

VISTA 50-Year Review

Evaluation and Measurements: VISTA's Impact on Poverty, A
50-Year Review of Evaluation and Evidence

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Introduction

AmeriCorps VISTA is a national service program established as part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.¹ Along with several other federally funded programs, Volunteers in Service to America or VISTA, as it was originally known, was created as part of a broad government effort to address economic and social inequality, known as the “War on Poverty.” VISTA began implementing services in 1965 following its historic charge to “alleviate the effects and eliminate the causes of poverty in America.” The VISTA program’s singular defining activity was, and is, to recruit and place volunteers in poor communities to address, by whatever means practical and available, the needs of the poor.²

From its inception, VISTA was envisioned as a program that would not provide direct services; rather, it would organize, empower, and enable the poor to act on their own behalf for self-advancement. While early efforts centered on community organizing and legal and social advocacy, across its history, VISTA’s activities also included empowerment, basic skills development, and building organizational and community capacity. In some instances, however, VISTA volunteers also provided direct service.

Following its early tenure as an anti-poverty program, VISTA was reauthorized under the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973.³ It was placed under the administration of the ACTION agency, and its legislative mission was more clearly defined: *[T]o enable persons from*

¹ United States Public Law 88-452, Title VI, Aug. 20, 1964, Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

² The State of the Union Address, Lyndon Baines Johnson, President, 1964. Retrieved February 20, 2013, from <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbj1964stateoftheunion.htm>.

³ Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-113, Oct. 1, 1973; 42 U.S.C. 4950 et seq.).

*all walks of life, all geographical areas, and all age groups, including elderly and retired Americans, to perform meaningful and constructive volunteer service in agencies, institutions, and situations where the application of human talent and dedication may assist in the solution of poverty and poverty-related problems.*⁴ With this reauthorization, VISTA evolved from an anti-poverty initiative into a national service program.

In 1984, amendments to the act expanded the objectives of the program to include “generating the commitment of private sector resources, encouraging volunteer service at the local level, and strengthening local agencies and organizations to carry out their work fighting poverty.”⁵ As a result of this statute, VISTA solidified its role and primary activity as capacity building and resource development.

These simple mandates have served as a mission statement and have guided most of VISTA’s attempts to establish an identity, evaluate its activities, and assess its impact. Cited prominently in the introductions to all evaluations have been references to authorizing legislation and the charge to eliminate poverty. Although VISTA activities have hewed closely to this vague and broadly defined goal, assessing its actual impact on poverty has presented substantial challenges.

This report critically examines and summarizes the efforts that VISTA has made to evaluate its impact on poverty both nationally and within the communities it serves, and it reviews VISTA’s efforts to assess its outputs, services, and processes. Part 1 describes VISTA’s administrative structure and the evolution of its policies and procedures over a 50-year period, including past and current policies that affect recruitment and volunteer characteristics, its project activities, and

⁴ Public Law 93-113, Oct 1, 1973, Part A – Statement of Purpose.

⁵ Ibid.

its focus areas. In addition, the report frames this review within a discussion of VISTA's competing and complementary service ideologies. Part 2 reviews the various evaluation methodologies, measurement issues, and the organization's structural factors that impact or limit evaluation and measurement of its services, and reviews all past and extant evaluation research. Part 3 will summarize the state of the evidence and will suggest potential approaches and some necessary steps to implement future evaluations.

PART 1. History, Policy, Ideology, and Activities

AmeriCorps VISTA is a federally funded, anti-poverty/national service program that provides full-time volunteers to agencies and organizations that serve poor communities. This simple program description has held across 50 years of its existence, yet it belies a more complex process for implementing this seemingly basic objective. The evolution of VISTA, its approach to service, its politics and policies, and the various ways it has been conceptualized have all exerted a significant influence on the manner and extent to which VISTA can evaluate the impact of its services.

Although founded primarily as an anti-poverty initiative, across different political administrations, VISTA has evolved into a national service program, expanding its mission from alleviation and eradication of poverty to include the impact of VISTA service on the volunteer. Policy changes, often triggered by administrative and political considerations, particularly during the first 15 years of operation, have had a substantial impact on volunteer recruitment and training, administrative structure, and modification to the types of activities that VISTA has implemented (Bass, 2013).

One prominent change during the Vietnam War era was ending military service deferments for VISTAs.⁶ This decision triggered significant shifts in both service activities and importantly, volunteer demographics. Following the end of military deferments, the demographics of the volunteer corps reflected more women, and older, less educated, and less professionally trained members (Pass, 1975; Bass, 2013). A second change involved volunteer recruitment practices, which shifted substantially during these formative years. At its inception in 1965, VISTA headquarters was responsible for recruiting, approving, training, and placing all volunteers, known then as Nationally Recruited Volunteers. These outsiders were envisioned as catalysts with skills and education that could bring about change. However, in 1966, VISTA expanded the recruitment process to include volunteers recruited by sponsors. Known as Locally Recruited Volunteers, they were viewed as knowledgeable about conditions on the ground, key stakeholders, and resources. Municipalities and organizations began recruiting from the communities that VISTA served, specifically seeking out low-income volunteers who would serve alongside national recruits, ostensibly each enhancing the skills and values of the other (Pass, 1975; Strickler, 1994; Bass, 2013). Although all volunteers were ultimately approved by the national office, over time, a majority were recruited from local communities – a practice that continues to the present day. A third historic shift occurred in response to political concerns during the early 1970s, chiefly the perceived intrusion of the federal government into state and local jurisdictions. VISTA sought to decentralize program management, shifting approval of projects and volunteer activity descriptions to state offices. Consequently, the influence of the national headquarters staff over programmatic issues was diminished. This development would

⁶ *VLine*, VISTA Newsletter, June 1970.

significantly impact VISTA's ability to develop and implement standardized volunteer activities (Pass, 1975; Strickler, 1995; Bass, 2013). Last, but not least, over a period of several decades spanning the mid-1960s into the early 21st century, growing costs, episodic concerns about radical activism, social changes, and technological advances combined to substantially alter the way that VISTA delivered volunteer orientation and training. To address these concerns, VISTA limited both the focus and length of the orientation and increased the role of state and local organizations in the training process (Clark, 2002). Although VISTA's initial training period lasted two weeks, its present process is a three-day pre-service orientation with follow-up in-services, supervision, and on-the-job training experiences.

These changes presented substantial challenges for evaluation and measurement, as VISTA was not a static entity with clearly defined administrative practices and consistent well-developed service activities.

From 1976 through 1980, VISTA underwent additional changes in the nature of its project activities and recruitment strategies. This term witnessed a renewed emphasis on activist community organizing, an enhanced effort to recruit locally and to target low-income volunteers, and a substantial effort to evaluate its impact, including the impact of service on the volunteer.

After 1980, following a change in the political climate, and as a result of its activist anti-poverty work, VISTA experienced a sharp decline in its resources and significant limitations were placed

on its activities. Despite failed efforts to de-fund the program (the second attempt in a six-year period), VISTA survived, but in a diminished capacity (Strickler, 1994; Bass, 2013).⁷

Concurrent with substantially reduced funding, the number of VISTAs actively serving across this period fell from a high of more than 6,000 full-time volunteers to a low of fewer than 3,000 in the mid to late 1980s, and the range of its service activities was substantially curtailed. In 1984, reauthorization of the national Domestic Volunteer Service Act more clearly directed VISTA to engage in capacity-building activities and to recruit more local volunteers (Clark, 2002). As a result of evolving policy, and later social and political trends, VISTA's demographic profile reflects overwhelmingly female participation and substantially higher involvement of the poor. From the mid-1970s to the present time, women comprise nearly 80 percent of volunteers, and local and low-income recruits make up approximately 66 percent of the volunteers in service. Through outreach and targeted recruitment efforts, minority participation in VISTA has grown to comprise approximately 40 percent of all recruits.⁸

With the signing of the 1993 National and Community Service Trust Act, the Corporation for National and Community Service assumed administrative control over VISTA and it was incorporated into AmeriCorps. Since that time, it has maintained a relatively stable cadre of

⁷ In the 1981 ACTION Annual Report, Director Thomas Pauken writes: *Within recent years VISTA has attracted controversy as a result of the political role of some of the organizations it has supported. The fact is that in the last administration, VISTA rapidly became a tax-supported tool in the hands of political activists. Following the election of President Ronald Reagan, a profound rethinking of the place of government in the life of the community took place. In ACTION, this process led to a re-evaluation of the VISTA program, its objectives and its practices. This critical review focused on the twin issues of voluntarism in the service of the community and political activism disguised as service to the community. As a result the decision was made to take steps to de-politicize VISTA as the short-term objective while measures would get underway aimed at an eventual complete phasing out of the program in FY 1983. The decision to take these steps was paralleled with the Director's determination to add emphasis to the recruitment of genuine volunteers in contrast to the paid volunteer service of VISTA.*

⁸ VISTA Annual Reports

volunteers, fielding approximately 6,000 full-time volunteers and 2,000 summer associates yearly. Primary activities continue to reflect capacity building and resource development.

VISTA's Service Ideologies

Although clearly worded, VISTA's mission to address and eliminate poverty was not well considered in the design of the program. Critics of VISTA have long expressed concerns that its activities would duplicate professional services, replacing existing workers who were already performing these tasks in the field. Additional criticism centered on concerns that volunteers were often not trained to provide the direct services that were needed. To quell these criticisms, VISTA encouraged volunteers to focus their efforts on enhancing opportunities for the poor by providing them with the tools, knowledge, and skills to improve their own circumstances. Consequently, from its inception, VISTA has limited direct service activities, and instead focused on problem solving and capacity building within the communities and for the people it served.

However, given these constraints and the natural challenges inherent in addressing the needs of the poor, VISTA has often had to strike a balance between competing ideologies that reflect both complementary and conflicting approaches: a compensatory service ideology and a community advocacy/activist ideology (Pass, 1975). In a compensatory service model, poverty is primarily due to a dearth of opportunity for growth. Within this framework, poor communities lack the resources to provide for the basic needs of their residents. Absent these resources, the poor lack the ability to advance and are marginalized in the larger economy. VISTA's role would then be to foster the development of services that can assist the poor to overcome poverty's

circumstances. These could include opportunities for adult literacy; early childhood education; job training programs; and access to health care, social services, and improved nutrition.

In an advocacy/activist model, poverty's root causes are embedded in the structure of the social system. Impoverished communities are disenfranchised and, in essence, unable to speak or advocate on their own behalf. Participation by the community in the decision-making process or power structure is viewed as the best pathway for progress out of poverty. By sharing the power, communities can acquire the necessary tools and resources to address their own needs.

Under an advocacy/activist framework, VISTA's primary role involved organizing the community to achieve three essential outcomes: (1) to speak for itself; (2) to participate in problem-solving processes; and (3) to challenge the social, political, and economic structures for greater access to resources and opportunities.

In practice, VISTA's activities almost always reflected elements of both ideologies. Project activities were generally shaped by multiple factors, including the actual conditions of poverty, the expressed needs of the local community, and the volunteer's perspective on what was necessary and feasible (Bass, 2013). Consequently, volunteers have nearly always brought to bear solutions that included input from community leaders, the poor, VISTA supervisors, and the volunteer his or herself.

This "from the ground up" approach to volunteer activities necessarily reflects creative problem solving; however, it makes it difficult to establish uniformity in service activity across sponsor organizations. Within VISTA, there are no well-identified models of anti-poverty activity that allow for uniform description and fidelity in implementation. Under the rubric of "capacity

building,” volunteers may participate in some role in any number of anti-poverty approaches that meet the needs of the community regardless of an evidence base.

VISTA Project Activities and Focus Areas

When VISTA was first created, the services that the volunteers provided were largely shaped by perceived community needs, available resources, and the skills of the volunteer. Through the latter part of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, in order to provide structure and improve management of the program, and to exert some control over its activities, VISTA developed project service sectors, which were broadly defined categories that loosely encompassed the varied project activities performed by volunteers. These sectors included Health, Education and Manpower, Economic Development, Housing, Social Services, Legal Assistance, and Community/Program Development. By the mid to late 1970s, these sectors evolved into seven service areas of ACTION’s Basic Human Needs, service categories that again encompassed most project activities.⁹ These service areas formed the basis of annual reports, and provided a framework for early regular quantitative evaluations.

Concurrent with the emergence of both the project sectors and Basic Human Needs service areas, VISTA made two distinct efforts to craft evaluation paradigms that would ensure rigorous, high-quality impact evaluations (Chafkin, Pines, Kennefick, Colligan, Freeman, Montgomery, 1969; Gilmartin, Rossi, & Russ-Eft, 1977). Not surprisingly, these assessments noted the substantial barriers to evaluating VISTA’s anti-poverty impact, citing among other issues its small size, diffuse organizational structure, unspecified unit of measurement, and vaguely described effect.

⁹ The seven service areas included Education, Health, Economic Development, Housing, Community and Program Development, Social Services, and Legal Assistance.

Nevertheless, these early “evaluability assessments” recommended protocols for evaluating its activities, elements of which were adopted in later evaluation projects. Realistically, however, only a few selected recommendations were implemented in ongoing evaluations of the program. Nevertheless, concerns raised by these evaluation capacity assessments remain salient across the whole of VISTA’s history. Through the latter part of the 1980s, project activities were implemented that emphasized emerging community needs, recent legislation, and social trends. VISTA began assisting service programs related to domestic violence, drug use, weatherization/energy efficiency, economic opportunity, and HIV/AIDS.¹⁰ Childhood and adult literacy became a significant area of concern for two successive presidential administrations, and VISTA became a launch point for several high-profile literacy projects. These included Literacy Corps and the Summer Reads program, both of which involved quantitative evaluations of their own.

Following the transition from ACTION to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), and its incorporation into AmeriCorps, VISTA distinguished itself from other CNCS programs by emphasizing its capacity-building and resource development activities. This distinction highlighted VISTA’s stronger emphasis on fostering organizational capacity and minimized its limited direct service activity. With the signing of the Serve America Act in 2009, CNCS incorporated into its strategic plan the six focus areas for service across all of its programs. These focus areas are Disaster Services, Economic Opportunity, Education,

¹⁰ The first annual combined progress reports described VISTA activities by regions of the country and individual sponsor. After VISTA was placed under ACTION, all national service program activities were summarized in ACTION Annual Reports, which included project descriptions by service or focus area, budget, and some deliverables, including resources generated. The 1988 ACTION Report, VISTA, pages 11–12, provided a description of activities occurring in the late 1980s. Similarly, the AmeriCorps VISTA National Newsletters (1994–1998) describe a number of activities, including community building, domestic violence efforts, and work with HIV/AIDS patients.

Environmental Stewardship, Healthy Futures, and Veterans and Military Families.¹¹ As an addendum, CNCS included Capacity Building at a later date.

A closer examination of the themes inherent in the service categories and volunteer assignment descriptions across five decades suggests that, across its entire history, VISTA has consistently aligned its project activities and services to address issues specific to poverty, including education and employment training, health care, social services, housing, and legal advocacy. Less clear, however, are the goals of the activities (whether these are implemented to eliminate poverty or ameliorate its effects), the intended outcomes (expanding organization capacity vs. addressing poverty's causes and correlates), and the theoretical mechanisms by which these activities are linked to the elimination of poverty.

PART 2. Evidence Assessment

Evaluation Issues – Types and Methods of Assessment

Across the course of its 50-year history, VISTA has engaged in the long-standing practice of periodic program evaluation. Over these five decades, VISTA has evolved in response to social and political trends, and yet the methodology used by the federal offices overseeing VISTA, as well as by the program itself, has remained remarkably consistent. In actuality, VISTA's "impact evaluations," almost all required by statute, can more accurately be defined as program assessments, although, while many include a community perspective, few, if any, assess actual community impact.¹² Typical evaluations conducted by and for VISTA have consisted of surveys and/or targeted interviews with volunteers, supervisors, site managers, and staff. On

¹¹ Public Law 111-13, Apr. 21, 2009, The Serve America Act.

¹² Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-113, Oct. 1, 1973; 42 U.S.C. 4950 et seq.).

occasion, community partners are also interviewed or surveyed. Reporting generally consisted of simple descriptions, including volunteer demographics, service area activities, estimated measures of performance, and anecdotal accounts of services and outcomes from selected community members. Analyses are generally restricted to the level and types of data collected, and generally provide assessments of the program for congressionally mandated reports.

Recent studies have included random samples of programs, stratified by focus areas, and types of volunteers and service regions, which allowed for generalizations to the population of programs. Most recently, program outcome studies have employed more sophisticated statistical models and have sought to identify factors associated with measures of impact, such as project sustainability or productivity.

Community member participation assessment, however, has always been through convenience samples. Baseline levels of poverty have never been established, limiting generalizability or measures of actual impact.

Among all of its evaluations, there have been few attempts to generate rigorously designed studies, identify best practices, develop evidence-based models of service, and even effectively assess innovations in national service programing. Consequently, the collective knowledge about VISTA's success in the War on Poverty remains limited and largely anecdotal.

Assessing the work of an evolving program over an extended period may not be fair or even warranted, as standards for both practice and measurement evolve. This is not to say that some of VISTA's studies lack utility or could not now – even 50 years on – contribute to the design of more rigorous impact evaluations and research. VISTA's evaluation efforts, both qualitative and

quantitative, may provide the seeds that could potentially inform research designs examining the mechanisms of change, effective processes and practices, and actual community impact.

Measurement Issues

A consistent focus on poverty issues regardless of changes across time, political administration, internal management, and emerging manifestations of poverty suggests that VISTA is an adaptive organization that adheres strongly to its founding charge to address poverty. The program has developed a wide range of innovative activities; theory-inspired interventions; flexible and, in some instances, well-delineated procedures; and, above all, adherence to its mission. While these factors may accurately describe VISTA and are necessary for rigorous impact evaluation, at present, these are not sufficient to evaluate VISTA's impact relative to its mission and goals.

Any evaluation of the impact of VISTA's activities in alleviating and addressing poverty will encounter challenges across several measurement areas, and will need to address a substantial number of barriers. These challenges include both general issues of measurement and issues specific to the program.

Within the first category of general measurement issues, any evaluation of VISTA should begin by examining its project activities and services. A clear strategy linking these activities to both the needs of the poor and expected improvement in poverty outcomes is a necessary first step. Hence, any evaluation should include a well-developed logic model, some baseline measures of poverty, clearly specified interventions, a well-designed protocol for implementing these interventions and identified units of measurement, valid instruments, and data collection protocols.

Although these elements may be developed by large project sponsors with a defined service task for its volunteers, VISTA's relationship with project sponsors has often impeded this approach. First, at the national level, VISTA's volunteer management structure reflects a diffuse decision-making process, yielding key decisions regarding program management, volunteer recruitment, volunteer assignment descriptions, project activities, training, and supervision for state and local sponsors. This management structure, while key to responsiveness, adaptability, and innovation, can result in wide variability across similarly named activities and no manifest standardized guidelines for service implementation, such as population characteristics, dosage, model guidelines, or curricula.

Second, VISTA national headquarters maintains a non-directive relationship with sponsoring agencies, and with the exception of limited performance measurements, does not actively promote data collection, including community-level baseline measures and post service data collection. In truth, this would be difficult for most small sites, and where it does occur, the efforts of a few volunteers providing capacity-building service, subsumed within a larger organization, would be difficult to disentangle from other factors.

Relatedly, VISTA's size has never been great, numbering around 6,000 volunteers at its peak, and substantially less during lean funding years. A typical project sponsor may support, on average, three to five members, often with overlapping assignment descriptions and activities.

However, VISTA also partners with larger national sponsors overseeing multiple small sites, and at these locations, it is possible to measure the aggregate impact of its members on organizational capacity. Still, given that there are often overlapping assignments and multiple activities, as well as a lack of clear service descriptions, measuring impact is reduced to the presence or absence of

the volunteer – and key elements of success related to best practices, volunteer characteristics, organizational dynamics, and focus areas remain elusive.

Another factor that presents a challenge to evaluation is related to service ideology. This quite simply boils down to the identified unit of measurement. Under its current state of output reporting, VISTA focuses primarily on the contributions that its volunteers make to organizational functioning and development. Subsumed under this capacity-building framework, the unit of measurement is the organization or sponsor. Quantifiable indices include resources generated, volunteers organized, and sustainability. Less easily measured are activities that support administrative and management functions (e.g., developing record-keeping systems, developing community partnerships, writing curriculum or promotional material). In either case, however, poverty impact is a function of the sponsor, and therefore only indirectly related to VISTA's efforts.

There are cases where VISTA does provide direct service, however. This approach provides VISTA with a more direct hand in implementing and delivering services that address or ameliorate the effects of poverty, such as child care, access to services, job training, education, and counseling. Under this scenario, the unit of measurement is the individual. Here, too, VISTA's small size, lack of structured programing, multiple or overlapping activities, and lack of a clearly defined logic model also impede measurement. While individual-level measures are easily quantifiable, these are not so easily linked to gains against poverty, whether at the local level or in aggregate at the national level.

Evidence Assessment

Within the preceding context, the remaining discussion critically analyzes VISTA's program assessments, evaluations, and research studies that have been conducted over its 50-year history (Appendix A). Roughly speaking, these studies and program assessments can be categorized by the era in which the evaluation was designed and conducted, the purpose of the study, the methodology, and the level of rigor employed. Each of these factors influences how these studies may inform a long view of the program, as well as mark VISTA's evolution over time. In addition, this evidence review will critically assess the value of these periodic assessments in order to shed light on the potential contributions of these efforts.

Evidence

Process Evaluations

Between 1965 and 1975, shortly after it began placing volunteers in American communities, VISTA began periodic research and assessments of its work. The two primary lines of inquiry it pursued included what VISTA is achieving (outputs) and how VISTA does its work (process). Because information generated by the first question has more utility, the majority of VISTA's evaluations contained three standard components: (1) descriptive reporting and output measurement, (2) volunteer satisfaction, and (3) stakeholder perceptions and anecdotal reports of impact. While informative for tracking and reporting purposes, these output evaluations provided little in the way of community impact or changes in beneficiary or community levels of poverty.

However, targeted studies and critical reviews have also been conducted to probe VISTA's mechanisms of change, including process assessments that explore a range of individual and

community impacts. These studies have expanded the knowledge base about VISTA and are suggestive of how it may be evaluated in the future.

VISTA's earliest efforts at process evaluations were two-fold in purpose. The first focused on understanding the role of the VISTA volunteer in the community and the mechanisms through which the volunteer brought about change (process and presence). The second targeted program implementation, specifically for improvement or adaptation following critical questions, volunteer complaints, and negative reports of VISTA activity.

One of the first and most influential series of evaluations involved a longitudinal assessment of volunteers and their service activity (Cantor, 1967). This four-part study conducted over a two-to three-year period was commissioned by the Columbia School of Social Work upon becoming a VISTA training site. Largely qualitative in nature, the purpose of the study was to identify: (1) the mechanisms of change inherent in the volunteer's work; (2) differences in volunteer demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal characteristics potentially linked to performance and satisfaction; (3) volunteer activities that may be linked to successful performance; and (4) service impact on the volunteer (satisfaction and professional growth).

Although only two of the four studies were available for review, these are nevertheless instructive. Primarily centered on the volunteer, these explorations were conducted within the service milieu and the context of the beneficiary. Strikingly, impact was not interpreted as changes in actual poverty conditions, but instead as changes in the beneficiary's attitudes, outlook, sense of community, and most importantly, level of self-efficacy. From a temporal perspective, this outcome was more consistent with VISTA's initial charge to help the poor help themselves and remains, to date, the only study to adopt this focus.

In one of these earliest publications, Cantor (1967–1968) interviewed and surveyed volunteers, supervisors, sponsors, and community members to identify the key roles of VISTA volunteers as agents of change. These findings explicated the theoretical framework that facilitated community and individual change.¹³ Cantor identified five roles that VISTAs play in addressing the needs of the poor: (1) a bridge between the ghetto and the outside world, (2) a catalyst to activate others, (3) a service provider addressing pressing needs, (4) a gadfly or innovator, and (5) a role model. Interestingly, these roles capture well the competing and complementary service ideologies. To date, however, no other studies reviewed have rigorously tested this model. These roles subsequently fueled several of VISTA’s promotional publications. And yet, there were no subsequent follow-up research projects that validated these observations. Nevertheless, individual beneficiary-level change (efficacy) wrought by contact and advocacy remains an intriguing unit of measurement. In a related vein, a 2002 study on motivation to serve generated typologies of service providers, with some intriguing links to these same concepts (Standerfer, 2002). Although not related or even cited in the later work, the same thematic constructs attest to a consistent adherence to addressing the needs of the poor and the volunteer motivations that undergird these efforts.

Concurrent with this nascent research on the theoretical mechanisms of service were two efforts to assess both VISTA’s operational side and the feasibility of conducting a large-scale impact evaluation. The first study resulted in *A Call to ACTION in 1972*, a report by the evaluation staff of the Office of Domestic and Anti-Poverty Operations (ACTION, 1971). This report was an internally commissioned study to assess the management and operations of the program. At the

¹³ Cantor’s research was targeted at understanding the process by which volunteers could bring about change in the lives of the poor, and what social/relational and community engagement mechanism were critical for social change. This work informed both the prevailing views of the VISTA volunteers and the debate in how to address long-term systemic poverty.

time the report was commissioned, VISTA was being criticized for purported political activity by some volunteers, and was receiving complaints from volunteers regarding training assignment descriptions.

This study involved a rigorous qualitative evaluation in order to establish an unbiased and non-partisan perspective. A team of 21 evaluators was organized, consisting of social scientists, psychologists, evaluation consultants, community action specialists, and successful VISTA alumni. All evaluators were external to the ACTION office and were trained in structured interviewing and on how to score a standardized evaluation form. Although the study cites a number of positive aspects about the program, including the quality and genuine commitment of the staff and volunteers, there were several areas of concern, specifically with regard to management and programming. Among these were: (1) a lack of specific goals, undefined strategies, and unclear or inaccurate assignment descriptions; (2) the prominence of the sponsoring organization's objectives over those of the national headquarters; and (3) no clear or dominant service ideology.

The recommendations of the team included fostering a stronger role for the national headquarters in conducting a needs assessment at the project level, and implementing evaluation processes that underscore the need for more strenuous project planning and programming.

This study captures well the essence of VISTA while undergoing political conflict and change, and it is as instructive in its approach as it is in its findings. The use of a large and independent group of stakeholders, scholars, practitioners, and evaluation specialists seeking consensus on problem identification and future recommendations suggests a necessary first step in building an evaluation framework and promoting institutional buy-in within such a diffuse and entrenched

organization. Although readiness for change is critical in any organization, strong and informed guidance from specialists and stakeholders can be influential in propelling a more rigorous evaluation agenda moving forward.

The second study, entitled the VISTA Impact Assessment (ACTION/VISTA, 1973, Internal Document), involved an interim assessment of the impact of VISTA services to enhance organizations' capacity to combat poverty. The methodology involved a telephone survey of VISTA supervisors from all 10 regions that had projects with five or more volunteers and that had been in operation six months or more. Two hypotheses were tested: (1) organizations sponsoring VISTA volunteers are becoming more self-reliant, and (2) VISTA volunteers supplement community efforts to eliminate poverty. The conclusions of the study were affirmative for VISTA and indicated gains for both the organizations and the communities.

Although this demonstration amounted to a less than rigorous quantitative evaluation, importantly, the study outlined a five-factor evaluation framework and six recommendations for expanding and improving this very process.¹⁴ Within this evaluation framework, VISTA would assess: (1) the appropriateness of service objectives (logic model or guided intervention), (2) the adequacy of effect (actual impact on poverty measures), (3) the effectiveness of the intervention (strength), (4) efficiency (costs vs. gains), and (5) unintended consequences.

The report also issued six recommendations for future evaluations, including: (1) data collection at multiple levels (volunteers, sponsors, and the community), (2) collecting baseline community-level data for pre/post analysis, (3) identifying and controlling for overlapping causes of change,

¹⁴ The study proposed an evaluation framework that reiterated findings and recommendations from an earlier evaluability assessment of the VISTA program, suggesting some effort to integrate professional consultation with actual practice.

(4) using control groups for comparison (closed VISTA projects terminated prior to completion or organizations with and without VISTA volunteers), (5) expanding data usage to include alternative data sources for measurement, and (6) emphasizing sustainability as an impact. The report acknowledged that these suggestions were both costly and difficult to implement in a decentralized organization with small, diffuse sponsor sites. Indeed, wide-scale implementation of all but one of these recommendations – the recommendation pertaining to sustainability – has not, to date, taken place.¹⁵

The preceding studies occurred during VISTA's first 10 years of operation. Although not the only evaluations to have occurred, these studies are the most important ones in terms of heuristic value and actionable recommendations. The next section will discuss VISTA's efforts to quantify its work and assess policy changes within the organization.

Program Assessments and Policy Impact Studies

During the period from 1976 through 1980, yearly evaluations were conducted that comprised surveys of volunteers, supervisors, sponsors, and community participants. This simple methodology reflected the approach used in the earlier demonstration project.

However, the intent was not to assess feasibility or expand evaluation capacity. The two-fold purpose of these evaluations was to generate activity reports that quantified VISTA's

¹⁵ The three studies that focused on sustainability were: (1) *The VISTA Goal Accomplishments and Community Effects Evaluation: Final Report 1986–1987* (1988), (2) *The Sustainability of AmeriCorps VISTA Programs and Activities* (1997), and (3) *The VISTA Program Assessment* (2010). Each study reported strong impacts for VISTA projects within sponsor programs and reported approximately 60 percent to 80 percent sustainability or incorporation of the VISTA interventions (see the appendix for citations).

accomplishments (for political purposes) and to establish empirical evidence of the impact of policy changes within the organization.

Policy shifts during this period included several initiatives to expand community organizing activities and the number of locally recruited volunteers (particularly those from poor communities), as well as to promote partnerships with national poverty advocacy groups. In a series of evaluations commencing in 1976, VISTA began collecting baseline member and service data, and volunteer demographics and activity profiles.¹⁶ Across a four-year span, volunteer characteristics, outputs (resources and recruited volunteers), and activities were tracked and compared over time. Findings from the final 1980 evaluation indicated that the targeted activities and member demographics changed in the anticipated direction, and VISTA continued to generate substantial resources for communities. Not surprisingly, with regard to compiling impact figures for annual reports, questions about the validity or accuracy of VISTA outputs created opportunities for challenges from critics for many years (Bass, 2013).

Through the better part of the 1980s, VISTA encountered significant political challenges involving its services, and subsequently experienced dramatic budget cuts. Evaluations across this time were rare; however, those that were conducted in large part followed the standard format of surveying volunteers, supervisors, and sponsors, coupled with selected interviews.

¹⁶ There were eight studies commissioned by the ACTION agency from 1973 through 1980. All were conducted by the Office of Policy and Planning, Research and Evaluation Unit. These studies included: (1) A Study of Target and Non-Target VISTA Volunteers (1973), (2) VISTA Volunteer – Sponsor Survey (1976), (3) VISTA Project Survey (1976), (4) National VISTA Study (FY 1977), (5) VISTA National Grant Evaluation (1978), (6) *VISTA Activities Survey (1978), Volume 1: Final Report*, (7) VISTA Activities Survey (1979), and (8) VISTA Activities Survey (1980).

Nonetheless, in 1988, ACTION released *VISTA Goal Accomplishments and Community Effects Evaluation: Final Report 1986–1987* (Abt Associates, 1988). This evaluation design included pre/post measures of site assessments, as well as interviews with volunteers, sponsors, and community members. Consistent with previous findings, the descriptive analysis continued to report significant gains in program service expansion, greater reach, and increased revenues. VISTA’s volunteer demographic profile remained largely unchanged, and sponsor and community ratings remained positive. Notably, one reported finding focused on predicted project sustainability. Through interviews with program staff, the study found that at the close of services following the second year, 48 percent of VISTA projects were institutionalized, and approximately 90 percent were projected to be sustained post VISTA support.¹⁷

Special Initiatives

In 1986, the national Domestic Volunteer Service Act was modified, directing VISTA to focus on literacy primarily through capacity building and resource development. This mandate shifted a substantial portion of VISTA service activity toward supporting adult and child literacy projects, and it facilitated a series of targeted evaluations. Not surprisingly, these early assessments followed the same format and methodology as previous VISTA evaluations, lacking rigor and measures of impact.

The following paragraph, lifted from a 1991 evaluation of Literacy Corps, is atypical of VISTA evaluations to date in that the authors acknowledge serious limitations in the evaluation:

Fieldworkers found that there were no established procedures for collecting information at any literacy program. The closest thing to this was an annual report which is

¹⁷ *VISTA Goal Accomplishments and Community Effects Evaluation: Final Report 1986–1987*, Abt Associates, 1988.

submitted to the LVA national office or Laubach International Headquarters. But these data simply represent the number of clients being served, and do not reflect the broader results of the literacy program.

Anecdotes were far too often substituted for statistical data. One Director said of her literacy program, “Students come in creeping through the door and leave with their heads held high.”¹⁸

All reported metrics relative to VISTA’s accomplishments were gleaned from surveys and amounted to the numbers of clients reached, volunteers recruited, projects expanded, and projects sustained. A lack of baseline or comparative measures hampered any assessment of impact.

Similarly, in 1997, VISTA participated in “America Reads” – a national program initiative by the Clinton Administration.¹⁹ Volunteers were placed in several Summer Read projects to fulfill various capacity-building, direct service, and project support roles. The program was evaluated using a rapid assessment protocol consisting of interviews with project directors and volunteers, limited site visits, literature reviews, project descriptions, and in some instances, project evaluation results. The report cites factors that impede evaluations, including no uniformity across individual projects, little project measurement, and wide variation in the role of the VISTAs. The results of the study were largely based on anecdotal reports. Although, in some

¹⁸ *Improving Literacy with VISTA Volunteers: An Evaluation Report on the VISTA Literacy Corps.* Developmental Associates, 1991.

¹⁹ *Description and Evaluation of the Summer Reads Initiative.* Macro International, 1997.

rare instances, there were pre/post measures of literacy attainment, measurement instruments differed across sites, impeding comparisons.

Concurrent with VISTA's literacy focus, in the mid to late 1990s, program assessments were conducted that focused on VISTA's other primary service activities – capacity building and resource development. A prime example included an addendum report attached to the 1995 accomplishment survey.²⁰

Although the methodology of these evaluations largely adopted those used in previous approaches, the inclusion of capacity outputs and the expansion of descriptive output measures assessing support for organizations more clearly delineated the areas where VISTA was making contributions. In this report, capacity-building assessment focused on three areas: (1) expanding local organizational resources (financial), (2) strengthening community ties with sponsoring organizations, and (3) supporting management and administration. Within these assessment areas, several outputs were reported, including generating financial resources, the proportional significance of resources for sponsors, fund-raising activities, partnership development and community outreach, program planning, volunteer recruitment, developing management systems, and direct support.

Findings from these in-depth, cross-sectional surveys supported the general findings across several decades – that VISTA was producing benefits and gains through its volunteers. For instance, VISTA generated \$26.4 million in cash and \$39 million in in-kind service. VISTA increased organizational resources, averaging 2.3 percent for cash and 6.6 percent for in-kind

²⁰ *Support for Local Organizations: Report from the AmeriCorps VISTA 1994 Accomplishment Survey*. Westat, 1994.

resources (Westat Accomplishment Survey, 1994). This evaluation appears to be a single study focusing on measuring organizational support and capacity.

One unintended upshot of this report was the identification of a potential list of quantifiable capacity measures appropriate for either pre/post assessment or a more rigorous comparative research project. In addition, these items could be considered for inclusion in capacity-building scales.

Despite this work and a focus on targeted assessments of special initiative, the issues of impact measurement continued to pose difficulties for VISTA across the next two decades. A 2004 evaluation of VISTA's Asset Building Program found that:

Entrepreneur Corps VISTAs are responsible for developing, implementing and expanding asset building programs. VISTA members are definitely "getting things done" ... However the impact of their activities on the programs they support remains largely anecdotal.

Nevertheless, the report recommended a list of performance measures for future evaluations, and highlighted the need for targeted training (Moore McBride, 2004).

Measures of Impact

Three evaluations, notable for a strong design, modest level of rigor, and actual measures of impact, were commissioned by VISTA between 1997 and 2010. The first sustainability study, entitled The Sustainability of AmeriCorps Programs and Activities (Tabori, Gordon, & Martinez, 1997), examined the impact of VISTA's capacity-building and resource development activities on organizational change. Structured interviews were conducted with an initial random sample of

240 organizations that had VISTA-supported projects and were closed for either two or five years. Of these, 119 organizations were primary interviews and 82 represented follow-up interviews (projects that refused or were unable to participate in the primary interview).

Accounting for programs that were no longer in existence or were unable to participate, the adjusted response rate was 93.4 percent. The survey yielded information on seven key items: (1) characteristics of the VISTA-supported project; (2) the goals, objectives, and activities of the project; (3) the project budget; (4) the pre/post status of the VISTA-supported activity; (5) the number and role of the VISTA volunteers; (6) the post VISTA status of the volunteers; and (7) the sources of support for post VISTA continuation.

The two samples were compared on key indicators to assess for systematic differences between those that agreed to participate and those that did not. Due to program turnover and a lack of institutional memory, limited information was collected from the follow-up organization.

Addressing a range of empirical and policy questions, the study addressed factors associated with the survival or continuation of the VISTA member activity or program after the grant closed.

This would include services, practices, or policies created and adopted by the host organization.²¹

The study reported strong impacts, citing survival rates of more than 60 percent five years after project closure and a 76 percent survival rate two years out. Greater sustainability was demonstrated for previously existing projects vs. new initiatives; however, even these were sustained at a rate that exceeded 60 percent. Although these findings demonstrate the positive

²¹ The primary research questions focused on sponsor characteristics and policy implications: (1) What proportion of the VISTA-supported project survived after VISTA had departed? (2) Were there differences in survival rates between the two-year mark and the five-year mark? (3) What role did VISTA policies play in the survival rates? (4) What was the role of prior VISTA experience in sustaining a project? (5) Was organizational capacity-building activity likely to influence survival rates? (6) What role did VISTA volunteers play in recruiting, training, and supervising non-VISTA volunteers? (7) What problems did projects face in raising continuation funds? and (8) What impact did they have on survival rates?

impact of VISTA support for both new and existing projects, over time VISTA was more likely to target its service to support and expand existing projects.

Although VISTA has previously reported sustainability rates, this was the first evaluation project to focus specifically on this outcome, suggesting that sustainability should be a component in a constellation of impact measures. Furthermore, this study suggested that comparative research focusing on organizations that sustained VISTA-supported programs and those that did not allows another avenue for assessing best practices, volunteer placement, and network development. In addition, this type of evaluation can serve as a basis to indirectly measure VISTA's impact on poverty via an intermediary organization.

In 2010, VISTA commissioned another program assessment that examined factors associated with project success and sustainability – the VISTA Program Assessment (Thomas et al., 2010). In this evaluation, a sample of 250 current projects in their third year and 250 projects closed between two and five years were surveyed; site visits were conducted with a smaller subset of closed projects. Using a rigorous sampling process, project information, site visits, interviews, and administrative records, the research team constructed multivariate models that predicted both project success and sustainability.

Similar results were reported, with nearly 80 percent of projects sustained at the two-year mark. This research also examined the characteristics of volunteers, projects, sponsors, and the community, as well as VISTA's policies and practices. Factors associated with success and sustainability included well-trained VISTA volunteers, screening, organization-specific training, and well-designed projects.

The importance of this study lies with the accurate identification of factors associated with project success and sustainability. These factors may aid in the design of activities, volunteer placement practices, and project management. Ultimately, the creation of prescriptive models also can promote the design of rigorous impact evaluations.

The most rigorous impact study, conducted by a National Service Fellowship Program participant, was not directly commissioned by VISTA. This project was entitled Capacity Building as a Fundamental Objective: Definition and Measurement in the AmeriCorps VISTA – Habitat for Humanity International Affiliate Partnerships (Elliot, 2002), and examined the organizational impact of the program’s capacity-building activities. The study compared Habitat for Humanity sites where VISTAs serve to those where they are not assigned. In this study, the researcher conceptualized capacity along a 38-point scale, generating a total score. Production was then assessed by both size and output, and capacity-building activity was defined as generated resources and volunteers, administrative assistance, and support. This quasi-experimental design compared similar Habitat for Humanity affiliates with VISTA volunteers to affiliates without VISTA support. The outcomes were site levels of productivity and, most prominently, the number of houses built.

Controlling for organizational measures, community-level measures, and volunteer characteristics, sites with VISTA volunteers were more productive and generated more actual output (i.e., houses built/land secured) compared to sites without VISTAs. This study is the first and, to date, only empirical evidence of VISTA’s activity that can be directly related to measureable community impact.

This evaluation hewed closely to earlier recommended evaluation strategies, including clear definition of a service activity, a large enough sample to generate reliable findings, the use of a comparison group and baseline measures to assess performance, and clear theoretically derived dependent measures.

The capacity-building study represents the type of evaluation design that should be a prominent model for many VISTA evaluations, particularly among large sponsors.²²

PART 3: Summary and Recommendations

The overarching purpose of this review is to inform planning and discussion regarding a VISTA research agenda, including impact evaluations. The documents reviewed include all available research studies, program evaluations, evaluability assessments, accomplishment surveys, member surveys, training evaluations, and special reports generated during VISTA's 50-year history (See the attached references for a list of the documents, and Appendix A.) Although it is likely that these documents provide a reasonably comprehensive record of VISTA's evaluation history, inconsistent and inadequate record keeping may have contributed to a small number of misplaced evaluation documents.

In assessing this body of evidence, two related questions guided interpretation of the findings. The first question addressed the evidence of VISTA's impact on poverty. From this macro perspective, did VISTA's activities have a measureable impact on national poverty metrics? The second question, more focused and causal, assessed the impact of VISTA's activities on the

²² Inadvertently, the study was replicated in 2016 by Olson, Cooper, and Viola, *2013–16 External Evaluation for HFH National Service Programs*, with highly similar results. The authors' did not cite Ginger Elliot's previous study as it had never been published. Similarly, the 2010 VISTA Program Assessment (Olson et al.) does not appear to be informed by the 1997 Sustainability Study (Tabori et al.). Although there is no doubt that these omissions are not purposeful, it is one indication that there is little organizational learning and planning by VISTA leadership on evidence-informed decision making regarding programing and measurement.

specific measureable variables that address or ameliorate poverty within a service area. This perspective is admittedly more realistic, despite the fact that VISTA's interventions are difficult to isolate. Consequently, efforts to assess impact within specific individuals, organizations, and communities served by VISTA remain a more feasible and realistic endeavor.

After examining a broad range of reports and studies on the program's work, its special projects, and research efforts (Appendix A), it is tempting to conclude that VISTA has indeed had an impact on the national poverty rate. However, this conclusion begs the question, what is the evidence to support this claim? Unlike its larger sister programs (Head Start, Job Corps, and Community Action Programs), VISTA has remained a very small initiative, limiting its capacity to demonstrate change on a national or even regional scale. Regardless of its fifty years as a national service, anti-poverty program, scant rigorous evidence exists that, through its activities, VISTA has contributed to a reduction in poverty at the national level.

Conversely, this review found several consistent themes related to impact that resonated across this 50-year history. The three most prominent are: (1) VISTAs have consistently been viewed as both talented and dedicated to their work; (2) VISTAs have consistently generated a substantial amount of capacity in the form of monetary, in-kind, and volunteer support for sponsor organization; and (3) VISTA-supported projects have consistently demonstrated an impressive record of sustainability, averaging more than 60 percent at the five-year mark. In addition to these themes, replicated evaluation research supports the notion that organizations utilizing VISTAs have substantially higher levels of productivity and extended reach (Elliot, 2002; Olson et al., 2016).

Given these consistent findings, it is not unrealistic to suggest that VISTA may have had an impact on poverty, albeit mostly at local or community levels. More accurately, VISTA has probably improved the lives of beneficiaries by addressing needs often associated with poverty through enhanced or sustained services via an intermediary organization. Acknowledging that VISTA's strongest activities involve capacity building, the evidence of the success of the VISTA program through this organizational work does demand some consideration.

Still, there are limitations associated with this body of evidence. Most interventions that VISTA members employ lack demonstrated evidence of effectiveness, and approved projects are not typically required to include evidence-based interventions. In addition, baseline metrics, pre/post measures, or control groups are rarely used to evaluate or isolate the effect of an intervention. Consequently, in the final analysis, VISTA's impact on poverty remains equivocal.

Nevertheless, despite a lack of evidence, one of the strongest contributions from this body of work is the collected wisdom that derives from years of implementing service, and the many attempts to measure its impact. Furthermore, these efforts also might inform an understanding of the dynamics associated with VISTA service at the member level. The collective crop of research, evaluations, and program assessments provides a basis for informing and addressing structural and programmatic barriers to evaluation, research on scale development, and innovative measurements.

Recommendations

The preceding review is meant to inform the decision-making process as VISTA considers a research and evaluation agenda. Prior to drafting a plan, it will be important to engage in a broad

discussion of the purpose, potential uses, and any administrative or programmatic changes necessary to facilitate the process.

Potential changes may include formally defining aspects of its programming and services, standardizing some activities, designing interventions, formalizing and expanding training specific to the service being evaluated, specifying clear guidelines for placing volunteers, conducting or requiring thorough needs assessments, collecting valid community measures, and developing logic models and theories of change consistent with its range of services. Many of these changes will have a significant impact on both grant making and project administration.

Recommendation #1: Acquire Expert Consultation and Guidance on VISTA's Program Policies and Practices

Should VISTA consider developing a comprehensive evaluation and research strategy, it may consider replicating an approach utilized in *A Call to Action* (ACTION/VISTA, 1972). For this project, VISTA assembled and trained a team of external stakeholders to review and evaluate all aspects of the program, including policies and procedures, volunteer orientation and activities, the scope and scale of its services, satisfaction and attrition, and community/sponsor perspectives on service activities and training.

Using a similar approach to examine all facets of the program, these discussions can inform planning and the practical elements of evaluation, including information needs, measurement issues, barriers, and costs.

Central questions that can guide this work ask:

- What is the current administrative structure of VISTA and how are its policies consistent with its operating practices? What evidence is there for the efficiency and effectiveness of these policies in terms of impacting service delivery and reporting?
- What are essential information needs that can guide planning and implementation of services and assessment of these activities?
- What internal practices and policy changes are critical to implement consistent, well-defined evidence-based services and facilitate data collection?

Successful evaluation of both program functioning and impact requires that these inter-related policies and practices be made explicit and subject to assessment.²³

Recommendation #2: Assess and Improve Measurement

Valid measures are critical to program management and impact assessment. Critical features of good measurement include a well-designed logic model that defines or specifies the problem to be addressed, the selected intervention, and the outcome variables that are theoretically linked to a VISTA activity or sponsor intervention. Identifying the selected outcomes and impact measures enables the collection of data on pre-activity levels of functionality at the individual, organizational, and community levels. In some instances, particularly at the community level, many measures are readily available through administrative records. In addition to identified

²³ A similar technical working group might be assembled comprising experts in evaluation and national service. These may include former VISTA administrators, current and former sponsors, and other government agency staff that implement evidence-based programs and anti-poverty experts.

community or organizational markers, many qualitative and quantitative evaluations will require valid instruments for data collection at the individual level.

Over the course of its history, VISTA has amassed a small library of questionnaires, surveys, data collection protocols, and definitions of outcome measures for capacity building and project success. Collecting, modifying, and validating these instruments and measures, in itself, is a worthwhile research pursuit that can further the field of community-based program measurement, and would serve as a needed first step in assessing multiple effects.

A general guiding framework for assessing impact at the individual member level might include metrics similar to the currently used member assessment surveys. Combining these metrics with measures assessing psychosocial functioning, motivation to serve, leadership, cultural competency, and administrative data on employment and education can enable and strengthen the development of predictive models associated with program success. Employing pre/post or longitudinal designs with comparisons groups from other service organizations can seek to validate what is anecdotal data on the impact of VISTA services.

Beneficiary impact may be assessed via qualitative methods, including case studies, longitudinal observations, and innovative strategies employing both VISTA membership and skill-based training such as community-based participatory research. Metrics should include beneficiary resident involvement and activation, psychosocial functioning, family role functioning, employment/education/self-sufficiency, health, and well-being.

Organizational measures may include pre/post capacity-building assessments targeting the impact of VISTA activities on sponsors. These should include scaling an organization's services through expansion, reach, and productivity; developing innovative services; developing or

changing policy; and strengthening community engagement. Evaluation methods should consider clustering sponsors by common characteristics, such as focus areas or the use of evidenced-based interventions, and comparison groups should be considered.

At the community level, impact metrics may include collective resident activation and involvement, utilization of social and government services, level of ongoing citizen participation (e.g., volunteering/social responsiveness), and resident/local government relationship metrics. Methods to assess these metrics may include social or organizational network analysis and community engagement assessments.

Prior to implementing any program assessment or evaluation plan, it is prudent to conduct a data audit, including, at a minimum, these suggested steps:

1. Examining the data needs relevant to the proposed assessment or evaluation.
2. Identifying available sources of existing administrative data.
3. Identifying existing valid data collection instruments or creating new instruments. These may include scales assessing individual or organizational measures (e.g., behavioral functionality, self-efficacy, connectedness to others, organizational capacity).
4. Assessing the capacity to link with existing survey data or longitudinal survey follow-up data (e.g., exit survey, follow-up survey).
5. Developing a formalized oral history methodology to record and track former and current volunteers, beneficiaries, supervisors, and organizational staff.

Recommendation #3: Consider Capitalizing on New Opportunities by Developing Innovative Service Models and Targeting These Projects for Evaluation

VISTA is a multifaceted organization that has a diffuse management structure. Governance over project designs, volunteer recruitment, training, supervision, and service activity is decentralized, and is held typically by the state office and sponsor. Introducing policy changes or standardizing some practices may prove to be a complicated and difficult task as these may vary widely across states and sponsors. In spite of its decentralized design, however, VISTA has finely honed and established management practices and, across its history, has regularly considered and implemented innovative service designs in partnership with government, corporate, and nonprofit organizations (e.g., Literacy Corps, Entrepreneur Corps, Bridging the Digital Divide, Habitat for Humanity).

These innovative service projects may offer an opportunity to consider building an evaluation plan prior to, and even as part of, the implementation of service. In this regard, VISTA may gain substantial insight from a review of Social Innovation Fund project designs. Well-conducted needs assessments, articulated theories of change and related logic models, homogeneous assignment descriptions, well-designed and specified interventions, targeted or expanded trainings specific to the intervention, assessable and measureable beneficiaries, and implementation strategies that generate comparison groups (such as through lagged implementation) may provide an opportunity to conduct rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental designs.

Recommendation #4: Consider Standardizing Assignment Descriptions and Volunteer Role

Heterogeneity – Identify What Works and How It Works

VISTA volunteer sponsor organizations vary widely in size, service needs, and capacity.

Typically, sponsors host no more than five volunteers, who in turn often serve in small groups or

alone. Some larger organization, however, may host 20 or more VISTAs, and some national organizations can even host several hundred placed in sites across the country.

Given this wide variation in size and capacity, sponsors and even state offices may interpret application guidelines very differently, perhaps bending guidelines to suit specific needs. Within a capacity-building framework, concept papers and related volunteer assignment descriptions will vary as sponsors meet specific needs. In addition, within a single sponsor, two or more VISTAs may work on the same project with overlapping roles and assignment descriptions, or with evolving tasks targeting different beneficiaries.

This heterogeneity across and even within sponsors, state offices, project focus areas, and in particular volunteer assignment descriptions may impede the identification of best practices and the measurement of impact specific to VISTA activities.

One approach may be for VISTA to consider embedding core tasks and a minimum allocated time within volunteer assignment descriptions. VISTA can then assess volunteers for adherence to the description and roles. It then may be feasible to aggregate sponsors or volunteers within assignment descriptions across different geographical regions and evaluate the impact of their volunteers' work. In addition, these assessments can serve a three-fold purpose: (1) monitor volunteer assignments, (2) identify best practices, and (3) facilitate an impact evaluation.

A related consideration is the adequacy of the impact evaluation sample size. Statewide and within communities there are often only a handful of VISTA volunteers serving within projects at any one time. Given that heterogeneity across projects can be addressed, bundling smaller sponsor sites with similar projects and missions, as well as similar volunteer activity descriptions, may generate a feasible sample size for a rigorous and cost-effective evaluation of

VISTA-supported interventions. Successful quasi-experimental studies of organizational impact have been conducted based on the aggregated presence of VISTA volunteers. However, one limitation of these studies is that it has been difficult to assess the impact of different assignment descriptions at a level other than the organization. In addition, these studies have not identified volunteer best practices, the most efficacious or productive settings for different assignment descriptions, or the unique contributions of supervision and training. These factors may be controlled in an aggregated sample collected from several bundled sites.

Studies conducted with larger sponsors or smaller bundled sponsors offer an opportunity for more rigorous quantitative impact evaluations, provided that VISTA can adequately specify assignment descriptions and volunteer roles, collect detailed sponsor site characteristics, measure comprehensive and valid pre/post outputs and outcomes, and identify comparable control groups.

Recommendation #5: Specify a Range of Primary Beneficiaries and Create a Continuum of Impact

VISTA beneficiaries can range from individuals to organizations, at times to whole communities, or in some instances all three. In assessing impact or the success of an assignment, it is critical to specify in advance the target of the services. Given legislative mandates to implement capacity-building services, VISTA has demonstrated some success at evaluating impact through its sustainability studies. Because organizations often serve as bridges between the individual and the community, any assessment of organizational impact (such as sustainability, scope, and reach of services) should include some measures of individual and/or community effect as well. These may include targeted case studies that provide context for the impact.

Recommendation #6: Consider Multiple Innovative Evaluation Methodologies

Because the parameters of VISTA's services and activities span a range of geographies and beneficiaries, multiple evaluation strategies need to be considered. Quantitative measures of impact at the local levels may be available in only limited instances. Beyond strictly quantitative measures, evaluation designs might include mixed methods and qualitative strategies. Case studies can be used to provide a comprehensive overview of service impact, and VISTA has long used variations of this approach to provide perspective on its projects.

VISTA should consider establishing protocols for rigorous, targeted case studies of host communities, sponsors, focus areas, and volunteer activities. Included in a mixed-methods approach, VISTA should consider rigorously designed studies involving oral histories of volunteers and beneficiaries over time.

Final Thoughts

While prior evaluations provide modest evidence of organizational impact, future evaluations of VISTA, if done well, will provide a basis for the organizational adaptation and evolution necessary for a 21st century program. Ever-increasing calls for evidence of impact and better stewardship of public dollars only underscore the need for a well-developed, comprehensive evaluation strategy. This rationale for studying VISTA highlights the need to identify volunteer activities that yield impact and measurable change, isolate volunteer characteristics associated with project completion and success, promote challenging and transformative volunteer placements, and most importantly, provide information that can inform and advance the field of national service such that it truly has an impact on poverty. In this regard, VISTA may serve well

as a laboratory within which successful innovations of community-based programs can be discovered.

There will be numerous opportunities for VISTA to re-define its role as an anti-poverty/national service program over the coming decade. While the problems of poverty and social justice never seem to abate, a wealth of information, resources, and innovative practices have been gathered that show promise in alleviating and even preventing poverty. VISTA has had a long history of contributing to these practices, and in meeting these new challenges, it can again make a substantial contribution to this emerging body of knowledge.

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APPENDIX A

TITLE/TYPE	DATE	AUTHOR(S)	TYPE OF STUDY	RESEARCH QUESTIONS	DESCRIPTION/QUALITY/ MAJOR FINDING
Early Process Assessments and Research on Volunteer Impact					
VISTA Associates in Appalachia: An Assessment of the 1966 Summer Associate Program	Feb-67	Harold Goldblatt	Evaluation – survey and open-ended narrative	What do VISTA SAs do? How do they accomplish their goals? How are they received in the community?	A description of the volunteers, their activities, the communities they served, their perspectives of the service, and the needs they addressed – Well done process assessment. Also suggested a typology of volunteers. The purpose of this study was to understand the aspects of the volunteer, the type of work they do, and their integration into the communities they serve.
VISTA Volunteers and the Poor: A Special Type of Helping Relationship	Apr-67	Marjorie Cantor	Qualitative evaluation	Who and what are VISTAs? What are the mechanisms by which they achieve their goals? How does VISTA work?	A typology of volunteers and an initial theory of change – The first and most publicized volume on VISTA.
Study of VISTA Summer Associates – Legal Services	Sep-68	Sidney Cohen, Sidney Hollander Associates	Member survey and interviews	What do VISTA Legal Services volunteers do? How do they accomplish their goals? How are they received in the community?	An activity survey to assess VISTA's summer associates legal services project – Poor response rates and simplistic but fairly good interviews and good anecdotal information. Provided an overview of VISTA legal services.
Some Correlates of Success and Satisfaction in Urban VISTA	Jul-68	Marjorie Cantor	Qualitative and quantitative evaluation	What member characteristics correlated with project success for VISTA volunteers?	Preliminary tests of the constructs cited in the first paper and factors associated with perceived success and satisfaction – Attempted to address the question of what volunteer characteristics are most useful in which situations.
VISTA Resource Book	Jun-68	VISTA Staff	Resource and onboarding information		An informative view of VISTA's organization, policies, and practices during the early years.
A Call to ACTION in 1972: An Analysis and Evaluation of VISTA Programs, August–September 1971	Dec-71	Evaluation Staff, Office of Domestic and Anti-Poverty Operations, ACTION	Qualitative – process assessment	How is VISTA managed? What practices are effective/ineffective? Is VISTA achieving its goals? What are the barriers to better management and goal attainment? What changes can improve evaluation and measurement?	High-quality process assessment – Excellent recommendation for improving evaluations and measuring impact. Attempted to assess what VISTA does, what it does well, what problems there are in the program related to management, uniformity in service, barriers to successful completion, potential improvements.

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Early Process Assessments and Research on Volunteer Impact					
Program Impact Study	Mar-73	VISTA Staff	Quantitative – a telephone survey of a stratified sample of VISTA supervisors	What has VISTA accomplished?	Preliminary impact study – More of a feasibility study than anything else. Reported on VISTA accomplishments and made solid recommendations.
A Study of Target and Non-Target VISTA Volunteers	Mar-73	VISTA Staff	Quantitative – a questionnaire for VISTA volunteers, sponsors, and program staff	What are the differences (age, education, income, race, residence) between locally recruited and nationally recruited VISTA volunteers? How do they work differently/together?	The first study to examine LRV vs. NRV – Very positive findings overall for comparability.
Program and Policy Assessments					
VISTA Volunteer – Sponsor Survey	Oct-76	L. Frazier, K. Jamtgaard, & J. Kalin, OPP, Division of Evaluation, ACTION	Quantitative – survey of volunteers, supervisors, and sponsors	A survey of VISTA sponsors, supervisors, volunteers, and community around the country assessing aspects of the VISTA program related to volunteer training, readiness, and assignment characteristics, project completion, and program improvements.	A record review and a complex method for administering related data collection instruments across four program strata – Finding were positive for successful completion of anti-poverty programs. Greater clarity and project definition was cited as a need. This study was a general program assessment.
VISTA Project Survey 1976	Mar-77	Melvin Beetle, OPP, Evaluation Division, ACTION			A related study examining the accomplishments of national goals, project objectives, volunteer productivity, community impact, and policy compliance. Generally high marks for VISTA – Moderate level of rigor. Not an impact evaluation. This was a program assessment – Were implemented policies achieving their desired effect?
National VISTA Study FY 77	Jul-78	Jamtaard, Schwartz, & Younger, OPP, Evaluation Division, ACTION	Quantitative evaluation	The research questions for this study included: Has VISTA accomplished its national goals? Has it accomplished its project objectives? What is the level of productivity for VISTA's projects and volunteers? Has there been a measureable impact in the community? Has VISTA adhered to its policies?	The first national assessment – Modest rigor, adequate design, and relevant research questions related to project success and poverty relevance. Not an impact study but suggestive of positive change. Evaluated VISTA at the program unit level. Poor community measures – only anecdotal measures of impact.

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Program and Policy Assessments					
VISTA National Grant Evaluation	Nov-78	OPP, Evaluation Division, ACTION	Process evaluation – questionnaire and survey site visits	Does direct funding of large grantees improve overall participation of the community in the design and implementation of programs?	Process assessment of the National Grants Program – A direct funding project for large national grantees. Assessed implementation and compliance – Found higher rates of participation by poor communities vs. traditional funding mechanisms.
VISTA Activities Survey 1978, Volume 1: Final Report	Jan-79	OPP, Evaluation Division, ACTION	Activities survey questionnaire and site visits	Program assessment – How many were served and in what service areas? How many resources were generated? Who served and in what focus areas?	Quantitative and qualitative analysis of volunteer activity and community and organizational impact – Moderate level of rigor. Adequate findings related to organizational impact – Very poor community measures (no pre/post or baseline and no community markers. Findings suggest an inability to involve the poor in decision processes.
VISTA Activities Survey 1979	Nov-79	OPP, Evaluation Division, ACTION	Activities survey questionnaire	Have VISTA policies expanding community organizing been successful?	A follow-up study to assess progress implementing VISTA policies to emphasize the community organizing project area and limit direct services – Successful shift but several difficulties in definition, planning, and phasing out tasks. This was a policy assessment study.
VISTA Activities Survey 1980	Sep-81	OPP, Evaluation Division, ACTION	Activities and outcome survey	Program assessment – How many were served and in what service areas? How many resources were generated? Who served and in what focus areas?	Reported on volunteer demographics, project characteristics, beneficiaries, volunteer satisfaction, training, and policy changes instituted prior to 1978. Moderate level of rigor – No impact methodology. This was another program assessment. What has VISTA accomplished? How many served? How much generated?
Demonstrating Impact and Evaluating Special Initiatives					
VISTA Goal Accomplishments and Community Effects Evaluation: Final Report 1986–1987	Jul-88	Abt Associates – ACTION, Program Analysis and Evaluation Unit	Pre/Post service site visits; conducted interviews with staff, volunteers, and community members	Program assessment – How many were served and in what service areas? How many resources were generated? Who served and in what focus areas? What is the impact of VISTA on program sustainability?	Positive finding – Modest rigor and proper focus – still anecdotal evidence of effect. No independent measures of impact and poor measures of sustainability. Consistent findings though; 66% of projects had planned sustainability or were in some phase of integration.

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Demonstrating Impact and Evaluating Special Initiatives					
Improving Literacy with VISTA Volunteers: An Evaluation Report on the VISTA Literacy Corps	Mar-91	Developmental Associates – ACTION, Office of Policy Research and Evaluation, Program Analysis and Evaluation Unit	Mail surveys of current L.C. volunteers and sponsor project directors; telephone surveys of former L.C. volunteers	Program assessment – How many were served in the literacy programs? What gains were made? How well were the programs implemented?	Same general finding – Strong volunteer dedication and organizational skills. No measure of actual impact – poor sustainability.
VISTA Evaluation: Rapid Assessment Site Visit Report	Jun-92	Developmental Associates – ACTION, Office of Policy Research and Evaluation, Program Analysis and Evaluation Unit	Preliminary process assessment to determine survey items, available outcome data, and information access for full evaluation	Feasibility assessment of a model for evaluating programs.	Highly interesting review of selected programs – decent narrative. Worth reviewing to inform the process for future impact evaluations.
An Evaluation Report on Volunteers in Service to America	May-93	Developmental Associates – ACTION, Office of Policy Research and Evaluation, Program Analysis and Evaluation Unit	Survey of volunteers, supervisors, and community members	Program assessment – How many were served and in what service areas? How many resources were generated? Who served and in what focus areas? What is the impact of VISTA in the community?	Large stratified sample – Moderate to high response rates. Positive findings – Self-rating by volunteers and supervisors and project success ratings by community members. No pre/post design or any use of community markers.
AmeriCorps VISTA 1994 Accomplishments Survey: Final Report	Dec-95	Westat, Inc.	A mail survey with telephone follow-up of the universe of projects (667) active for the full year in 1994; 70% response rate (465)	Program assessment – How many were served and in what service areas? How many resources were generated? Who served and in what focus areas? What is the impact of VISTA in the community?	Comprehensive count of VISTA activities and outputs for a one-year period for projects that were open across the full year. Categorized by focus areas. Findings are estimates from the survey and are open to substantial error.

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Evaluating Special Initiatives					
Description and Evaluation of the Summer Reads Initiative	Oct-97	Macro International, Inc.	Rapid response methodology – modified process assessment – record review, lit review, site visits (5 programs), and interviews (15 programs)	Program assessment – How many were served in the literacy programs? What gains were made? How well were the programs implemented?	Programs were successful in setting up the summer reading projects – Marked by wide variability across the model. No actual pre/post measures for outcomes. Recommendations suggest a poorly designed, implemented, and organized initiative.
Member Survey for ACNS, AC VISTA and AC NCCC, Final Report	1999	Regina Nudd, Isabelle Nguyen, & William Strang, Westat, Inc.	Internal evaluation – contained within the CNCS National Service Member survey, a sample of 1,257 state and national AC members, 798 NCCC members, and 1,140 AC VISTA volunteers were interviewed; VISTA response rate was 75%	What are the demographic profiles of the national service program members?	Confirms long-standing demographic profile of VISTA – Predominantly women, 60% white, high dedication. Spans all socioeconomic levels and NRV have higher educational levels.

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Evaluating Special Initiatives					
Evaluation of DC Reads – Year 2, Final Report	Jan-00	Macro International, Inc.	Surveys and interviews with all participants, including VISTAs	Special initiative – Literacy: How did VISTA preform as a support for this program?	CNCS (AC VISTAs) participated in the DC Reads initiative with three other partners – CIS, DCPS, and five local universities. Federal work/study students provided tutoring in 16 underperforming schools – Four were selected for outcome measures – Very successful program. VISTA provided site coordination, tutor supervision, and some training. VISTAs also helped to integrate the curriculum and material. No direct impact from VISTA presence – VISTA provided administrative and managerial support. A lack of training in educational programing was cited as a barrier to better management. Raises the question of how to evaluate the supporting role that VISTA plays in designing and implementing services for other programs.
Comprehensive Evaluation of AmeriCorps VISTA Faith-Based and Grassroots Initiatives: Final Report, Year 1	Oct-04	ORC Macro, Applied Human Technologies Division	Census survey of 1,178 VISTA projects – 15 selected for in-depth review	Special initiative – Faith-based community programs: How did VISTA preform as a support for this project?	Examined the scope of VISTA’s projects that are in faith-based or community-based organizations – The number of VISTAs serving at the projects and the focus areas addressed by these projects. Reviewed VISTA activities at these sites as well. Capacity development, volunteer generation, community development.
AmeriCorps VISTA and Asset Development: Increasing Capacity for Performance Measurement and Effects	Jul-04	Amanda Moore McBride, Center for Social Development, Washington University, St Louis, MO	Process assessment – case studies/telephone interviews with 28 identified Entrepreneur Corps VISTA projects	Special initiative – Entrepreneur Corps: How did VISTA preform as a support for this project?	Identified outputs and outcomes that would be useful in measuring performance and potentially impact. Excellent study for highlighting the barriers and potential solutions to measurement and the role of inadequate volunteer training was cited.

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Improved Study Designs and Diversified Methodology					
Support for Local Organizations: Report from the AmeriCorps VISTA 1994 Accomplishment Survey	Nov-95	Westat, Inc.	A mail survey with telephone follow-up of the universe of projects (667) active for the full year in 1994; 70% response rate (465)	What were the impacts of VISTAs on organizational level of functioning, resources, and community integration?	Excellent study examining overall capacity building – Organizational resources, financial resources, fund raising, partnerships, volunteer generation, etc. Suggests elements of scale for capacity-building measures.
The Sustainability of AmeriCorps VISTA Programs and Activities	Aug-97	J.R. Tabori, I. Margarita Gordon, & R. Martinez, People Work, Inc.	Interviews with VISTA supervisors at sponsor organizations	What were the impacts of VISTA support on project sustainability? What were the circumstances that fostered sustainability?	The research goals were to estimate the post-VISTA sustainability rates across time and to identify the main factors that influenced sustainability. This study is characterized by a well-designed sample and well-defined outcomes. The sample included 240 supervisory personnel from VISTA projects that have been closed two years and five years prior to 1996. Of these, 25 were ineligible. Of the remaining sample, 119 completed the interview on initial contact and 82 completed a follow-up interview (93.4% response rate). Findings includes 68% sustainability at five years, 76% at two years. Capacity building was an influential factor for the two-year rates, and VISTAs were more influential in the project's survival vs. the five-year sample.
Why Serve: Understanding the Service Orientation of AmeriCorps VISTA Service Members	Jul-02	Christine Standerfer, National and Community Service Fellow	Q-sort methodology and interviews with 61 newly recruited VISTA service members attending 5 regional PSOs and one national PSO	What are the motivations and perspectives of individuals who chose to serve in VISTA?	Categorized members into one of five service orientations.

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Improved Study Designs and Diversified Methodology					
Capacity Building as a Fundamental Objective: Definition and Measurement in the AmeriCorps VISTA – Habitat for Humanity International Affiliate Partnerships	Nov-02	Ginger Elliott, National and Community Service Fellow	Quasi-experimental design – measures the impact of capacity building on productivity between Habitat for Humanity sites with and without VISTA support	What are the overall impacts of VISTA support for organizational capacity and productivity compared to comparable organizations without support?	Well-designed and implemented study – Clearly defines capacity building and relevant outcome measures. Generated comparable intervention and control groups. Positive findings for VISTAs – Controlling for site differences. VISTA sites outperformed non-VISTA sites. Limitation – Only measures the impact of presence, cannot determine specific activities linked to capacity except (fund raising, material acquisition, volunteer generation).
The VISTA Program Assessment	Mar-10	Cynthia Thomas, Joseph Gasper, Cynthia Robins, & Priyanthi Silva, Westat, Inc.	Random sample of 250 closed projects and 265 ongoing projects in their third year; document review and abstraction, site visits and interviews with project staff and state offices	What are the program and member characteristics that are associated with project sustainability?	A sustainability study with impressive results – More than 70% sustained at the two-year mark. Includes a descriptive analysis of the projects and a comprehensive review of the status of closed projects, as well as the details of the volunteer roles and activities, goals, management issues, and plans. Generated a predictive model to test hypotheses regarding factors associated with sustainability.
Dissertations/Books					
The Politics of VISTA in the War on Poverty: A Study of Ideological Conflict	1975	David Pass	Dissertation		A political perspective on the forces that shaped VISTA's organizational mindset and approach to service.
VISTA: A Study in Organizational Survival	1994	Gay Strickler	Dissertation		An organizational assessment of the strategies that VISTA employed during periods of existential threat and funding cuts.
The War on Poverty: Selected Programs and Ongoing Impact	2002	Robert F. Clark	Book		

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Dissertations/Books					
The Politics and Civics of National Service	2013	Melissa Bass	Book		
The Underclass Debate: Views From History	1992	Michael B. Katz	Edited book		
Evaluability Assessments					
Measuring the Impact of VISTA on Poverty Communities	1969	S.H. Chafkin, J.M. Pines, A.R. Kennefick, E. Colligan, A.L. Freeman, E. Montgomery, American Technical Assistance Corporation	Evaluability assessment	What are the most feasible and defensible methods to evaluate VISTA?	A thorough examination of the VISTA program; its structure, processes, and policies; and the barriers to evaluation. The study make recommendations for measurement and evaluation, including a stronger central role in project design, planning projects with measurement included in the process, community analysis prior to project interventions to assess impact, identifying selected outcomes for the target intervention such as behavioral change, attitudinal changes, and enhanced training.
Program Impact Evaluation Paradigm for VISTA	1977	K.J. Gilmartin, R.J. Rossi, & D. Russ-Eft, American Institute for Research	Evaluability assessment	What are the most feasible and defensible methods to evaluate VISTA?	This attempt to craft an evaluation design for the VISTA program was based on interviews with 25 middle management staff. The project encountered a changed political administration, shifting agency needs, and no well-defined work plan. It is a study in scope change, poorly defined goals, and institutional inertia. Nevertheless, the recommendations that are made include organizational changes to exert control over projects, developing logic models, building in a measurement mechanism linked to interventions, and specifying outcomes within varying units of measurement. Very detailed and instructive.

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Member Studies and Training Assessments					
Impact of VISTA and Peace Corps Service on Former Volunteers and American Society	1977	Ester Smith	Study 76-043-1068, contract research corporation		Poor sample size – Comparative research. Not comparable samples/experiences – No valid measures of community impact.
Improving Lives and Communities: Perspectives on 40 Years of VISTA Service	2008	C. Markovitz, G. Schnider, J. Jastrzab, & P. Frumpkin, Abt Associates	Member impact study	What is the impact of service in VISTA on the civic, educational, and employment outcomes and the intergenerational transfer of values on members over time?	A retrospective study of service impact on three waves of VISTA volunteers – 1965–1972, 1973–1980, and 1980–1993. The study employed both survey methodology (n=1,539) and in-depth interviews (n=64) with VISTA members and a comparison group of members who withdrew from service prior to completion. Findings suggest that, for many outcomes, VISTA service had a very modest positive impact (education, income, values – some civic). Some limitations include a 38% response rate for the survey and challenging comparability of the two groups; the retrospective design may also have introduced bias (recall) and inability to control for pre-existing factors leading to service. In addition, differences between the intervention and control groups were small.
AmeriCorps VISTA Member Survey	2013	J. Devine, E. Clark, & J. Lau, Education Northwest	Member experience and satisfaction survey	How do VISTA volunteers rate their national service experience?	A survey of new VISTA volunteers regarding their experience at key points during their service year – The survey was administered four times over the course of a one-year period and in each phase included volunteers who served less than three months and up to 11 months. The survey asked about onboarding, stipends, training, VADs, the VISTA campus, post-VISTA adjustment assistance, etc. Nearly 80% suggested that their assignment description matched their placement tasks and well over 70% reported satisfaction with their experience. Several recommendations are made for modifications to the training process.