

# Training Briefs: Ten Tips for Successful Pre-Service Orientation

Member training and development are shared responsibilities between AmeriCorps program staff, site supervisors, training coordinators, and trainers. **Training Briefs** are designed to provide these individuals with useful information and innovative ideas for member training and development.

A successful pre-service training or orientation is the key to starting the program year off strong. This is the first opportunity for members to see the program in action; set realistic expectations; form partnerships with other members, program staff, and site supervisors; and begin building a strong sense of team (or esprit de corps). AmeriCorps members need to develop a foundation, a functional level of general and project specific knowledge and skills, in order to feel comfortable and confident in their new roles, and effectively serve their community. A strong foundation laid during pre-service training can help ensure a smooth year (effective and happy members) and be built upon during in-service sessions throughout the year. If the foundation is not strong, it will need reinforcing. Ineffective pre-service training will create challenges and leave program staff, and members, playing catch-up for the rest of the year. Investing in effective training up front pays off later.

The following tips will help AmeriCorps programs prepare for member pre-service training or orientation.

1. **Plan.** The better organized you are, the better the orientation will be -- even if you make lots of changes during the session. The more you systematically consider possible situations and needs, methods and potential problems, the more confident and flexible you will be.
2. **Make your orientation outcome-based.** Instead of designing your orientation based on topics to include, decide what outcomes you want to accomplish. Then pick topics and methods that will generate these outcomes. Often, one activity can contribute to several outcomes.
3. **Make your pre-service training truly interactive and experiential.** That means more than time for question and answer. Use every component of the experiential learning model -- and keep in mind the learning pyramid. The greater the active participation of the members, the greater the retention.
4. **Carefully choose, and thoroughly prepare, your facilitators and presenters.** Select them for their training skills, not just their content knowledge. Be sure they know what you expect, and review materials and methods before the training. For experts who aren't trainers, use them as "resources," and facilitate the session yourself.
5. **Emphasize teamwork.** Most participants will be working in teams. Use icebreakers, well-designed small-group activities, special teambuilding activities, and community projects to build team spirit and mutual trust.
6. **Model the service ethic.** Bring in role models, build on individual eagerness to serve, and have the staff, site supervisors, and other presenters reflect the benefits of service. Talk about service directly and honestly, and communicate realistic expectations.
7. **Use participants as resources.** Assess their skills as well as their training needs. Give them opportunities to teach each other, through cooperative learning groups and other specific peer teaching activities. Use them as co-facilitators in areas in which they have special expertise.
8. **Link training with the service assignment.** Train the supervisors as well as the members. Have supervisors work with members to plan their service activities. Provide or plan community projects. The more relevant the orientation to the actual assignment, the more interesting and useful it will be for members.
9. **Monitor, assess, and evaluate.** Throughout the session, ask members for feedback, and make immediate refinements. Assess specific activities and the overall session as a basis for change next year. Follow up to see if skills learned are retained and used. Use varied evaluation techniques.
10. **Make pre-service training the first step in ongoing learning.** Link it to in-service sessions, site-based training, and other knowledge and skill development opportunities.

## Activity: The Perfect AmeriCorps Member

Purpose: To discuss the expectations of program staff and site supervisors for AmeriCorps members. To agree on a shared vision of desired knowledge, skills, and attitudes for members in your program. To design training to reach the shared vision.

Instructions: Ask program staff, site supervisors, and past AmeriCorps members to think for 2 minutes individually about their vision of the perfect AmeriCorps member. How would they describe her/him? What would the member be able to do? What would her/his attitude be? What would s/he know? Once they have in mind a picture of the perfect AmeriCorps member, ask them to take 8 minutes to create a representation of him/her on newsprint. They can use any combination of drawing and words to complete the representation. Give each person one minute to share her/his representation of the perfect AmeriCorps member. Then as a group, compare and contrast the perfect AmeriCorps members and forge them into a collective vision. Now draw one representation that highlights the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (training outcomes) your program wants its members to have. Use these outcomes to guide the design of your pre-service training.

Variation: Adapt the activity for teambuilding. During pre-service training, ask individual members of work teams to draw a representation of what they hope their team will be. Have them compare and contrast their visions in their teams and decide on a collective vision. Ask members to decide on steps the team needs to take to develop and achieve the characteristics outlined in the vision.