

## FIGHTING POVERTY WITH PASSION AND A UNIVERSITY PARTNER: THE CREATION OF A HIGH IMPACT AMERICORPS VISTA PROGRAM

**Thomas A. Bryer** is the Director of the Center for Public and Nonprofit Management at the University of Central Florida.

**Maria-Elena Augustin** is the Assistant Director of the Center for Public and Nonprofit Management at the University of Central Florida.

**Mukta Barve** is an AmeriCorps VISTA Member and Master of Public Administration Student at the University of Central Florida.

**Norma Gracia** is an AmeriCorps VISTA Member and Master of Nonprofit Management Student at the University of Central Florida.

**Valerie Perez** is an AmeriCorps VISTA Member and Master of Nonprofit Management Student at the University of Central Florida.

*With pressures to both develop skills necessary for an emerging job market and to develop strong, active, and ethical citizens, higher education institutions are facing a period reform. This article presents a case study of an academic center that strives, as part of its mission, to cultivate civically healthy communities through strategic university-community partnerships. Specifically, the case study examines the role of an academic center hosting an AmeriCorps VISTA program in building the capacity of school district, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations that are individually and collectively seeking to enhance educational resources and opportunities for K-12 homeless students. The article describes the rationale, theory, design, and early results of this partnership, and it suggests implications for both university-community partnerships and national service initiatives.*



### INTRODUCTION

In higher education today, there are two pressures being applied for reform. The first has the muscle of state governors and legislative leaders behind it; the second is promoted by educational and civic leaders. One is most concerned about value for the dollar, with value defined as student ability to get a job and contribute to the economy upon graduation; the other is concerned with the declining civic health of our communities. Advocates of one reform path often neglect the other, give the other lip service, or chastise the other for being ill conceived. Fundamentally, the concerns share a common foundation: how to strengthen our citizens and our communities to be empowered, skilled, self-reliant, and concerned for the whole body politic. Different reforms will emphasize each component differently, but the core remains.

This article presents a case study of an academic center housed within the School of Public Administration at the University of Central Florida. Specifically, the case examines how the Center for Public and Nonprofit Management (CPNM) has built a program and sustainable foundation for contributing to the development of citizens, strengthening of communities, and teaching of skills to students and community members. Through a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service, the CPNM designed and implemented an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program that seeks to build capacity of school districts, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations to better meet the needs of K-12 homeless students. The program enables promotion of volunteer service, development of skills to build organizational and relational capacity across sectors, and enhancement of overall community capacity to respond to the unique needs of K-12 students who are at high-risk of academic underperformance due to their unstable housing situation.

By framing the case of the CPNM and the development of its AmeriCorps VISTA program within historical, theoretical, and practical contexts, this article will discuss the implications of a model for university-community partnerships as it relates to higher education reform, and national service.

### **BRIEF HISTORY OF NATIONAL SERVICE AND AMERICORPS VISTA**

Volunteerism is documented to have positive social, economic, and self-efficacy benefits for volunteers and the communities they serve (Nesbit & Brudney, 2010). According to the Volunteering in America report (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012):

- In 2011, the number of volunteers reached its highest level in five years (64.3 million Americans)
- Americans volunteered approximately eight billion hours
- The most popular place for volunteering was in schools or other youth serving organizations

Since the 1930s and more specifically since the 1960s, the U.S. government has promoted volunteer service as a vital attribute of active citizenship. Whereas Republican and Democratic presidential administrations have varied in their approach to promoting the ideals of citizenship and their philosophy regarding the role of the federal government in such promotion, both parties have been consistent in their emphasis on volunteerism and national service (Bryer, 2012). The Franklin Roosevelt administration was the first to venture into the concept of federally-sponsored volunteer service as a means to achieve broader societal goals. At that time, the administration was concerned with putting able bodied men to work in the thick of the Great Depression, while simultaneously working to preserve and rebuild an expanding acreage of national forests—twin interests that gave rise to the Civilian Conservation Corps (Egan, 2009).

In the 1960s, the United States saw a renewed interest in fighting poverty, and governmental leaders sought avenues for citizens to serve the community and nation at home, just as they were able to do internationally through the Peace Corps. Thus, during the Johnson administration, we

saw the launch of VISTA, Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program—all initiatives to engage citizens in service activities to strengthen communities and fight poverty. As described to VISTA members in their official handbook:

*[T]he purpose of VISTA, as authorized in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act (DVSA) of 1973, as amended is: To strengthen and supplement efforts to eliminate and alleviate poverty... in the United States by encouraging and enabling persons from all walks of life, all geographic areas, and all age groups, including low-income individuals... to perform meaningful and constructive volunteer service in agencies, institutions, and situations where the application of human talent and dedication may assist in the solution of poverty and poverty related problems.*

The sacrifice expected of volunteers was apparent. President Johnson stated, in swearing in the first 20 VISTA members in 1964, “your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor often will be difficult, but you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort, and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man” (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006). VISTA members commit to one year of service, receive a small living allowance, access to health services, and they get an educational grant at the end of their year of service.

George H. W. Bush’s administration was next to renew attention on national service, with his creation of the Commission on National and Community Service to support full time service and encourage service learning in schools. The Clinton administration followed and ushered in the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and AmeriCorps. VISTA was placed under this umbrella to stand as it does today as AmeriCorps VISTA, a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations increased popular and financial support to national service programs. President Bush called on Americans to devote two years of their lives or 4000 hours to service and volunteerism; President Obama’s first legislative accomplishment was the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which increased funding for the range of CNCS programs, including AmeriCorps VISTA.

Since 1994, there have been over 800,000 AmeriCorps and VISTA members who have served the nation with over one billion hours of service (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013). VISTA members have engaged in a range of activities to help alleviate poverty through government, faith-based, and nonprofit capacity building, through cultivation of new programs, development of new systems of volunteer management, and creation of donor database systems to communicate with donors and track donations.

Continued support for national service programming is backed by research indicating a number of benefits. For instance, those who participate in service are more likely to continue volunteering, to engage civically and politically in their community, and seek a career in government or nonprofit service (Nesbit & Brudney, 2010). Further, data suggest that AmeriCorps has maintained neutrality in its volunteer activities and populations served, without bias in gender or race (Simon, 2002). National service programs are not without challenge

however. There remain questions on the ability of public policies, such as national service programs, to increase volunteering beyond levels that would otherwise be achieved, as well as the ability of volunteerism to have lasting impact on pressing social issues (Nesbit & Brudney, 2010). The difficulty of measuring outcomes associated with volunteerism presents perhaps the most significant challenge for continued support to entities and programs like the CNCS and AmeriCorps (Reingold & Lenkowsky, 2010). It is also one challenge which strategic partnerships between government agencies and higher education institutes and centers can help to address.

### UNIVERSITY AS A COMMUNITY PARTNER

As the U.S. government has sought to promote volunteerism and citizenship through federal programs and initiatives, institutions of higher education have been concerned with cultivating citizens as one of several of their significant functions (Watson, Hollister, Stroud & Babcock, 2011; Williams, 2012). Developing citizens to serve the needs of the state and society is not a new function of educational institutions; it is a role that dates to antiquity when the need was for preparing citizen-soldiers who were physically fit and loyal to the state (Murrou, 1956). In the present day, the challenge presented to higher education institutions includes the following (National Task Force, 2011):

- “Champion civic learning explicitly and repeatedly in its fullest democratic-enhancing dimensions as a fundamental U.S. priority and a component of all educational programs, including those that relate to job training and workforce development” (p. 41).
- “Strategically refocus existing funding streams to spur—from school through college and beyond—civic learning and practice in the curriculum, co-curriculum, and experiential education” (p. 42).
- “Create financial incentives for students, including first-generation students and those studying in career and occupation fields, to facilitate their access to college while expanding their civic capacities as part of their education” (p. 43).
- “Tie funding for educational reform and research initiatives—at all levels—to evidence that the funded initiatives will build civic learning and democratic engagement, both U.S. and global” (p. 43).
- “Report regularly on the levels of civic and democratic learning, set national and state goals for expectations about students’ achievement in civic learning before they graduate, and make such outcomes a measurable expectation of school and post-secondary education in public, private, and for-profit degree granting institutions” (p. 43).

In the past several decades, higher education institutions have become more open and widely available for the diverse populations in the United States. What began with an offering of higher education for returning soldiers through the GI Bill evolved to an opportunity for citizens from all socio-economic backgrounds. Democratized education presented new opportunities and challenges for institutions; with an increasing number of students passing through their halls, colleges and universities needed to be responsive to their diversity (through the development of new classes and programs in emergent disciplines such as women’s and gender studies) while also maintaining a set of core commitments to universal notions of citizenship (Loss, 2012).

Judging by the array of books and popular media articles that have been produced in the past decade alone, we can suggest that higher education has not met normatively desirable objectives of citizenship (Dewey, 1916; Ehrlich, 2000). Some of the statistics that suggest the need for new thinking and action on how higher education can promote citizenship include the following (National Task Force, 2011, p. 7):

- U.S. ranked 139th in voter participation of 172 world democracies in 2007
- The 2010 Civic Health Index indicates that only 10 percent of citizens contacted a public official in 2008-2009
- Twenty four percent of graduating high school seniors scored at the proficient or advanced level in civic in 2010, fewer than in 2006 or in 1998
- Fewer than 70 percent of high school seniors reported learning about important parts of civic knowledge in 2010, including the U.S. Constitution, Congress, or the court system
- Half of the states no longer require civic education for high school graduation
- College seniors scored only 54 percent correct answers on a test measuring civic knowledge
- Opportunities to develop civic skills in high school through community service, school government, or clubs are available disproportionately to wealthier students
- Just over one third of college faculty surveyed in 2007 strongly agreed that their campus actively promotes awareness of U.S. or global social, political, and economic issues
- 35.8 percent of college students surveyed strongly agreed that faculty publicly advocate the need for students to become active and involved citizens
- One third of college students surveyed strongly agreed that their college education resulted in increased civic capacities

To address the decline of civic health requires not only attention paid to civic education and a preparation of citizens to participate in procedural democracy, but also to the ideal of substantive democracy. In order to engage the vast array of citizens, both those who are students at universities and those who are not, procedurally and equally in democratic institutions, there must be a fair and equitable foundation for providing citizens with the means to meet their basic needs (Eikenberry, 2009). The role of higher education, we suggest, is to be a partner in cultivating *civically healthy communities*, defined as communities in which participatory processes are inclusive and diverse and in which participants have the skills, tools, and confidence to contribute meaningfully to the social, economic, and intellectual strengthening of communities.

This level of health is less likely achieved if citizens' basic needs are unmet. Basic needs typically are thought to include (Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2012): (1) *health* as the "full functioning of the body, the perfection of our animal nature" (p. 153); (2) *security* as "an individual's justified expectation that his life will continue more or less in its accustomed course, undisturbed by war, crime, revolution or major social and economic upheavals" (p. 156); (3) *respect*, meaning to "respect someone is to indicate, by some formality or otherwise, that one regards his views and interests as worthy of consideration, as things not to be ignored or trampled on" (p. 157); (4) *personality* as "the ability to frame and execute a plan of life reflective



of one's tastes, temperament and conception of the good" that also includes "an element of spontaneity, individuality, and spirit" (p. 160); (5) *harmony with nature* as a "sense of kinship with animals, plant and landscapes" (p. 162); (6) *friendship*, meaning when "each party embraces the other's good as his own, thereby bringing into being a new common good" (p. 163) and when people "love one another for what they are, not for what they can offer" (p. 164); and (7) *leisure* as "that which we do for its own sake, not as a means to something else" or due to some "external compulsion" (p. 165).

Partnerships between universities and the community are vital for the establishment of basic needs for all citizens. As Bryer (2011, p. 90) states: "Collaboration between universities and communities is potentially significant to successfully achieve both the educational objectives of the university and the public service objectives of community partners." The university brings to bear the full breadth and depth of faculty expertise, student passion, and an interest in both community-engaged research and teaching that can produce innovative research outputs and enhanced learning experiences. Community partners bring experiential knowledge, a set of needs and challenges with a range in complexity, and a generally open posture to receiving assistance. A model for partnership that seeks to forge this kind of mutually beneficial relationship and achieve a more civically healthy community—promoting both procedural and substantive democracy—is discussed next.

### FORMING AN AMERICORPS VISTA PROGRAM WITH THE CENTER

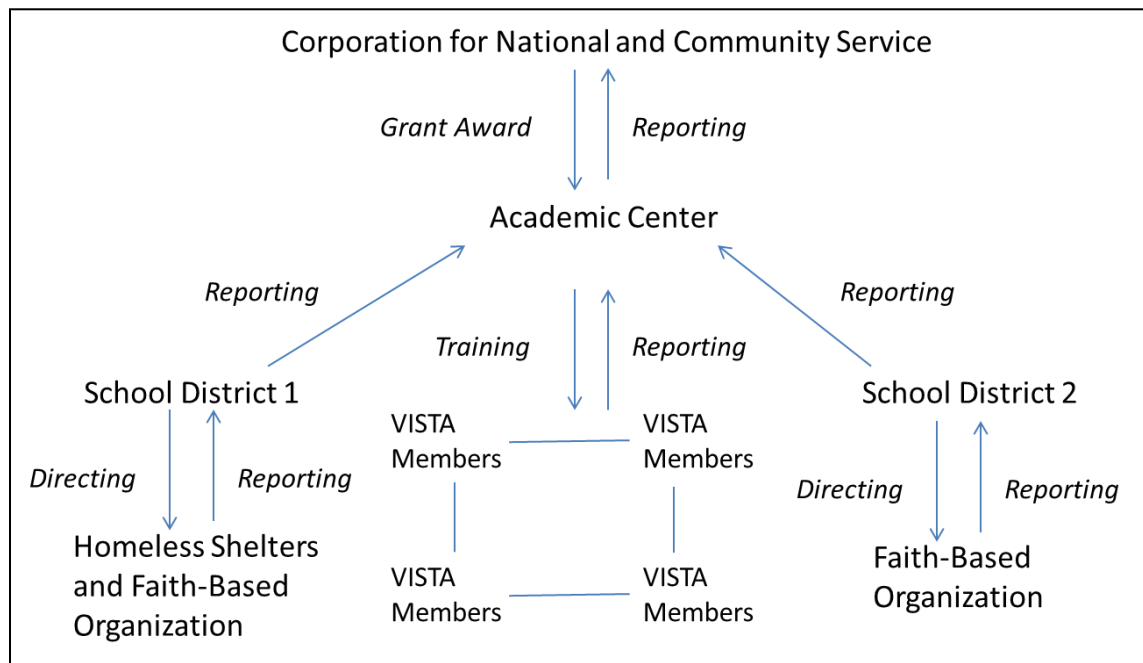
The Center for Public and Nonprofit Management (CPNM) at the University of Central Florida seeks to strengthen communities through relevant research by faculty and students and through capacity building services to public and nonprofit organizations. It represents the formalization and expansion of services and research already being conducted through various faculty members within the School of Public Administration, and facilitates the dissemination of the research. Current core research areas for the CPNM, defined by faculty and supported by the advisory council, are collaborative governance, democracy and citizen engagement, diversity and inclusiveness, and sustainability.

The CPNM was first established in 2003 as the Capacity Building Institute, which secured over \$2 million in funded awards for 11 major nonprofit capacity building projects. Working with more than 200 diverse secular and faith-based community organizations across the university's 11 county service area, the services delivered by the CPNM included capacity building research, training, technical assistance, and evaluation through a unique team approach utilizing faculty, graduate students, and local nonprofit professionals. Two research projects on healthcare access and quality were coordinated and presented at six conferences and research forums. In fall 2009, a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services supported capacity building for 80 small nonprofits to improve economic recovery in their areas.

Grant funded work through the Corporation for National and Community Service began in 2010 with a project to develop and incorporate performance management systems for nine

targeted nonprofit organizations. In 2012, CNCS awarded the CPNM an AmeriCorps VISTA program to work with the Homeless Education Programs of two school districts to build their capacity and sustainability. Figure 1 summarizes the structure of the Center's AmeriCorps VISTA program

**FIGURE 1: STRUCTURE OF THE CENTER'S AMERICORPS VISTA PROGRAM**



### *Addressing a Need*

Local to the University, Orange County identifies 7,232 homeless students as of May 2013 (3.8% of enrollment) and another, Seminole County, identified 2,229 homeless students (3.5% of enrollment). The CPNM AmeriCorps VISTA program provides capacity building services to identified partners in the community to ensure children and youth have access to education and other services and that such children and youth have an equal chance of meeting the same challenging state student academic achievement standards as any other student, despite their tenuous housing situation.

### *VISTA Member Activities*

Enhancing the capacity of organizations and programs to alleviate poverty is a core principle of the CNCS AmeriCorps VISTA Program and a critical component of the CPNM AmeriCorps VISTA program. The activities of VISTA members most directly relate to capacity building. VISTA members strengthen and support organizations by building infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, coordinating training for participants, and more, as dictated by local needs. They create systems that remain long after their service ends.

The CPNM VISTA members have been in service since August 2012 in the CNCS focus area of education, with the objective of K-12 success. They are building the capacity of organizations providing services to students living in poverty to improve academic performance and academic engagement. The project includes two action plans, one per school district homeless education program. One of the programs strives to build internal capacity for organizations, while the other seeks to strengthen organizations' external capacity developing community partnerships.

### *Internal Capacity Building*

To deliver internal capacity building, four VISTA members have been placed in the Families in Transition program in a local school district. The main goal of these VISTA members is to provide capacity building within the school district office and a partnering faith-based organization dedicated to serving K-12 homeless students. The VISTA members work at the Families in Transition (FIT) office, and an additional two member's work at the faith-based partner organization. The FIT VISTA members work on one of the following: involvement in tutoring and other school related activities, staff education, shelter liaison, or community awareness and outreach development. At the faith-based organization, two VISTA members work on community volunteer recruitment and management as well marketing of its programming to assist homeless students.

In a second school district, three VISTA members are stationed at homeless shelters to build capacity for new programs and services targeted at homeless youth residing in the shelter. The VISTA members also seek to build relationships with the school district, which is an externally focused role and thus also fits in that category.

### *External Capacity Building*

To deliver external capacity building, two AmeriCorps VISTA members work in the second school district to provide services to the Homeless Education Program and partnering nonprofit organizations in the areas of: organizational development, program development, collaboration and community engagement, leadership development, and evaluation of effectiveness. The goal of external capacity building is to aid organizations in increasing the quality and effectiveness of educational services for children experiencing homelessness.

One of the CPNM VISTA members who serves with the school district's Homeless Education Program (HEP) provides services to support the program's development as well as enhance community engagement. Activities include creating and updating print materials and updating website content and social media pages. Additional roles include evaluating the tutoring program and tutoring manuals, identifying and securing new Partners in Education, and creating a process of acknowledgement and recognition that sustains community engagement. The second CPNM VISTA member serving with HEP is responsible for providing nonprofit capacity building services to the agency's overall program development and collaboration efforts with service agencies. The VISTA member's activities include identifying and collaborating with early childhood programs, shelter and youth facilities in the county and community service agencies that provide services for homeless families.



*Supporting the VISTA Members through the Center*

The CPNM not only serves as the supervisor of the VISTA members and the overseer of the AmeriCorps program, but it also is a resource to VISTA members. Central to that role, the CPNM convenes all VISTA members on a weekly basis for professional development training on a range of subjects related to the work in their assigned organizations. For instance, the CPNM has conducted workshops on collaboration, fundraising, volunteer management, public speaking, e-mail etiquette, strategic planning, and needs assessment. Figure 2 depicts VISTA members engaged in one interactive workshop, in which VISTA members learned about the fragmentation of the social service delivery system in homeless services. The resulting discussion considered both the fragmentation of service delivery and the potential formation of partnerships to create more seamless access to services as it related to promoting substantive democracy in which more citizens can engage in politics and governance.

**FIGURE 2: AMERICORPS MEMBERS FACILITATING WORKSHOP ON SOCIAL SERVICE FRAGMENTATION**

*Early Results from the VISTA Program*

The program has already proven to be successful in enhancing collaboration between multiple agencies serving homeless students. Through the assessment process, the program is first exposing the cracks in the existing systems, and now plans to fill in the gaps to enhance services to the youth. One of the community partners offers the following testimony to the success achieved thus far (Anonymous, 2013):

*In a non-profit setting with limited resources, it is often difficult to set aside time to build systems that would eventually help ease the everyday difficulties of service. The CPNM VISTA project is an invaluable resource at this time where we have experienced our highest numbers of identified homeless students yet stagnant funding to increase staff to address capacity building. Our VISTAs are helping us create a more efficient and effective operation, so that we can meet the student need during these challenging times.*

Results across the two school districts can be categorized into two broad sets of activities: internal capacity building and enhanced collaboration with external stakeholders. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the results and specific task accomplishments from the first six months of the project.

**TABLE 1: INTERNAL CAPACITY BUILDING**

| Core Achievement  | Sustainable Output  |
|---|---|
| Two organizations implemented effective volunteer management practices  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrote a brochure for recruiting volunteers</li> <li>• Developed volunteer job descriptions for a Family Resource Advocate</li> <li>• Created volunteer database</li> </ul>   |
| Thirteen staff and community volunteers received training   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trained 12 volunteer Resource Advocates on the emotional and behavioral needs of the parents and children and the resources to assist them</li> <li>• Conducted a one-on-one session with a social worker using a new database</li> </ul>  |
| Three new/enhanced systems and business processes were put in place as a result of capacity building services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modified computer based system to track homeless youth in order to improve identification of student needs and issues to be successful in school</li> <li>• Created training materials on documenting homeless students in (Cayan) database</li> <li>• Created sponsor/donor database</li> </ul> |
| Six additional (education) activities/outputs produced by the program   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1,814 homeless students have been identified (target of 1,200)</li> </ul>  |
| Dollar value of cash resources leveraged  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$28,000 in donations from newsletter recipients</li> </ul>  |

**TABLE 2: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

| Core Achievement                                     | Sustainable Output  |
|--|---|
| Six staff and community volunteers received training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trained case managers and intake specialists at three partnering sites about the McKinney-Vento Act and the importance of identification with the school district</li> </ul> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Two new/enhanced systems and business processes were put in place as a result of capacity building services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed awareness/procedural folders targeted specifically to under-identifying schools</li> <li>• One partnering site is fully implementing a process whereas all parents of school-aged students receive informational material during intake</li> </ul>  |
| Three additional (education) activities/outputs produced by the program                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In two partnering sites, promotional materials have been created and posted in regards to utilizing existing academic resources such as tutoring for students residing in the facility</li> <li>• Created a parent bulletin board at two partnering facilities, informing parents of current education resources in the surrounding area</li> <li>• Developed “What’s next after high school” brochure, for parents to discuss college and technical school options with their child</li> </ul> |

### *Challenges and Opportunities*

An academic center hosting an AmeriCorps VISTA program is unique. There are other examples (e.g., the Center for Public Service at Tulane University and Baylor University’s School of Social Work), but the authors know of no other examples where the VISTA members are focused on a singular issue and social need. In that, the Center’s homeless education AmeriCorps VISTA program stands apart. It is not without challenges, however, some of which may be unique to an academic center and others may apply to the model of a third party institutions hosting multiple VISTA members who are then sub-granted out to other organizations.

Although seen as a challenge, there is also a benefit to academic centers hosting AmeriCorps VISTA programs including having the expertise of diverse faculty to train VISTA members. Further, access to university library resources is a benefit. The challenge is in meeting unique needs to a small fraction of the VISTA members through the delivery of whole population workshops. Developing more customized trainings regiments for VISTA members is desirable but not if such customization significantly increases costs of the training.

A second challenge also mirrors an opportunity. Whereas it is desirable if not imperative to engage multiple stakeholders in capacity building for such a complex issue as homeless student education services, not all partners may have understanding or leadership capacity to manage the VISTA members on a day-to-day basis. The academic center can provide simultaneous training to partner organization leadership and staff that complements the training received by VISTA members, but this may not be feasible on a voluntary basis for leadership and staff who are already pressed for time and resources.

One challenge that is likely not unique to an academic center is in the integration and socialization of VISTA members into the cultures of their work placements. VISTA members are not full-time employees of the organization, and they are likely only to remain in the organization (as individuals) for a period of one year. Investing heavily in them as part of an

organizational “family” may not seem worth it for partner organizations. However, such investment can ensure both VISTA member satisfaction and ultimate alignment of their work with the larger aim of the organization. Thus, participating in staff meetings, social events, and other workplace activities can be vitally important for the success and sustainability of VISTA member work.

Finally, two opportunities or advantages of hosting an AmeriCorps VISTA program within an academic center seem notable. First, as a university-based entity, the Center has access to a range of students and recent alumni to recruit for VISTA member positions. This can be particularly helpful in conducting targeted recruitment of students with known skills and credentialed training aligned with the needs of partner organizations. Second, and to the point raised previously about national service programs not having a clear outcomes-based record of accomplishment, academic centers can rigorously and systematically keep a focus on measuring impact across VISTA members and partner agencies. The Center has the capacity for ultimately tracking any “movement of the needle” with respect to social concerns, such as homeless student academic success.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SERVICE AND UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

With declining revenues available to local governments, increasing need for services, and more pressure to achieve outcomes with less, it is vital for partnerships and collaborations to develop in sustainable ways if, as a society, we want to meet our most pressing social and economic objectives. In the case of homeless education, we know that without support beyond a standard school day, homeless students, due to emotional trauma, poor nutrition, and unstable living conditions, are likely to underperform in school. The broader implication of this is that underperformance in elementary school is not easily corrected. A student who is not reading on grade level by third grade is likely to be challenged throughout his or her educational career. Middle school kids who have no permanent home to go to after school, or who have little or no food available once they get home, are likely to have a more difficult time focusing on their studies than kids in a more stable environment. High school students who are forced by family necessity to take part-time work to help stabilize their family may not graduate high school on time, if at all, and if they do, it may not be with the same competence and passion for higher learning as might otherwise be the case. Partnerships are vital when budgets are constrained across sectors, need is high for providing even the most basic needs to citizens, and there are untapped resources available through institutions, like colleges and universities.

The civically healthy community—through which citizens have their basic needs met universally and without bias in order to participate equally in our political and governance processes—demands creative collaboration that leverages the resources of a university. Universities have faculty with research agendas, students with passion, and instructional needs that can be met through strategic placement of students and alumni with community partner organizations. Fundamentally, if universities are seen as instruments through which to develop skills of students to enter an evolving workforce and as instruments through which to cultivate strong and ethical citizens, the university cannot operate in isolation.

The lessons from the Center's AmeriCorps VISTA program for university-community partnerships and national service are several. Taken together, they may be seen as a collection of principles on which to consider structuring programs in the future, or they may be seen as recommendations—in either case, they are based on the experience of a single academic center's experiences in the formation and early development of an AmeriCorps VISTA program and should be interpreted with this limitation in mind. It is our hope that the ideas be taken to advance the dialogue more than as fully refined notions that equal a formula for success.

First, we must recognize the politically tenuous position of national service programs despite bipartisan support over the past two-plus decades. Ongoing support for CNCS programs and projects, including AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA is not guaranteed. Yet, we know the data reported previously show benefits to both volunteers and communities. Citizens are cultivated; communities are strengthened. Through strategic alliance with CNCS, colleges and universities can strive towards an ideal in which democracy is actively pursued on college campuses through teaching, training, and community outreach. This strategic alliance can take the form of a sponsored AmeriCorps VISTA program, or it can be less intensive and take the form of annual recruitments for national service positions elsewhere. More compellingly, if we should see the time when CNCS is defunded and national service programs eliminated from the federal budget, we might look to colleges and universities to take up the torch in more structured and strategic ways.

Second, universities must recognize that their opportunity to provide education and individual empowerment does not stop at the edge of their campus. This is not a new idea, but it is a significant one. Preparing an “elite” few to be active and ethical citizens is helpful for the sustainability of our democratic institutions, but it is not sufficient if, as a society, we recognize the need for not only sustaining but strengthening of our institutions. Through service learning, applied research partnerships, and creative national service collaborations, education can be democratized to the benefit of faculty, students, communities, and society.

Third, universities must develop flexibilities to opening their resources—such as library resources—to citizens who are committed volunteers through national service or related local service initiatives, as the Center has done for its VISTA members. Access to information and expertise can make the difference between a high-impact service project and a service project that merely makes the volunteer feel good about him or herself. New rules should be explored so that committed volunteers can more easily register for classes, obtain a parking pass, borrow material from the library, browse library collections from off-campus, and receive appropriate discounts for special events similar to discounts students might receive.

Finally, universities should incentivize participation in national service programs. Several public and private colleges and universities offer to match the education award presented to AmeriCorps VISTA members at the end of their service, but the total number that makes this offer is a fraction of the population of institutions. Offering the matching scholarship is good for the university, as it can help recruit students with great passion, applied experience, and strong



commitments to public service. It is also, obviously, good for the volunteer—who can remain in the community after his or her year of service ends, rather than leaving for another city or another university where a benefit is offered. Keeping active and passionate citizens living locally and contributing locally serves a vital interest that can help transform communities from civically depressed to civically healthy. Indeed, working together, universities and national service can fight poverty with a passion and achieve sustainable impact.



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