



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Definition of Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement Affiliation

Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement (MCNCE) is a statewide coalition of college and university CEOs who have made a formal commitment to advancing the public purposes of higher education and educating students for civic and social responsibility. Each year, these CEOs affiliate their institutions with Campus Compact by paying dues to both the state network office and national organization.

Joining MCNCE means that the affiliated campus's CEO holds a position on MCNCE's board of directors, which employs an Executive Director and network office staff to manage the organization's programming and operations.

All MCNCE grants and programs are available to MCNCE affiliate campuses. K-12 schools, public agencies, and community organizations wishing to participate in MCNCE's programs must collaborate with an affiliated MCNCE campus in order to receive funding or programmatic support.

In the event a community-based entity applies for MCNCE program funding, an MCNCE campus must sign on as co-sponsor for the project.

Determining Allowable Placement Sites

In order to receive the services of a VISTA member through Campus Compact, an agency or organization must be:

1. Classified as a public or private nonprofit agency, state/local government entity, Indian tribe, K-12 school, including faith-based organizations.
2. Insured, with general liability coverage for employees and volunteers;
3. Operate under a current Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), written agreement or legal contract with a local college or university campus by member start date.

Denial of Proposed Service Placement

The MCNCE network office reserves the right to withhold, reduce or cease support of any partnering agency or community organization, based on the following criteria:

1. Unavailability of AmeriCorps VISTA member slots;
2. Failure to comply with grant provisions;
3. Misalignment with the mission, values and acceptable services activities of CNCS or Campus Compact; and/or
4. Inadequate supervision of members and/or VISTA-related service activities.

About Host Site Participation Fees

Montana's AmeriCorps VISTA placements are through intermediary organizations like the Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement. To fund the non-federal portion of the program participation fees are assessed.

These funds support the AmeriCorps VISTA project. The full dollar value of placing an AmeriCorps VISTA member is approximately \$32,000/year, which includes living allowance, Education Award and health insurance, as well as ongoing member support, program administration, training, and service-related travel costs.

The Host Site Participation Fee may be paid all at once or made over four smaller payments. Part of this commitment includes an administrative fee*, which must be paid prior to the member's start date.

This fee supports programmatic costs such as training, travel and administration. Subsequent payments are for partner cost share, which supports living allowance and member costs, such as health insurance.

***Note: The administrative fee waived for campus-based host sites that are affiliates-in-good-standing of MCNCE.**

Defining "Unmet Community Needs"

Community needs are considered "unmet" if current efforts do not address, or do not adequately deal with community problems.

First, think about challenges your community faces.

Some examples of a community need:

- Below average school high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment;
- Poor access to health care;
- Homelessness or housing issues; and
- Hunger or poor access to healthy foods.

Secondly, determine current activities to address these challenges and decide whether AmeriCorps VISTA is an appropriate solution.

Questions to consider:

- What specific community need would the proposed project address?
- How was the need identified? Is the need based on documented data or observation?
- How have you documented the need? Local expertise? A national study? A statewide study?
- What are the short-term and long-term outcomes projected for the project?

Appropriate AmeriCorps VISTA Activities

VISTAs focus their efforts on building the organizational, administrative, and financial capacity of organizations that fight illiteracy, improve health services, foster economic develop, and otherwise assist low-income communities. VISTAs develop programs, write grants, and recruit and train volunteers. As a rule, VISTA members do not provide direct services, such as tutoring children or building homes.

Example VISTA activities:

- Organizing a campus-based veterans center and expanding support for college student veterans;
- Assessing college access and success efforts in a community;
- Supporting dual credit (high school-post secondary) efforts;
- Creating a graduation awareness campaign and recruiting volunteer mentors;
- Setting up affordable after school programs;
- Developing a recruitment campaign for college students to serve with an after school program;
- Expanding programs to help low-income families navigate college application/enrollment;
- Recruiting mentors for students identified as at-risk of dropping out;

In each case, the VISTA member improves and strengthens an organization so it can continue to serve the needs once the VISTA’s service has ended. A list of prohibited VISTA activities may be viewed [here](#).

Capacity-Building Activities Information

The Corporation for National & Community Service defines capacity building as “a set of activities that expand the scale, reach, efficiency, or effectiveness of programs and organizations.”

Capacity building is indirect service. This type of service does not involve the one-to-one provision of services or benefits between an AmeriCorps member and the beneficiary community, which is direct service.

Direct service activities involve working directly with individuals or groups of individuals to bring about personal change, while capacity-building activities involve working behind the scenes to bring about systematic or organizational change.

Capacity Building v. Direct Service

Examples of indirect service activities:

- Project planning,
- Developing training or outreach materials,
- Cultivating partnerships or creating systems to measure impact, etc.
- Leverage resources for programs and/or organizations.

Examples of direct service activities:

- Teaching or tutoring,
- Mediating, counseling, or case management,
- Coaching,
- Managing volunteers, or
- Providing direct client care, etc.

Community Building Lifecycle

The Community Building Lifecycle is the community development framework, which provides the foundation for local projects to become self-sustained, community-supported programs. This approach is a widely accepted best practice, supported by University of Kansas research, among others. The lifecycle contains into six discrete stages – and multiple sub-stages, which foster community ownership and sustainable approaches to challenging problems.

Community Building Lifecycle stages include:

- Assessment
- Create Community Awareness and Stakeholder Involvement
- Building Community/Advisory Groups
- Strategic Community Planning
- Strategic Plan Implementation/Fundraising
- Evaluation

The community building lifecycle is an ongoing process, which operates in one or more of the stages at any given time. The VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) structures the project using the community building lifecycle as the framework for the activities of VISTA members.

The Community Building Institute is a semi-annual 6-part webinar training series for all MCNCE VISTA site supervisors/members to encourage development of their projects around the community building lifecycle. This training is hosted by the Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement network office and happens at the beginning of each VISTA project.

AmeriCorps VISTA Performance Measures

Performance measures are the method of assessing a project’s progress toward stated goals, and a sponsor organization’s ability to meet its broad programmatic goals. Performance measures define what impact the project seeks to make by providing specific targets and details about project activities.
Each MCNCE VISTA project must align with one or more of the following performance measures:
Education: K – 12 Success or School Readiness: Educational programs that build capacity to maintain enrollment and support school success in grades K-12, particularly in low-achieving schools. These activities includes teaching, tutoring, mentoring students; providing supportive services to teachers and school leaders; providing expanded learning programs such as before / after school and summer learning programs; providing family engagement programs, and providing other types of school improvement support.
Education: College Access & Success: These projects build capacity in programs for students in grades 9-12; students working toward a GED; and for students preparing for college and careers. This includes building capacity for programs engaging in proven or promising counseling, academic, enrollment, and retention activities benefiting economically disadvantaged first-generation college students.
Community Resilience: These projects focus on developing or enhancing the resilience or sustainability of communities, with priority given to projects addressing climate resilience. The focus of these projects should be on increasing resiliency of communities or populations that are low-income or at high risk of adverse impacts from climate change.
Veterans & Military Families: These projects support military, veterans and their families, or engage veterans as VISTA Summer Associates.
These measures – outputs and intermediate outcomes – collected monthly/quarterly to monitor the project’s progress and effectiveness.

What Is the VISTA Assignment Description?

The VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) is a document that describes what each of VISTA project will accomplish over the course of one service year, utilizing the Community Building Lifecycle.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The host site will develop the goals and activities VISTAs will perform to help achieve the organizational and capacity-building goals. The anti-poverty mission of the project should be apparent in the VAD as well. • The VAD functions as a position description and therefore a useful document for recruiting applicants who are well suited to the organization and community’s needs. • The VAD clarifies the VISTA roles and maps a course of action in the long and short term. • The VAD cannot replace the guidance of a supervisor, nor detailed monthly work plans, but it can help frame the early conversations between a supervisor and a VISTA and serve to steer the project.
The VAD is also a resource to monitor performance and to keep the project on track. MCNCE staff will work with host sites awarded a VISTA member to develop strong VADs for their projects.

How MCNCE Priorities are Determined

Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement, along with all state and regional Compacts across the country, supports the mission and vision of Campus Compact. The Compact's mission *is to advance the public purposes of colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility*. MCNCE is a grantee of the Corporation for National & Community Service and receives funding that aligns with its core priorities (improving community life, educating students) and key focus areas. Campus Compact's strategic plan serves as a guide for current priorities within the state and national networks.

Examples of activities that are tied to national funding priorities include:

- Provide services to students living in poverty to improve academic performance or academic engagement;
- Provide services to students living in poverty to increase enrollment in a post-secondary institution; and
- Provide services to low-income veterans, veterans' family members, family members of active duty military, and military service members.

Examples of program objectives that are tied to Campus Compact priorities include:

- Eliminate gaps in college access and college completion programming;
- Provide more opportunities for first-generation students, veterans and work-study students to serve; and
- Expand programming, with a particular focus on serving rural and tribal communities throughout the region.