

Chapter 13

Planning and Evaluation

Chapter 13 Planning and Evaluation

Wonderful things can happen on any project. Some wonderful things will happen by sheer luck, no matter what you do. But even more wonderful things can happen when you and your team think carefully & energetically about the project beforehand -- and during, and afterwards.

-- "The Cycle of Questions," in the *Team Leader Toolkit, Resources for Service-Learning*,
AmeriCorps*National Civilian Community Corps

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SCOPE

This chapter covers basic planning skills and tasks, developing measurable process and outcome objectives, and evaluation methods -- with specific applications to setting objectives, planning, and evaluation of your project.

IMPORTANCE

Planning and evaluation are important to the success of AmeriCorps programs. AmeriCorps requires each local service site to establish and monitor a set of annual objectives, establish a system for using "customer" feedback to improve program quality, and collect additional descriptive and demographic data (through forms developed by CNS).

The careful planning and evaluation of individual assignments is also important, to provide focus and clarity concerning member responsibilities and expectations, and provide a basis for assessing progress and results.

In addition, planning and evaluation are valuable skills which members can use in carrying out a wide variety of tasks, from community needs assessments to the planning and assessment of specific project activities.

TARGETED USERS

The individuals responsible for developing the pre-service training units related to planning and evaluation, and any joint planning to be done by host site supervisors and members during the PST.

EXPECTED LEARNING

This section is designed to enable program personnel:

- To develop training units which provide core planning and evaluation knowledge and skills for members.
- To give members the skills to help plan and evaluate their own projects.
- To prepare members to carry out other planning and evaluation tasks, individually or as part of a team.

RELATED CHAPTERS

This section is closely related to the *Chapter 12: Community-Related Skills*, page 501, and *Chapter 14: Community Projects*, page 575.

Activity #29: The Planning Process

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:	Familiarity with planning theory and practice Facilitation skills
Time Required:	1 1/2 hours
Materials Needed:	Easel pad, markers, and masking tape -- so each small group can have several pieces of newsprint and several colored markers <i>Member Instructions</i> Cooperative Learning Roles Chart posted on newsprint
Learning Objectives:	At the end of this activity, members should be able: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● To identify logical steps and procedures for planning a project or activity● To become familiar with organizational and community factors to consider in developing a plan
Skills Development:	Skills in outlining a planning process Group process skills
Directions:	Have members work in small cooperative learning groups. If possible, group the members so that people who will have similar assignments or work for the same host organization are in the same group (e.g., make the groups as homogeneous as possible in terms of project assignment). Review the <i>Member Instructions</i> with the full group. Tell them that it is their responsibility to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Present to the full group a plan for carrying out that task, and● Describe the factors they considered and the process they used to develop this plan. Give the groups 30 minutes to work on their planning task.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT PLANNING

Parameters for the task:

Objectives -- desired results

Deadline

Resources available (people, money, equipment, and materials)

Required processes or methods

The external environment:

Community resources and support

Socioeconomic factors

"Political" climate

Relationships with other organizations

The internal environment:

Organizational capacity and skills

Organizational weaknesses

Now have the groups present their plans and the factors and processes used to develop them.

Process the experience -- ask how they felt when they were given the task. Ask the observer how the group went about organizing itself for the task, and how the experience went. Discuss any problems the group encountered due to lack of information or structure.

Now work with the groups to:

- Identify the major project and community factors the groups considered in their planning.
- List the planning steps the groups identified.

Generalize -- compare those lists to some sample planning steps and factors (see boxes), and see what factors and steps are often included. Discuss these approaches and answer any questions.

See how the skills and knowledge **apply** -- discuss how the members might be able to use this process in their project assignments.

TYPICAL PLANNING STEPS

1. **Define the task** -- specify what is to be accomplished and by when; a problem to be solved, a project or task to be organized, etc.
2. **Quantify objectives** -- specify measurable outcomes, and criteria by which success will be measured.
3. **Analyze internal and external factors affecting the task** -- organizational strengths and weaknesses; available capacity; community resources and support; other "environmental" factors; resources.
4. **Determine available resources** -- members, staff, community residents, other volunteers, funds, equipment and supplies.
5. **Identify and consider alternative approaches** -- various ways in which the task might be completed.
6. **Choose methods and develop tasks, with responsibilities and deadlines** -- what are the steps, who is responsible, and by what date must each be completed.
7. **Develop an evaluation plan** -- determine how progress will be monitored and results evaluated.

Additional Planning Exercises:

See *Chapter 14: Community Projects*, page 575, for additional planning exercises. The activities of planning for a community survey and planning a community service project can be used as further practice and application of planning skills.

HINTS FOR THE PLANNING ASSIGNMENT

The planning assignment is designed to let members discover ways to organize themselves and plan an activity or project. This may be somewhat frustrating, but going through the experience will help them realize the importance of organizing themselves and using a logical process in planning. It will also help them try out and select appropriate formats for organizing and presenting a plan.

Use the planning assignment given as a model. Develop one or more planning assignments which relate to the kinds of activities members will be involved in as part of their project assignments.

The planning assignment should be fairly broad, requiring members to ask questions about the community and about the organization. However, the activity being planned should not require technical knowledge or skills they have not yet had help in developing.

Assignment:

To develop a plan for carrying out a specific activity, and to document the factors considered and the steps used in developing the plan.

Directions:

Once in cooperative learning groups, decide on the roles for group members, choosing from the cooperative learning roles list posted in the training room.

Your tasks are:

1. To review the assignment which follows and plan how you would implement that assignment. Provide a plan which indicates what tasks are required, who is responsible for carrying them out, time deadlines, and any other information you feel is necessary as part of the plan. Summarize your plan on newsprint.
2. With the help of your observer, to document the process you used in planning, and the factors you considered in making your decisions.

Activity to be Planned:

You are AmeriCorps members serving as teacher aides, tutors, and community workers within the Youth Action Center, an inner-city nonprofit organization which provides an after-school and summer enrichment program designed to help elementary school children get a good start in school, develop high self-esteem, and do well in math and science. You use a thematic curriculum called "Building Communities" which encourages creative activity and higher-order reasoning skills. Children get a chance to practice skills in cooperative learning environments, work in groups on tasks, and learn about their community through field trips and special assignments. Your service area covers two public elementary schools and one Catholic school; the community is racially and ethnically mixed, and largely low-income.

The program uses high school students as tutors, providing the tutors with training and part-time jobs. The students are fourth through sixth graders identified by teachers in the local public and parochial schools as in need of special attention because of concern about their school progress or because of family situations. You also get referrals from parents and from several local community centers. Students must agree to participate regularly. Parents or guardians must agree to their children's participation, and are expected to review their children's work, read to

their children or have their children read to them (since some parents may not be able to read), and attend at least three parent sessions at the Center during the year.

It is now the second week in January. The next group of fourth graders needs to be selected by the end of May, for a summer program operating six hours a day, four days a week; the school-year program operates two hours a day, three days a week, plus some weekend activities.

Your assignment is to design a plan for locating and selecting 25 fourth graders to participate in the program over the next year, and enrolling them in the program. Specify what needs to be done, by whom, and by when. In addition to you, staff available to help carry out the recruitment and selection include the Project Director, two senior teachers, five tutors, and a community resource specialist; however, the members have been asked to take responsibility for most of the "leg work." Identify any additional information needed for the assignment, and make any desired assumptions about the community and the project.

Activity #30: Preparing Objectives

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:	Familiarity with the development of objectives, and with AmeriCorps guidelines for writing objectives Facilitation skills
Time Required:	1 hour and 15 minutes
Materials Needed:	<i>Member Instructions</i> and <i>List of Objectives</i> Handout on <i>Writing Annual Objectives for AmeriCorps Programs</i> (see box) Cooperative Learning Roles Chart posted on newsprint
Learning Objectives:	At the end of this activity, members should be able: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● To describe the five components of an AmeriCorps "objective statement"● To distinguish process and outcome objectives● To prepare process and outcome objectives which meet AmeriCorps standards
Skills Development:	Developing objectives Group problem solving
Directions:	Begin by introducing basic concepts of objectives, asking members to explain what an objective is, why we use objectives, why it is so important that they be measurable. Provide the handout on <i>Writing Annual Objectives for AmeriCorps Programs</i> , explaining the required components of an AmeriCorps local project objective, and work with the group to develop several examples of both <i>process</i> and <i>outcome</i> objectives which include these components. This process should take no more than 15 minutes. Now give the members the <i>Member Instructions</i> and <i>List of Objectives</i> , and review them with the full group. Have them work in cooperative learning groups to critique and revise a set of defective objectives. Each group should be responsible for working

on two objectives in Part A. Also, have all groups develop an outcome objective based on the information provided in Part B. Give groups 25 minutes to work on the objectives assigned to them.

Then have reporters present each initial, flawed objective, how they changed it, and why. Assign each group to critique or offer suggestions to another group -- e.g., Group 4 critiques Group 1, Group 1 critiques Group 2, Group 2 critiques Group 3, Group 3 critiques Group 4.

Hint: See the attached *Trainer Notes on Objectives Activity* for help in analyzing and improving the objectives in the exercise.

Process the experience, being sure to identify areas in which groups had difficulty. **Generalize**, discussing typical types of objectives for particular priority areas.

Discuss how members are likely to **apply** skills in preparing objectives and using them as a basis for evaluation. They will need to understand the objectives already prepared for their projects, assist in evaluating progress towards them, and help ensure that they are met. Some projects have overall objectives but also develop individual objectives for a member, team, or crew, and host site supervisors may want to involve members in preparing these objectives. In addition, many members will be helping to develop activities for which they will need to prepare objectives, such as community service projects or special activities within their assignments.

**CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL SERVICE
WRITING ANNUAL OBJECTIVES FOR AMERICORPS PROGRAMS**

An objective is a statement of what your program believes will be the result of a year of effort, a statement about what will change.

An annual AmeriCorps project objective should include a description of:

- The program's activities or services to be provided (e.g., *tutoring*)
- The expected result of those activities or services (e.g., *increased reading skills*)
- A means of measuring the impact of the provided services or the quality of the provided product (e.g., *pre-/post- reading test*)
- A standard of success the program hopes to meet (e.g., *average increase of one grade level*)
- The number of service recipients or individuals who benefit (e.g., *25 at-risk middle-school youth*)

Example:

To improve the reading skills of 25 at-risk middle-school youth through tutoring, as measured by an average increase of one grade level on the school district's reading comprehension test, to be administered before and after the program.

As the example illustrates, a useful format for an objective is:

To plus an *active verb and object* describing the service activity and desired outcome, followed by *phrases or clauses* which specify the number and description of service recipients, indicate how the "improvement" or outcome will be measured, and specify the standard for measuring whether the objective was received.

Annual objectives may also measure change in terms of the *process* of operating a program -- process objectives which address *how* work will get done, not *what* work will get done. The ultimate goal of a program is unlikely to be the recruitment of participants or the holding of meetings, although those are important processes in creating a quality program.

Examples:

- To recruit 45 participants within six weeks of beginning operation.
- To hold weekly staff meetings with all youth team supervisors.

Trainer Notes on Objectives Activity

PART A

1. **To renovate houses owned by low-income families so that they meet housing code standards.**

Outcome objective. Lacks number of service recipients (number of families whose houses are to be renovated); lacks standard of success (100% of housing code requirements).

Possible rewrite:

To renovate the houses owned by 10 low-income families so that they meet 100% of housing code requirements as measured by local housing inspectors.

2. **To provide mentoring with the result that three-fourths of participating fifth and sixth graders improve their attitudes toward school significantly.**

Outcome objective. Lacks number and description of service recipients. Lacks sufficient detail on means of measuring the impact of the service; lacks adequate standard of success. Possible rewrite:

To improve attitudes towards school of 200 fifth and sixth graders through mentoring, so that at least 75% of participants show increases of 20% or more using pre- and post-program measures of educational aspirations, expectations, and attitudes as judged by teachers and the students themselves.

3. **The project will decrease the incidence of school violence by at least 10% in three elementary schools as measured by reported incidence of violence.**

Outcome objective. Does not use preferred "to plus verb" format. Means of measuring impact of the service is not sufficiently clear, and standard of success is vague. Possible rewrite:

To decrease the incidence of school violence by at least 10% in each of three elementary schools, as measured by the number of incidence of violence in the school as reported by school personnel for a three-month period before program initiation and a three-month period after the program has been operational for six months.

- 4. To establish a recycling program with participation by 300 families on a weekly basis.**

Process objective. Needs time deadline. Possible rewrite:

To establish a paper and bottle recycling program with weekly participation by 300 families in the Midtown community by the end of December.

- 5. To increase parental participation in school activities by 10% through a community outreach and home visiting program.**

Outcome objective. Standard of success and means of measuring impact not specific enough; number of service beneficiaries not stated. Possible rewrite:

To carry out a community outreach and home visiting program which leads to a 10% increase in average PTA attendance and a 20% increase in the number of parent-teacher visits by the parents of 350 middle-school students, based on comparisons between the second semester of the previous school year and the second semester of this school year.

- 6. To recruit 50 students for an after-school tutoring program within two months after school starts.**

Process objective. Needs more explanation of beneficiaries. Timing not clearly described. Possible rewrite:

To recruit 50 high school students who are in danger of failing math and science for an after-school tutoring program in those subjects within two months after the beginning of the semester.

- 7. To provide intensive parenting training to 100 teen parents, resulting in parental commitment to participate in a six-month "strong start" parent-child education program.**

Process objective. Needs numerical measure of level of parenting training and improved measurement of results and standard of success. Possible rewrite:

To provide 40 hours of parenting training to 100 teen parents, resulting in 90% enrollment and 75% participation in the activities of a six-month "strong start" parent-child pre-school education program.

8. To ensure that children from 350 families become fully immunized through an outreach program associated with La Clínica Familiar.

Outcome objective. Needs number of service recipients and better means of measurement and standard of success. Possible rewrite:

To provide immunization outreach and referral services leading to 100% up-to-date immunizations for 350 children aged six months to five years at La Clínica Familiar, as measured by American Academy of Pediatrics immunization standards.

PART B

Sample outcome objective:

To improve the English, spelling, and arithmetic skills of 60 primary-school children through tutoring, as measured by an average increase of two months on standardized school system achievement tests for every one month spent in the tutoring program, with tests to be administered before and after the program.

Activity #30: Preparing Objectives
Member Instructions

Assignment:

To review several sample annual local project objectives to identify any problems with them, and to revise them so they include the five components specified by AmeriCorps

Directions:

Once in cooperative learning groups, decide on the roles for group members, choosing from the cooperative learning roles list posted in the training room.

Attached is a list of sample AmeriCorps annual local project objectives, many of which do not meet the standards specified by AmeriCorps -- they are missing one or more of the components specified by AmeriCorps and included in your handout on *Writing Annual Objectives for AmeriCorps Programs*.

Individually read the objectives assigned to your group and try to identify whether this is a process or an outcome objective -- and whether it includes all five components and is in an appropriate format. Spend about three minutes individually reviewing the objectives.

Working as a group, try to rewrite each objective so that it contains the five required components. Spend about 15 minutes working on the two objectives.

Now develop an outcome objective using the information provided in Part B. You have ten minutes for this task.

Be prepared to present your work to the full group.

List of Objectives

PART A.

For each objective, determine:

- **Is it a process or outcome objective?**
 - **Does it include all the five AmeriCorps components?**
 - **How can you revise the objective so that it includes all five components and is in an appropriate format?**
1. To renovate houses owned by low-income families so that they meet housing code standards.
 2. To provide mentoring with the result that three-fourths of participating fifth and sixth graders improve their attitudes toward school significantly.
 3. The project will decrease the incidence of school violence by at least 10% in three elementary schools as measured by reported incidence of violence.
 4. To establish a recycling program with participation by 300 families on a weekly basis.
 5. To increase parental participation in school activities by 10% through a community outreach and home visiting program.
 6. To recruit 50 students for an after-school tutoring program within two months after school starts.
 7. To provide intensive parenting training to 100 teen parents, resulting in parental commitment to participation in a six-month "strong start" parent-child education program.

8. To ensure that children from 350 families become fully immunized through an outreach program associated with La Clínica Familiar.

PART B.

Develop one outcome objective for the following project.

This project involves intensive tutoring of children in primary grades who are at least one year below grade level in their achievement in core subjects such as English, arithmetic, and spelling. Your desired outcome is for each student to improve two months for every one month spent in the tutoring program, based on the use of standardized performance-based achievement tests. Tutoring sessions are organized by semester, with about three and a half months of tutoring each semester. The project includes 60 children, who receive two hours of tutoring two days a week. One group of 30 comes in on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the other group of 30 on Mondays and Wednesdays. You also provide enrichment activities on weekends.

Activity #31: Methods of Evaluation

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:

Familiarity with the development of objectives, and with AmeriCorps guidelines for writing objectives
Facilitation skills

Time Required:

1 1/2 hours

Materials Needed:

Member Instructions

Learning Objectives:

At the end of this activity, members should be able:

- To identify and describe practical methods of tracking progress towards your annual objectives
- To select appropriate evaluation methods and formats for various types of projects
- To specify ways of collecting and using regular "customer" feedback to improve program quality

Skills Development:

Evaluation
Group problem solving

Directions:

Begin by asking members to tell you what they consider to be the purposes of evaluation within the AmeriCorps program. Discuss AmeriCorps expectations about evaluation, and why monitoring and evaluation are such an important part of the AmeriCorps experience. (Use the information in the shaded box.)

**RESOURCES: HANDBOOK
FOR CONTINUOUS
IMPROVEMENT**

For information about Activity Tracking Logs and Service Recipient Satisfaction Surveys, see AmeriCorps' *Handbook for Continuous Improvement*.

Ask members to individually think about the kinds of projects this AmeriCorps program will be involved in, and to write down three methods that might be used to monitor progress towards objectives

and obtain "customer" feedback. Allow three minutes for members to work individually. Now go around the room, asking each member to state one evaluation approach and how it would be used. Keep going around until you have all the different methods listed on newsprint. Make sure everyone is familiar with the terminology used.

Have members work with one or two other people, selected to include people who will be working in different service sites and different types of projects. Review the *Member Instructions* with the full group. Ask each group to review one or two of the following situations and suggest one or more methods of monitoring progress towards the project's annual objectives and obtaining "customer" feedback to improve program quality. Ask that they be as specific as possible in terms of the sources of information, methods of information collection, and kinds of information to be sought. It is useful to have two groups addressing each situation, so their approaches can be compared. Allow 20 minutes for the small groups.

Hint: You may want to provide members a copy of the *Evaluation Methods Chart*, for reference in identifying possible evaluation methods.

Now have each group present its situation and its recommended evaluation methods. If two groups worked on the same situation, have one present, and then the other talk about what it did differently.

Process the experience -- was the assignment difficult? What problems did they identify in trying to develop practical evaluation approaches?

Generalize -- what methods seem most appropriate for particular types of "customers" or programs and why?

Discuss **applications** -- and indicate that additional activities will focus on how to apply what they have learned in their own project.

**CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL SERVICE
AMERICORPS PROJECT EVALUATION RESPONSIBILITIES**

At the national level, evaluation is designed to determine community impacts of the overall AmeriCorps effort and address the following questions:

- What work was performed?
- What is the impact of that work on direct beneficiaries?
- What are the impacts on involved institutions?
- Do programs build stronger communities?

At the local level, evaluation is needed to "continuously improve" programs by:

- Tracking progress towards annual objectives for community service, member development, and community strengthening
- Obtaining regular "customer" and "stakeholder" feedback to improve program quality

In addition, local sites cooperate with national evaluation efforts through:

- Completing an Annual Accomplishments Survey
- Having members complete enrollment and exit forms
- Having Service sites complete Service Site Information Forms
- Serve as an intensive evaluation site if asked to do so

Members themselves are most likely to become involved in helping to:

- Monitor progress towards annual objectives, especially those related to community service
- Obtain regular "customer" feedback

Source: Corporation for National Service, Office of Evaluation, *Background Information and Related Materials*.

Activity #31: Methods of Evaluation
Member Instructions

Assignment:

To identify evaluation approaches appropriate for measuring progress towards objectives and service recipient satisfaction.

Directions:

Working with one or two other people, review the situations assigned to you, and describe one or more evaluation methods which you believe would be appropriate for each situation. Be prepared to share your recommendations with the full group.

1. Your project's objective is to renovate the houses owned by 10 low-income families so that they meet 100% of housing code requirements as measured by local housing inspectors. These houses are located in the inner city. You will be identifying homes that do not meet housing code standards, and helping the owners renovate them so that they are in full compliance with housing codes. You are also concerned with ensuring that the residents are happy with the quality of the work and feel that their homes are now safer and more comfortable.

How and from whom will you measure progress towards your objective?
How will you obtain "customer" feedback?

2. Your project's objective is to improve attitudes towards school of 200 fifth and sixth graders through mentoring, so that at least 75% of participants show increases of 20% or more on measures of educational aspirations, expectations, and attitudes as judged by teachers and the students themselves, as measured before and after program participation. You are also concerned with how the students feel about the mentoring program, so that you can keep improving it.

How and from whom will you obtain information on changes in attitudes towards school?
How can you measure student satisfaction with the project?

3. Your public safety project is attempting to decrease the incidence of school violence by at least 10% in each of three elementary schools, as measured by the number of incidence of violence in the school as reported by school personnel for a three-month period before program initiation and a three-month period after the program has been operational for six months. You hope working with students to change their attitudes about violence will

help them become involved in efforts to eliminate weapons from the schools and to establish a norm of nonviolent conflict resolution.

How and from whom will you obtain the information needed to measure progress towards your annual objective?

How can you assess school personnel and student perceptions of the appropriateness and quality of your services?

4. Your environmental program is designed to establish a paper and bottle recycling program with weekly participation by 300 families in the Midtown community by the end of December. You hope to increase student and family awareness of the value and importance of recycling. You also hope the project will make enough money from recycling to support other community clean-up and beautification activities.

How and from whom will you obtain the information needed to measure progress towards your annual objective?

What methods can you use to determine "customer" satisfaction with the project and changes in their attitudes about recycling?

5. Your community outreach and home visiting program has an objective of generating a 10% increase in average PTA attendance and a 20% increase in the number of parent-teacher visits by the parents of 350 middle-school students, based on comparisons between the second semester of the previous school year and the second semester of this school year.

How and from whom will you obtain the information needed to measure whether your annual objective has been met?

What methods can you use to determine how parents feel about your services and identify ways to improve them? To obtain feedback from teachers and school administrators?

6. Your health outreach program expects to provide immunization outreach and referral services leading to 100% up-to-date immunizations for 350 children aged six months to five years at La Clínica Familiar. You will use the recommended immunization schedule of the American Academy of Pediatrics as your standard of measurement. You also want to understand what messages are most effective in motivating women to get their children immunized.

How and from whom will you obtain the information needed to see whether you have met your primary objective?

What methods can you use to determine what messages are most effective in motivating women to get their children immunized? To obtain consumer feedback about your outreach efforts?

Activity #32: Focus Group Simulation

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:	Familiarity with evaluation methods, including focus groups Facilitation skills
Time Required:	2 hours
Materials Needed:	Handouts on how to run a focus group <i>Member Instructions</i> Cooperative Learning Roles Chart posted on newsprint
Learning Objectives:	At the end of this activity, members should be able: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● To prepare a script and plan for a focus group● To conduct a focus group for the purpose of evaluating a program or activity
Skills Development:	Program evaluation Group problem solving Planning Running focus groups
Directions:	Review the <i>Member Instructions</i> with the full group. Divide the members into groups of not more than seven members to serve as focus group planners. Have each group go through the same process of designing a focus group. Groups may divide up the work as they please, but the process should include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Agreeing on the purposes of the focus group and the main kinds of information to be obtained● Developing a script to guide the focus group● Selecting a group of not more than 10 to 12 members to serve as focus group members Allow 45 minutes for planning.

Then pick one of the groups to conduct the focus group, with members selected by that group serving as focus group members, and others observing the focus group.

Assign roles to the observers: have some observe the focus group participants, and others the facilitators. Have some members focus on body language and other nonverbal communication. Have others concentrate on how the script is handled and the methods used to get everyone to participate. Have still others listen to the content of the focus group and identify major themes and areas of agreement and disagreement among the focus group members.

Allow the focus group to run for about half an hour; then call a halt and **process, generalize, and apply** the experience. End by asking members to describe situations in which they feel focus groups might be useful to them in their AmeriCorps project assignments.

Activity #32: Focus Group Simulation
Member Instructions

Assignment:

To develop and carry out a focus group to obtain information about program quality.

Directions:

Once in cooperative learning groups, decide on the roles for group members, choosing from the cooperative learning roles list posted in the training room.

Read the task described below, and plan as a group how you would use a focus group to obtain the information needed. You will need to work as a group or in subgroups to:

- Agree on the purposes of the focus group and the main kinds of information to be obtained.
- Develop a script to guide the focus group.
- Select a group of not more than 10 to 12 members to serve as focus group members.

You will have 45 minutes to plan your focus group. Then one group will be selected to implement the focus group as planned, with other members serving as focus group members and observers.

Situation:

You are the facilitators/trainers of this pre-service training, and you want member feedback on how it is going, what they have learned, what they like most and least about the PST, and what they feel should be changed for the remainder of the PST. Design a focus group to obtain this information, select its members from among the other AmeriCorps members in this training, and begin to conduct the focus group.

Activity #33: Putting It All Together: Planning for Your AmeriCorps Assignment

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:

Familiarity with AmeriCorps guidelines for service sites
Knowledge of your program's service sites
Facilitation skills

Time Required:

2 1/2 hours

Materials Needed:

Member Instructions
Operating plans or at least mission statements and annual objectives for each service site
Planning Formats

NOTE:

This activity can be done properly only if the host site supervisors or other host site representatives are at the PST site to participate.

Learning Objectives:

At the end of this activity, members will be able:

- To become familiar with the annual objectives for their AmeriCorps program and for the specific service site where they will be assigned
- To develop personal objectives, a plan, and evaluation procedures for their assignment

Skills Development:

Planning
Objective setting
Evaluation design

Directions:

Begin with a brief overview of the mission and objectives for your AmeriCorps program, provided by individuals who helped develop and are extremely familiar with this material. While a program overview may have been provided early in the training, this discussion should focus specifically on mission, objectives, and plans for monitoring progress towards objectives and determining

"customer" satisfaction. Welcome and answer questions. This process should take no more than 20 minutes.

If multiple service organizations and sites are involved, follow this discussion with brief presentations or a panel discussion covering the same information about each project and service site. This gives all members an overview of the work plans for the service sites which are a part of this program.

CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL SERVICE LOCAL PLANS

Each AmeriCorps program is expected to:

- Establish a mission statement
- Develop a set of annual objectives and systems for tracking progress towards these objectives
- Establish systems for collecting and using regular "customer" feedback to improve program quality
- Complete and submit forms that provide basic service site and member information

AmeriCorps programs are expected to submit to the Corporation objectives which are at the core of their mission. Up to three objectives are submitted in each of the following areas:

- Community impact (covering the direct services provided to the community)
- Member/participant development
- Community building, or, in the case of Higher Education, institutional impacts (covering infrastructure building, partnerships, fundraising, etc.)

Source: Materials drawn from Corporation for National Service, Office of Education, Background Information and Related Materials.

Review the *Member Instructions* with the full group. For the small-group work, host site supervisors/representatives should be grouped with the members who will be assigned to their organizations. Ask the groups to accomplish the following:

1. Ensure members' familiarity with the overall plan, missions, and objectives for the project to which they will be assigned, by having host site supervisors and members together review written plans or summaries.
2. Discuss the specific roles which members will play, and the assignments for individual members. If members have not had specific assignments before, they can learn about them now.
3. Work together to plan how each member's assignment will be carried out. Unless host sites have other needs, this should involve having members with the same assignments work together and with their host site representative to:
 - Identify their individual roles in helping to reach annual community service objectives.
 - Specify major tasks and responsibilities for the members.
 - Indicate member roles in monitoring progress towards objectives and obtaining "customer" feedback.
4. Summarize this information on the *Planning Formats* provided.
5. Have members from the same service site compare their plans to ensure that they are compatible and consistent.

Allow at least an hour for this process.

Do not ask for presentations of the plans. **Process** the experience -- how did the planning go? Were there problems in developing the plans? **Generalize**, identifying common themes and

concerns. Ask how members expect to **apply** these plans during their project assignments.

Now group members in groups of two or three, so that they all will have project assignments in the same priority area and similar project responsibilities. Ask them to think about their project, and to identify at least three evaluation methods that might help them to monitor progress towards their objectives and obtain "customer" feedback.

***Activity #33: Putting It All Together: Planning for Your AmeriCorps
Assignment
Member Instructions***

Assignment:

Work with a representative of your host organization and with other members who will be assigned to that organization, to develop a plan for your AmeriCorps assignment.

Directions:

Working with the other members from your site and with a host site representative:

1. Review and ask questions about the overall plan, missions, and objectives for the project to which you will be assigned.
2. Discuss the specific roles which members will play, and your specific assignments.
3. Work individually and then with the group to plan your assignment. This will involve your working with other members with similar assignments and your host site representative to:
 - Identify what will be your individual roles in helping to reach annual community service objectives.
 - Specify your major tasks and responsibilities.
 - Describe your role in monitoring progress towards objectives and obtaining "customer" feedback.
4. Summarize this information using the *Planning Format* provided.
5. Compare your plan with the rest of your group to ensure that all the plans are compatible and consistent.

Planning Format

Member name:

Host organization:

List community service objectives you will help to meet:

List your specific responsibilities as an AmeriCorps member:

List your projected major tasks and deadlines, relating your job responsibilities to the annual community service objectives:

Task

Deadline

List ways in which you will consult and maintain contact with other AmeriCorps members, including those located at other sites and involved in similar activities.

List member development objectives for the organization:

Specify your personal member development objectives:

Supporting Information

Evaluation Methods Chart

Many different methods can be used to evaluate the progress and impact of your AmeriCorps program. The appropriate methods depend upon the priority area, specific project, objectives, target group or "customers," and other factors. Among the methods most likely to be used in AmeriCorps evaluation are the following.

Ways to Gather Information	When and Why to Use	Considerations
Achievement or other standardized test	Before and after services are provided, to measure change.	Without careful sampling and the use of comparison or control groups, pre- and post-tests show correlations but cannot demonstrate that your services were the cause of observed changes. It is possible that changes which occur were due to factors other than the services provided.
Interviews	To obtain customer reactions to services; good for quick reactions; useful when customers have limited literacy or when you want immediate feedback while impressions are fresh in people's minds.	People may not say what they really think if the person doing the interviews is a service provider. Interviewers need careful training. It is hard to interview a large number of customers quickly, so interviews will probably include only a small sample of customers.

Ways to Gather Information	When and Why to Use	Considerations
Written exit surveys or post-service assessments	To obtain written feedback from customers; useful where you want reactions from a large number of customers and they are all together in a room and have the time, literacy skills, and motivation to complete a survey form.	Practical only if customers have good reading and writing skills; not useful with small children. People may not say what they really think if the person picking up the surveys is a service provider; not asking for a name helps, and so does providing envelopes or having customers put their completed survey in a box.
Mail surveys	To obtain information from a large number of people with limited staff time; provide anonymity, which can encourage honest responses.	Return rate is often low, and those returning the survey may not be a representative sample of customers. Return postage is needed to encourage response, and mailing costs can be high. Written surveys require a moderate literacy level. Sometimes mailing addresses are not available.
Telephone interviews	To obtain information from a large number of people. Like other oral methods, may generate more detailed and understandable information than a written survey, and offers the chance to request clarification of unclear responses. Can get a high response rate, even from low-literacy populations.	Some low-income people do not have telephones, or it may be hard to obtain telephone numbers for some customers. Costs can be high. Requires well-trained interviewers. Customers can be promised anonymity, but may not be comfortable about providing honest information.

Ways to Gather Information	When and Why to Use	Considerations
Focus groups	To obtain in-depth information from a small number of customers. Can generate valuable perceptions and help identify problems. Participant interaction can lead to valuable dialog.	Requires careful planning and a well-developed "script." Usually most effective with a relatively homogeneous group; several focus groups may be needed to explore the perceptions of various groups.
Demonstration sessions	To test customer reactions to a new method of service delivery or training; provides feedback which can be used to modify the service before it is widely implemented.	Requires planned use of other approaches for observing customer reaction and seeking feedback, such as exit interviews or written forms.
Community meetings	To obtain informal information from groups of community residents -- can be open to specific groups such as mothers of children in a particular preschool or to anyone living in a particular neighborhood.	Requires careful planning and development of questions and discussion topics, plus effective facilitation. Hard to control controversy.
Use of observers	To obtain indirect feedback by observing customer reaction to services; can provide information missed by service personnel because they are focused on providing the service, not watching responses to it.	Requires careful training and a clear idea of the kind of information sought.
Key-person interview	To obtain perceptions and information from specific experts or knowledgeable individuals, such as teachers, nonprofit agency directors.	Not a substitute but a complement to customer reactions.

Ways to Gather Information	When and Why to Use	Considerations
Cameras and Video-cameras	To get feedback on and to see and self-assess skills; to document the quality of work completed (e.g., a home renovation)	Involves costs and skills. Use of video equipment in training requires some skill with the equipment as well as reliability -- be sure the camera and monitor are working! Some people object to being taped; be sure to check.
Games, simulations, role plays, and other active feedback	To obtain indirect feedback as part of the community service process; can often obtain honest information in an informal setting.	Must be carefully planned and organized to provide useful information. Information may be subject to multiple interpretations -- are these real opinions or were they presented as a part of a simulation.

Using Portfolios for Self-Assessment and Evaluation**

BACKGROUND

The creation of portfolios of completed works has become an important evaluation tool for both program participants and those evaluating projects. Portfolios borrow the concept used by artists, photographers, and others in the fine arts field to present and illustrate the range and breadth of an individual's skills. Individuals creating their own portfolios select what they consider to be the best representations of their activities or learning experiences over some period of time -- artwork, reports, written products, journals, self-assessments, tapes, or any other concrete examples of their work and their proficiency.

Portfolios can be used in several ways, and this summary discusses two of the most often used techniques:

- **Use of portfolios as a personal self-assessment tool, a vehicle for self-reflection and personal growth** -- appropriate for use by members or by students or other customers served by members in their AmeriCorps assignments; and
- **Incorporation of portfolios into an overall project evaluation plan**, in which portfolios provide evidence of proficiency in certain skills areas, and also provide a tool for program publicity.

PORTFOLIOS AS SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOLS

One of the most exciting concepts of portfolio learning is that it allows members to become seriously involved in the process of assessing personal growth, in seeing tangible evidence of "before and after" changes, and in being both a player and an observer in their own highly personal and sometimes subjective learning experiences.

Members use portfolios as self-assessment tools by selecting for their portfolios what they consider to be representative examples documenting their activities and skill development over some period of time. A portfolio may be a large notebook, folder, carry-all, or other container which can hold the kinds of products to be included. The period is usually the service year or longer; members complete a cumulative portfolio which exhibits competency through including selected samples of their best work.

** Special thanks for information about the use of portfolios in AmeriCorps programs go to Anne Brown, Northeast Kingdom Initiative, Vail Hill, Lyndon State College, Lyndonville, Vermont. This summary benefited greatly from the following material provided by Ms. Brown: "Youth-At-Risk: Perspectives on Research and Practice," proceedings of a regional workshop and the 1993 annual meeting of NEC-81.

Portfolios can be used by members personally and by AmeriCorps service recipients.

AmeriCorps members can use portfolios to document their year of service, recording their perceptions of experiences and demonstrating what they have learned. Members may want to encourage young people or other service participants to use portfolios in similar ways -- to document and illustrate their learning in tutoring, educational enrichment, arts, and/or other projects which aim to develop knowledge, skills, and self-esteem.

PORTFOLIOS AS A PART OF PROJECT EVALUATION

Portfolios can serve as an important addition to the formal project evaluation process. Increasing emphasis is now being placed on performance-based rather than paper-and-pencil assessment of knowledge and skills, and portfolios typically contain samples of an individual's best "products" -- demonstrating skills in writing, art, or other content areas. A portfolio can become a valuable segment of the evaluation system, providing products which can be evaluated externally. If portfolios of members or service recipients are to be used for external review and evaluation, this needs to be made clear at the start.

A portfolio enables each individual to tell a personal story with self-selected materials. A set of member or service participant portfolios may serve as the varied evidence of the positive results of a particular project.

A portfolio can also be completed as a group project. Having group input involves group planning and problem solving, and usually involves a more formal process than simply having each participant use the process as a self-reflection guide. The group can include two or more individuals; a crew or team might decide to create a group portfolio. The group portfolio provides a qualitative record of the group's activities and accomplishments.

LESSONS LEARNED: GROUP PORTFOLIO

Some AmeriCorps project managers report that individual members sometimes feel overwhelmed by the prospect of an individual portfolio. However, a group portfolio created by a team or crew and used later on as an AmeriCorps educational tool worked well and serves as a visual record of annual accomplishments.

Portfolios can provide valuable input to qualitative evaluation of project outcomes, especially if project objectives include skills which are to be demonstrated through the development of relevant products.

It is difficult but possible to generate quantitative information from portfolios. If portfolios include specified types of products, they can be evaluated using consistent criteria. For example, if every participant in a tutoring course periodically prepares a written product or a piece of artwork, these products can be evaluated to identify changes in demonstrated capacity.

A set of portfolios or a group portfolio can undergo expert or panel review as a means of assessing product quality. The reasons for involving a panel in the portfolio review process should be made clear to all who take part. Is the evaluation focused on the project as a whole or designed to judge individual proficiency and accomplishments? Who will participate in the panel review: peers, supervisors, other staff, and/or outside experts?

Confidential...or Not? If portfolios are to be evaluated, then someone will need to see and review them. It is important to be very clear from the beginning of the portfolio learning process whether the material included in portfolios is expected to be shown or made available to others. If they are to be shown, they can still remain anonymous if desired -- that is, the reviewers need not know the identity of the person preparing the portfolio. If portfolios will be shown to or reviewed by others, be sure to specify who will be seeing them -- other members, site supervisors, program staff, AmeriCorps staff, experts, or others.

If members are willing to share their portfolios, they can also be used to demonstrate project success to the public, helping people to understand the tangible results of education or other activities.

HINTS FOR USING PORTFOLIOS

- 1. Provide an overview on portfolio use to the members or service recipients.** Consider bringing in a former member who kept a portfolio or someone experienced in portfolio use from a school or university.

LESSONS LEARNED: USING PORTFOLIOS TO HIGHLIGHT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

AmeriCorps programs report that portfolios can become a very visible and effective public awareness and education tool. One program asks members to share their portfolios, and puts several of them in the reception area of the organization like a "coffee table book," where community residents and local officials look at them -- and learn about what AmeriCorps members are accomplishing in that community.

2. **Let the group consider whether members would prefer to develop individual or group portfolios.** If a group approach is preferred, try to ensure that the group is small -- preferably not larger than three or four -- so all members participate actively.
3. **Decide whether the portfolios will be for individual use or will be shared, and what level of anonymity or confidentiality will be provided.** See if members are comfortable sharing their portfolios, and consider your evaluation needs in making a decision.
4. **Make available a small stipend so each member can purchase or create a portfolio container or "shell."** Leave it to the members to decide what kind of receptacle to use, and encourage creativity.
5. **Discuss the ways in which learning can be summarized and memories documented.** Try a brainstorming approach. Encourage mixed-media ideas. If the portfolios will be reviewed or evaluated by others, remind members to use methods that are accessible to other people.
6. **If possible, show the members a completed portfolio** from a former member or from another program. Ideally, show several very different portfolios.
7. **Help members consider a schedule and process for adding to their portfolio.** Encourage them to take a few minutes each week to devote to portfolio development, so they really experience the self-learning and self-assessment benefits.
8. **If the portfolios will undergo external reviews, set periodic schedules for review,** and be sure the members know they will need to share their portfolios at these times. Ask members to date their portfolio items, so reviewers can look at them in chronological order and see skill development over time. Periodic review is better than one final review.
9. **If the portfolios are to be used solely as a tool for member self-reflection, stress that it is entirely their choice whom they allow to see it.** Even if no external review is required, members may find that sharing their portfolios with each other or another trusted person may be helpful, mainly for the suggestions and positive feedback they may receive through the process.
10. **Throughout the year, remind members about their portfolios.** Encourage them to set aside time regularly to prepare portfolio materials, warn them about deadlines for any external reviews, and use the opportunity to review a portfolio as a way to learn member perspectives and praise evidence of personal growth and accomplishment.