



# How Embracing Workforce Development Can Set Up AmeriCorps Members for Post-Service Success

AUGUST 16, 2022 – ROBERT GODFRIED

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AmeriCorps is a national service program that pairs roughly 250,000 members across the country with local organizations to help communities tackle their toughest challenges. The program works best when it serves a dual function of both helping communities while also putting service members on a path to a well-paying job or educational opportunity after their service. To meet this goal, AmeriCorps programs should embrace workforce development by providing career exploration that connects to the skills members build through service, credentialing, and job connections to set them up for post-service success.

Workforce development is an equity issue. For AmeriCorp programs to be a viable option for Americans who want to serve their community but lack the financial resources, social capital, or educational background necessary to find a well-paying job quickly after serving, then AmeriCorps must take professional development seriously. As Next100 and the author have previously written, the AmeriCorps federal agency must rethink old assumptions about who serves in AmeriCorps and be willing to modify outdated rules and ideas about the role of workforce development in the program in order to make these opportunities more accessible. Grantee organizations (the local partner who

receives the AmeriCorps grant) must also devote the time and energy necessary to modify their programs to better support the post-service needs of their members.

This report was informed by over forty interviews with both members and staff of AmeriCorps grantee organizations across the country, as well as the members and staff of national service advocacy and policy organizations. The interviews focused on AmeriCorps programs that were models for workforce development initiatives and had a track record of placing the majority of their graduates in full-time employment or educational opportunities after their term of service. Programs interviewed include: a climate corps that is part of The Corps Network in Texas; a rural program focused on food insecurity in Tennessee; a program providing social services in Baltimore; and a construction-oriented YouthBuild program in Las Vegas, to name just a few. These interviews informed the workforce development best practices and policy recommendations that are outlined in this report.

This report is organized into two sections. The first section details policy recommendations for the Biden administration to improve workforce development and post-service

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This report can be found online at:

<https://thenext100.org/embracing-workforce-development-can-set-up-ameri-corps-members-for-post-service-success/>

placement opportunities for AmeriCorps members. The second section details workforce development best practices for grantee organizations.

Many of the best practices and recommendations for grantee organizations in this report require additional resources and capacity from already cash-strapped AmeriCorps nonprofits and an underfunded federal agency. The ideal scenario to fund these efforts would come from additional congressional spending to support national service. Without a large federal investment, nonprofits may be able to find additional funding to support these efforts from philanthropic organizations or supplemental grants from other federal or state agencies. The AmeriCorps federal agency can collaborate with other federal agencies to increase administrative capacity for workforce development initiatives and find additional funding sources for AmeriCorps grantee organizations.

## **The State of AmeriCorps and Workforce Development Today**

The most important rule that affects professional development and training for AmeriCorps members is called the 80/20 rule. This rule mandates that members can spend no more than 20 percent of their overall service time on educational and development activities. Programs are expected to train their members for their service term, provide professional development and skill building, and facilitate personal development, all within this 20 percent cap, a herculean task for even the most well-resourced programs.

In addition, the AmeriCorps federal agency is fairly vague about how this time must be spent, and provides few resources to help guide professional development training. Instead, it is up to the grantee organization to decide how to effectively use this time. As a result, the quality of workforce development training that a given member receives often corresponds with the financial resources and priorities of the organization with which they are serving. This leads to an unequal system where larger, well-funded programs that prioritize member post-service outcomes offer their members robust professional development (for example, by

pairing members with career coaches to figure out their post-AmeriCorps journey) while other programs can only do the bare minimum (like hosting a few resume-building workshops with outdated PowerPoints, which the author experienced first-hand). Members who serve with organizations that do not prioritize workforce development, or are not well-resourced enough to do so, end up without the workforce readiness skills necessary to transition to a job or educational opportunity after the program. As a result, many members are left with the option to re-enroll in AmeriCorps, find a minimum wage job, or become unemployed.

As of summer 2022, this lack of a direct path into a career or educational opportunity after the program may also be making recruitment more challenging. Program staff who were interviewed for this article reported that they were facing increasing difficulty recruiting AmeriCorps members, perhaps as a result of the strong labor market that has increased the opportunity cost of serving for pay at far less than most states' living wage. One way AmeriCorps programs can attract potential members is by increasing professional development opportunities in the program and building a pipeline to well-paying employment or educational opportunities after service.

In the recently released AmeriCorps Strategic Plan, the federal agency sets out the goal to “strengthen pathways to education, employment, and other opportunities [for AmeriCorps service members].” To achieve this goal and increase the post-service success and placement opportunities for AmeriCorps members, the AmeriCorps federal agency can focus on effective workforce development strategies by updating outdated rules and guidelines with stakeholder input, making additional funds available for grantee agencies to support these efforts, and facilitating the sharing of best practices for workforce development among grantee organizations. The report below outline policy recommendations and best practices for how the Biden administration, Congress, and AmeriCorps grantee organizations can improve workforce development in AmeriCorps.



## Recommendations for the Biden Administration

### 1. Track post-service outcomes and additional demographic data to better facilitate post-service opportunities for AmeriCorps members.

In the recently released AmeriCorps Strategic Plan, AmeriCorps leadership outlines the following goal: “strengthen pathways to education, employment, and other opportunities [for AmeriCorps service members].” To achieve this goal, the AmeriCorps federal agency needs more comprehensive data measuring post-service outcomes for AmeriCorps participants. Such metrics are necessary to evaluate how successful programs are in placing graduates in professional or educational opportunities after their service. These data also help programs better understand where and how to improve their workforce development training.

Many grantee organizations interviewed reported that they are already overwhelmed by the administrative burden of current AmeriCorps grant requirements. The AmeriCorps federal agency should offer additional sources of funding to cover the costs of increased data collection, perhaps by starting with pilot grants for programs that want to collect additional data on participants. The AmeriCorps federal agency should work with these programs to set up effective data collection processes and solicit feedback to assess which data are useful and not overly burdensome to collect. In its pilot, AmeriCorps should roll out these additional data collection efforts in tiers, starting with basic core member outcomes and eventually asking for more comprehensive data on outcomes, allowing grantee organizations time to figure out how to collect these data effectively. Grantee organizations that receive money directly from AmeriCorps (national direct programs) and state commissions should be partners both in the design and implementation of this data collection process. The AmeriCorps federal agency

## Metrics that the agency should collect on post-member outcomes include the following:



Whether AmeriCorps members complete their service.



Whether, upon program completion, members find a job or educational opportunity for up to one year.

- These data should be tracked at the half-year and one-year mark to get an accurate snapshot of post-service activities over time.
- Post-service education opportunities should include post-secondary education as well as occupational skills training and credentialing opportunities.
- These data are currently tracked by some opportunity youth-serving AmeriCorps organizations (doing so is required by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) grants); they can serve as a model.



**Members' wages in their post-service positions.**



**Whether members continue working in public service (including the public sector, the nonprofit sector, or an additional AmeriCorps service year).**



**Whether members enter a field of work or educational opportunity in the same issue area as their AmeriCorps placement.**



**Whether members continue to work in the area in which they served during their program, or in which they have previously served through other positions.**



**Whether members enter careers related to their AmeriCorps placement.**



**Whether members go on to work in high-need geographies.**

will also need to modify their exit form and may need to seek congressional guidance in order to facilitate programs' post-service communication with AmeriCorps participants and related data collection.

The agency should make these anonymized demographic data public and post it on the AmeriCorps Open Data Portal. Data should be shared at the state level and by the type of AmeriCorps program. Individual program-level data need not be shared publicly, but the AmeriCorps federal agency should track program specific data internally and be able to compile and share these data back with programs, which will require the agency to set up data sharing agreements with programs. This internal data can be useful in tracking and understanding larger patterns across certain types of programs or programs located in certain geographies.

For these metrics to be useful, the AmeriCorps federal agency should collect more comprehensive demographic data on AmeriCorps members themselves. These data would allow the agency to better understand larger trends

for AmeriCorps members as well as better understand important equity metrics, such as how post-service outcomes differ across race, income, education level, geography, and other relevant metrics.

## **2. Coordinate with the Department of Labor to streamline joint funding opportunities and fix alignment issues.**

Interviewed grantee organization staff reported that they found it difficult to apply to grants from both the AmeriCorps federal agency and the Department of Labor (DOL). They mentioned that the conflicting application and grant term timelines, reporting metrics, administrative requirements, and the high match requirements made it challenging to apply and made them less likely to try to use braided funding sources. The below recommendations provide potential solutions to these problems through recommendations for more effective inter-agency collaboration and funding alignment.

### **Synchronize AmeriCorps and Workforce Innovation**

## As Next100 has previously recommended, the AmeriCorps federal agency should track demographic data on the following:



Race and ethnicity, family socioeconomic data, and educational attainment of corps members—by state and county, as well as issue area and placement type.

- It should be made clear to members that these data will be anonymized, to ensure they are comfortable disclosing this information.



The percentage of corps members who are serving in the communities in which they grew up.



Annual feedback from a demographically diverse sample of members— about their experience, including the application process, their overall experience in the program, and the training and support they receive.

**and Opportunity Act funding timelines and reporting requirements.** The AmeriCorps federal agency and the Department of Labor should coordinate AmeriCorps grants and Workforce and Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding timelines to decrease the administrative burden for programs interested in braiding funding from the two agencies. These agencies should reduce or eliminate duplicative reporting requirements for opportunity youth-serving programs that are eligible for braided funds, allowing them to fulfill the requirements for both agencies concurrently.

### **Identify AmeriCorps programs eligible for braided funding streams from the Department of Labor.**

The Department of Labor and the AmeriCorps federal agency should identify opportunities for braided funding opportunities between AmeriCorps programs and DOL sources such as employment and training administration (ETA) programs (e.g. Indian and Native American programs), as well as funding streams that target specific populations, such as dislocated workers grants, reentry employment opportunity funding, and other relevant DOL

funding streams. These opportunities can allow participants to gain the benefits of service through AmeriCorps while also receiving training and workforce development services from DOL programs.

### **Provide technical assistance and encourage partnerships between local providers.**

AmeriCorps and the Department of Labor should provide technical assistance for state commissions and grantee organizations to better utilize WIOA funding for national service programs and encourage partnerships between state commissions and workforce development boards on the local level. The DOL can encourage such partnerships by including AmeriCorps programs as optional or required partners in select grant opportunities and issuing training and employment notices to state and local workforce development boards to facilitate this engagement. These partnerships can also provide local AmeriCorps programs and state commissions with information on how to apply for and receive AmeriCorps funds, WIOA funds, and other relevant DOL funding opportunities. (WIOA funding can support services that vary from employment training

to wraparound supports, such as transportation). These partners can connect grantee organizations directly to workforce development and human services agencies, providers, and educational institutions to streamline the process of helping participants access

**Allow Department of Labor funds to be used as match funds for AmeriCorps grants.** The Department of Labor should explicitly allow YouthBuild and other WIOA programs that work with opportunity youth to use DOL funding to meet the AmeriCorps match requirement and vice-versa. Interviewed practitioners reported that the use of DOL funds for match funding by AmeriCorps grantee organizations was common practice until 2018, when the Trump administration's Department of Labor issued a guidance letter that prevented the use of agency funding as match. The Department of Education (ED) released a letter in April of this year that explicitly allows ED funding streams to be used to match AmeriCorps funding, as have the Departments of Transportation, Interior and Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families in recent years. The DOL should issue a similar letter making it clear that DOL funds can be used as match for AmeriCorps grants.

### **3. Increase flexibility of the 80/20 rule, to ensure AmeriCorps members receive adequate workforce development training.**

Current AmeriCorps guidelines cap workforce development training at 20 percent of the total time spent in the program. As a result, multiple programs reported that they lacked sufficient time to both train members for their service position and provide adequate professional development for a career or educational opportunity after service. To remedy this issue, the AmeriCorps federal agency should exclude training that targets post-service career development from the 20 percent cap. This change would increase the amount of time the grantee organization can spend training a member and as a result allow an increase in the amount of professional development training available.

The agency should also create pilot workforce development grants that can be used by programs to fund training before or after the term of service. These grants would not be subject to the 20 percent cap and would allow for more flexible spending on workforce development training expenses (such as credentialing programs) and administrative costs (such as additional staff members to facilitate career coaching). Programs that are particularly successful in using the grant to improve post-service outcomes for members can also serve as potential models for other programs after the pilot period ends.

The AmeriCorps federal agency should also create a "Workforce Development Program Track" that grantee organizations can choose to opt into. In this track, grantees would be exempt from meeting the requirements of the 80/20 rule and instead would be responsible for meeting certain professional development goals such as providing a useful credential for participants, working with a high-need population, or tracking post-service outcomes for members with a goal of a high placement rate of participants in work or educational outcomes by one year after program completion.

Programs that work with opportunity youth, criminal justice system-impacted youth, or dislocated workers have greater needs when compared to programs that work with other populations. They often cannot meet such a low professional training cap as members require additional hours of professional development time to complete educational aspects of the program (such as receiving a high school equivalency degree) as well as receive adequate training to perform in their service position. To remedy this issue, the AmeriCorps federal agency should automatically provide waivers and exemptions for opportunity youth-serving programs to exempt them from the 20 percent training cap.

While these changes are immediately necessary to ensure that AmeriCorps participants can meet program requirements while receiving adequate training, larger revisions to this rule are needed. AmeriCorps should send out a request for information about this rule to solicit

community and stakeholder feedback on how to effectively amend this rule to better suit program and participant needs.

#### **4. Create a team dedicated to alumni management.**

AmeriCorps should do more to promote alumni engagement after service, as alumni can help provide mentorship and post-service job opportunities for current members. The AmeriCorps federal agency should create a team dedicated to alumni management.

This team should be charged with the following:

- Tracking alumni contact information and engagement
- Tracking post-service opportunities and placement.
- Increasing the number of colleges that match education award funding.
- Increasing the number of employer partnerships, with a focus on member benefits such as hiring preferences, deferral policies, etc.
- Ensuring data on alumni experience are gathered and utilized to help improve programs.

For the AmeriCorps federal agency to access data on AmeriCorps alumni, it may need to set up data sharing agreements with grantee programs in partnership with state commissions that would allow the release of participant contact information. According to multiple people interviewed for this report, the AmeriCorps federal agency has the legal authority to implement this data sharing currently. Getting permission for data sharing may also require a congressional sign-off and a letter from AmeriCorps.

#### **5. Create a professional development portal with resources for grantee organizations.**

The AmeriCorps federal agency currently does not have staff dedicated to helping grantee programs integrate effective professional development into their service programs. The agency should hire staff to build and

manage a workforce development portal with resources and training for current members and alumni.

The portal should have the following characteristics:

- Dynamic and regularly updated by soliciting feedback from grantee organizations, members, and employers.’
- Allows AmeriCorps grantee organizations to share high-quality curricula and programming, and establish connections that can lead collaborative development of curricula across topics.
- Creates partnerships with outside workforce development experts who can share workforce development training programs on the platform.
- Coordinates with the Department of Labor to ensure that their workforce development resources are accessible for AmeriCorps members and vice-versa.

#### **6. Modify the formula for fixed-price grants to prevent punishing grantee organizations if members leave service early for a full-time position.**

AmeriCorps grantee organizations currently do not receive the full grant amount if a service member does not complete their term. This financial punishment for a grantee organization fails to address the distinction between upfront and ongoing costs, resulting in grantee organizations losing funding for costs already incurred. Organizations invest resources up front in member development and training, on top of the fixed price of overhead costs such as staff salaries. In addition, this rule penalizes programs even if they help the member achieve the positive outcome of connecting to a well-paying job or quality educational program. This rule also especially hurts programs who work with members from lower income backgrounds, who may face additional barriers to survive on a low AmeriCorps living stipend, or lack the financial luxury to turn down immediate full-time employment with benefits.

One solution to this problem is for the AmeriCorps federal agency to change the formula for fixed price grants that



AmeriCorps grantee organizations receive to account for up-front costs by programs. In line with a proposal from Voices for National Service, the AmeriCorps federal agency should adjust the drawdown formula to include the following:

*25% of the grant award provided up front to support year-long program costs that occur regardless of length of time the member serves. The remaining 75% of the grant award should be distributed based on [the] number of members actively serving and hours served. Programs with members who complete 85% of the required hours or who participate in a program with employment as a desired outcome (such as Opportunity Youth programs) should be eligible to draw down 100% of the awarded cost per MSY for those members.<sup>1</sup>*

This change would allow programs to receive greater up-front funding as well as funding throughout the term of service proportionate to the number of members serving at a given time.

### **7. Create a Workforce Development Program Track so that post-service minded programs can offer more flexibility for members leaving service early.**

AmeriCorps service members are ineligible to receive their education award if they do not complete their term of service. Members who leave for full-time employment even days before the end of their service term are unable to receive one of the major benefits of AmeriCorps service. This rule creates a particular burden for members offered time sensitive employment offers (which happened to the author), or who lack the financial privilege to turn down a better paying job to complete a service term after which they must scramble to find employment. According to AmeriCorps rules, a member may only leave their term of service early if they are released for a “compelling personal circumstance” or “cause.” As a result of this requirement, most AmeriCorps members are not eligible for an education award if they leave the program early to accept a full-time position.<sup>2</sup>

AmeriCorps should create a Workforce Development Program Track for grantees that would allow for additional flexibility for programs focused on post-service member outcomes. For programs in this pathway, the AmeriCorps federal agency should require the objective of promotion of employment among participants, which would allow members to leave the program early without penalty as long as certain conditions are met. The agency should limit this scenario to a member leaving for a full-time position in the same field as their service position and who completed at least 75 percent of their service term. These restrictions will disincentivize members from serving in AmeriCorps for only a few months. The education award received by the participant in this scenario should be proportional to the length of their service.

### **8. Strengthen the pathway from AmeriCorps to federal government jobs.**

Currently, AmeriCorps VISTA makes all graduates eligible for preferential hiring treatment for federal government jobs. Such an initiative allows for a pathway into government service for thousands of Americans who cannot afford to intern unpaid in Congress or a non-profit, which is often the more traditional route into public service.

The origin of this hiring preference stems from Executive Order 11103, which President John F. Kennedy issued in 1963, and offered non-competitive eligibility to returned Peace Corps volunteers. This non-competitive eligibility was expanded to AmeriCorps VISTA members through the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973. This status is not available to members who serve in other AmeriCorps programs, such as AmeriCorps State and National or NCCC.

As recommended in a joint memo on this topic from Service Year Alliance, Voices for National Service, AmeriCorps Alums, Partnership for Public Service and the National Peace Corps Association, the Biden administration should issue a revision of Executive Order 11103 to make AmeriCorps State and National and NCCC graduates eligible for the same preferential hiring status for

federal jobs. This would cement President Biden's legacy as a president devoted to public service, as well as fulfill key priorities established by the Task Force on Expanding National Service and the 21st Century.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the Biden administration should extend the amount of time AmeriCorps members are able to use this special hiring status. AmeriCorps VISTA members are eligible to use this status for one year after their completion of service, with the ability for an up-to-three-year extension for military service, educational attainment, or an activity that the agency believes warrants an exception. Such a short period of time unnecessarily hinders those who do not want to immediately use their preferential status. The executive order should extend the amount of time this status lasts to ten years, so that members have more time and flexibility to apply for a position within the federal government.



## Recommendations for Congress

### 1. Allocate explicit funding for workforce development in AmeriCorps and cross-agency collaboration.

To support workforce development and training in AmeriCorps programs, additional funding for workforce development is needed. The House-passed version of the Build Back Better Act allocated \$1.01 billion in administrative funding to both address corrective actions from audits, as well for the AmeriCorps federal agency administrative costs to coordinate efforts and activities with the Departments of Labor and Education, to support service members' transition to high-quality jobs and education after serving. This legislation represents an important first step in acknowledging the administration costs of providing workforce development in all AmeriCorps programs. However, with the Build Back Better Act stalled, Congress should pass legislation that specifically allocates funding to the AmeriCorps federal agency to provide workforce development training to members and support members' transition to high-quality jobs or education after their terms of service.

Much of the work of providing workforce development services to participants will fall onto individual AmeriCorps programs. Therefore, Congress should allocate specific grant funding for costs associated with workforce development and training, and make these grants available for state commissions to allocate to programs interested in building out their workforce development training as a

### Leveraging The Reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to Improve Workforce Development Opportunities in AmeriCorps

The House of Representatives recently passed a reauthorization of The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). If passed by the Senate, this legislation would provide an update to critical workforce development programs and can provide additional funding for post-service training in national service programs. Service Year Alliance and America's Service Commissions released a series of policy recommendations to leverage WIOA reauthorization to help align and expand workforce development opportunities in AmeriCorps. Two recommendations from this report that support earlier recommendations (see Recommendation 2 from "Recommendations for The Biden Administration") include: requiring state workforce development board membership include a representative of the state service commission; and requiring that WIOA state plans address integration of national service programs with workforce development strategies. These changes would facilitate partnerships between workforce development boards and state service commissions as well as ensure that WIOA integrates national service programs into workforce development partnerships, opening up the door for additional joint funding opportunities.

part of the Workforce Development Program Track (see Recommendation 7 from “Recommendations for The Biden Administration”). Programs that apply for this grant funding should have the ability to opt-out of the 20 percent training cap and instead be required to report post-service outcomes of participants (as outlined in Recommendation 1 from “Recommendations for The Biden Administration”) and be evaluated based on program type-specific benchmarks set by the agency. Programs should be able to apply for these supplemental grants during the standard AmeriCorps grant cycle with minimal additional administrative burden.

## **2. Revise funding and training rules for programs that work with opportunity youth to better support the unique needs of these programs.**

Programs that work with opportunity youth have different needs when compared to programs that work with other populations. Many of these programs help members complete their high school equivalency and receive training in soft skills critical for job placement after the program. Staff of interviewed programs reported that they needed to spend nearly 50 percent of their time on training, which makes programs like YouthBuild qualify for only a quarter-time AmeriCorps grant and reduced funding. Given that more training is needed for programs that work with this population, Congress should exempt programs that work with opportunity youth from the 20 percent training cap that applies to AmeriCorps member time use.

In line with the above recommendation for the Department of Labor, Congress should also explicitly allow YouthBuild and other programs that work with opportunity youth to use DOL funding to meet the AmeriCorps match requirement and vice-versa. The use of DOL funds for match funding by AmeriCorps grantee organizations was common practice until 2018, when the Trump administration’s DOL issued a guidance letter that prevented the use of its funding to meet the AmeriCorps match requirement. (Read more about this change in Recommendation 2 from “Recommendations for The

Biden Administration.” )

## **3. Revise rules governing alternative uses of the Segal Education Award and eliminate award expiration.**

AmeriCorps members who complete their service term may be interested in non-traditional education opportunities that are outside of the allowable uses for their education award. Interviewed program managers asked for more flexibility for using funding for specific opportunities that are not covered, such as English as a second language classes, as well as for private, industry-specific credentialing. Congress should consider allowing AmeriCorps members to use their education award for private credentialing or other non-traditional educational opportunities, while erecting appropriate safeguards to prevent bad actors from abusing this system.

Federal law also requires that the education award must be used within seven years of service. This timeline prevents members from being able to use their rightfully earned reward on their own timeframe, perhaps for a career change or mid-career credentialing opportunity. Congress should revise this requirement to allow an AmeriCorps member to use their award anytime within their lifetime, bringing them in line with the timeframe for military education benefits.

Interviewed participants reported that some AmeriCorps members were unable to utilize their education award, because they did not want to return to school shortly after serving or did not have student loans to forgive. As a result, education awards that AmeriCorps members had earned during their service were left unused. AmeriCorps VISTA currently allows graduates to receive a reduced education award as cash. Congress should expand this policy, and increase the award offered in cash to the full amount, to all programs, to give AmeriCorps members increased flexibility in how they choose to spend their education award.



## Best Practices for Grantee Organizations

### 1. Create and maintain relationships with industry-relevant employers and gather information on relevant training and credentials.

AmeriCorps grantee organizations should seek to build and maintain relationships with potential future employers in their field. Through speaking with employers in the field, programs can learn what workforce development training is most useful for AmeriCorps members and which is not. Grantee organizations can also quickly learn this information and gain connections to relevant employers by partnering with local workforce development agencies and providers in their field and geographic area. To achieve this goal, grantee organizations can seek out their local workforce board, American Job Center, CareerOneStop, chamber of commerce, or local economic development entity.

Programs should also build relationships between AmeriCorps members and potential future employers by setting up job fairs, networking sessions, and informational interviews. Interviewed practitioners found that these professional connections (facilitated through the practices outlined above) proved critical in helping their members find opportunities after their service had ended.

### 2. Offer impactful skills or credentials that are employer-desired and stackable.

Professional credentials are accreditations used to mark an individual's expertise with a skill set. Credentials can help members build and validate the skills they gain through service. As more employers across industries and occupations turn to credentials to build their workforce, it is important that service programs offer them to members, when possible. Credentials can be industry-recognized certifications like the Multi Craft Core Curriculum or CompTIA+, but can also include a driver's license or OSHA certification.



## CREATING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH EMPLOYERS

### Spotlight: YouthBuild, Las Vegas, NV

YouthBuild is a community-based youth development program that offers pre-apprenticeships (a program designed to help participants to enter and succeed in a Registered Apprenticeship Program) and AmeriCorps service opportunities. YouthBuild programs provide job training and educational opportunities for opportunity youth, young people ages 16–24 who are disconnected from work and education. In the program, youth learn vocational skills in construction, as well as in other in-demand industries including health care, information technology, manufacturing and logistics, conservation, and hospitality. They also provide community service through the required construction or rehabilitation of affordable housing for low-income or homeless families in their own neighborhoods. In Department of Labor (DOL) funded YouthBuild programs, youth split their time between the vocational training work site and the classroom, where they earn their high school diploma or equivalency degree, learn to be community leaders, and prepare for postsecondary training opportunities, including college, apprenticeships, and employment. YouthBuild programs are able to provide high-quality workforce development training due to only being quarter- or half-time AmeriCorps members (which allows them to provide more training while only having to comply with the 80/20 rule for a fraction of their total hours). In addition, these programs receive grant funding through the DOL, which provides structured, direct funding for workforce development training. These grants also require YouthBuild programs to report on post-service outcomes for members,

which encourages programs to stay in touch with their alumni and incentivizes the creation of a culture focused on post-service outcomes.

Interviewed staff reported that YouthBuild Las Vegas has a focus on ensuring that its graduates receive jobs, a core element of which is maintaining ongoing relationships with relevant employers. The program has a strong focus on construction fields and, as a result, staff maintain relationships with construction unions and construction outfits in the greater Las Vegas area. The program invites union recruiters and representatives to service sites to see their members on the job and build relationships with them. These networks give members access to information about who is hiring and for what projects, and provides a pathway to full-time employment and union membership after the program.

Youthbuild Las Vegas is constantly modifying its workforce development curriculum to suit employer needs. The program's strong relationships with employers make it easy to receive regular feedback and continuously fine-tune their program to fit job-market needs. If employers want a certain type of training, the program develops instruction modules to make those skills available to their members. If employers decide that certain skills are no longer relevant, they pass this information on to Youthbuild, and training is updated to eliminate those skills. This feedback loop ensures that YouthBuild Las Vegas is constantly adapting, and ensures that members graduate with all of the skills necessary to land a well-paying job.

The most effective credentials and skills are those that local employers have explicitly named as useful for future employees to have, and are applicable in fields that corps members plan to join after finishing the program. In line with the first recommendation, grantee organizations should partner with their local workforce board to understand what credentials or skills are critical for members in their field and try to incorporate them into their program. Through this research and communication with employers in the field, grantee organizations should continuously update the credentials they provide to avoid equipping their corps members with unnecessary or outdated credentials. Grantee organizations should also be aware of the issue of over-credentialing and low-quality credentials, which grantee programs can avoid through the frequent communication with employers and organizations mentioned above.

Programs should prioritize stackable credentials, meaning two or more credentials that build on each other, part of a sequence of training that members accumulate over time and move them along a career ladder. This allows members to build on pre-existing skills or knowledge and creates

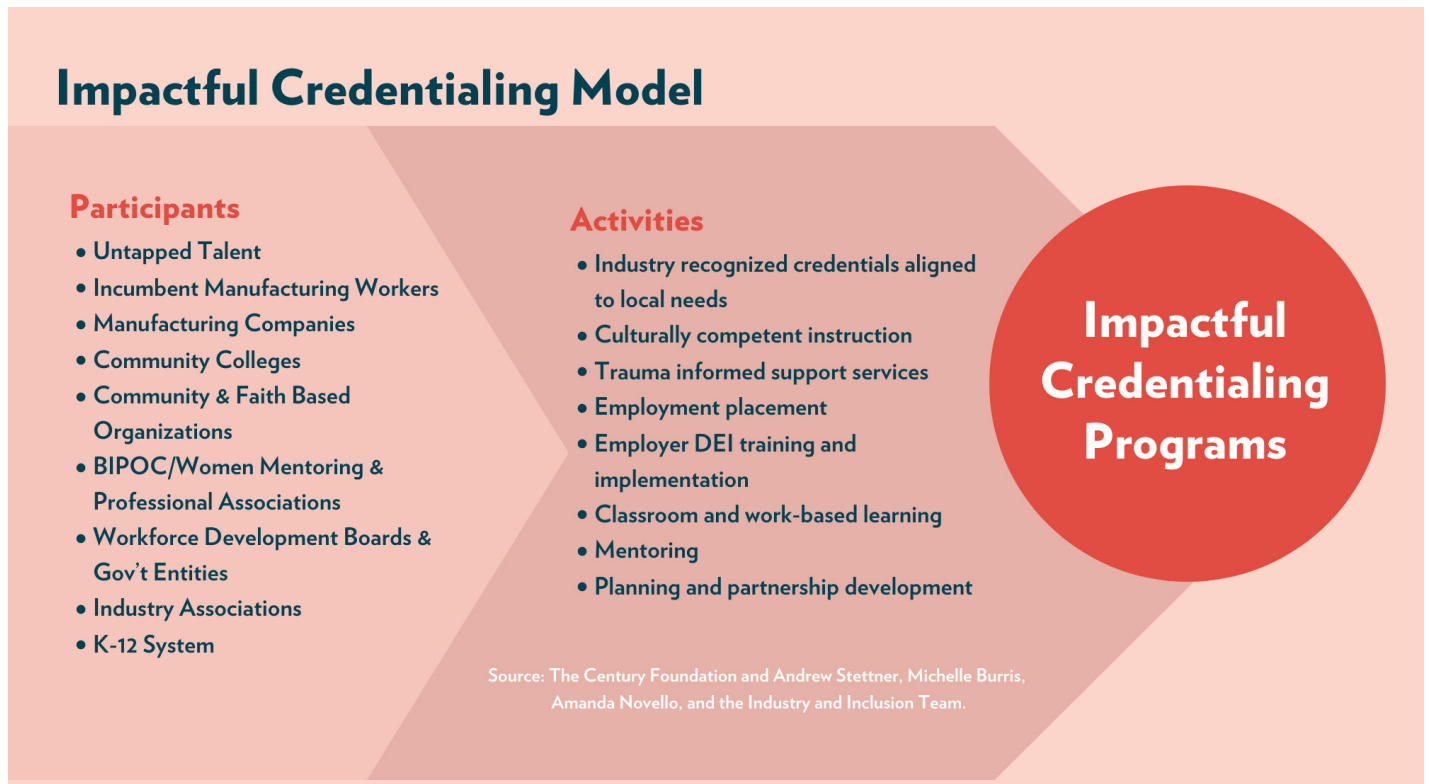
clear pathways for later career advancement. Interviewed practitioners reported that attaining stackable credentials was extraordinarily useful for corps members in their transition into a job after finishing the program.

Adding a certification module to an AmeriCorps program can be difficult due to the difficulties of providing adequate training while complying with the 80/20 rule, the administrative burdens of running a training, and the difficulty of getting the module approved by the AmeriCorps federal agency and other stakeholders. AmeriCorps programs can reduce some of these burdens by partnering with an accredited outside provider who can use their expertise and knowledge to help create and administer credential training. Not all AmeriCorps grantees will find adding certifications to their program necessary or useful; they should also be realistic about the benefits that such training would provide against the administrative burden, funding difficulties, and logistical challenges the training would entail. However, many of the interviewed grantees reported that a relevant, industry-specific credential was extraordinarily helpful for AmeriCorps members in finding a job after their service.

## Best Practice in Action

The leaders of two different climate corps mentioned the importance of professional credentials and accreditations to help members be considered qualified applicants for green jobs after leaving the programs. In particular, these leaders mentioned the importance of a chainsaw use accreditation as well as a “Red Card” (a certificate that demonstrates that an individual has been trained in wildfire management) for AmeriCorps graduates seeking employment in forest management after finishing their service.

FIGURE 1



### 3. Create professional development curricula that contextualize technical skill-building and provide training for participants in soft skills.

Soft skills (also known as employability skills) include interpersonal skills, professional expectations, critical thinking, problem-solving, public speaking, professional writing, career management, and intercultural fluency. Such core competencies are often overlooked in traditional training programs but are particularly important for younger participants starting their careers. Soft skills are

important in the workplace, and interviewed grantees noted that skills in professionalism, communicating effectively with a supervisor, showing up on time, and communicating when sick were all listed as critical by employers.

Service itself can be its own form of experience that can help facilitate the development of soft skills. A well-designed service experience can seamlessly blend the accumulation of soft skills and training with service and community impact. In particular, effective programs provide structured guidance and mentorship for participants as

well as training in employer-relevant skills. These programs are particularly advantageous for opportunity youth or disadvantaged youth, who have less access to resources and training opportunities in their communities.

To ensure participants receive this training, it is critical for AmeriCorps programs to develop or identify a training curriculum for their program that ensures members are gaining critical professional skills alongside personal development. An effective professional development curriculum is dynamic and updated regularly based on the changing needs of members, potential employers, and a rapidly changing economy. Once relevant and effective curricula are developed, AmeriCorps programs can share them with other programs and collaborate to refine and improve these trainings.

#### **4. Create a supportive and inclusive team culture that prioritizes alumni engagement and participant mentorship.**

It is critical for AmeriCorps programs to create a strong

and inclusive team culture. Interviewed participants and experts have found that organizations with supportive team cultures had higher retention rates, satisfaction rates, and better career outcomes than those that did not. These organizations encouraged a strong culture by finding ways for team members to celebrate each other's successes and provide emotional support where necessary. They created opportunities for members to get to know each other personally and connect through group activities and after-work events. A strong culture is necessary before staff can successfully support members' professional development and career goals.

**Facilitate alumni involvement.** AmeriCorps programs should seek to integrate alumni engagement into their program. Interviewed grantees reported integrating the idea of being a lifelong AmeriCorps member into their culture made alumni more likely to engage after they graduated. Programs crafted this mentality through alumni events, encouraging alumni to stay in touch with cohort mates, and facilitating connections and mentorship opportunities between alumni and current members.



### CREATING A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CURRICULUM TO TRAIN SOFT SKILLS

#### **Spotlight: Gulf Corps, Gulfport, MS**

GulfCorps is a project of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) that protects and restores the Gulf's lands and waters while creating jobs through conservation corps in the five Gulf states (Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas).

Through their partnership with The Corps Network, they utilize a robust workforce development curriculum in their program that prioritizes teaching members soft skills and emphasizes personal development. The table of contents breaks the curriculum into modules that focus on providing professional training and developing soft skills. Module 2 includes personal development and acquiring soft skills, with lessons on professionalism in the workplace, time management, and teamwork. Module 3 touches on career exploration, informational interviews, and internship, and apprenticeship opportunities. Module 5 teaches participants how to conduct situational interviews and conduct an elevator pitch to potential employers. A GulfCorps leader told me that all of these training curricula were created with the goal of equipping members with the critical skills necessary to transition into a professional opportunity after completing the program.



## SPOTLIGHT: BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE TEAM CULTURE

### YouthBuild, Columbia, MO

Youthbuild Columbia models how to build a supportive and inclusive team culture for their members. The program encourages members to get to know each other, celebrate their successes, and be supportive during tough times. Program staff wrote important dates (such as completion dates) in a communal location and organized office parties to celebrate. When members were going through a hard time or did not show up multiple days in a row, staff encouraged their friends in the program to contact them to check-in. If they continued to not show up, staff eventually reached out. Staff and members were encouraged to be supportive in these scenarios and try to help the struggling member with what was preventing them from being able to attend. If the member was not able to continue the program for a period of time, staff would not remove them from the program, but “suspend” them, so that they would still be able to continue if they returned. Such a practice normally ensures that the member can still receive their education award after they complete their service.

Interviewed YouthBuild Columbia staff reported that they encouraged members to think of themselves as lifelong AmeriCorps members committed to service, and invited graduates to return after the end of the program and to stay involved. They reported that many graduates mentored current members, taught classes, and even popped into the office occasionally just to say hello. Some alumni even re-enrolled in the program if they were struggling to find employment or wanted to continue their service. These alumni used this second service opportunity to build new skills and professional relationships.

These same programs also hired alumni as staff members whenever possible and continuously updated alumni on job opportunities both within and outside the organization. Programs reported that such practices kept alumni engaged and willing to provide continuous feedback on improving the program as well as mentorship and job opportunities for current participants.

**Utilize alumni feedback.** AmeriCorps programs should gather data from alumni about their career paths once they graduate from the program. Programs could conduct a post-service exit survey, as well as periodic alumni feedback surveys, to learn detailed information about what was useful and not useful in the workforce development training they received. Programs should specifically inquire about the quality of the career preparation, skill building, and professional coaching they received. Programs can use these data to improve their program and find larger trends on how their training needs to evolve for the changing

workplace. Grantee organizations that collected these data reported that they were able to gather them more often and in more detail than the AmeriCorps federal agency, which only makes available high-level, aggregate data every several years.

**Integrate mentorship.** It is critical that programs incorporate some form of mentorship into their program. Studies show that one-on-one employment coaching and mentorship is critical for positive employment outcomes. Program staff should seek to establish mentorship relationships with members to guide conversations about future employment and education goals, as well as which credentials or training are necessary to attain those goals. Staff should also build a supportive relationship with their mentees to help them navigate difficult professional and personal challenges. Alumni can also serve as vital mentors and professional connections for members. Programs with robust alumni involvement reported that pairing members



with alumni mentors with similar professional or personal interests helped graduates find a job or educational opportunity after their service.

## **5. Consider registering your program as a pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship**

AmeriCorps programs can serve double duty as pre-apprenticeship programs, to help funnel members into apprenticeships that lead to high-quality jobs and careers. The Department of Labor defines a pre-apprenticeship as a program or set of strategies designed to prepare individuals for a Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) or other opportunities. The time frame and wage/stipend requirement of pre-apprenticeships are more flexible than a RAP and the flexibility allows for a more streamlined integration with AmeriCorps programs' requirements.

Although not official requirements, the Department of Labor has outlined the elements of what they consider a quality pre-apprenticeship program. These elements include the following:

1. An approved curriculum that is based on industry standards and is approved by a RAP partner.
2. A simulated hands-on training experience or volunteer opportunity that does not displace paid employees.
3. Facilitated entry agreements with RAP sponsors that allow program participants to enter directly into a RAP.
4. Increased diversity by recruiting and preparing underrepresented populations to be successful in a RAP.
5. Wrap-around services or referrals to help participants complete the program (like child care or transportation).
6. Sustainable partnerships that collaboratively promote RAPs to other employers.

Pre-apprenticeships have the potential to yield other benefits, too. Existing pre-apprenticeship programs are often housed at community colleges, which can provide hands-on learning opportunities for students at an accessible location. In addition, these programs

are advantageous for employers, as they can save time and money when hiring program graduates who are already pre-screened and trained in the specific skills that employers need. Making AmeriCorps programs count as pre-apprenticeship programs can be particularly advantageous when focused on opportunity youth, given that these programs can provide ladders to career opportunities, especially for those who lack the skills or qualifications to access registered apprenticeship programs.

We have seen the promise of the integration of AmeriCorps programs and pre-apprenticeships through programs such as, YouthBuild, JEVS Human Services, and select programs affiliated with The Corps Network. They have a proven record of helping opportunity youth gain entry into apprenticeships and other well-paying employment opportunities.

While the success of AmeriCorps pre-apprenticeship programs has been demonstrated by multiple programs, only two AmeriCorps programs have ever become registered apprenticeships. Interviewees reported that this low number was likely due to the complexity of becoming a registered apprenticeship program. The registration process to get a program accredited differs by state, and can be a long and rule-heavy process. The AmeriCorps rule that caps educational and development activities at 20 percent of member time, as well as rigorous reporting requirements and the fact that service hour minimums do not align with those required for RAPs, also add to the difficulty.

Despite these difficulties, partnerships between AmeriCorps programs and apprenticeship programs are possible and can provide increased benefits for participants enrolled. Enrolling in an AmeriCorps RAP allows participants to serve their communities while receiving critical job skills and a pathway to a family-sustaining job. Registering your AmeriCorps program may also potentially open up additional funding opportunities from the Department of Labor or state-level apprenticeship funding.

The author interviewed numerous AmeriCorps program staff and state commission staff who are

considering how to register AmeriCorps programs as apprenticeships. Some are piloting new Public Health Corps apprenticeship programs (through the recently announced AmeriCorps Public Health Corps funding), while others are attempting to register existing AmeriCorps programs as apprenticeships. These programs will publicly launch in the near future, and could serve as models for AmeriCorps programs interested in becoming registered apprenticeships.

## Conclusion

We are in a moment of renewed interest in post-service outcomes and workforce development training for AmeriCorps members. The AmeriCorps Strategic Plan sets out as a key goal to “strengthen pathways to education, employment, and other opportunities [for AmeriCorps service members].” President Biden’s 2023 proposed budget includes millions of dollars in new funding for AmeriCorps and prioritizes “Provid[ing] Underserved Youth with Training and Employment Pathways.” These documents set bold new priorities for AmeriCorps and a focus on equity and workforce development in the program.

Workforce development is an equity issue. If the Biden administration and Congress want AmeriCorps to be a national service program for all Americans who want to serve their communities regardless of their background, they must take these steps to improve workforce development in AmeriCorps.

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## Authors

**Robert Godfried** is an advocate for creating public service opportunities that are accessible to all. At Next100, Robert focuses on increasing equity and inclusion in AmeriCorps and public service more broadly at the federal, state, and local levels. He previously worked in tenant organizing as an AmeriCorps member, as a field organizer for Elizabeth Warren’s presidential campaign, and as an associate for a progressive political digital marketing firm.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Proposed Reforms to AmeriCorps Fiscal Requirements”, Voices for National Service, October 13, 2021, 10.
- <sup>2</sup> There is one exception in the statute that clarifies if the program includes the promotion of employment among participants in its approved objectives (often opportunity youth serving programs) then the member may receive a partial education award if they leave the program early. Many AmeriCorps programs do not have the promotion of employment as an approved objective, making many members ineligible.
- <sup>3</sup> “Strengthening Our Federal Workforce: Non-Competitive Eligibility for All National Service Participants”, Service Year Alliance, Voices for National Service, AmeriCorps Alums, Partnership for Public Service, National Peace Corps Association, 2.