

Preparation for the Session

Advance Preparation – Inviting Panelists – two months ahead

STEPS

1. Assess the interests of your members and invite panelists accordingly. The Community Inventory from Session 3 should have uncovered relevant organizations to draw upon. For example, if most of your members are interested in careers in environmental protection, you may want to invite panelists from a non-profit environmental agency or a wildlife center. A local biology teacher whom you know is involved in environmental projects may also be a good choice. Try to invite panelists who represent the diversity in the community and the interests of AmeriCorps members.
2. Start inviting panelists at least two months before the session. A willing panelist may be unable to participate if his or her calendar is already filled.
3. If your group is small (approximately ten members), we recommend that you invite three panelists. If it is large, (25 or more), invite four panelists. Invite enough panelists so that if someone cancels at the last minute, it will not be a problem. However, don't invite so many panelists that they miss opportunities to speak and feel under-utilized.
4. After a prospective panelist has accepted your invitation, send a confirmation letter. (See "Tips for Writing a Confirmation Letter" below.)
5. Offer to meet the panelists one at a time or arrange a conference call to discuss the format of the panel.

Tips for Writing a Confirmation Letter

Use a business letter format and include the following points:

- A sincere expression of thanks for their acceptance.
- Day, time, location, and directions to the training site.
- A brief description of the AmeriCorps members and their service.
- The names and organizations of the other panelists.
- The purpose of the session and the six questions that will be used to start the discussion.
- An invitation to stay for refreshments after the session so they can meet with members informally.

Facilitator's Note: Send the letter within two days of panelist's acceptance and include AmeriCorps brochures or other agency information.

Early Preparation – one week before

STEPS

1. Remind members of the nature of the session and the importance of dressing appropriately. The panelists may be AmeriCorps members' current or future employers, so you'll want them to leave with a positive impression of the members and their work.
2. Arrange for refreshments after the panel. Remind members that this time has been set aside for them to talk informally with panelists.
3. Ask members to help with session tasks. Some members can arrive early to make place cards, welcome the panelists, and be responsible for the refreshment table. You need to be free at the end of the session to answer questions, thank panelists, and take care of any last minute details.
4. Make copies of Field Assignment #5 for the members.
5. On a wall chart, write the recommended timing and the six questions that members generated in Session 4.

Later Preparation – at the session

STEPS

1. Make sure that the meeting place is clean, comfortable, and well organized. Set up the room before the panelists arrive.
2. If possible, have a table with a tablecloth for the panelists. Place a pitcher of water and glasses and a name and organization place card at each place setting.
3. Have AmeriCorps brochures or other agency information on hand. Remember, the panelists will also be networking, trying to understand local AmeriCorps activities, and identifying possible areas of collaboration.
4. Post the wall chart with the topics, the themed questions, and time frame in a visible place.

Follow up

Within a few days after the session, send a thank-you letter to each panelist.

Arrange to do Field Assignment #5, Handout A, page 105, and The Learning Store, Handout B, page 109, either individually or as a group. When passing out the evaluation forms, stress that it is the session that the members are evaluating, not the panelists. Through informal discussions and your own assessment, you will be able to decide whom to invite back to the panel next year.

Tips for Facilitating the Panel Discussion

STEPS

1. Open the discussion by introducing yourself and thanking the panelists for coming. Introduce each panelist by name, job title, and organization.
2. Explain your role as moderator and time-keeper. Describe how the discussion will be organized and the general time frame (e.g., questions will be taken from the members; all presenters are requested to answer the prepared questions.)
3. As moderator, keep your eye on three things:
 - a) Is anyone on the panel dominating the discussion? If so, call for or direct some questions to other panelists. Remind the panelists of the time constraints.
 - b) Has someone on the panel not spoken much? If so, direct a question to him or her.
 - c) If it seems that the discussion has taken a turn down a long and unproductive track, break in politely and redirect the conversation, or call for a stretch break.

SESSION 5

MATERIALS

Handout A, Field Assignment #5

- 4 pages

Handout B, The Learning Store

- 1 page

Handout A

Field Assignment #5 - Conducting Informational Interviews

Before the next session, set up and conduct at least one informational interview with someone in a public service field you might be interested in pursuing after AmeriCorps. Even if you are already serving or volunteering in that field, set up an interview to find out more information about the field. If you are unsure of a field, choose one in which you have some interest in pursuing after your AmeriCorps service.

In order to help you develop meaningful questions before the interview, review the session materials you have already received:

- Your Holland type.
- Listening and questioning skills.
- Your approach to activity, time, and human relationships.

Informational Interviews¹

In recent years, informational interviews have become more common and are recommended for anyone in a job transition, from the highest executive to a new job seeker. In an informational interview, your objectives are to gather as much information and advice as possible and to make contacts in the occupational area and/or organization that interests you most.

Don't use the informational interview as a job interview. It would be appropriate to offer a business card with your name and contact information. However, do not offer a résumé. If a résumé is requested, you can mail it with a follow-up thank-you note.

¹ Expanded from, *Next Steps, Life After AmeriCorps*, by Nedra Klee Hartzell, Publication of Corporation for National Service, Washington, D.C. 1997.

Handout A continued

Informational interviews can serve a variety of functions: doing background research on a field of work; researching a type of organization; finding out where the jobs might be; or exploring a particular organization.

Ideally, you want to set up an interview with someone with whom you have a connection. You may be able to get the name of a contact person by asking for suggestions and referrals from people you know – parents, friends, community members, church members, co-workers, or supervisors. Ask these people if you can use their names when making the initial contact for your informational interview.

Your initial contact person may not be an exact match to your area of interest. However, he or she will probably have good information for you and may refer you to another contact. For example, let's say you are interested in becoming a policewoman, but your contact is an accountant at the local police department. Although you may not be interested in accounting, this person can probably give you information about the organization of the police department, salary ranges, peak hiring seasons, and a referral to someone who would give you another informational interview.

Other ways to contact people in your occupational area can be through affiliated groups, and such organizations as professional associations and labor unions. Many towns and cities also have volunteer programs in which retired professionals offer their time as a source of support and advice. It is worth trying to make a match with any of these volunteers.

In your initial contact to request an interview, cover the following points:

- Tell the contact person your name, why you chose that person to interview, and who referred you.
- Make it clear that you are seeking information and advice, not a job.
- Say something positive that you know about the person.
- Request 20 minutes of time at the person's convenience.

Handout A continued

Before calling, rehearse your request for an interview. It might go something like this:

"I'm (*your name*), and I'm calling because I'm considering (*name the career, job, field, or organization in the interviewee's field*) following my AmeriCorps service. (*Name the person*) suggested that I call you. I'm looking for information about the (*career, job, field, or organization*), and I've heard you are a (*knowledgeable, experienced, informed*) person. May I have 20 minutes of your time at your convenience, to ask some questions and get advice?"

The following questions may be useful. Organize them so that you ask the most important questions first.

- What kinds of experience and education are required in your work?
- How did you get into this type of work?
- Why did you choose this type of work?
- What do you do in a typical day?
- What is the employment outlook for this type of work?
- What skills and abilities are most valued in this type of work?
- What are entry-level salary ranges and the potential for advancement in this field?
- Is there anyone else I can speak to about this field?
- May I use your name when I contact them?

Handout A continued

Note that the last two questions are important for leads to future informational interviews. It is unlikely that you will get all of the above information in a 20-minute interview. If you are serious about the field, though, more contacts and interviews will only help your prospects of identifying a rewarding profession.

If you are interested in the organization, request brochures, annual reports, or other information that might be available.

Keep track of time. After 20 minutes, end the interview. Giving you more time is at the interviewee's discretion. After the interview, thank the person and follow up with a thank-you note.

Handout B

The Learning Store, Session 5

In order to help us better serve your learning needs, and to help you reinforce your own learning, please take a few minutes and thoughtfully answer the following questions about today's session. Please give this completed form to your facilitator. Thanks very much for your input.

Name:

1. Please list at least three things you learned or relearned today that you think will come in handy.
2. What did you find the most useful in the Field Assignment?
3. Was there anything you found less useful in today's session? If so, what was it?
4. What did you especially like about today's session?
5. What aspect(s) of this session could be changed to make it better in the future?