

Building Capacity, Connecting Communities:



A Guide to Using AmeriCorps VISTA
Members in Science Centers and Museums

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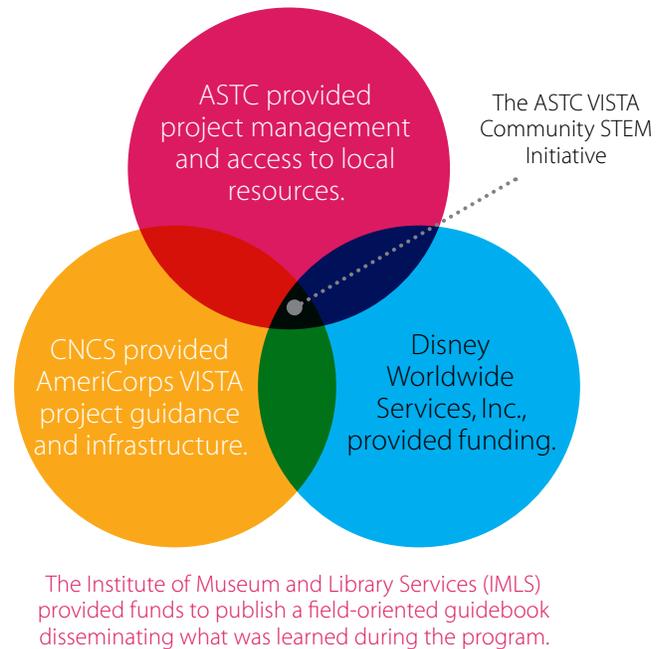
The ASTC VISTA Community STEM Initiative

The ASTC VISTA Community STEM Initiative was a pilot program of the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC) designed to develop a better understanding of how the AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America) program could be used by museums. In spring of 2015, 10 VISTA members were placed in seven science centers for a full year to strengthen the museums' capacity to serve youth in low-resource communities. VISTA members were tasked with surveying their museums' existing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programming and community relationships. By improving existing relationships between the community and the museum's STEM programming and creating new relationships where they did not yet exist, the project aimed to serve youth in low-resource communities through increasing awareness about STEM fields and career pathways.

With additional financial support from Disney Worldwide Services, Inc., the ASTC VISTA program placed VISTA members in four metropolitan areas across the United States: Los Angeles, California; Berkeley/Oakland/San Francisco, California; Queens, New York; and Honolulu, Hawaii. Each area has a high poverty rate and compelling unmet needs. The individual science museums that hosted VISTA members during the program were

- Chabot Space and Science Center (Oakland, California)
- The Lawrence Hall of Science (Berkeley, California)
- The Exploratorium (San Francisco, California)
- The California Science Center (Los Angeles, California)
- Discovery Cube (Los Angeles, California)
- The New York Hall of Science (Queens, New York)
- The Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum (Honolulu, Hawaii).

As trusted organizations within each geographic area, ASTC-member museums offered both an existing knowledge base regarding their local communities and a framework of community relationships on which the VISTA member could build. As an association, one of ASTC's major roles in this program was to leverage the resources and expertise of member science centers and museums located in funder-identified cities to advance the project.



How to use this guidebook

This guidebook describes the process of running a VISTA program in a museum and shares the experiences and lessons learned by ASTC and the participating science centers over the course of the year. There are four primary sections, which address the following topics:

- Why a museum should consider AmeriCorps VISTA
- How a VISTA project is funded
- How a VISTA project works
- Supporting a VISTA member during their term.

Each section examines various processes and components that museums should be aware of when considering a VISTA project. General guidance about the VISTA program is presented in conjunction with museum-specific examples derived during the ASTC VISTA program. Organizational decision makers (e.g. CEOs, VPs, and directors) should focus on the sections *Why a museum should consider AmeriCorps VISTA* and *How a VISTA project is funded*. Those individuals designing and managing the project should refer to *How a VISTA project works*. A potential site supervisor will need to read all sections with a special focus on *Supporting a VISTA member during their term*.

What is AmeriCorps VISTA?

“VISTA members make a year-long, full-time commitment to serve on a specific project. They focus their efforts on building the organizational, administrative, and financial capacity of organizations that fight illiteracy, improve health services, foster economic development, and otherwise assist low-income communities.”

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriCorps/ameriCorps-vista>
accessed 7-1-2016

Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) is a federal anti-poverty program from AmeriCorps, administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). VISTA provides full-time volunteers, called VISTA members, to support projects at nonprofit organizations and local government agencies that operate programs to help alleviate poverty.

“Congress has directed AmeriCorps VISTA to serve as short-term resources that serve to build the long-term sustainability of anti-poverty programs. Projects should be developed with a goal to phase out the need for VISTAs within three years and have the project continue without them.”

AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance, Fiscal Year 2016, Page 2
<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/AmeriCorps%20VISTA%20Program%20Guidance%20Fiscal%20Year%202016.pdf>
accessed 7-21-2016

Why a museum should consider AmeriCorps VISTA

"The program gave the Bishop Museum an opportunity to expand our educational programs to those on neighbor islands." —Angela Ameling, site supervisor at the Bishop Museum

"We obviously found a great person who...had museum experience already, was already here, [and] knew what she was getting herself into. We benefited from that side of it..."

—Katherine MacDougall, site supervisor at the Exploratorium

"Being in this position and seeing how much it helps people, helps the community, and helps the site that you're working at, it's just absolutely incredible."

—Laura Sposato, VISTA member at the Lawrence Hall of Science

Nonprofit organizations including science centers and museums are eligible to apply to sponsor a VISTA project. CNCS provides organizations with access to an ambitious and dedicated talent pool of recruits, training for both existing staff and newly recruited VISTA members when a project begins, and human resources support throughout the project.

Enhancing community relationships

Science centers and museums strive to reach underserved audiences in their local communities through education initiatives aimed at families, children, and youth. Activities may include school programming, afterschool activities, and camps. Each museum works with its own network of school districts and community organizations to bring children and youth to the museum, or for the museum to go out into the community. However robust those relationships are, most museums would agree that they could both enhance existing community relationships and create new ones if they had the resources to devote to this work.

Nonprofit organizations with projects that directly or indirectly address issues related to poverty in low-resource communities are appropriate partners for the VISTA program. This includes science centers, museums, and other providers of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-related programming. CNCS considers STEM programming as particularly important to raise individuals out of poverty because these types of programs highlight workforce skills and career options.

Hosting a VISTA member can be an enriching and cost-effective way to grow the museum's community network. VISTA members are tasked exclusively with increasing the capacity of the organization; they cannot be used for work unrelated to their assigned VISTA project, nor can they be used to regularly provide direct service to public audiences through programming. This ensures a more efficient and productive project by focusing VISTA members' efforts on strengthening existing community relationships and developing new ones. The majority of the museum leaders who participated in the ASTC VISTA program appreciated the focused role that VISTA members played in their organizations and specifically mentioned that as an important aspect of the project.

CNCS provides the following statistics on VISTA member capacity-building efforts. In recent years, VISTA members have

- helped their sponsoring organizations generate more than \$87 million in cash funding with an average annual amount per organization of nearly \$92,000
- generated in-kind support valued by sponsoring organizations at nearly \$50 million
- recruited more than a million community volunteers who in turn provided more than 14.5 million hours of service to their communities annually.

“VISTAs enable an organization to turn dream projects into reality. They mobilize local human, financial, and material resources to expand the capacity of low-income communities to build on their own resources and address the challenges they face.”

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/SponsorGuide.pdf>
page 3, accessed 7-26-2016

Other considerations for science centers and museums

In its publication, *Is AmeriCorps VISTA Right for Your Organization?* CNCS provides a set of key questions that an organization should ask when considering a VISTA project:

- Is there a poverty-focused project my organization would like to start or expand?
- What are the long-term goals of the project?
- Are the project's goals to help move people and communities out of poverty (not just to make poverty more tolerable)?
- What population(s) does the project target?
- How will we include the local community in project planning and implementation?
- How will a VISTA support these efforts?
- How will we measure the project's impact?
- With what other community groups or organizations will we collaborate?
- Do we have the resources to support one or more VISTAs?

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/SponsorGuide.pdf>
page 7, accessed 7-1-2016

It is crucial to have a good project plan before recruiting a VISTA member. This ensures the best possible match between project and candidate. Since a VISTA member may only be at an organization for a year, it is important that a project plan is in place prior to recruitment so that work can begin as soon as the VISTA member arrives at the museum. There will always be unforeseen events but spending time putting together a plan that satisfies the above questions will be well worth the effort. By holding internal discussions across working teams, a museum can identify meaningful work for a potential VISTA member. This can include supporting ongoing projects or beginning a new one. Include human resources staff as well as programmatic teams to establish a strong foundation on which to build the project. VISTA members and staff who held positive views of the ASTC VISTA program upon its completion cited that their museum, through advance planning, had a project in place before the VISTA member's arrival.

How a VISTA project is funded

VISTA is a federally funded program administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). CNCS allocates funding on a state-by-state basis. When a museum applies to sponsor a VISTA project the application is reviewed and, if accepted, administered by the CNCS office in the state where that museum is located. Each state office has a limited number of VISTA projects that can be administered in a fiscal year.

The VISTA living allowance

The largest component of the typical VISTA budget is the living allowance provided to each VISTA member. VISTA members receive a biweekly living allowance as part of their service. The amount, which is based on but not equal to federal poverty guidelines, is calculated by CNCS on a county-by-county basis. As of 2016, the living allowance for a VISTA member ranged from \$12,000 to \$18,000 per year nationally. The amounts are low because VISTA members are expected to live at approximately the same economic level as the people they serve. The living allowance cannot be supplemented by the sponsor organization.

Figures derived from *FY2016 VISTA Living Rates by County*,
https://www.vistacampus.gov/sites/default/files/2016_VISTA_Living_Rates_by_County.pdf
accessed 7-14-2016

VISTA funding models

A museum applying to sponsor a VISTA member will choose from two types of funding models: a regular agreement or a cost-share agreement. The major difference between the two is how the living allowance is funded. Under a regular agreement, CNCS provides funding for the VISTA member's living allowance. Although this reduces the financial responsibility of the sponsoring museum, there are a limited number of VISTA members that each CNCS state office can support under a regular agreement.

Under a cost-share agreement, the museum provides funds to support the VISTA member's living allowance. CNCS bills the organization biweekly to collect the living allowance and processes the payroll for the VISTA member. The sponsor organization can either fund the living allowance itself or seek an external funding source such as a foundation, corporation, or local government.

Whether a museum pursues the regular agreement or cost-share agreement, CNCS expects that the museum will

- direct the overall project from the initial application through reporting and closeout
- supervise the VISTA member or members
- provide the administrative support necessary to complete the goals and objectives of the project.

CNCS will provide

- a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or post-service stipend
- supplemental health coverage for all VISTA members assigned to the project
- payroll services: members receive their paychecks directly from AmeriCorps VISTA

- training in project management and leadership for members and project supervisors
- travel costs associated with training
- moving allowances for members relocating to serve
- liability coverage for all members, under the Federal Employees Compensation Act and the Federal Torts Claims Act
- child care for income-eligible members
- assistance with recruiting members.

Additional support for VISTA members

The ASTC-VISTA Community STEM Initiative operated under a cost-share agreement; a generous contribution from Disney Worldwide Services, Inc., funded the living allowances for all 10 VISTA members. Although not required under the cost-share agreement, funds were also provided to supplement the usual support offered to VISTA members. CNCS does not allow the host organization to supplement the living allowance, but they do allow other kinds of support. Extra funds were used to provide each VISTA member with a monthly housing stipend of \$300 per month (paid directly to the landlord), program supply and travel support funds, professional development opportunities such as relevant meetings and conferences, and grocery or gas cards. By easing the financial burden on the VISTA member, additional support can improve a museum's chances of recruiting the candidate that best fits the project. The CNCS program officer assigned to the ASTC VISTA program encouraged the above types of support while stressing that unrestricted gift cards, such as American Express or VISA gift cards, could be considered direct financial assistance and should be avoided.

The ASTC VISTA team convening at the Chabot Space and Science Center in Oakland, California. Photo by ASTC.





The ASTC VISTA team meets at CNCS Headquarters in Oakland, California. Photo by ASTC.

How a VISTA project works

Defining the VISTA project, identifying museum staff involvement, and writing a clear proposal will lead to a successful project. A concrete plan is important to matching the right VISTA candidate with the project.

Preparing in advance

VISTA members build capacity to serve communities living in poverty through specific projects at nonprofit organizations, including science centers and museums. It is vital that projects are based on organizational and community need. In addition to proposing a project, museums also identify a site supervisor and define each VISTA member's role in the project, including how those members will interact with museum staff. During the ASTC VISTA program, members who reported that they felt comfortable with and connected to the other staff at their museum also had a well-defined project in place when they arrived. VISTA members who expressed difficulty connecting with their host organization identified the lack of a clear project as a contributing factor.

Identifying a site supervisor

A key requirement for organizations participating in a VISTA project is to provide daily oversight for its VISTA member through a site supervisor. It is the responsibility of the host site to select a staff member who has the time and resources to devote to the VISTA member and project. CNCS provides a required three-day training session for site supervisors before a project begins. Session dates and locations are determined by CNCS. Trainings are held regionally and include sessions for supervisors and new VISTA members respectively. Supervisors and VISTA members working on the same project are typically assigned to the same regional supervisor or VISTA member trainings. The start date for a project is linked to when training occurs. CNCS provides accommodations and meals and offers funding for travel between the host site and the training location. In cases where a single project is held across multiple sites, the overall project director attends the CNCS-sponsored

Site Story: The Lawrence Hall of Science

Laura Sposato

- built capacity by incorporating volunteers into the Inventor's Workshop community outreach program, offered to families with youth in grades K–8
- trained 20 volunteers
- led family programming themed presentations at community organizations that target low-resource, underserved communities.

training and then trains the individual site supervisors.

According to one of the ASTC VISTA program site supervisors, “Management and supervision take time...that’s something to keep in mind.” Two of the seven site supervisors reported working outside of and in addition to their usual hours to prepare for and manage the VISTA members. A museum can prevent this by assigning two or more staff members to provide supervision as a team or by moving tasks that the site supervisor would normally perform to other staff members.

Applying to sponsor a VISTA project

Organizations apply to become a VISTA sponsor through [eGrants](http://egrants.cns.gov) (<http://egrants.cns.gov>), an online portal used by CNCS grantees for applying, tracking, administering, reporting, and closing out grants. Several museum staff members may need to enroll in eGrants, including the site supervisor, grant writers, and a member of the leadership team to approve the application. The CNCS website provides excellent user guidance about eGrants and successfully applying to the program.

Figure 2. Suggested resources

Is AmeriCorps VISTA Right for Your Organization?

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/SponsorGuide.pdf>

Sponsor a VISTA Project

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriCorps/ameriCorps-programs/ameriCorps-vista/sponsor-vista-project>

All VISTA project applications must address capacity building that increases the organization's ability to serve communities experiencing poverty. The Lawrence Hall of Science assigned its VISTA member to the Inventor's Workshop, an existing community outreach program. In addition to recruiting and training new volunteers to deliver Inventor's Workshop programs, the VISTA member developed a method that other museum staff can use in the future to recruit and train additional volunteers. This is one example of how a museum can build capacity with the help of a VISTA member. Other ASTC VISTA museums built capacity by assigning their VISTA members to promote existing programs through increased community outreach or by supporting the creation of entirely new programs to serve low-resource communities. CNCS encourages proposals that demonstrate capacity building and sustainable activities; see Figure 3 for general examples.

Figure 3. Is AmeriCorps VISTA Right for Your Organization?

Acceptable Service	Capacity Building	Sustainable Activities
Recruit volunteers	Develop forms, volunteer assignments	Develop volunteer handbook
Train direct service providers	Write training curriculum or train the trainer curriculum	Develop training manual
Coordinate projects	Develop procedures and systems	Develop volunteer management system and procedural guide
Public speaking	Develop speakers' bureau	Develop community partnerships
Write press releases	Develop press kits, media database	Secure media partners
Organize fundraising events	Grant writing; develop database	Secure project staffing
Organize task forces/coalitions	Develop leadership structure of task force/coalition	Create infrastructure
Conduct outreach	Design brochures, posters	Create mechanism for project evaluation

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/SponsorGuide.pdf>, accessed 7-1-2016

Opportunity listings and the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)

Among the first tasks for an organization whose application has been accepted is to submit an “opportunity listing” via eGrants. The opportunity listing is the public announcement advertising a VISTA position at an organization. One opportunity listing can be used for more than one VISTA member provided the work is on the same project and at the same site. If a project takes place at multiple sites, a listing for each site is required. Once the opportunity listings are created and approved in eGrants, CNCS posts them in the My AmeriCorps Portal (<https://my.americorps.gov>) where individuals interested in serving as VISTA members can register and apply for opportunities.

Like the opportunity listing, the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) is created by organizations via eGrants. VADs are internal documents and will not be posted on the My AmeriCorps portal. The VAD acts as a job description; it governs the specific tasks that a VISTA member will perform. CNCS requires organizations to submit one VAD for each VISTA member it hosts. The VAD should clearly communicate the VISTA member and sponsor organization expectations. Each VISTA member receives their specific VAD at a required CNCS-sponsored preservice orientation that takes place immediately prior to the VISTA member’s start date. The VAD keeps the VISTA members and their sponsoring organizations accountable to each other.

The VAD is a vital component of a VISTA project. It should be specific, thorough, and most importantly, completed before the recruitment process can begin. The VAD follows directly from

the goals of the overall project. It will outline the skills and requirements that the successful VISTA candidate will possess. A thoughtful VAD that has been prepared in advance ensures that the project's goals are clear and that the tasks being assigned to the VISTA member are neither vague nor overwhelming. Potential site supervisors should also be aware that CNCS refers to the VAD as a "living document." The site supervisor and VISTA member may review and update the VAD if the project work differs from the museum's originally intended plan.

Recruiting a VISTA member

"Some VISTAs are recent college graduates looking for an opportunity to serve their community and country and gain real-world experience and skills they might not receive in an entry-level position at a corporation, public agency, or nonprofit organization," while "other VISTAs are recently retired professionals looking for a meaningful way to spend their retirement years. They are interested in providing their time and skills to benefit the community."

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/SponsorGuide.pdf>
page 5, accessed 7-1-2016

To be eligible to serve as an AmeriCorps VISTA member, applicants must be 18 years old or older (there is no upper age limit) and either a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident. Applicants register on the My AmeriCorps online portal. Once registered, candidates browse listings of VISTA jobs known as opportunity descriptions. The portal lists projects nationwide.

Selection of the VISTA member rests with the museum directing the project, providing them with overall control of the recruitment process. The site supervisor reviews applications to the

Participants at a STEM Night event in Queens, New York. Photo by the New York Hall of Science.



Site Story: The New York Hall of Science

Andrea Canova

- worked on six STEM Nights, culminating with a final STEM Career Expo in May
- increased average attendance from 30 to 284 participants per event
- recruited volunteers for each event, including
 - ▲ professionals employed in STEM-related careers
 - ▲ students from STEM-related academic programs and organizations
 - ▲ staff from other science institutions that offer STEM-themed educational programs.

STEM Nights are monthly events featuring a panel discussion, tabletop activities, and a networking session for high school and college students.

Katherine Rivera

- built capacity for the NYSCI Neighbors program by reinforcing the relationship between schools, community partners, and the museum through outreach events, special events , educational programs, class field trips, PTA meetings, and parent orientations
- added five schools, bringing the total number of NYSCI Neighbor participating schools to 15
- added two community partners, bringing the total number of partner organizations to 19
- added 230 new families as museum members through the NYSCI Neighbors program.

NYSCI Neighbors supports STEM pathways for local children and families by providing low-cost museum memberships, access to special events, and free educational programs.

museum's particular VISTA project through eGrants. They then use eGrants to contact and schedule interviews with those most suited to the work envisioned in that museum and community. After the museum makes an offer that is accepted by a candidate, CNCS performs a background check on the potential VISTA member before a training session is assigned. Once selected and trained, CNCS expects the VISTA member to serve at an organization's site 40 hours per a week for an entire year. If the selected candidate is not a good fit, CNCS will work with both parties to reassign them to a different organization and project.

Museums can supplement the applicant pool by advertising the VISTA position themselves, as they would any other job opening. Candidates selected through this method must still register in the My AmeriCorps portal to formally apply for the position. While selecting from the pool of candidates who have applied via the My AmeriCorps portal works well in many cases, some of the ASTC VISTA program museums advertised locally through their own recruitment channels.

The Bishop Museum, located in Honolulu, Hawaii, indicated a strong preference for a local candidate with knowledge of Hawaii's unique culture. The museum recognized that a locally recruited candidate would be more familiar with the specific underserved communities and local organizations its project would eventually serve. The ASTC project director, with the assistance the AmeriCorps state office located in Honolulu, provided the Bishop Museum with potential candidates that met these specific requirements in addition to the museum's own recruitment pool.

The New York Hall of Science recruited two VISTA members. One lived locally in the New York Hall of Science's neighborhood. She had grown up there and still had family in the area, including schoolage siblings. When asked about why she had applied to the program, she specifically cited "providing opportunities for my younger siblings that I did not have" as an influencing factor. The second VISTA member recruited came from Colorado. Her decision to pursue a VISTA opportunity was influenced by her mother, who works with a nonprofit that also hosts AmeriCorps VISTA members. She chose New York because of her prior volunteer experiences serving in large cities.

Discovery Cube Los Angeles, which opened only six months before the project began, recruited its VISTA member by activating its local volunteer network rather than using the national portal. Discovery Cube identified candidates who had already applied to its volunteer program and decided to steer one to the VISTA project. This candidate lived locally and was a retiree who expressed a desire to use her time to benefit her community and its brand new museum.

When the ASTC VISTA program museums began screening applicants who had applied via the My AmeriCorps portal, they remarked on the high number of candidates with prior professional experience in the museum field and/or education beyond a bachelor's degree. The support of Disney Worldwide Services, Inc., allowed the program to offer extra benefits including a housing

Site Story: **Discovery Cube – Los Angeles**

Lia Roberts

- attended local neighborhood events and council meetings acting as "boots on the ground" community outreach on behalf of this recently opened museum
- developed partnerships with local Title 1 schools
- fostered partnerships with the Lake View Terrace Library, Passport to Success (a Families in Schools program), the STEM-Up Initiative program, and The Connector
- provided opportunity for 195 families to attend the museum's Egg Drop Competition in February 2016
 - ▲ 59% of total participants at the event attended as a result of the VISTA's outreach
 - ▲ doubled the number of competition participants compared to 2015
- purchased Future Science and Engineers of America (FSEA) kits for distribution to local science teachers, enabling them to bring STEM from DCLA into their classrooms.

Site Story: The Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum

Jackie Troller and Kimberlee Harding

- researched and identified barriers to community access, notably that Hawaii’s geography results in disconnect between schools statewide and the museum
- evaluated current museum programming
- surveyed teachers and community members to identify potential partners
- established new relationships with partners through outreach
- planned to develop future STEAM programming
- proposed a project to create and distribute 3D rendering of artifacts from the museum’s science and cultural collection to mitigate barriers resulting from geography.

stipend, travel support, and funding for other professional development opportunities. Anecdotal evidence from the CNCS program officer, staff at the host sites, and the VISTA members themselves indicated that these extra benefits influenced candidates to accept positions with the ASTC VISTA program. While organizations may not supplement the VISTA living allowance with extra payments, payments, CNCS allows additional support that encourages applicants to become VISTA members. See pages 8–9 for more information.

“Since the museum field is highly competitive, candidates are likely to be educated, early- to mid-career professionals looking for professional development or a foot in the door. Unpaid internships are a huge hot-button topic on all sides in museum employment and equity discussions right now, and VISTA positions offer a middle path.”

—Dorothy Bayern, VISTA member at the Exploratorium

VISTA members and staff at the New York Hall of Science.
Photo by the New York Hall of Science.



VISTA member at the Hawaii Teachers Association. Photo by the Bishop Museum.





Participants at a STEM Night event in Queens, New York. Photo by the New York Hall of Science.

Site Story: **The California Science Center**

Genevieve Rana

- created a STEM and arts resource database in partnership with Education Consortium of Central Los Angeles (ECCLA) to improve educational outcomes for K–12 students by connecting educators and students with high-quality resources and opportunities
- built capacity for Science Live! floor programming through curriculum development and supporting and training youth presenter staff.

Lyna Abal

- facilitated youth volunteer workshops for the Guest Services Department to increase awareness and to promote STEM education and volunteer opportunities to youths in the local community
- built capacity by increasing the retention of youth volunteers in Guest Services Department.

Both VISTA members participated in a project celebrating the arrival of External Tank 94 (ET-94), the last surviving flight-qualified space shuttle external tank, donated to the California Science Center by NASA. Together Rana and Abal

- developed educational materials, such as rack cards and presentations, to inform the community about ET-94's arrival at the science center
- recruited volunteers for day of support during ET-94's move from Marina Del Rey to the science center in Los Angeles
- coordinated outreach to high schools to increase awareness along the route ET-94 traversed to the science center.

Supporting a VISTA member during their term

There are many ways a museum can support a VISTA member. CNCS views professional development as a valuable benefit to a VISTA member and as part of a robust, well-planned project. Museums should build this type of support into any VISTA proposal.

Knowing the VISTA member's place in the museum

"The daily operations I [took part in] at the museum helped me to get comfortable and familiar with the museum and staff members. I made a schedule for myself each day and that included floor walks...and asking questions to volunteers and staff members to get a better idea of the museum environment and interactions."

—Lyna Abal, VISTA member at the California Science Center

Site supervisors can create a welcoming and productive environment for both staff and the VISTA member by having a thoughtful and thorough introduction that defines the overall scope of the VISTA program and describes the benefits the program offers to the museum. Site supervisors should thoroughly plan how the VISTA member will relate functionally with other staff members and share the VAD internally before the VISTA member arrives. While different sites within the ASTC program had their own preference on how to refer to their VISTA positions, site supervisors and VISTA members agreed that it was better for the site to have a job title selected before the VISTA member began. A job title that communicated each VISTA member's role to internal staff and external partners helped better integrate VISTA members with museum staff. CNCS also requires that the term "VISTA member" is used in connection with any title a museum assigns.

The ASTC VISTA team meets at CNCS Headquarters in Oakland, California. Photo by ASTC.



Site Story: Chabot Space and Science Center

Rachel Gelenius

- built the capacity of the science center to reach low-resource communities in nearby Contra Costa County by establishing regular connections with science administrators at the county school district level
- researched grants offered by Google that support scholarships and other educational opportunities to youth in low-resource school districts
- planned to use the project to resurrect a local partnership with the Oakland Fire Department supporting an outreach program entitled Random Acts of Science
- planned possible community outreach centered around Super Bowl 50, held February 2016 in Santa Clara, California.

VISTA members reported most satisfaction when working within a team; when given access to internal resources (e.g., keys, email accounts, internal networks); and when staff understood their role and project. Even when they participated in regular meetings and enjoyed a positive relationship with their site supervisor, VISTA members reported feeling out of place until their roles were well understood by other staff. If a VISTA member will not be working directly with an internal team, look for other ways to connect them to peers and mentors. Being seated near a staff member known as a “mover and shaker” in the organization helped one VISTA member form better internal relationships. Of the 10 VISTA members who participated in the ASTC VISTA program, six were placed as pairs. Each pair worked closely together at their respective museums. Identifying as a team helped those particular VISTA members develop positive relationships with staff.

VISTA members in the program used different strategies to integrate with their respective organizations’ staff. At the New York Hall of Science, VISTA members obtained business cards with a specific job title in addition to “VISTA member.” Sharing these cards with fellow staff helped them feel comfortable with and part of the New York Hall of Science’s culture. The VISTA member at the Lawrence Hall of Science used a similar strategy with business cards, but listed her job title as “VISTA member” exclusively. She used this as a prompt to explain the VISTA program and her project to fellow staff, facilitating her integration into the museum’s culture. Finally, several other museums used all-staff meetings to introduce the VISTA member and their project to the organization. Site supervisors and VISTA members presented at other all-staff meetings throughout the program year both to provide project updates and to ensure that the VISTA members maintained a visible profile.

Site Story: The Exploratorium

Dorothy Bayern

- built database documenting over 60 external partnerships and evaluated a promising relationship management platform to improve future documentation processes
- initiated a relationship with the nearby San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park after making contact through the AmeriCorps VISTA network
- presented a poster about the ASTC VISTA pilot at the Western Museums Association's 2015 annual conference
- participated in the internal Girls Science Institute Steering Committee, Latino Coordinating Committee, and Community Confab
- reoriented and recommenced work after organizational restructuring and leadership change impacted planned projects
- supported an independent STEM day camp with market research, landscape analysis, business planning, web development, and program materials
- developed and documented a registration system for a series of five professional development workshops for the NSF-funded Exhibit Design for Girls Engagement project and co-facilitated four of those workshops.



VISTA member presenting at the 2016 ASTC Conference in Montreal, QC. Photo by ASTC.

Connecting a VISTA member to internal and external networks

VISTA members benefit from networking opportunities with other VISTA members as well as with people engaged in similar service roles. CNCS supports quarterly regional VISTA meetings in locations with high numbers of VISTA members and sufficient interest. At these meetings, VISTA members receive additional training and share their experiences. The opportunities to share survival stories and strategies and to feel part of a larger community of service provide valuable emotional support. Site supervisors are expected to release VISTA members from their usual duties so that they may attend these official gatherings.

VISTA members may also need assistance finding affordable housing, particularly those who are relocating. Site supervisors can markedly improve their VISTA member's experience by connecting them to networks with local expertise, such as those that exist in areas with a significant college or university population. Assistance can be as simple as sharing knowledge regarding safe neighborhoods and public transit accessibility or directly connecting a VISTA member to appropriate housing opportunities.

Site supervisors can help by facilitating connections with the museum's own internal staff and resources and with local organizations that also host VISTA members, as well as by encouraging informal meet-ups with VISTA members from nearby organizations. The ASTC VISTA Community STEM Initiative hosted 10 VISTA members at seven different sites in locations across the United States.

While widely distributed geographically, site supervisors and VISTA members interacted with each other by regular video calls, webinars, and shared online spaces provided by ASTC. A museum's own internal staff and resources are potential networks to which a VISTA member can be connected.

Strategies for retention

The VISTA program is highly demanding and rewarding for those who serve. There are many factors that may drive members out of the VISTA program, including financial stresses or an ill fit with the sponsor organization. Other factors that may lead them away from the VISTA program include a position elsewhere that is either better paid or better suited to their skills and interests. During the program, eight of the 10 ASTC VISTA members completed their year; this is comparable to the national average of 88% retention reported in 2014. Two VISTA members left the program early: one cited financial and other external factors; the other accepted an employment offer.

There are strategies that an organization can use to encourage retention. The more prepared a VISTA member is for the financial challenges, the more likely they will stay in the program. An organization should contact CNCS for details of the current stipend rates for its county and encourage candidates to research local costs of living before taking up an offer. To encourage retention, CNCS offers a choice of a \$1,500 cash stipend or an education award (equal to a Pell Grant) together with a year of noncompetitive eligibility for Federal employment positions. Sites can also introduce their own incentives to retain VISTA members by emphasizing professional development and networking opportunities, which can be valuable to a VISTA member's personal interests or long-term career goals. Most importantly, organizations should hire the candidate best suited for their project. With enough preparation and support, sites can provide a positive atmosphere to foster a VISTA member's year of service.

The ASTC VISTA team convening at the Chabot Space and Science Center in Oakland, California. Photo by ASTC.



Sustaining the work beyond year one

“One consistent goal for every AmeriCorps VISTA project should be the sustainability of the project by the sponsoring agency and the low-income community after AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsorship ends.”

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ Americorps/ Americorps-programs/ Americorps-vista/sponsor-vista-project>
accessed 7-21-2016

VISTA projects typically last for three years, with individual VISTA members serving one or two single-year terms. Regardless of the length of the project, documentation and transfer of project information is a critical part of the VISTA member’s role. At the CNCS preservice orientation and training, new VISTA members and supervisors are encouraged to think ahead to a future VISTA member who might inherit their project. A binder left for a new VISTA member might include advice for settling in at that particular site or tips and tricks for living frugally in the area. General project documentation should include records of upcoming opportunities, workflows, and community partner contacts.

Many VISTA projects center on community partnerships. Local organizations that serve low-resource communities are especially important; they offer museums access to the very communities the VISTA project aims to serve. These relationships often take multiple years to cultivate. When a VISTA member is the point-of-contact between a museum and a community partner, it is important to plan ahead to maintain healthy relationships after that VISTA member’s departure. Change is a built-in component of any VISTA project. Museums can preserve important relationships by keeping community partners informed of upcoming changes and making relevant introductions as soon as possible.

VISTA members and museums work together

The AmeriCorps VISTA program is a potentially valuable resource for science centers and museums seeking to increase their capacity to better serve low-resource communities. Feedback from the ASTC VISTA Community STEM Initiative indicated that VISTA members, site supervisors, and CEOs had many positive experiences. Considering the VISTA program in general, the following are worthwhile suggestions:

- Any organization should plan a support structure for its VISTA member through the project year.
- Substantial financial resources are not required although sufficient staff time for a site supervisor must be found.
- Cost-share opportunities from sponsors and foundations that allow for additional resources encourage high-quality candidates to apply to become a VISTA member at a particular organization.

Based on the experiences of participating site supervisors, VISTA members, and ASTC staff with the ASTC VISTA program specifically, here are some considerations regarding sponsoring VISTA members at museums:

- The VISTA program is unique; it is essential that science centers and museums thoroughly prepare in advance to reap the greatest benefits.
- Museums should ensure there is an internal culture compatible with and supportive of volunteers and interns; the way in which staff responds to the addition of a VISTA member will play a major role in both their experience and the project's effectiveness.
- VISTA members were most effective at increasing the capacity of existing programs rather than starting new projects. However, with proper planning and support, VISTA members can help with the implementation of new programs.



The ASTC VISTA team at a resource retreat in Berkeley, CA. Photo by ASTC.

Sponsoring one or more VISTA members can be an effective way for museums to increase their capacity to serve low-resource communities. The VISTA members assigned to the New York Hall of Science increased participation in each of their respective community programs. Both the California Science Center and the Lawrence Hall of Science used VISTA members to build capacity for programs serving low-resource communities through volunteer training and recruitment. The Bishop Museum used its VISTA members to connect with teachers and communities in areas previously inaccessible due to geographic distance and staffing constraints. Each participating science center made new community connections or improved those that already existed.

ASTC is also pleased to report that four of the seven museums that participated in the program offered their VISTA members temporary or permanent employment to continue their work. One museum investigated the possibility of becoming a VISTA sponsor independently. The participating science centers and museums reported that they benefited throughout the program year from VISTA member-driven partnerships and research.

The VISTA program can provide science centers and museums with dedicated, passionate individuals. By using VISTA members who will serve on their behalf, museums can create new or improve existing partnerships that benefit their communities. While there are costs in terms of staff time and funds, with proper planning and commitment, museums with a thorough understanding of the program can realize substantial accomplishments through AmeriCorps VISTA.

Additional resources

General information about AmeriCorps VISTA and how to apply

AmeriCorps VISTA home page

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriacorps/ameriacorps-vista>

The National Service Hotline

<https://questions.nationalservice.gov/>

Information for those deciding whether a museum should apply to sponsor VISTA members

Sponsor a VISTA project

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriacorps/ameriacorps-programs/ameriacorps-vista/sponsor-vista-project>

Is AmeriCorps VISTA Right for Your Organization?

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/SponsorGuide.pdf>

Information for potential site supervisors and museum staff who may work directly with the VISTA member or project

VISTA Campus homepage

<https://www.vistacampus.gov/>

Understanding VISTA (flash course)

<https://www.vistacampus.gov/resources/vista-101-understanding-vista-0>

VISTA Supervisor Manual

<https://www.vistacampus.gov/lessons/vista-supervisors-manual>

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VISTA members: *Kimberlee Harding and Jackie Troller*

**California Science Center, Los Angeles,
California**

Supervisors and staff: *Valerie Thompson, volunteer manager, and Katharine Mendivil, director of community and exhibit programs*

VISTA members: *Lyna Abal and Genevieve Rana*

**Chabot Space and Science Center,
Oakland, California**

Supervisors and staff: *Eric Havel, senior manager of education; Andrew Ignacio, science education lead-outreach programs; and Samantha Bell, lead flight director, Challenger Learning Center*

VISTA member: *Rachel Gelenius*

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Supervisors and staff: *Dawn Mondie, manager, volunteer services, and Sacha Van Voorhis, director, operations*

VISTA member: *Lia Roberts*

Exploratorium, San Francisco, California

Supervisors and staff: *Deirdre Araujo, manager, volunteer services, and Katherine MacDougall, administrative director, Institute for Research & Learning*

VISTA member: *Dorothy Bayern*

The Lawrence Hall of Science, Berkeley, California

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About ASTC



The Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC) is a global organization providing collective voice, professional support, and programming opportunities for science centers, museums, and related institutions, whose innovative approaches to science learning inspire people of all ages about the wonders and the meaning of science in their lives. Through strategic alliances and global partnerships, ASTC strives to increase awareness of the valuable contributions its members make to their communities and the field of informal STEM learning.

For more information about ASTC, or to find a science center near you, visit <http://www.astc.org>.

About the Corporation for National and Community Service and AmeriCorps VISTA



We are the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency that helps more than 5 million Americans improve the lives of their fellow citizens through service. Working hand in hand with local partners, we tap the ingenuity and can-do spirit of the American people to tackle some of the most pressing challenges facing our nation. Find out more at <http://www.nationalservice.gov/>.



AmeriCorps VISTA, a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, taps the skills, talents, and passion of more than 7,000 Americans annually to support community efforts to overcome poverty. By serving with AmeriCorps VISTA, you can make a tangible difference. And, you'll find the fulfillment that comes from using your knowledge and skills to help those in disadvantaged circumstances turn their dreams into reality. Find out more at <http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista>.

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