

PART TWO



During your transition

Making the switch from service to social impact work

Part Two Overview

Part Two is useful both for people nearing the end of their service corps as well as those who have already completed their term (if you already finished your term and just found this book, see the box on page 88). Part Two discusses the following topics:

- **Section one: Motivation and courage in the transition** (pages 51-52)
 - * Includes a pep talk (page 51) and advice on how to activate your network to help your transition (pages 51-52)
- **Section two: The challenges of your transition** (pages 53-67)
 - * Includes discussions of a range of challenges you may face during your transition, such as “selling” yourself to hiring managers (pages 53-54), choosing which jobs to apply for (page 54), embracing opportunities that may seem daunting (page 54), timing your job search (page 55), deciding whether to stay in your service program if opportunities arise before it’s over (pages 56-59), looking for jobs from a distance (page 60), living on less income during the transition (pages 61-65), and keeping your health insured (page 67)
- **Section three: Translating your experience** (pages 68-82)
 - * Includes discussions of introducing your service corps to potential employers (pages 68-69), creating a resume and cover letter (pages 69-70), putting your experience across in an interview (pages 70-71), helpful frameworks to organize your experience (pages 72-75), a list of assumptions employers may make about your service background (pages 75-77), discussing your service work if you’re mid-career or beyond (pages 77-78), discussing an early termination of your service term (pages 79-81), and tying your experience to your salary negotiations (pages 81-82)
- **Section four: Other options for your next steps** (pages 83-87)
 - * Includes discussions of committing to a second service term (pages 83-84), finding work in government (pages 84-86) or business (pages 86-87), furthering your education (page 87), and starting your own organization (page 87)

Part Two of this *Companion* supports currently serving and recently finished corps members who are transitioning from corps to career. It’s focused on the time leading up to, as well as the months following, the end of your service.

Part Two starts out with a pep talk that we encourage you to return to throughout your



transition if you find it helpful. Then it addresses the many challenges you may face, providing a series of action steps to help you overcome them. It offers you a framework for translating your service experience on paper (on your resume and in your cover letter) as well as in person (in interviewing, negotiating your salary, and networking).

Throughout, Part Two refers to resources on Idealist.org that can help you with your career transition, and also presents new resources designed specifically for you.

Section one: Motivation and courage in the transition

Pep talk: Read early and often

This section is for people who, deep down inside, fear that they will not be able to get the job they want. It's for people who might feel terrified when they think about applying for grad school. For people who doubt they will ever find a career that allows them to pursue their life's calling while earning a living wage. It's for people who dread the questions, "What are you going to do when your term of service ends?" and "Are you going to get a real job next year?" and "What do you want to do with your life?" If you have a hard time answering any or all of the above questions, this section is for you.

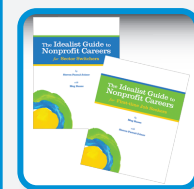
Here are some important things you should know about yourself:

- You deserve to take the next steps necessary to live out your thoughtful vision of your life.
- You deserve to find a place to go to school, to work, or to serve where your professors, employers, classmates, and colleagues appreciate your professional strengths and your personality.
- You deserve to have confidence in yourself.
- You deserve to succeed.

Your term of service has offered you opportunities to grow, learn, and give back. These opportunities, as well as the experiences you brought with you when you joined, will all play a role in helping you with your next steps.

Kicking your network into high gear during the transition

You have likely spent some time and effort building a network of people to work with during your term of service. You may have connected with some of these people locally, while you connected with others online, through email, letters, or telephone. While your intentions may have been more focused on getting your service project done well, you can now look to your professional



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

Some of the psychological

ups and downs of the job search are explored in **Chapter Two** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version
www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch2.html

Sector Switchers version
www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch2.html

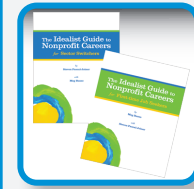


Kicking your network into high gear... (continued)

partners to help guide or support your next steps. Here are some ways to call on your network to help you in your transition:

- Let the people in your network know what you hope to do next. Since they will ask you, prepare an “elevator pitch”—a short but compelling story about your plans post-service (see the discussion in [Part One](#) of this *Companion*, page 42). Also feel free to email people (individually is best) to thank them for their partnership during your term, concluding with your vision for your life after the corps
- Ask for an informational interview. You may have already sat down with them to chat. This time, explore their career paths. Let them know what you plan for your next steps, and get their advice. Discuss the experiences and skills you’ve developed and hope to use, and ask if they have other ideas for how to proceed. Find out what education you might need to achieve your goals—you might have an idea about this, based on your own research. What do they think? Ask what the job market is like in your field, and where jobs are posted. See Chapter Four of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* where you’ll find suggested questions—never ask for a job—as well as ways of approaching people for informational interviews, and everything else you need to know for networking.
- Ask your allies to put you in touch with other people you may want to chat with for informational interviews. Remember to mention your ally when introducing yourself to their contacts.
- Ask them to keep you in mind if they see an opportunity appropriate for you.
- Approach three to five people for their permission to be listed as references; make sure they have a copy of your resume. It may even be helpful for them to see your cover letters, so they have an idea of the positions you’re applying for, and why you are a good fit (see sidebar).
- Always send a thank you note when someone does something nice for you.
- With each outcome (a job, admission to school, rejection from either) your supporters will appreciate an update letting them know how things turned out. Don’t make them beg for news; this makes people feel like you don’t value them and instead were just using them to get ahead. Also, letting them know how and what you’re doing expands their network. With an update, they now have a new contact to refer people to, ask advice from, and contact for people in your new network.

The partners you cultivated during your term may be your greatest champions during your transition because they see your potential, enjoy helping people in their network, and ultimately, want to see you succeed.



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

Informational interviews

are discussed in detail in **Chapter Four** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version
www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch4.html

Sector Switchers version
www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch4.html

CHOOSING REFERENCES

Ask people who know your work well to serve as references. A common mistake is to choose someone with a lofty title who knows you a little, but not well enough to speak in detail about your accomplishments and strengths. Hiring managers and admissions professionals value hearing from someone who can share specific details about your work ethic and your goals for the future. From their point of view, a specific reference from a colleague who knows you well is much more valuable than generic information from someone with an impressive title. A caveat is that you *should*, however, ask someone to serve as a reference if they know the hiring manager and can go to bat for you in an authentic way.

To learn more about how to approach people to write letters of reference for grad school admissions (or fellowships), go to the Idealist.org **Public Service Graduate Education Resource Center**:
www.idealism.org/en/psgerc/application2.html#letters



Section two: The challenges of your transition

Warning: the discussion below may be disturbing to some readers.

Some of the questions and difficult tasks you face during your transition are outlined in this section and discussed further in the coming pages. While the opportunities awaiting you are exciting and real, so are some of the trials you'll undergo. The goal is not to scare you, but to address concerns you might have. Feel free to skip ahead if a point of concern does not resonate with you.

Issues you may be facing during your transition

Because you've recently been participating in a term of service, this transition is different from other career transitions you have made or will make in your life.

Some challenges of your current transition may be include:

- “Selling” yourself to a potential employer
- Choosing jobs wisely
- Embracing opportunities rather than shying away from them
- Timing your job search
- Hanging in there in your service program as the job search beckons
- Looking for a job from a distance
- Living on even less money (until the new job starts)
- Finding (or keeping) affordable health insurance

Selling yourself long

Everyone you've been serving with already knows your talent, your work ethic, and your intelligence. You've grown as a leader during your term, developed and solidified your skill sets. But you may be put off by the idea of “selling” the hiring manager on your leadership skills in high-pressure and competitive settings. It's also natural to feel awkward advocating for yourself in your resume, interviews, and salary negotiations—after all, your motivations to serve may not have included self-promotion. Finally, you may question whether a hiring manager will take your application seriously, since you've not been a permanent member of staff at your host organization.

Action steps

- Beginning on page 68 you can read about how to translate your service experience during a job or school search. Many corps members relax once they know they can talk about their accomplishments.



While the opportunities awaiting you are exciting and real, so are some of the trials you'll undergo.”



- Corps members who are motivated by their moral convictions and faith often have a particularly hard time using their service as a stepping stone to a salaried job. If you feel this way, know that you are not dishonoring the service by seeking to move into employment that allows you to also work for a greater purpose.
- For more tips on crafting your resume and preparing for the interview, check out Chapters Eight and Nine of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers*.
- Chapter Four of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers*, on networking, will help you start any conversation off right through a prepared elevator pitch.

Choosing jobs wisely

Whether this transition is your first targeted or professional job search, or you've held many professional jobs in the past, it's possible that through your service you've sharpened your sense of what you'd like to do with the rest of your life.

Action steps

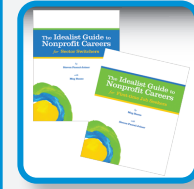
- Use your focus to your advantage by carefully choosing jobs to apply for.
- Emphasize quality applications—a relevant cover letter and resume for each opening you apply for—over quantity, sending out identical resumes to every organization that's hiring.
- Don't cave in to pressure to meet a minimum quota of resumes to send out weekly as a strategy for landing a job. Again, quality over quantity.
- Read more about discerning your career path from page 11 in [Part One](#) of this *Companion*. You must take the time to discover what you want to do, search out opportunities to do it, and find jobs that are the right fit. Only then can you convince a hiring manager that you really want the job.

Running toward opportunities, not away from them

Always make decisions based on the merits of each opportunity, rather than to avoid a tougher challenge. Given the pressure you may feel right now, and the open-ended nature of a job search, alternatives may appeal to you for the wrong reasons. Enlisting in another term of service or applying to college or grad school, for example, can seem easier because the application processes are more straightforward and the start dates more definite than a job search. Both are legitimate options, just make sure you are clear about your aims in pursuing them, as well as their potential drawbacks.

Action steps

- On page 83 in Part Two of this *Companion* is a discussion about committing to a second term of service for the right reasons (there are plenty).
- Read good and bad reasons to go to graduate school in Idealist's Public Service Graduate Education Resource Center (www.idealistservice.org/gradschool).
- As for college—it's always a good time to get your undergraduate degree.



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

Chapter Eight of The

Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers (free PDF) is all about writing strong resumes and effective cover letters.

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealistservice.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch8.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealistservice.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch8.html

Chapter Nine of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF) will help you make the right impression at your interview.

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealistservice.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch9.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealistservice.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch9.html

Learn how to craft your “elevator pitch” in **Chapter Four** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealistservice.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch4.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealistservice.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch4.html



Timing your job search

Your term probably has a definite end date. The upside is that you know when you will be available for your next opportunity, and you can plan accordingly. The downside is that lining up a job can pose tricky questions, such as when do you start applying for jobs? When during the application process do you let the hiring team know your availability? If you are offered a job early, do you consider quitting your term before completion?

When to start your active job search—sending in applications—is a little fuzzy. The typical job search takes about six months. But if you get a job offer two months before the end of your term, you may put yourself and the hiring organization in a bind. Do they wait for you? Do you sever ties with your program, service site, and clients by ending your term early? That said, if you wait too long, you may still be looking for a job months after your term ends, raising logistical problems like paying your rent.

Action steps

- Start applying within about six to eight weeks of your final day with the service corps. That way if you are offered a position, the hiring organization won't have to wait too long for you to start—and you won't have to wait too long post-term to collect a new paycheck.
- Include your available start date in your cover letter or share the information during the (first) interview. Mentioning it earlier in the process may be perceived as presumptuous; but mentioning it later can be seen as hiding info from the hiring team, especially if your term doesn't end for a while.
- Read about the decision to terminate your service early on the next page of this *Companion*.
- Starting on page 61 you'll find some suggestions for staying afloat financially in case of a protracted post-term job search.



Start applying for jobs about six to eight weeks from the last day of your service term.”



BEA'S STORY: TIMING THE JOB SEARCH

Bea, who has been connecting local organic farmers with public schools, is looking for opportunities to continue working on sustainability and food issues after her term of service ends.

Two months before she is due to leave the school district, her mentor Julia tells her about a job that would draw on many of the skills and networks Bea's developed this past year. A nonprofit called Farm Adventure has been piloting a summer camp and after-school trips that have brought a small number of children to tour the farm fields, listen to farmers talk about their work, and



BEA'S STORY (CONTINUED)

cook with vegetables. Farm Adventure has received funding to expand their program called Kids2Farm. The expansion will include more farms, serve more children, and even start daytime visits to farms through field trips and working with home-schooling groups.

At this stage in her career, coordinating these projects truly represents Bea's dream job. She would be able to leverage all of her relationships with the farmers she's met this year—which she hopes will increase her chances of getting the job. She knows people at most of the elementary schools in the district, and the right people at the district offices, to enable students to participate in the program. And she would still get to help kids access more nutritious food.

The tricky part is that Bea learns of the job two months before her term ends, so she is worried that they might not hire her. She puts together a relevant cover letter and resume, shows it to Julia and her team leader Jim, and sends it in. She mentions her time constraint in the cover letter. To be on the safe side Bea asks Julia—who knows Farm Adventure's executive director—to put in a good word for her and to find out what the time frame is for bringing on the new hire.

Several weeks later, word comes from Julia that Farm Adventure will start scheduling interviews in the coming weeks. By the time they ask Bea for an interview, a month has passed since the application deadline. After a first and second round of interviews, a couple weeks more pass. Two weeks before her term ends, Farm Adventure has checked her references and offers Bea the job. They agree that she's the ideal candidate, and don't mind waiting two more weeks for her to start.

She ends her service term on a Friday and starts her Farm Adventure position the following Monday. Although she'd been hoping to go home for a long weekend at least to see her family and to take a bit of a break, she is grateful for the short period between paychecks.

Bea **activated her service-related networks** to find her new position and **negotiated the timing** of her transition to her new job.

TRANSPARENCY IN YOUR JOB SEARCH

If you were in a permanent job right now, you might choose to be secretive about your job search. Since your service term is ending on a specified date, however, you have no reason to hide your career transition from your host site supervisor or service corps program staff. In fact, they may be able to approve your time away from site for job interviews, help you network, and give feedback on your resume.

Hanging in there till the end

Problems may arise if you find your dream job—or even just a next job—too early. You have good reasons to apply and you have nothing to lose, though the hiring team may not want to wait for you. If they can't wait, you will have to decide whether to quit your service program, or pass up the job offer.

If you are offered a job that is scheduled to begin before the end of your term, here



are just a few of the ways the situation could play out:

- You could ask to start your new job later than scheduled.
- Depending on your circumstances and the rules of the service corps, you may be able to work part-time in the new position until your term of service ends. Bear in mind that some corps forbid working outside the corps—if you're not sure, ask.
- Your host organization and/or service corps may be thrilled that you have found something already, and may be willing to let you go a bit early without damaging your relationship with them.

Reasons for staying in your program through the end of your term are many; maintaining the integrity of the relationships you've built is primary among them. Though you may not have signed a contract, your organization or school is counting on you. They may not be able to replace you with another corps member until next year—thus leaving your projects and constituents in limbo. Some people would say that fulfilling your commitment is simply the right thing to do—you made a promise, and now you are seeing it through.

Finishing your term also allows you to connect to your alumni group with your head held high; you also may have scholarship or other benefits coming to you that will be compromised if you leave early. (Except in very special circumstances, for example, the AmeriCorps Education Award is not prorated; if you leave early, you forfeit the entire award. See the box entitled “A VISTA asks ...” on page 58.)

Reasons to leave early may be financial, to accept a job or school opportunity simply too good to pass up, or to escape serving at a host organization that turns out to be an awful fit for you.

Action steps

- If your issues are with your host organization or location, first explore the possibility of transferring elsewhere. Some corps are more accommodating than others.
- Before making a decision, find out the ramifications of quitting for yourself, your host organization, your projects, and your community. Note that in some service corps, bringing up the conversation is, in itself, grounds for dismissal (the idea being that you'd bring down morale for everyone).
- If you choose to exit early, be sure to make your departure as meaningful as it would be if you stayed till the end. For example, say goodbye to students, write thank you notes to colleagues, and make personal phone calls to people who supported you, to let them know of your decision. If you don't have time to do this before you leave, make an effort to do so as soon as possible afterwards.

LEAVING EARLY: A PERSONAL STORY

I agreed to a year of service with my faith-based program (there were no contracts involved, though), and was offered a position as a campus minister after my term of service was over. In order to be on campus at least a week prior to the start of classes, I had to end my term of service a month early. I was very torn and upset with this decision. To my surprise, my program was not. They were sad to see me leave, but harbored no resentment about leaving early; they were thrilled with my job opportunity, which I really felt called to. I have since returned for a week or two at a time to do short-term work; one time I brought a group of college students with me. I joke that I am working off my last month. Depending on the program, I think it's helpful to discuss options about leaving. My program was quite flexible about when people came and left.

—Stacie, a former member of a faith-based service corps



- Collect documentation of your service effort, including statistics, writing samples, photos, and other evidence of your accomplishments (see the discussion of documenting your service in [Part One](#)). Your experience still counts, even if it was shorter than the full term.

If you've already quit your term early, you may be concerned about how to talk about your service experience since it was relatively short; you also may wonder how to request a letter of recommendation from people involved with your term of service. Those topics are addressed in the discussion on translating your experience, and on presenting yourself on paper, a little bit later on in this *Companion* on page 79.

A VISTA asks about accepting a job offer from her host organization before her term ends

Hi Amy,

The site where I perform my AmeriCorps VISTA service has offered me a full-time job. I am trying to decide whether I want to quit my service program now and take the job, or ask my host site to wait until my term is up in three months before hiring me. One dilemma, of course, is my education award. Do you know if the National Service Trust ever prorates the educational award? Are there any options that you might know of?

Also could I just take the job now, but remain an AmeriCorps VISTA member?

Of course, it might also be more profitable to take the job now, because I could probably make the amount of the educational award in a few months.

Thanks so much!

Torn Up

Dear Torn Up,

Congratulations! I am really glad that your host organization recognizes your hard work and talent.

Yikes, this is a tough question. One important thing to note is, you have little chance of collecting any part of your educational award if you leave on the terms you describe.

To be perfectly clear, you can't remain an AmeriCorps VISTA member and take on the identical duties of the open position. You're not allowed to displace staff of the organization where you're serving. Because technically you are simi-



A VISTA asks... (continued)

lar to a human resource grant to your host organization, your activities must align with what your supervisor described in the grant proposal they wrote to fund your VISTA position.

It would reflect very negatively on your hosting organization if they were to hire a service program participant who isn't finished with her term yet. Your organization would jeopardize getting new participants by hiring you on. I was hired by my boss at Idealist.org about three months before my AmeriCorps VISTA Leader term ended—and he waited for me! I took his willingness to wait as a sign of respect for me and for AmeriCorps VISTA.

I think asking your host organization to wait is the best option. In the long run you'll feel more of a sense of accomplishment, and you won't let down community partners who are expecting you to serve out your term. If you ever need to apply to have AmeriCorps members yourself, you and definitely your organization would be at a disadvantage were you to leave early now. You might feel awkward, too, if you one day wanted to participate in the activities of your alumni group.

If you decide to wait and your organization agrees, maybe you can change your work plan enough to tackle some of the new job tasks, as long as they are related to the grant proposal originally submitted to fund your current service position. If you want to attempt this, it's best to bring in the counsel of your VISTA program director, or someone at the appropriate state office for the Corporation for National and Community Service. (For contact information for the office responsible for your state, see www.nationalservice.gov/about/contact/directory.asp.)

On the other hand, if you are facing more than just the typical economic hardship (i.e., if you are ruining your credit record or running up irreparable debt), the choice is also clear that you should accept the job offer. Also, if your organization isn't willing to wait for you, that might be another reason to seriously consider leaving your service year early—though again, it won't reflect well on the organization.

If you started a salaried job tomorrow, you'd have little chance of saving the full value of an educational award in three months. Most likely, once you start earning a regular salary you won't feel like you missed out by waiting.

Regardless of what you decide, you can interpret the early job offer as a clear sign that your hard work is recognized!

Good luck whatever you decide. Let me know how it works out,
Amy



Looking for a job from a distance

If you want to set up a job in another state or country from where you are serving, you are fortunate in that you will soon join a network of other former service corps members throughout the country—and world—who can support your move. The network of former corps members can help you overcome at least some of the long-distance job search challenges. Many wonder whether to wait before applying for jobs. If you don't line up a job right away, how will you support yourself in the intervening weeks or months?

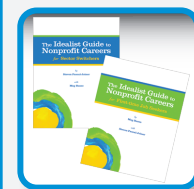
For most professionals, the long-distance job search poses challenges such as timing trips to your destination city to maximize meetings and job interviews. But as a service corps member, you may not have the money to visit your destination(s) in order to network and participate in job interviews. That limitation may result in a hiring organization taking your application less seriously.

Action steps

- Chapter Six of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* offers great resources for your long-distance job search. [Part One](#) of this *Companion* also deals with alternative and long-distance networking which may be helpful to you during your transition.
- If possible, save your vacation days so you still have some time to travel near the end of your term when you'll be looking for a job. Be sure to check if this is okay with your service program and host site.
- Seek frequent-flyer-mile donations from friends and family. Some airlines allow people to transfer their miles to others. Your friends and family may have accrued some miles on an airline they no longer use, or have a lot of miles from an overseas flight, but not nearly enough to buy a plane ticket. Ask around and see if anyone is in a position to help you.
- If your service corps or alma mater has an alumni group in your destination city, connect with them for advice about where locals look for job postings in the nonprofit sector. Email-based listservs are popular among nonprofits and are cheap places to post jobs, but they tend to fly under the radar—the only way to find out about many of them is word-of-mouth.
- If a university in your destination city has a nonprofit management program, check with that office for information about local nonprofit job boards.
- Finally, sign up for free email alerts from Idealist.org if you haven't already—we'll send you listings for any region you're interested in as they get added to the site.



If you don't line up a job right away, how will you support yourself?"



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

Chapter Six of *The Idealist*

Guides to Nonprofit Careers (free PDF) examines long-distance job searches and strategies for networking at a distance.

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch6.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch6.html

MORE JOB SITES

In addition to the job listings on Idealist.org, the Idealist **Career Center** contains links to a wide range of nonprofit and public service job sites.

www.idealists.org/career





ED'S STORY: LONG-DISTANCE JOB SEARCHING

Ed, the retiree who's been teaching with a service corps in the interior of China, has been networking online with people in Portland, OR for the past six months.

Through his networks he's learned about CNRG (pronounced "synergy"), the Community Nonprofit Resource Group, and their website and listserv that lets nonprofits in the area post opportunities and events for free. He also learns that Portland State University's Institute on Nonprofit Management has a listserv with announcements for its students that anyone can join by request. He signs up to receive their daily digests—one email with all the announcements from the day, rather than many separate email messages with individual announcements.

One day he sees that a nonprofit computer lab for job-seeking adults is looking to hire several part-time assistants to help students with computer skills. The positions begin a month after Ed is scheduled to return home, when the summer classes start at the organization. He applies for the position, explaining in his cover letter that he's in China and would have a hard time returning for a job interview. The hiring manager at the computer lab schedules a conversation with him over Skype, a computer program that allows people to chat and even see each other, using their internet connections.

By the time Ed starts to pack his bags for his trip home, he has happily accepted the job offer. He plans to live with his daughter during the first month home, while he gets settled and looks for an apartment. His service program will provide him with an allowance to settle back in the States. He plans to live off the allowance and some savings until he starts accepting his Social Security benefits and gets on his feet with the new position.

Long before packing his bags to fly home from China, Ed started **looking online to build relevant professional networks** across the world in Portland, OR. **Using online social networking sites** and **communicating with people** who are friends with his daughter in Portland, Ed has positioned himself to hear about opportunities as they arise.

Living on even less during your transition

As a corps member you've likely been earning a very basic allowance—possibly in a foreign currency that has even less value back in the United States. While it's a good idea to save money before a career transition, chances are you haven't had much to save. What's a person to do if a new job doesn't present itself immediately?



Spending your readjustment allowance wisely

If you are exiting a corps that offers you a lump sum of money at the end of your term, use it wisely. Before you spend anything, work out a budget taking into consideration your housing, food, transportation, clothing, and other needs.

Peace Corps Volunteers, for example, take home about \$6,000—broken into two payments. You may travel with that money, and take an around-the-world flight path home. You earned the money and you deserve to have fun with it if you want.

But if you are coming straight back to the United States, haven't got a job lined up, and want to use the money more strategically, consider:

- **The cost of an apartment** in the place where you'd like to live. Triple the monthly rent to estimate how much you'll have to plunk down for deposit, plus first and last months' rent, when you sign the lease. If you don't have a car (to save money, don't buy one unless you need it), remember that rents tend to be higher on bus and subway lines.
- Also consider **monthly utilities**—which will depend partly on your tastes and the time of year—and basic **furniture**. Something resembling a bed, a table, and a chair are helpful to start. Use your closets and suitcase to hold clothes for now; keep an eye out for decent used furniture at thrift stores and garage sales. Friends and family may have furniture collecting dust in the attic that they'd be willing to lend or give you.
- **Haircut and new clothes.** Your hair may benefit from a trip to the barber or salon. Save money by visiting a beauty school that offers student haircuts for a reduced price. The clothes you took with you into Peace Corps may be pretty threadbare by now or you may have abandoned them overseas. As such, they likely are not suitable for job interviewing. If you disagree, ask a trusted friend to give their opinion—sometimes a person can wear an item too long to notice the holes and nubs themselves. Invest in some good interview outfits (think plain, accessorizable, interchangeable, and conservative so you can wear them in a variety of settings). You may feel rich with your readjustment allowance, but it's best not to overspend.
- **Groceries and transportation costs** for the duration of your job search. How much do you spend each month on groceries? Eating out? (You may need to do it once or twice to remember.) If you have a car waiting for you back home, how much will you spend for a tune up and gas? If you don't have a car, how much will you spend on mass transit?
- **Health insurance?** Corps Care—the insurance plan you have access to as a recently Returned Peace Corps Volunteer—is free the first month, but \$140 per month thereafter (for your first 18 months home).
- Finally, think about the things you need to make your job search possible: A **cell phone**? A **computer**? If you need to buy these things, include them in your budget.

MORE TIPS ON BUDGETS AND FINANCE

Making a Difference: A Guide to Personal Profit in a Nonprofit World is a free PDF booklet available at www.idealists.org/en/career/financialadvice.html.

The booklet, developed by the National Endowment for Financial Education and Idealists.org, introduces a range of money-smart topics for people thinking about a nonprofit career—from handling student loan debt to thinking about salaries and benefits, credit and savings basics, and investing.



Spending your readjustment allowance wisely (continued)

Expenses for your first month home from Peace Corps

| Typical expenses | Your estimates | Example – Portland, OR |
|--|----------------|--|
| Rent | | $\$700 \times 3 = \$2,100$ |
| Utilities and furniture | | \$300 |
| Clothes and a haircut | | \$200 |
| Groceries and transportation | | \$500 |
| Health insurance | | Free for first month (Corps Care) |
| Cell phone, computer, phone and internet charges | | $\$1,000 + \$100/\text{month} = \$1,100$ |
| Total | | \$4,200 |

Taken together, you've spent thousands of dollars, just for your first month home and a few essentials. After you've taken care of the priorities, save as much as you can—you just don't know how long the job search may last. As you can tell, you don't have a lot of room for shopping sprees, but at least you won't have to go into debt.



Before your term ends, consider taking a part-time job (if it's allowed)."

Action steps

- Before your term of service ends, consider taking a part-time job if you can (and it's allowed), and save the extra income for the transition. Once your term ends, you can hang on to the job for the length of your job search. If you are in a program that forbids moonlighting, or if your schedule makes it impossible, consider the ideas below.
- Create a budget for yourself (like the one above) so you have a sense of how much money you'll need for essentials. This will help you know how much money you'll need to have saved, or that you'll want to earn now, as well as how much money you have left over to spend on extras like entertainment and fancy coffee drinks.
- Once your term has ended, look for ways to cut costs and bring in some money. For example, some people have the option of living at home or with friends. Establish early in your stay how much rent they'd like you to contribute, and a timeframe for moving on—and tread lightly. It can be hard to gauge the disruption your moving in causes to the lives of your hosts.
- If you were receiving public benefits during your term, or living in low-income housing, you should be able to continue until you've found a job that increases your income significantly. For some low-income housing,



your income can increase without affecting your lease. Check with your housing manager or case worker if you aren't sure. *Note that most service corps positions do not count as "employment" and so you should not count on unemployment benefits to kick in once your term has ended.*

Whether you have the ability to couch surf at home or among friends, you should still consider temporary employment, or "temping." With temporary employment, you'll be able to afford to put food on the table; it may even provide some other benefits. The key is to find a short-term source of income that also lets you take time to pursue job interviews as you are invited to them.

Here are some options for temporary employment:

- Let your network know you are looking for something temporary to tide you over until you find something more permanent. They may have ideas.
- You can find temporary work through a "temp agency"—an employment agency that helps connect people with organizations that have short-term gaps in staffing. Larger nonprofits use temp agencies to hire short-term workers to fill in for people on vacation, maternity leave, sick leave, or those who've left the organization permanently. The pay isn't super, but it's often better than minimum wage. Further, you can use the experience strategically. Let's say you are interested in working on issues of food security. Find out where the relief organizations or larger food banks in your region get their temporary staff. You can do this with a phone call to the main phone number of the nonprofit. Sign up with the same temp agency that the nonprofit uses. When you do, let the temp agency know you are interested in working with that nonprofit—and ask what other nonprofits use the agency. Benefits of this kind of arrangement include networking at your target nonprofit and showcasing your work ethic. Temp agencies sometimes offer health insurance options for temps who have worked through the agency for a set minimum amount of time.
- Search Idealist.org—under "job type" you'll see "Temporary." As you are searching for permanent jobs, also tick the box for temporary jobs.
- Consider skills you've built that may allow you to freelance or seek contracts, such as technical writing, grantwriting, event planning, photography, or even volunteer management for special events. Find out where these jobs are posted, and also check Idealist and Craigslist. Also, consider tutoring students in academic subjects, musical instruments, or athletic skills that you are particularly adept at. This may require a lot of work on the front end as you research how and where to market yourself, but once you get a client or two, word of mouth may be all you need to promote and build your client base.



- If you've garnered some teaching experience during your service term, you may be able to work as a substitute teacher. Some school districts don't require a teaching license for subs, so if you don't have a license, ask what the policies are.
- Some industries—like retail, hospitality, and food service—expect regular staff turnover. Consider accepting a job with a company or coop so you can pay your rent. If your schedule is less regular than 9-to-5, your job search can continue as normal.
- Similarly, seasonal work means that the job will end after a month or so. Some companies, stores, and farms need more workers during certain times of the year. (For example, a retail store might need more help in December; a fireworks stand might need more help in June and July; summer camps need counselors.) If you are ending your term of service during a time with seasonal employment needs, consider taking advantage. Again, seasonal positions are often available for weekends and evenings so you can use daytime hours for the job search.
- Ranches, international travel programs for youth, national park concessionaires, and summer camps all offer summer jobs. The benefit of these types of positions is that you can avoid paying rent and grocery costs a bit longer. The downside is that you may have limited time off, and you may be far from home, so it could be difficult to access job interviews. If you plan to head to school in the fall, though, lining up these types of summer jobs is ideal.



Beyond putting food on the table and paying the rent, temporary jobs can benefit you as you apply for new jobs.”

Beyond putting food on the table and paying the rent, temporary jobs can also benefit you as you apply for new jobs. Because you don't need the new job as desperately as you would if you were completely out of work, you will be more confident and relaxed in interviews. You can also be more particular in choosing which positions to apply to, and which job offers to accept.

Further, if you are staying with friends or family, you won't be as much of a financial burden to them if you have income and can contribute to rent, utilities, and food expenses. Plus, they'll see you are making an effort to regain independence, which they may appreciate.

Another advantage of temporary employment is that you will be less likely to go into debt or damage your credit rating during your transition. If you have a credit card, use it carefully, pay it off monthly (or at the very least pay more than the minimum amount required), and pay on time.





CESAR'S STORY: STAYING AFLOAT

Cesar's term of service as a teacher in a community center for immigrants is winding down. He's applied to several organizations with a variety of missions, which work on different issues, and with a range of roles to play. One organization had an opening for an administrative assistant. Another had a marketing specialist opening. A third was looking for a program assistant. He hasn't heard back from any of them. He's not too discouraged yet, though, because he knows the local job market isn't great and he has faith that he'll be led where his gifts are most needed.

Cesar knows he wants to work in a grassroots organization where he can wear many hats, but isn't concerned as much about what the organization does, as long as it is in service to people in need. He is pretty sure he doesn't want to be a teacher. He has enjoyed his work with immigrants but hasn't seen any job openings related to that kind of work.

As his last month at the host site draws near, he starts to fear that finding a job will be harder than he imagined. He has spent much of his savings from his cell phone job to make car payments this year. His last two paychecks from his service program will only cover one-and-a-half pay periods, so he starts to worry about his next rent payment, health insurance, car payments, food...

He's tempted to try to stay on at his service site another year, though he knows it would be for the wrong reasons. The main issues preventing him from committing to a second year are that he's eager to try something new, and also he's not crazy about committing to another year of full-time teaching.

He looks for a part-time job that he can take on as a corps member and eventually finds a job at the registration desk of the local YMCA. The pay isn't bad, and the hours are mainly evening and weekend, which is enough to tide him over. The schedule leaves him the daytime hours to finish his service term, and once that's over, to look for work. And finally, it's still a nonprofit where he can learn a lot and meet people in positions he aspires to.

The job won't include health insurance, so he also explores the Massachusetts health plan. He's lucky that he lives in a state with universal health coverage but it still takes some effort and time to get himself enrolled.

A month before his term ends, Cesar is offered the part-time YMCA job, and gets to work right away, evenings and weekends. He vows to keep it until he finds something more related to his interests. For now it supplements his service corps income.



Staying insured

Because health insurance is so often tied to employment, losing it can be another challenge for the newly graduated corps member. It may be tempting to go without insurance—whether they like it or not, millions of people in the United States lack health care coverage. If you can continue your health insurance in some form, you should seriously consider it. The benefits of having medical insurance can range from paying less for prescription medication and doctor's visits, to protecting yourself against accruing serious debt in case of an accident. With health insurance, you may be more likely to see a doctor for regular checkups and in the earlier stages of an illness, thereby catching problems when they are small and possibly more responsive to treatment.

Action steps

- If you have a health need that requires prescription medicine, you may want to stockpile what you can before you leave your term. Ask the pharmacist or insurance company how soon you can fill your prescription again—it may be every two weeks, for example—and then go back to refill.
- If you are young enough, or still in college part-time, you may be able to seek coverage under your parents' plan.
- Your program may let you pay your own insurance premium through a program called Cobra and thus keep your same or similar insurance after your term ends; look carefully, because you might find cheaper rates on your own if you shop around.
- Another option is to try to get on your state's health plan, if your state offers one, and if you are eligible. Getting enrolled may take a while, so if you have a more immediate health concern, this option may not be ideal. If you are currently living where you'd like to have state health coverage, find out if you can start the enrollment process while you are still in your service program. Your low income probably qualifies you. Other eligibility criteria usually include your age and mental or physical condition. To find out if your state has a public health plan, do an internet search or call your local hospital.
- You may also be able to find health coverage through your college alumni association or professional associations in your field.

Surpassing these challenges

While you are facing a lot of challenges right now, the greatest of these may be that you are forced to focus so much on yourself. For many service corps participants, advocating for other people comes so much more naturally than planning for their own futures. Keep in mind that to help others you need to attend to yourself and that you have achieved great things during your term, stretched your limits, and risen to so many new and unfamiliar occasions with grace and aplomb. If you can learn new skills to benefit your organization's constituents or the students in your school, surely you can master the job search skills you need for, and overcome the complications inherent in, a career transition of this magnitude.

MORE ABOUT HEALTH INSURANCE

To read a brief overview of insurance terms and options, check out this Wikipedia article on "health insurance":

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Health_insurance

If you can't access health insurance, consider researching low-cost health clinics in your area, in case you get sick. To find listings of free or low-cost medical clinics, see <http://freemedicalcamps.com>. Some of these serve only certain populations (HIV patients, for example) so call ahead.



Section three: Translating your experience

For any job search or school admissions process, you've got to learn how to explain your skills and experiences. This discussion focuses first on describing your service corps to hiring managers—people who may have a lot of background knowledge about your specific corps, or very little. Knowing how to succinctly explain the type of service can benefit you in conversation and writing. This section discusses ways to translate your service experience and transferable skills on paper and in person. It goes on to prepare you to handle the unspoken assumptions hiring managers may make about you, assist corps members at mid-career to explain their reasons for participating in the corps, and help corps members who terminated their service early to overcome some of the associated challenges. Finally, the section discusses ways all corps members can successfully negotiate salary and benefits after a job offer.

As a graduating service corps participant, you have an extra challenge: How do you explain your term of service to your network and prospective employers who might not be familiar with the inner workings of your program? No matter how well known your program is, you should never assume that the people you speak with have any specific prior knowledge of it, or even of the concept of long-term, full-time service.

Introducing your service corps

Most nonprofit hiring managers may have heard of Teach For America, Peace Corps, City Year, and some other service corps. They may even have children, family, or friends participating in a program, or they may be alums themselves. They may be confident that they know enough about the program you participated in that they don't need to ask about it. But the truth is, they may not understand the differences between, say, Public Allies and City Year. Or they may not truly understand how and why VSO volunteers serve abroad—or that assignments vary greatly from country to country. Other hiring managers may have no connection to, or background knowledge about, service corps opportunities *at all*. In all of these instances, preparing to translate your term of service is essential. Learn to focus on the transferable skills you built during your term. (See the discussion of frameworks for organizing your skills beginning on page 72.)

When useful, provide a simple explanation of your service corps program, including its mission and method of service. Doing so, you enable your hiring manager to clearly understand the specific strengths of your experience. In addition you'll show that you can speak eloquently about an organization you've been involved with—a trait any employer would relish. If you don't already know how to describe your corps, look at the language used on its website, search for news articles, or ask your program director.



Be prepared to talk about your goals for the future. If you went through the process of discerning your career path—evaluating and reflecting on your experiences, researching opportunities, and talking to people who were doing what you would like to do—you have probably arrived at clear goals for yourself, and a way of describing what you hope to do with the next stage of your life.

You may worry that a hiring manager will be turned off by your affiliation with a service corps. After all, you haven't been a staff member of your host site, but a full-time corps member or stipended volunteer. *Keep in mind that the skills you built during your term are what your prospective employer is really after.* Emphasizing your service affiliation may also serve as a shorthand for letting your employer know that you aren't job-hopping by looking for a new job right now. Finally, your participation in the service program may garner you “network love” if the hiring manager is also an alum, or is a fan of your program.

Translating for the resume and cover letter (or school admissions essay)

How to craft your resume may raise questions for you. Service programs are often considered a form of volunteering, and even if you earned a stipend, you may have been called a “volunteer” throughout your term. You may wonder, will employers take a service term seriously as professional experience? Should you include the name of your service program in your title?

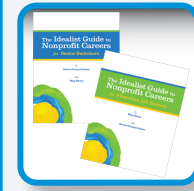
For the resume, it's a good idea to include both your title or role within your host organization as well as your title as a participant in the service corps. For example: “Instructor of College English – Peace Corps Volunteer,” or “Volunteer Coordinator – AmeriCorps Member.”

In the first bullet point, include a brief explanation of your program:

- Designed and launched a volunteer program during a one-year term with a national corps of conservation volunteers.

Likewise, in your cover letter or school admissions essay, include a phrase or brief explanation of your service. For example: “During my time with City Year—a ten-month, urban youth corps that serves children—I developed tutoring, event planning, and cross-cultural communication skills.”

Mentioning your affiliation with your service program, you will help the hiring team understand why your stint in your last “job” was relatively short, you'll help them understand your program, and you may even connect with them as an insider if they are also a service corps alum.



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

The elevator pitch and

other aspects of networking are detailed in **Chapter Four** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch4.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch4.html

Chapter Eight of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF) can help you effectively market your distinct skills.

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch8.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch8.html



This *Companion* doesn't go into detail about all there is to learn about crafting resumes and cover letters, and preparing for your interviews. See Chapters Eight and Nine of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* for these career search details.

Translating your experience for the interview

When it comes time to interview for a position, regardless of how service-savvy the hiring team appears to be, you'll do yourself a favor by proactively describing your service program and experience. You can bring the topic up when you're talking about something you accomplished during the term.

Chapter Nine of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* explains thoroughly how to prepare for the interview. The discussion here addresses only issues of special concern to a transitioning corps member.

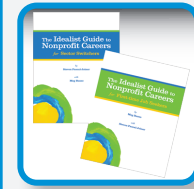
For the interview, adapt your elevator pitch—the brief, oral introduction to your service experience introduced in [Part One](#) of this *Companion*—that you've grown accustomed to using during your term. The short explanation should include:

- Your program's mission or vision
- The length of the term
- The primary method(s) of your service
- Any numerical indicators of success while you were on the job
- Any leadership roles you took on during your term
- Your reasons for serving, and one or two ways your experience has meaningfully changed you
- How the service experience has led to your applying for this job, now.

This could sound like:

"I am just ending a term with Habitat for Humanity's AmeriCorps VISTA program—a year-long opportunity that allowed me to help people buy their own homes. I chose to serve in AmeriCorps because I wanted more than an entry-level job during my first year out of college, and I wanted a team to consult with during that year. After a few months I was selected to join the board of a partner organization. The experience I had training new volunteers—doubling participation in our projects—is the reason I'm so excited to apply for this volunteer manager position."

In *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* you can read about preparing talking points for your interview. Talking points are key ideas you'd like to communicate during the interview, either through the questions you ask, or the information you include in your responses. Clearly explaining your service program can be one category of your



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

For a guide to creating re-

sumes and cover letters (complete with samples), see **Chapter Eight** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch8.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch8.html

Chapter Nine of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF) explains how to prepare for and succeed in an interview.

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch9.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch9.html

Chapter Four of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF) can help you develop a concise and compelling "elevator pitch."

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch4.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch4.html



talking points. Even if your interviewers do not ask you to talk about your term (after all, they might think they know enough about it), make the effort to introduce the topic and clearly identify several specific skills, experiences, or benefits that you have gained from the program.

With regard to talking about the skills you gained during your term of service, Pam Rechel has created a valuable exercise called “Translating your experience into job speak.” Found on pages 73-74 of this *Companion*, the exercise will prepare you for effectively answering almost any question a hiring manager can think to ask you about your past experience. The key is to share concrete anecdotes about your achievements, rather than listing them superficially:

“As the volunteer manager for my organization, I recruited and trained over 700 new volunteers. When I started the program we had few volunteers show up. We didn’t have a marketing plan, or a database for collecting contact information about our new volunteers. I identified the problems and researched ways to overcome them. Within a few months we started to see more volunteer interest, and had systems in place to put them to work. Those volunteers went on to build housing for ten families, and many are still helping us out.”



ACE'S STORY: TRANSLATING EXPERIENCES

Thanks to a scholarship that all participants in his service corps receive, Ace is able to put some money aside for college. It’s a good amount, but it’s not enough to get through an associates degree program, which Ace and his mentor have decided on as a first step for his education. So for now, Ace plans to apprentice with Solar NOLA, a nonprofit that partners with the city of New Orleans to make solar panel installation affordable. Ace knows Rod, the technician who heads the installation team, but his first interview at the organization is with Gail, the human resources manager.

Ace isn’t sure what Gail knows about his service program, which is pretty new. Rod may have explained it to her in detail, or not at all. Ace also doesn’t know if Gail has any background knowledge about national service corps, though many corps have been involved with rebuilding the region in the aftermath of the hurricanes in 2005. Finally, he knows he needs to address his criminal record—and he’s prepared to do so.

He decides to briefly introduce his service corps, and then talk about the skills he’s built. In the interview he offers the salient and unique aspects of his corps: They served full-time for 10 months, he was among 50 corps members, they took classes each Friday on a range of topics related to green construction and

WHAT ARE TRANSFERABLE SKILLS?

The term “transferable skills” is not just jargon. Having developed a skill set in one setting, you can then adapt those skills to a new setting. That’s why, in the nonprofit sector at least, volunteer experience can be as valuable as paid work experience. Ultimately, hiring managers are more interested in the skills you’ve developed, and less so in the setting where you acquired them.

For example, managing volunteers for community service projects helps prepare you to manage event volunteers. Planning and running an awards event during your term of service helps prepare you to coordinate a fundraising event in your next position.

Packing your skills and moving on to a new situation, you will have some new things to learn and challenges to overcome. But have confidence that the skills you gained during your service term are as authentic and valuable as if you’d been paid a salary to develop them. The key to unlocking their value is in how you communicate their transferability to the hiring manager.



ACE'S STORY (CONTINUED)

renovation, and they served Monday through Thursday at sites throughout the city, doing a variety of different tasks.

Ace's new skills include his ability to identify different types of weather damage, familiarity with the range of techniques to thwart their spread, and experience grappling with work atop the variety of roof pitches and styles in New Orleans. This knowledge has allowed him to assess which strategies are most appropriate and cost-effective for different scenarios. By the end of his term, Ace had realized he wanted to learn more about solar installation after working on projects with Rod.

He acknowledges that he was a nonviolent offender in the past, and explains that he didn't understand what his alternatives were at the time. He now has a much clearer sense of how to make a life for himself and his family, and understands better how education can be a powerful influence in a person's life. He knows what happened to his city in 2005, and he wants to be part of rebuilding it.

As he clearly spells out the scope of his skills, experiences, and involvement with his corps, Gail realizes the depth of Ace's knowledge. She likes that his experience in the corps has affirmed his passion for contributing to the community, and that he knows how he wants to continue his personal and professional development.

Some frameworks to help you organize your experiences

The next few pages highlight two frameworks that may prove helpful as you prepare to translate your term. The first is an exercise created by Pam Rechel of Brave Heart Consulting, included on the next two pages of this *Companion*. The idea is to identify your top strengths then prepare an anecdote that illustrates a specific time you employed each strength, including the positive outcomes of your efforts. The exercise prepares you to articulately answer questions during a job or school interview, and to share concrete examples of your past accomplishments.

Practice telling each story ahead of time, if it helps you—but be careful about sounding too rehearsed in an interview. To jog your memory during an interview, bring a typed list of your strengths and a word or phrase that reminds you of the anecdote you'd planned to share, along with information that helps you drive home the impact of your actions.

WORKING WITH A CRIMINAL RECORD

Career transitions with a criminal record bring up special challenges and scenarios. Use your term to work with your service corps program staff and other supporters to practice writing and speaking about your past in a way that is honest and helps you focus on what you have learned from your mistakes. Employers will want to know whether you've accepted responsibility for your actions and changed.

On job application forms that directly ask about your past, always be honest. When the application involves sending in a cover letter and resume, you don't have to use those to explain your history, but it is a good idea to disclose your past before you are offered a job.

Depending on your past offenses, you may find certain lines of employment off-limits. Learn what the limits are so that you don't go through all the hoops of a job application process only to be turned down on technicalities.



Translating your experience into job speak

by Pam Rechel, Brave Heart Consulting, www.braveheartconsulting.com

General competencies – life and work skills

There are many competencies that apply to ALL jobs. These are the competencies that you've been developing through your whole life. You take those skills with you to any job. Sometimes people get "hired for their technical skills... but fired for their general work skills".

To translate your experience into a language that an employer can understand, it is very important to:

- Name the competency or skill
- Give an example of a time when you used or learned the skill
- Identify ways the skill applies to the job you want and to clearly tell the potential employer how you think your skills match with the job requirements. It's up to you to help them connect the dots for them.

Exercise

1. On the competency list (next page), select your top 15 skills. Mark the first ones that jump out at you. Go over the list again to see if you've missed any.
2. Go over the list again and **put a star or two by the top 5 skills**—the ones you think are *the strongest or becoming stronger*. Pick skills you are proud of and want to strengthen even if you're not fabulous yet. By focusing on them, you soon will be fabulous!
3. Begin writing the list of "technical skills", those specific skills that apply to your job. It doesn't mean just computer skills. Examples are: teaching children to prepare for earthquakes; using knowledge of how to apply for college to mentor high school kids; teaching reading to children who don't speak English.
4. For each of the top skills, write down an example of a time when you used the skill. Write about what you did, what you learned, and the impact it had on you and the situation.
5. For each of your skills or competencies, develop at least one example of a specific time when you used the skill. For example, "There was a time last fall when I helped two students resolve a conflict. I did this by...".
6. For every job you want, review the list of competencies and imagine which competencies are required for that job. Think of a time when you displayed that competency. Describe the examples in interviews or in your cover letter.

Good luck!

Idealist.org gratefully acknowledges Pam Rechel of Brave Heart Consulting for allowing us to reprint her "Translating your experience into job speak" exercise, which was originally designed for Life After AmeriCorps Training, June 2006. For more of Pam Rechel's work, please visit www.braveheartconsulting.com



Translating your experience into job speak (page 2)

by Pam Rechel, Brave Heart Consulting, www.braveheartconsulting.com

Competencies

Thinking skills

1. ____ Analyze and solve problems
2. ____ Make sound decisions
3. ____ Make sound recommendations
4. ____ Innovate (create new solutions)

Administration

5. ____ Write project plans
6. ____ Work efficiently
7. ____ Manage programs
8. ____ Manage projects
9. ____ Manage volunteers
10. ____ Recruit volunteers

Leadership

11. ____ Lead a team
12. ____ Demonstrate leadership as a mentor
13. ____ Motivate and inspire others
14. ____ Coach others
15. ____ Adapt to change
16. ____ Lead change

Interpersonal skills

17. ____ Build relationships
18. ____ Manage disagreements and conflict

19. ____ Be a strong team member
20. ____ Create partnerships
21. ____ Engage diverse groups to participate
22. ____ Lead meetings effectively

Communication

23. ____ Speak effectively
24. ____ Listen openly
25. ____ Prepare written communication
26. ____ Make presentations

Motivation

27. ____ Demonstrate drive and commitment

Personal management

28. ____ Act with integrity (take responsibility for personal actions)
29. ____ Demonstrate flexibility
30. ____ Develop yourself (learn new things)
31. ____ Strong sense of self-worth and capabilities
32. ____ Commit to quality (strive to meet a new standard of excellence)
33. ____ Anticipate, recognize, and meet customer needs
34. ____ Overcome difficult challenges
35. ____ Manage crises
36. ____ Maintain a positive attitude in the midst of chaos

Technical competencies that apply to your specific work.

For example: teach children about safety, disaster relief, etc.

- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |

ASSIGNMENT: Select your top 15 competencies—your best skills. Then put stars (**) by the top 5.



In addition to Pam Rechel’s exercise, consider using the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA) framework that federal government job applications often include. A KSA statement is an opportunity for you to write about your knowledge, skills, and abilities related to a specific job function. Whether or not you’re applying for a federal job, using the KSA framework to inventory your qualifications can help you share them with a hiring manager or school. First, find a job announcement that appeals to you—or use one you’ve saved from the Career Tracks Exercise described in [Part One](#). (For school applications, consider the qualities the school says it’s looking for in a candidate.) Identify each skill, requirement, or other required credential mentioned in the announcement. Then, brainstorm the knowledge, skills, and abilities you have related to each qualification you’ve highlighted. In brainstorming your KSA list, include any and all experiences—don’t limit yourself to paid experiences. Research you did in school, summer jobs and internships, volunteer and service corps experiences, hobbies, student clubs, family responsibilities, etc.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA) framework

| Qualification | Knowledge | Skill | Ability |
|---------------|-----------|-------|---------|
| | | | |
| | | | |

See a guide to writing an effective KSA statement from the Partnership for Public Service: www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/programs/calltoserve/toolkit/KSAs.pdf.

What an employer may assume about you as a service corps alum

While you can never be sure what a potential employer’s views of your service program might be, you may encounter some or all of these preconceptions. Some are positive, others are negative. Some of them may in fact be true for you, and others completely false:

- That you were **unsure what you wanted to do** with your life, or you **couldn’t find a “real job”** so you chose a service program to “buy time.” You must be able to explain what drew you to national or international service.
- That you may be **rootless**, and that you **long to get back on the road** as soon as possible—particularly if you’re just getting home from an international service experience. If you are looking for a job in the United States after serving abroad, be clear in the interview why you are ready to be at home, and how you hope to implement new skill sets here.
- That you have developed **skills that may or may not transfer**. For example, some people may think you’ve spent your entire term doing manual labor and

FROM THE FRONT LINES TO A MANAGEMENT POSITION

Idealist.org offers resources that can help you translate your direct service into a career in program or organizational management. Focusing on your transferable skills can move the conversation from your job duties as an educator, construction worker, counselor, etc. to the skills you have that will contribute to your success in a management role. For starters, the article “Sharing your story with the admissions team” (www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/sharingyourstory.html) helps prepare you to talk about the transferable skills you developed as a corps member with graduate admissions or with a hiring manager. *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* also offer support for taking stock of your transferable skills—see **Chapter Three** (www.idealists.org/careerguide).

If required or recommended, more education may be in order. Check out grad schools that offer management degrees—many business schools focus on nonprofit management and corporate social responsibility; specific nonprofit management degree programs exist across the country; and public administration degrees are also very well received in the nonprofit world. Learn more about your grad school options at www.idealists.org/gradschool, or stop by an Idealist **Graduate Degree Fair for the Public Good** in your area (www.idealists.org/gradfairs). Many alternatives to grad school also exist and could be beneficial in your transition, including certification and other types of professional development (see www.idealists.org/en/psgerc/alternatives.html).



fail to see that you had to manage projects, liaise with local partners, and promote your project to local media—in addition to being handy with a hammer and nails. Explain which relevant skills you already have for each position you apply for—in your resume, cover letter, and interview.

- That you are **not on-trend** with your field, or that your **career goals aren't focused**. Especially if your service assignment was not related to the position you are currently applying for, you may find that employers miss the larger value that your service experience has brought you. Be vigilant about translating your experience, and communicating your familiarity with the field as well.
- That you are a **hard worker** and are more **driven by mission than by money**. Your hiring manager may have a very idealized, even unrealistic, image of people who have participated in national or international service. To the extent that the assumption is true, do everything you can to support it with your actions. Passion and enthusiasm go a long way in the hiring process—especially at nonprofit organizations. A downside of this view is that they may expect that you're accustomed to working long hours.
- That you are an **ineffectual dreamer**. Your hiring manager may assume you're a romantic who doesn't know how to actually get anything done. Show that passion and pragmatism aren't mutually exclusive by sharing creative and practical methods you employed to succeed during your term.
- That you are **resourceful** and can **do exceptional things with a small budget**. Most people recognize that service corps members haven't been working with huge budgets. If you have built programs from scratch, or improvised with few resources, be sure to share these stories and skills during the interview.
- That you are **naive, happy, and friendly**. For people who have never participated in a term of service, it may be hard to imagine what you have gone through in the term. You've likely seen and experienced issues—poverty, discrimination, pollution, addiction, natural disasters, etc.—that have forced you to confront your most basic assumptions in life, and to grow tougher and stronger. You may not have turned into a cynic, but you likely have a firmer grasp on reality. It's important to show your hiring manager your astute, grounded self.
- That you are **liberal politically**, or that you **share the same political views as your country of service** (if not the United States). While you should avoid talking about politics during your interview—you do not know and cannot assume the politics of the person hiring you—recognize that you may be seen as a liberal. Although national service enjoys bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress, legislation for Peace Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps all were initiated during Democratic presidential administrations. Your best bet in response to these assumptions—regardless of your personal political views—is to remain staunchly neutral and professional.
- That you are **religious**, or share a similar practice. The interview may or may not be the best time to discuss your faith, depending on the work you're hoping to do. If information about your faith isn't important for the job interview,

DISABILITY AND DISCLOSURES

While some federal laws govern disability accommodations, regulations really vary state by state. If you need accommodations in your workplace, you should make sure you know your state's regulations about what employers are required to provide. Also, be sure to read up on if, when, and how to disclose your disability. For more information on disabilities and accommodations in the workplace, here are some resources that may be useful:

Definition of a disability

www.jobaccess.org/ada_definition.htm

Americans with Disabilities Act

www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/

Handbook of your employment-related rights under the ADA

www.eeoc.gov/facts/jobapplicant.html

Job Accommodation Network

offers articles and resources on a variety of ADA-related topics, searchable by federal, state, local regulations; by disability; by specific legislation; and other criteria. Resources include "Pre-Employment Testing and the ADA", "Health Benefits Plans and the ADA", and many others.

www.jan.wvu.edu/links/

For additional resources on disability accommodations, visit the resource page for Chapter Ten of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers*:

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/ch10resources.html



it's probably best to not mention it, whether or not you share the faith of the program you took part in. Note that you are free to disclose personal information during the interview, but it's difficult to gauge the response—positive or negative—such a disclosure will elicit; also, because of anti-discrimination legislation, it is illegal for the interviewers to initiate the discussion of this topic. Thus, disclosing personal information prior to the job offer can put your hiring manager in an awkward position.

- That you **will accept a lower starting salary** than someone coming from a staff position at another organization. You must do your research to learn what the average salaries are for people in the position you're vying for. If you're offered the job, be prepared to negotiate. Keep reading for insights about negotiating your salary during this transition.

The purpose for listing these is not to frighten you but to make it clear that it's your job to respond to any misconceptions the hiring team may have about what you've been up to during your term of service. Without knowing their assumptions, your best bet is to be proactive in explaining—in writing and in the interview—what your service experience was all about, and how you can transfer the skills you built to help their organization achieve its mission.

Justifying your service participation at mid-career and beyond

If you are at a mid-career point as you end your term of service, you have an extra task. Service corps are definitely pegged as something young people do, so you've got to effectively explain how and why you chose to take a break from a career to do a term of service. Hiring managers will likely assume that you didn't do it for the money.

Help hiring managers understand what led you to your term—whether it was a way to make a transition to public service, because you were drawn by the position description and wanted the support of a cohort during the transition, or because it was an opportunity to work on an issue area you care deeply about. For example:

“I had been volunteering at the organization for several years, so when the funding came through for the AmeriCorps VISTA position, my supervisor encouraged me to apply for it. And I'm glad I did, because I've gained volunteer recruitment and management skills, and I know now that I can develop a program from scratch.”

A truthful explanation will help hiring managers overcome any suspicion they might have about you—especially if you explain how your service has led to applying for the current position.



Service corps are pegged as something young people do, so mid-career participants must explain how and why they chose to take a break from a career.”



Avoid telling negative stories during the interview about what you left behind in your old career by joining the corps. For example, don't kvetch about the corporate grind, or working in a bureaucracy. Instead, talk about what drew you to service in a nonprofit, school, or government agency—for example, a social issue you hoped to tackle, a population you wanted to help, or a new way you wanted to apply the skills you honed in a previous career.



DEENA'S STORY: JUSTIFYING SERVICE

Deena has joined her service corps working on microenterprise development in Ecuador at mid-career, after having run a successful bakery at home in the United States. She has joined the corps because of her interest in micro-lending and because she wants to put her business skills to work helping bring families out of poverty. She wants some field experience before going to graduate school or deciding to leave the baking industry for good.

Deena thinks that her logic will be easy to explain in any job interview, but she wants to make sure she could really tell the story of the passion that inspired her move to Ecuador and that propels her forward in her career.

She writes down all the moments she can think of that have led to her decision:

1. While a nursing student, she made a trip to a developing country to volunteer in a refugee camp which first exposed her to extreme poverty and what she considered “wretched inequality.”
2. More recently, as a Girl Scout Troop leader, she and the troop had a chance to do a service project with Heifer Project International, where they learned that increasing the income of a woman increases the chances for success of her entire family.
3. Finally, as her bakery began to thrive over the years, the initial, exciting challenges of building a business began to wane. She began to question her life's purpose and accomplishments.

All of these impulses ultimately have driven her to research job opportunities and fellowships in micro-lending.

In order to prepare for post-service corps job interviews she chooses to emphasize the story of working with the Girl Scouts. She writes the story out, including the moment one of the girls, Megan, made a comment along the lines of “I never wanted to be a businessperson, but now that I see how business education can help poor families, it makes me want to open a bakery, too, so I can learn the skills to go out and make people's lives better.”

Megan's comment had a profound effect on Deena. It really opened the door to her imagination, to think of her bakery as a means to something much more



DEENA'S STORY (CONTINUED)

meaningful than pastries, bread, and coffee. It inspired in her an impatience to dive in and find a way to test the waters of a career in micro-lending, which led her to discover her service corps.

Once Deena is able to write down the story of her mid-career progression from business owner to international volunteer, she is clear that she can share the story effectively with any hiring manager who asks.



Be proud of what you accomplished during your shortened term. Six months of service is six months of service!”

Translating your early termination during an interview

If you terminated your service commitment early, you may have special concerns about how to talk about your experiences. Keep in mind that your hiring manager may not know how long your service term was intended to be, since terms can range from a few weeks to a few years. As a result, you shouldn't feel overly self-conscious about how or when your term ended. This does not mean you should keep your premature departure a secret from the hiring manager—just that you shouldn't expect a barrage of questions about it.

Among other reasons, if you aren't fully upfront that you terminated your service early, and you do get the job, the truth will probably come out—through conversation with you, or during a reference check with your former supervisor. This will cause mistrust and make people wonder what else you've lied about, and possibly cost you a job.

Here are some ideas on how to discuss your early departure during the application process:

- First and foremost, be proud of what you accomplished during your shortened term of service. Six months of service is six months of service!
- On your resume, accurately represent the start and end dates of your service term, in addition to your job duties and accomplishments relevant to the job you're applying for.
- For the interview, be prepared with a logical, sympathetic explanation of why you left early.
- If you left due to personal reasons, be honest but don't go into detail—"I had to take care of a sick family member," or "My family (or financial) obligations made finishing the term impossible."
- If you left for your own health reasons, laws protect you from having to disclose that. "Personal obligations prevented me from completing the term."
- If the reason you exited early was because you clashed with program or host



agency staff, it will not help your chances for employment to bad-mouth them. It's best to move on. Stick to something honest but tastefully ambiguous like, "I wasn't getting the support I needed to do my best work." You may have to come up with a few examples of support you'd like in the new job—so have those ready, too.

- If you are asked to elaborate further about the reasons you left early, state that you'd much rather share what you learned from your service experience itself, rather than how it ended. Be prepared to talk about what you gained from your shortened term.

Depending on the intensely personal circumstances surrounding your departure, you may feel a sense of regret or you may be perfectly content with your decision. You may still resent people—service corps program staff, or host organization supervisors—who were involved with your service. Whatever your lingering feelings are, the interview is not the place to come to terms with them. Focus on the positive.

If you've left your site early, how do you salvage a good reference?

People who left their service commitment early may be nervous about approaching service corps program staff, team leaders, host agency staff, or community partners to request a reference. Your feelings will naturally depend on the circumstances surrounding your departure.

If you left on fairly good terms, because of something beyond your control—medical issues, family illness, natural disaster—your potential references will probably be sympathetic and willing to offer you a positive reference. See below for ideas on how to ask for one.

If you left on poor terms, you may be right to avoid approaching some or all of the people you worked with during your term. Perhaps you had an unresolved conflict with your direct supervisor, or your supervisor asked you to leave for poor performance. In these cases, you may have still developed a strong relationship with someone else—a team leader or service corps program staff person, or a community partner, for example—who would be able to speak honestly about your good qualities.

Schedule a chat with the people you have in mind, and offer them a copy of your resume, cover letter, and job description. Directly address the issue of your early termination, and offer a quick, benign explanation if the person wasn't privy to that information previously. "I left Peace Corps nine months early because I didn't feel I was doing my best work," or "I ended my term with AmeriCorps before I could complete my 1,700 hours of service because of a medical-related family matter."



Salvaging a reference if you left early... (continued)

Explain your current career objective. Then ask, “Can you give me a good reference?” Hopefully they will be honest with you at this point. If you think they can’t give you a good reference, ask someone else. Employers and school admissions staff are so accustomed to positive recommendations that a sour letter of reference may kill your chances. A reference letter can have some honest discussion of a weakness—you just want to avoid submitting a negative letter.

See page 143 in Chapter Eight of the *Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for Sector Switchers* (www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch8.html) for tips about dealing with “burned bridges” in your job application process. That discussion offers advice on how to talk about past professional experiences that ended poorly.

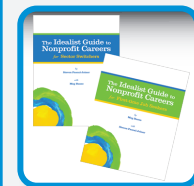
Translating your experience as part of the salary negotiation

Negotiating your salary may bring up so much anxiety that you feel like skipping it for now. But that would be a mistake. This discussion touches on the challenges you may face negotiating your starting salary in a new—and possibly first—professional position. It also offers encouragement to go ahead and ask for what you are worth. Before reading this section, you will benefit from reading Chapter Ten of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers*.

In your position as a recent service participant, you may feel especially defenseless in negotiating a salary. People often point to their previous salary as way to ask a new employer for a salary they deserve. Because your “previous salary” was a basic living stipend, you may feel at a disadvantage in salary talks.

The remedy is to find out what your skills are worth. While you may not be able to use your immediate previous salary as leverage in negotiations, you can still find out what the market rate is for your many skill sets. (And you can point to past accomplishments that prove you will be an asset to the team you are about to join—have this list handy so that you don’t have to memorize the points to make.)

It’s important to negotiate a salary that will work for you in the long run—not just one that seems impressive now because it’s \$10,000 or \$15,000 more than what you’ve been earning as a corps member. You will know the offer is fair by making sure that the salary is competitive with those for similar positions in your region.



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

Chapter Ten of *The Ideal-*

ist Guides to Nonprofit Careers (free PDF) discusses negotiating your compensation package and explores benefits. If you have little or no paid work experience, it’s recommended to read the First-time Job Seekers version.

First-time Job Seekers version
www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch10.html

Sector Switchers version
www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch10.html



Be realistic about nonprofit and government salaries in your area. If you entered your service corps at mid-career or beyond, and you are used to working in the business world, you may need to recalibrate salary ranges if you're now aiming to work in the nonprofit sector.

Chapter Ten of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* includes suggested language you can use when asking for more money. It also reminds you that while salary is important, you should also consider the entirety of the compensation package, including the benefits, vacation time, options for flexible schedules, and so on.

It's what you deserve, never what you need

Employers don't care about your car payment or how much you have to pay in rent. It doesn't matter how little your stipend was or how high your student loans are—salaries aren't determined by what you need. Instead, be prepared to speak to why you deserve and are worth a better offer based on your specific skills, qualifications, commitment to the issue, or experience. These factors are what will allow an employer to recognize the value you'll bring to their organization or company, and why you're worth a higher salary.

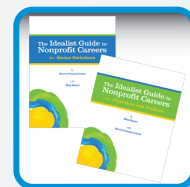
A good resource for figuring out your financial health if you're earlier in your career is the free PDF booklet by the National Endowment for Financial Education and Idealist.org called *Making a Difference: A Guide to Personal Profit in a Nonprofit World* (www.idealists.org/en/career/financialadvice.html).

Your starting salary is the basis for future raises, so it's worth it to view your long-term financial health when you are negotiating it. Your current expenses may be low because you've had to live simply. But now it may be time to consider financial goals like investing in a house and starting a family—even retirement, no matter your age.

BEFORE YOU ACCEPT OR DECLINE AN OFFER...

Before you accept or decline an offer, here are a few things to take into account:

- Don't get caught up in the moment
- Be sure to consider organizational fit
- Recognize that salary is only one component of the compensation package
- Make sure you understand all of the details of the job offer... including benefits
- Don't forget to negotiate—carefully



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

For advice on research-

ing salaries, see **Chapter Three** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version
www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch3.html

Sector Switchers version
www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch3.html

Read **Chapter Ten** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF) for tips on negotiating your compensation package.

First-time Job Seekers version
www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch10.html

Sector Switchers version
www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch10.html



Section four: Other options for your next steps

The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers and this *Companion* have both primarily focused on helping you move from your term of service into a nonprofit staff position. As you know, other options may be on the table; a few of these are spelled out below, including committing to a second term of service, considering careers in government or business, furthering your education, and starting your own nonprofit or social enterprise.

Committing to a second term of service

Doing a second (or third) term of service is a great idea for some people. Before committing, examine your reasons—what are you hoping to achieve in another term?

Reasons to consider a second term

You shouldn't commit to second term of service lightly (for example, to avoid undertaking a job search). That said, many corps members who serve a second term do offer solid justifications for their decision. Here are some:

- **Ditto.** You sign on for a second term for all the intentional reasons you signed on for the first one.
- **Continued learning and leadership.** Your second term may give you a chance to deepen your knowledge and serve as a leader among your fellow corps members.
- **Ties to your community.** You've built meaningful relationships in your community this year and you want to continue investing in them.
- **Responsibility for your project.** You want to build on, or finish, what you've started. If you started a new program during your first year, you may want to spend more time establishing it, especially if your organization has no funding to pay a salaried staff person to take over your work.
- **Acting on your new knowledge.** Doing a second term gives you a chance to apply all the lessons you learned during your first term.
- **Curiosity.** Trying a new service corps, or serving in a new place, can teach you about new places, people, roles, systems, organizations, and issues.
- **Good, clean fun.** You may have had so much fun in your first term that you want to do it all again.
- **First-hand experience.** You participated in one service corps, learned a lot about the way things really work and about yourself, and now you want to want to try another service corps.



Many corps members who serve a second term have solid justifications for their decision.”

ON SERVING AGAIN

I decided to serve a second term in City Year because I was excited about the opportunity to help launch a new site in a new city. It took a lot of soul-searching because I didn't want to have a repeat of the year I'd just had. In the end, though, I decided serving in a different location, with different people and in a leadership role, would be a great experience. And it was—serving in a new city made the experience unique, and I didn't regret my decision to do a second term at all.

—Hannah Kane, former two-term City Year corps member and Senior Project Manager, Website and Multimedia Production, Idealist.org



Most programs allow you to serve a second (and even a third, or seventh) term of service. Your options may include:

- Signing on with your same service corps, to serve again at your same organization, school, or agency.
- Signing on with your same corps, to serve as a team leader.
- Signing on with your same service corps but serving at a new organization, or even in a new city or country.
- Joining a completely different service corps (while serving in the same or a new city or country).

To discover new corps to explore, take a look at the Corps and Coalition sidebar on The New Service blog (www.idealists.org/thenewservice). Coming soon you'll find a directory of service corps on Idealist.org (www.idealists.org/service).

If you are considering committing to another term with your own corps, find out the specific rules of eligibility from your program director.

Also be aware that if further education is on the horizon for you—if you plan to serve with a program like AmeriCorps VISTA, where you can't be enrolled in school during your term of service—make sure start dates for your target academic programs do not overlap with your service term. Other service corps may not have an explicit prohibition against being in school during the service term, but your schedule and your location during your service term may prevent you from enrolling. Look ahead to these potential conflicts before signing on a second time.

Note that you can only earn two Education Awards from AmeriCorps (no matter the amount of either award), so that if you have already participated in a summer program and earned one Education Award of \$1,000, and then served in a year-long program where you earned a second full Education Award, you are not eligible for further Awards.

Finding a position in the government sector

Some things you may not have known about working for the government: Almost every job that exists in the private sector (nonprofit or for-profit) also exists in the public sector. And three times more people work for local and state governments than for the federal government. Also, more federal jobs exist outside of Washington, DC than within it.

People interested in social impact careers are often motivated more by mission and



Almost every job that exists in the private sector exists in the public sector.”



issue than by sector, and at the same time, public-private partnerships continue to blur the lines that traditionally distinguished sectors. Because of this you may want to explore job openings in the government sector in addition to the nonprofit sector.

During the first year after finishing their service term, Returned Peace Corps Volunteers and former AmeriCorps VISTA have “noncompetitive eligibility” for one year when applying for jobs in the federal government. Noncompetitive eligibility status means you can apply for federal jobs posted with a special status (“noncompetitive appointment eligibility”) in addition to federal jobs that are open to the public. If you were hired, you’d also be able to use your year or two of volunteer service toward calculating your benefits like retirement and vacation time.

Differences between public and nonprofit sectors

The nonprofit sector taken as a whole lacks an overarching, unifying hierarchy—there is no map of leadership that incorporates the entire sector from the top down. In terms of organizational variety and issue areas, the nonprofit sector is nearly infinite.

Governments, however, are often chartable and full of hierarchies. An elected leader appoints the head of a department; the department oversees that agency; and so on. You can see all the offices of a government in a list. Although sometimes sprawling, a government often operates like a single organism.

Nonprofits are independent and can rise up to fill in the gaps left by corporations and governments. Nonprofits also don’t have to make programmatic or financial decisions based on majority rule, although many nonprofits must comply with regulations that stipulate that their work serves some public benefit.

Governments, however, provide services according to the rules established by city councils and legislatures, and spend money in ways determined by politicians and taxpayers. On a related financial note, nonprofits don’t necessarily have pay grades; governments commonly do.

To begin exploring a public sector career, look at the structure of the government system you’re interested in joining. For example, if you aim to work in your city’s government, find a listing of its structure and agencies online. What bureaus, councils, offices, and boards does it have? What do all of these terms mean for your locale?

Pay attention to the titles people have—what’s comparable to the role you have been playing or have the skills to tackle? Consider the issue areas the agencies focus on—what issues overlap with your professional mission?

Brainstorm people you know who work for local government—or anyone they

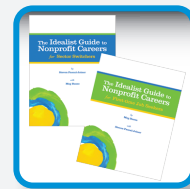
GETTING STARTED LOOKING FOR A FEDERAL JOB

The **Partnership for Public Service** is an organization that inspires new generations to work in the federal government. They publish guides to entry- and senior-level government careers; sponsor events and regional speakers bureaus; and connect college campuses to federal agencies. Learn more about federal government careers at their website.

www.ourpublicservice.org

Also the official job-posting website of the federal government is **USAJOBS.gov**:

www.usajobs.gov



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

For a deeper discussion

of the differences between the nonprofit, for-profit, and government sectors, see **Chapter One** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch1.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch1.html



might know who does. Start building your professional network through informational interviewing.

As you chat with people who work in government, notice the language they use. What terms seem new to you, what acronyms are bandied about, and where do they suggest you look for more information? Websites such as www.acronymfinder.com can help you decode acronyms that you come across.

Finding a position in the business sector

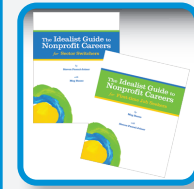
Much of the advice in this *Companion* as well as in *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* is applicable to finding a job in the business sector, too. For instance, building relationships, understanding what role you'd like to play and what type of enterprise you'd like to work for, learning the lingo of the sector, and building the skills and credentials to be taken seriously by a hiring manager are all relevant.

Differences also exist. While many businesses articulate their mission statements, their missions may or may not be centered on creating change on social or environmental issues.

Traditionally, the bottom line of a business is to make a profit, which is another difference from the nonprofit and government sectors. Increasingly businesses talk about other bottom lines, like their company's environmental impact and social responsibility. If you were drawn to service because of the positive impact you could have in your community, businesses that emphasize more than profit may be up your alley. For example, social enterprises—businesses where the core activities aim to enhance the public good—use profits to fuel the growth of public services or spread problem-solving technologies, in addition to accumulating personal wealth.

Responding to demand among customers and employees, more corporations are developing community involvement programs. As a former corps member, you may stand out particularly well in competition for some corporate jobs such as connecting staff with volunteer opportunities, working in the corporation's foundation, or developing a company's efforts to green its business practices.

Other business sector opportunities might appeal to you simply because of the impressive salary and comprehensive benefits—things you have been missing as a corps member. If you take a corporate position that allows it, find ways to incorporate sustainability or a triple bottom line approach into your daily work. With the limited number of business positions that are specifically geared toward sustainability, corporate social responsibility (CSR), community relations, or other socially beneficial



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

You can learn more about

how nonprofit hiring practices differ from those of the for-profit and government sectors by reading **Chapter Twelve** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch12.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch12.html

Chapter Thirteen of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF) deals with some of the common misconceptions about nonprofit work—including some that you (or your potential employer) may hold.

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch13.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch13.html



outlets, finding a way to incorporate these values into your daily work will highlight you as innovative, committed to a cause, and self-starting.

If you land a corporate job that does not offer you an outlet for contributing to your community, other ways to stay civically engaged outside the office include volunteering for a nonprofit, serving on the committee of a nonprofit board, or serving on the board itself. Many companies encourage their employees to sit on local nonprofit boards, because it's a positive form of community involvement as well as a good business strategy. Before agreeing to join a board, research the financial, legal, and time commitments of board service.

Further education

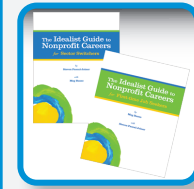
As your term ends you might be enthusiastic about the doors that would open if you had higher credentials—your GED, certification, an undergraduate or graduate degree. Chapter Five of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* offers an overview of various educational options. Idealist.org's Public Service Graduate Education Resource Center (www.idealism.org/gradschool) also offers support for people considering graduate school.

In case you are tempted to explore grad school as a way to avoid the job search, check out these articles on both bad (www.idealism.org/en/psgerc/badreasons.html) and good (www.idealism.org/en/psgerc/goodreasons.html) reasons for going to grad school.

Starting your own nonprofit or social enterprise

Based on your service corps and other experiences, you might be inspired to tackle social problems in a way that requires starting a whole new organization or business. For resources (and warnings) around starting a new nonprofit, take a look at Chapter Fourteen of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers*.

Learn more about starting your own social enterprise—a nonprofit or a business with equal emphasis on both transformative societal change and financial sustainability—through resources like the Skoll Foundation (www.skollfoundation.org), Echoing Green (www.echoinggreen.org), and the Ashoka Changemakers community (www.changemakers.com).



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

Chapter Five of *The Idealist*

Guides to Nonprofit Careers (free PDF) contains discussions of both board service and further education (among other topics) as ways to strengthen your candidacy for your chosen career.

First-time Job Seekers version
www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch5.html

Sector Switchers version
www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch5.html

If you're considering founding your own nonprofit organization, **Chapter Fourteen** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF) is a must-read. It contains advice while also explaining the major first steps in the process.

First-time Job Seekers version
www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch14.html

Sector Switchers version
www.idealism.org/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch14.html

MORE WAYS TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD

For many more ideas on how to make a positive impact in your community, check out **The Idealist.org Handbook to Building a Better World**, from Idealist.org and Stephanie Land, published by Penguin Books.

www.idealism.org/handbook



Playing catch-up: Networking, building skills, and documenting your service post-service

What if you have found this book after your term of service? What if you are already making the transition, but you weren't very conscientious about building your network or skills during your term, and you didn't document your service accomplishments?

Shore up your network: Even if you didn't go out of your way to meet community members during your term of service, you likely came into contact with community leaders regularly, through collaborating with other groups to make your project a success, meeting with visitors at your office, or participating in community events. Take stock of these people and set up informational interviews with them (see Chapter Four of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers*), reminding them of who you are and how you met.

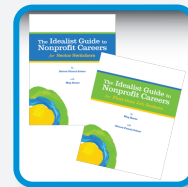
Inventory your skills: Unless you entered your term of service with all the experience you needed for it, you probably learned how to do things you had never done before. Brainstorm your skills and prepare to talk about them. See these resources:

- *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers*
 - * Chapter Eight, "Resume Worksheet" activity (p. 142 of First-time Job Seekers version and p. 146 of Sector Switchers version)
 - * Chapter Three, "Clarifying Your Greatest Skills" activity (pp. 43-44 of First-time Job Seekers version and pp. 47-48 of Sector Switchers version)
- "Sharing your story" article in the Public Service Graduate Education Resource Center (www.idealistservice.com/en/psgerc/sharingyourstory.html)
- "Translating your experience into job speak" activity by Pam Rechel (see pages 73-74 of this Part of this *Companion*)

Document service that's already completed: Your biggest challenge may be accessing the computer you used during your service term, if you didn't otherwise save copies of writing samples, photographs, emails, grant proposals or reports, statistics, and other artifacts that could be useful documentation of your term. If possible, ask your service site if you can stop by to pull some documents off the hard drive, or if you have moved far away, if someone can email you specific files.

If part of your service was to make a project sustainable, you may have created a binder or guidebook for the staff, or the next corps member after you. Ask if you can borrow that resource and photocopy it. (In itself, that would serve as a great work sample.)

Finally, connect with fellow corps members or community partners who may have documented projects that you worked on jointly. Websites like Flickr make it easy to share photographs that work well in a professional portfolio.



TIE-IN WITH THE IDEALIST GUIDES

Chapter Four of *The Idealist*

Guides to Nonprofit Careers (free PDF) covers many aspects of professional networking—including informational interviewing.

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealistservice.com/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch4.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealistservice.com/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch4.html

The "Resume Worksheet" activity referred to in the "Playing catch-up" text box is in **Chapter Eight** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealistservice.com/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch8.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealistservice.com/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch8.html

The "Clarifying Your Greatest Skills" activity is in **Chapter Three** of *The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers* (free PDF).

First-time Job Seekers version

www.idealistservice.com/en/career/guide/firsttime/ch3.html

Sector Switchers version

www.idealistservice.com/en/career/guide/sectorswitcher/ch3.html



Conclusion

Your career transition poses great challenges—but you’ve overcome challenges before. Can you muster the same passion to advocate for yourself the way you’ve advocated for the people or causes you’ve been serving? Have you created a network that would go to bat for you, if you asked? Have you learned the lessons of living with little money? Can you sell your service corps experience well? The answer is yes!

Your career transition presents many uncertainties, but what’s perfectly clear is that you have risen to meet all the same struggles during your term, and you’ve succeeded. As you move on to your next steps, you take with you the experiences accumulated during your service term. The skills and relationships you’ve built will stay with you and continue to support your work.



SUMMARY

As your term of service comes to an end and you begin to transition to your next steps, bear in mind that the experience you've gained during your term will be invaluable and enduring.

If the thought of shifting to a new stage of your life is daunting, **draw motivation and courage** (pages 51-52) from the fact that you've already been successful at dealing with a range of experiences during your term. Activate the network you've assembled and dive in—you can do this.

Given the unique experience you've had in your service corps, you may also face some **unique challenges in your transition** (pages 53-67). These can range from insecurity about the best way to market yourself to hiring managers or the right jobs to pursue, to complicated decisions about whether to complete your term or leave early to take up an offer, to worries about staying afloat financially or maintaining access to health care. But don't fret: there's tailored advice to help you navigate any of these concerns right here in these pages.

A major aspect of the transition from service corps to career (or other options) is **translating your experience** (pages 68-82). It's crucial to spend time refining how you go about conveying the value of your term of service—what you've learned and accomplished, how you've made an impact and developed skills. Since you can't assume that other people will immediately grasp the complexity or nuances of your service corps experience by name alone, be prepared to emphasize the transferable skills you've obtained when you interact with potential employers, university admissions staff, and other people who can connect you with your next steps.

While much of this book emphasizes transitions to nonprofit work, we recognize that there are **other options** (pages 83-87) you may choose to pursue, whether that's enrolling in another term of service, exploring work in the government or for-profit sectors, looking to further your education, or perhaps starting your own organization to tackle a cause that matters to you.

You are here

- This is **Part Two**. The entire book is available free of charge at www.idealists.org/servicecompanion.

About Action Without Borders, Idealist.org, and this book

Action Without Borders is a nonprofit organization founded in 1995 with offices in the United States and Argentina. Idealist.org, a project of Action Without Borders, is an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, find opportunities and supporters, and turn their good intentions into action.

Service Corps to Social Impact Career – A Companion to The Idealist Guides to Nonprofit Careers by Amy Potthast is a product of Action Without Borders' Careers and Service Team based in Portland, OR. This team works to support individuals and organizations with graduate education options; HR and volunteer management resources; and job, internship, and domestic and global volunteer opportunities. Published in 2009 by Action Without Borders.



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