End-of-Year Reflection

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Well, just as all good things come to an end, here I stand in my last week as a Volunteer In Service To America (AmeriCorps*VISTA). Some days were long, but the year flew by, and from it I have gained invaluable life lessons, an extensive list of professional accomplishments, life-long friendships, and an incredible springboard from which to make my next leap in life.

I highly doubt that any other year of my professional life will bring the wide range of résumé boosting, personal and professional development opportunities that my VISTA year has provided. Coming into VISTA right after college, this year has seen me transition from having minimal professional experience to conducting youth leadership trainings, reviewing and critiquing grant proposals, creating library databases, facilitating workshops at statewide conferences, organizing teacher trainings, and developing a nationally disseminated service-learning manual. On top of all I accomplished, I also had the privilege of traveling all over my VISTA home state of Florida, as well as to conferences and trainings in many other major U.S. cities. The caliber of speakers and presenters at these events was always top-notch, including best-selling authors, international democracy fighters, and former U.S. Presidents!

To say the least, my VISTA year was pretty remarkable, but I can’t say there weren’t challenges to overcome. Many AmeriCorps members (myself included) begin their year bright-eyed and bushy-tailed with hopes of “saving the world.” Inevitably, within the first few weeks, they will realize this isn’t possible in only one year’s time. The nature of “indirect” service means that very few VISTAs leave behind tangible results; you must trust you are making a difference by building capacity, forming networks, and creating sustainable practices for your host organization. The earlier you reconcile the difference between initial expectations and what is actually feasible in one year’s time, the sooner you can take steps to put realistic goals into action.

Adaptations such as this will be expected of you all year long, therefore, two important characteristics to keep during a VISTA term are flexibility and an open mind. You have much to complete in one year, but the work will not necessarily come at a steady pace; the day before a conference might find you swamped with preparations, whereas the following week may find you staring blankly at your computer. On slower days, take the initiative to elaborate on your work plan, using its focal points to create a project that caters to your personal skills and interests. Your host organization understands that a VISTA term is about gaining back as much from the project as you put in.

Though there are many useful qualities to retain during your term, I would say the key to a successful VISTA year is to KEEP THE BIG PICTURE IN MIND. This outlook will truly allow you to focus on the experience as a whole rather than what can be the struggles of day-to-day life. Some days you may leave the office after making a few phone calls and sending a few emails and wonder, “How was THAT effective in eradicating poverty?” Look down the road: those few connections you made could turn into huge networking opportunities for organizations in your community who would not have otherwise found each other. Because of you, they will be able to build off each others’ resources and expertise. Other days, the minimal living stipend may get to you – in this area, many VISTAs have to adjust to a new (and not so welcome) lifestyle. Day-to-day, it can be discouraging when you cannot afford anything above bare-bones necessities, and sometimes that gets tight. But, at the end of your term, are you going to look back and regret giving a year of service to a low-income community because you had to wear last year’s bathing suit for another summer?

Learning to live with economic hardship is an experience you cannot understand until you have lived it. I won’t lie – this is the hardest part of the VISTA year. From it, I have gained a deep appreciation for all I have, understanding and compassion for others with economic hardships, depth of character from experiencing a new, challenging way of life, incredible budgeting strategies, a commitment to live without the excess that plagues the American lifestyle, and a determination to improve the situation for others at and below the poverty line. These are lessons that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. I gained all these positive outcomes from the hardest part of the VISTA year – imagine what the overall experience has done for me. It’s impossible to quantify, but I know that I am infinitely better for it.