

Building a Training Calendar

Introduction

Designing a training calendar

You may be at a point in your professional life that you've been keeping a calendar "forever." You likely have your own style and idiosyncrasies, and may wonder: "What's there to learn about creating a calendar?"

When it comes to planning trainings for an AmeriCorps or VISTA program, there are many things to consider. The way you put together your training calendar can have a profound impact on the success of your program!

Learning Objectives

After spending 10-20 minutes with this resource, you'll have the tools to:

- Create a simple service-term training calendar in MS Word
- Strategize the best time to deliver specific trainings
- Choose a free online calendar to share with your team and project partners

Learning from others

Clyde

When Clyde was putting together his training calendar, he scheduled training with a college fair and resume workshop during the last month of the service term. As the term progressed, he noticed school-bound members putting their college applications together in December.

What might Clyde consider in putting together future calendars? Write your thoughts.

Another perspective: Clyde figured this out on his own, but scheduling college application-specific training for late fall is ideal, and resume workshops are effective roughly two months before members complete their service.

Judy

Judy wanted to bring the team together for trainings every week or two. She often scheduled them at the last minute according to when everyone was available. As her members gained steam at their service sites, she struggled to find common times.

What could Judy do differently? Write your thoughts.

Another perspective: Judy could require her team to hold one day a week (or every other week) for meetings and trainings. For example, "Training Tuesdays." She should check with the member sites ahead of time to make sure they don't have regularly scheduled meetings that could create scheduling conflicts.

Susan

During a break at a team meeting, Susan overheard a group of her VISTAs talking about a volunteer recruitment workshop that two of them attended on their own time. It made Susan wonder, how could she draw on the knowledge and skills her members gained inside and outside of service to share with the rest of the team?

What are Susan's options? Write your thoughts.

Another perspective: Susan has any number of options. One is to provide her members with presentation skills/public speaking training, and then ask them to look out for trainings they would like to attend and then report back to the national service team.

Starting a Training Calendar

We'll now walk through a relatively simple process to create a training calendar for your members. This section is designed mostly for new national service programs, new staff members, or programs that are overhauling their training plans.

What to plan when

Start with a calendar, electronic or traditional, that includes all relevant dates.

Dustin Speakman of The Ohio Benefit Bank AmeriCorps VISTA program (Columbus, OH) describes their organization's approach to meaningful member development:

Our philosophy on training and development is that you can never do enough; and so we're always looking for new ways to engage our VISTA members in meaningful training and development. Not just—you know—training and development for the sake of training and development, but stuff that they're actually going to be able to put to use during their year of service and beyond. So we do invest heavily in training and development.

What to plan when

Next, mark off any planned events. Consider:

- Holidays
- Service-term launches
- Scheduled retreats
- Transition ("Life after") days; college/career fairs
- National days/weeks of service (e.g., MLK Day)
- Site expectations (e.g., recurring staff meetings)

Of course, planning ahead, you'll find some dates aren't set. Make your best guess, and be prepared to refine some dates.

Remember: a calendar is an organic document and flexibility is crucial!

Scheduling regular meetings

After blocking out some dates, look at the big picture. What is your approach to training? Will you schedule recurring meetings?

Some programs gather members regularly (e.g., every other Friday). Regular meetings allow members to check-in, reconnect with the team, re-energize, and get ongoing training. If this is your approach, mark recurring dates, and begin considering topics.

Note: This is just one approach to training. Consider what's best (and feasible) for your own program.

Full-day training events

Another approach is to plan day-long (or even multi-day) training events. You can provide your members in-depth training on specific topic areas and skill sets.

Certain types of trainings work better with larger member audiences (career fairs, college fairs, wellness fairs). You might coordinate with other local AmeriCorps and VISTA programs to bring together members from across programs for these types of trainings. It's great for members to meet others serving in their area, and partnering with other programs makes planning easier (and the events potentially less expensive).

Note: Coordinate early so all programs involved hold the dates on their calendars and don't schedule redundant trainings.

Calendar Strategy

Here are a few keys for selecting and scheduling training topics.

Focus on site and people skills

Provide technical skills early on (so members arrive ready to serve) and interpersonal skills on an ongoing basis (so members can handle the challenges their service throws at them).

Beat the holiday blues

The period from Thanksgiving through MLK Day can be tough on members. This is a good time of year to schedule trainings on wellness topics, including stress relief. Check out [The National Service Stress Guide](#).

Provide transition training early and often

Throughout their service term, members have quite a bit of time to think about their future. It's never too early to provide training that relates to their transition from service. Check out the ["What's Next?" tutorial](#).

It's worth noting that college application and financial aid deadlines are often in the January-March window. Also, if members hope to start new jobs shortly after serving, they will need to begin checking listings and filling out applications at least one or two months before their exit dates.

Jim Heffernan of the New York Campus Compact VISTA program (Ithaca, NY) describes helping members prepare for life after national service”

We've had good success with a person from Syracuse University on résumé writing, network building, planning for life after VISTA, and we've moved that into the March time rather than June when we did it before because they were already finished thinking about it by then [*laughs*]. The teachable moment—so that résumé building and planning for life after VISTA—is—February and March is when it's useful.

Maintain calendar flexibility

Learning needs of all people change. If members are experiencing frequent conflicts, you might schedule “just-in-time” conflict management training.

Stay alert to skills that some members have and others want. For example, members with photography skills could mentor their peers to create a photo exhibit of service shots.

Keep your training calendar “in pencil” as much as possible. Then you can make adjustments as the team evolves.

Consider trainings outside your program scope

Over the course of the service term you'll hear about (or members will find) free/low cost trainings in the community relevant to their service. You may even have community members offer to provide training that will be valuable after service.

Beth Cook of Communities in Action VISTA (Sidney, MT) describes how her team receives EMT training.

The director of our Emergency Response Team—he gives the VISTAs all free Paramedic—or, not Paramedic but EMT training—if they want, which is a pretty intense process. And there have been people in the community who are like, “Oh—you know—why are you bothering training them... they're only here for a year... they're just going to take off and—you know—take this education with them... it's not benefitting us,” and his philosophy is, “if any one of these people I train can save a life somewhere, then it's worth it,” and I think that that's true—you know—in everything that we do. If we can—you know, like instill this sense of social responsibility and give the VISTA the tools to—you know—build capacity anywhere and in any form then we're doing our job. You know, it doesn't have to just be in our community. Hopefully it will be all over the world [*laughs*].

Set the tone in orientation

Starting out with a well put-together orientation can create a positive expectation for future trainings.

Caitlin Brooking of Hands On Gulf Coast AmeriCorps *State (Biloxi, MS) describes how the tone is set for training throughout the service term:

Something we try to keep in mind with orientation is it's not just the place where you have to sign your paperwork, [*laughs*] it's gonna set the tone for what member development and training is for the entire year. And if we focus on this paperwork and then training for this service, that's all they're going to focus on when they come back together like that. So, it's really an opportunity to stress that this is important for your personal and professional development as well and—you know—in addition to training, this is for you, and you should be interacting as well.

Conceptualizing Ideal Training Dates

Here's an activity that can help you decide what trainings to provide at specific times through the service term.

The first step is to write in the training grid below (page 6) the months of the service term.

Next, write fill in the grid with possible training topics or your own topics for each month to build your training calendar.

Possible training topics:

- CPR
- Civic Engagement
- Cultural Competency
- Orientation
- Storytelling
- Wellness
- Conflict Management
- Team-building
- Resume Writing
- Leadership Skills
- Reflection Workshop
- Poverty
- Personal Budgeting
- Project Management
- Book Club
- Public Speaking

Month				
Topic 1				
Topic 2				
Topic 3				
Topic 4				

Month				
Topic 1				
Topic 2				
Topic 3				
Topic 4				

Month				
Topic 1				
Topic 2				
Topic 3				
Topic 4				

Online Calendars

Benefits

There are several benefits to keeping an online “public” version of your training calendar that members can check when they are on site or at home.

It uses less paper and you can make changes and adjustments easily. You can also add an online evaluation feature (for example, [surveymonkey](#) or [zoomerang](#)) to receive post-training feedback and use the online training calendar to close the loop.

Tools

E-mail Services

If your members are on MS Outlook, you can send them invitations that get saved in their calendar. [Google](#) also has a free calendar feature, though it requires a Google account.

Social Networking Sites

You can use a site like [Ning](#) to create your own social network, just for your program. Have all your members sign up and you can share all sorts of resources with them, including an events feature where you can place your training calendar.

You can also use existing, popular social networking sites if all your members are on board. These include [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#), as well as others. Both of these free services have events/calendar functions. The upside is that if your members are already using these sites, they will check the calendar often. The downside is that the sites have many distractions, ranging from photos to video games.

Online Invitation Services

Traditionally for parties and weddings, you can use sites like [Evite](#) to let members know when a training takes place, the topic, and to verify they will be coming.

Conclusion

This ends the mini-tutorial on creating training calendars for your national service program. Find the tool that works best for you and your program to keep your training on track. Happy scheduling!

Our Experts

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- Beth Cook, project manager, Communities in Action (Sidney, MT)
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- Jim Heffernan, executive director, New York Campus Compact (Ithaca, NY)
- Dustin Speakman, program director, Ohio Benefit Bank (Columbus, OH)

Resources

Resources from this tutorial include:

- [The National Service Stress Guide](#), a training to schedule during the service year.
- [What's Next](#), an online tutorial to assist members in post-national service planning.

Download [Tips and Strategies](#) featured in this tutorial