively train AmeriCorps members."
- Don't expect trainers to adhere completely to your ideas on the topic; as the experts, they should guide the discussion of what information will be presented. Your role is:
 - 1) To describe the general outcomes you want at the end of the day.
 - 2) To ensure the training tactics will be effective (e.g., not too much lecturing, hands-on practicing).
- Keep in mind that experts aren't always adept at teaching; for this reason, Neil recommends making a local university or college your first stop. As you discuss content with the expert, make sure the presentation will have the interactive elements you desire.

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- When volunteering at an AmeriCorps training, it's not unusual for trainers to cancel when something job-related or urgent comes up. So, have a Plan B. Knowing your local experts personally can give you an edge; they may be less likely to cancel on someone they know. The ability to provide payment also helps ensure the trainers show up.
- After the initial contact, follow up with an e-mail that describes your objectives for the training and your understanding of the agreed-upon outline of the presentation. Reiterate the dates, time, and any remuneration discussed. Include information on your program's goals, work sites, and anything relevant. Keep it short.
- Roughly three weeks prior to the training, meet with the presenter face-to-face to go over the particulars.

Handling Sensitive Member Trainings

Communication and Conflict Resolution

Timing is a factor when planning these trainings. Do them too soon, and the topic of conflict resolution isn't relevant; members are still in a honeymoon period. Neil recommends scheduling these about one-third of the way through the year. For individual placements, he does a standard, interactive set of activities about communication and conflict resolution. Field teams, on the other hand, require a different approach. They are often working under adverse weather and housing conditions, and issues arise that are specific to each team. Neil consults with the team leader prior to planning a session to find out the issues that need to be addressed. He then chooses from a portfolio of activities and selects those that best suit the situation.

Diversity

Neil encourages members to participate in planning diversity training. In many cases, they've already had several diversity trainings, and they'll gain valuable experience in applying what they know in planning the training. Additionally, this is a hot-button topic and tailoring it as closely as possible to the individuals involved enhances your chances for success.

At NWSA, members are asked the diversity topics they'd like to see covered and their responses inform what's included in the training. For example, members' desire to learn about the parity of city parks in lower income versus higher income neighborhoods led to a session on this very specific diversity issue. Neil recommends considering local topics, rather than general discussions.

Conducting Post-Training Evaluations

At the end of a training, members fill out a form that asks: "What was valuable and why? What improvements would you recommend? Your Name_____." Neil notes, "I tend to ask for names on feedback, and not everyone likes it. In short, I try to create an open culture where people can attach their names to constructive feedback, and also feel some pressure to make feedback constructive."

Use these to debrief with staff. Use both staff comments and members' feedback to inform next year's training.