

AmeriCorps Training Panel Discussion | Entering the Workforce After AmeriCorps

Moderated and transcribed by Ryan Verstraete, VISTA Leader 2017-18

The CEDAM AmeriCorps members periodically pause from their regular service work around Michigan to attend supplemental trainings in Lansing hosted by CEDAM staff. Halfway through their term, members are starting to think about what's next after their service year ends in just a few months. At the February 15, 2018 training, members heard from AmeriCorps alumni and community economic development professionals on how to effectively navigate their professional lives after AmeriCorps. The following is a transcript of the career-building panel.

The following people participated in the panel:

- Kirsten Elliott, CEDAM Board Member, Vice President of Development for Community Housing Network;
- Jason Paulateer, CEDAM Board Member, Vice President and Market Manager of Community Development, PNC Bank (Jason joined the panel digitally);
- Jennifer McNeely, AmeriCorps Alum, Wife of 15 years, Mother of 5;
- Sydney Glasscoe, Employment & Classification Specialist in Human Resources at Lansing Community College;
- Shannon Simons, Data & Technology Coordinator at Habitat for Humanity of Michigan;
- Ben Dowd, Controller at CEDAM

Many people use AmeriCorps as a kickoff for a career or job placement. What tips do you have for people looking for jobs in new fields?

Jennifer McNeely: My boss at the Ingham County Treasurer's Office said that the experience managing community resources and VITA program experience was one of the biggest reasons for getting hired. This goes back to the previous session lessons of not hiding your service and ensuring that you have a good story of your service. I found my way to the job through the AmeriCorps page, so be aware of social media and the opportunities it can present for jobs.

Shannon Simons: There is a limited community of people who serve on boards. Generally, people serve on multiple boards, so get to know your board members. They are prominent people and you can network through them.

Kirsten Elliott: Be kind to everybody you talk to and meet. This is not exclusive to board members, but includes the community members and clients that you work with in your Show Me The Money Day events. Always be professional and return your emails because people remember nice people. When you're talking about your skills, learn how to speak about your transferable skills through stories. Be nice!

Ben Dowd: Be as involved as you possibly can in your board and in your community. Get to know the people. I look at my recent career change into the nonprofit world, and it happened because I've met people through serving on a board. You never know if three or four years down the road something comes up and you are the person that someone turns to for filling a position.

Sydney Glasscoe: Know your skills and when you're looking for jobs you need to think outside of the box. You might have an idea of what jobs you want, but stretch the box and look for jobs that will stretch you a bit outside of your boundaries. Those jobs may be the ones that are the best for you and could push you to grow.

Jason Paulateer: In terms of searching for employment, it's important that you do two things. One is to activate the power of your network. We all have networks that we may not be using as well as we could, either through social media or physical network. The second thing is to not be afraid of trying something different from what you are currently doing or have studied. Volunteer service for organizations gives experience that you would not have ordinarily gotten.

SS: You [AmeriCorps members] are in a unique position in your organization where you can get invited to certain things: board meetings, strategic planning sessions, etc. Even though it is not specifically something that you are there for, my supervisor brought me under her wing to these meetings. Show up early to board meetings or strategic planning sessions because when people are sitting and waiting for the meeting to start you can get a lot of meaningful personal conversations within that window before the meeting starts.

KE: Know that when you are job seeking you're not groveling for a job: it is a partnership. Your employer is going to want you as much as you want them, so when you're going and looking for a job, you have the ability to say no to organization. Interviews are a good time for you to see what will and what will not work for you in the position. You don't want to work somewhere that is not going to work for you, or have the boss that will not be a good fit for you. It's a two-way street so keep that in mind. It gives you a sense of empowerment, that you're interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you.

SG: Working in Human Resources, it really impresses the search committees when they get really good questions that make them stop to think. That makes them notice the people who are seriously interested in the position.

This is a good segue to the next prompt: interviewing insights. Easily the most important part of landing a job, interviews can be very intimidating. What do you recommend for good interviewing tips?

JP: One of the primary [things] that I learned as a very young man from my father is that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. First impressions are key for an interview. If you're interviewing for a bank, it is not a good idea to show up wearing a t-shirt. If you're interviewing for a construction job, it may not be a good idea to show up wearing a formal suit.

JM: Answer the questions that you are asked. Don't skirt around the question, and prepare yourselves for interview questions ahead of time by looking things up online. Don't be afraid to take a few seconds to repeat the question to be clear about the answer that you want to provide. My boss gets irritated when people dance around the question, so ask specific questions about the company's culture and how they treat their employees. I am anti-gossip, so I want to make sure going into a place that I will be comfortable there.

SS: People love a good story, so think of the stories that showcase your transferable skills from AmeriCorps. Have these stories ready for when they ask you to "Talk about a time when..."

KE: When I'm interviewing folks for my department, I'm assessing whether or not they are a good fit into the organization as a whole. I care about your skills, but that's not the most important thing to me. I want to know if you are going to fit in to the rest of the department. I'm trying to have more of a conversation, and I've been in interviews where I can't get the people to talk: they will say "yes", "no" or "I don't know". Relax and be yourself: it's okay to be nervous! Be ready to answer questions about yourself, such as what you do for stress relief or what you do in your free time. Interviewers are trying to learn about who you are as a person, since you are going to be spending a lot of time together.

SG: It's important to prepare a little statement that highlights all of your skills and how it applies into the position. Almost always at the end of the interview it will be asked if there is anything that you want to mention and I hate in interviews when someone says no because that is your time to shine and to show us that you are the best for this position. Do your preparation work!

JM: You can be bold too! Ask this question: "Is there anything about my resume or my experience that would prevent you from hiring me for this position?" They may answer you honestly and offer you a chance to respond or it may give you good insight to experiences that you may need to grow upon if you're trying to move into somewhere specific. I've asked it every interview and it provides good feedback.

KE: When you're researching a nonprofit, look at their financials. These will be public with their 990's, and you should try to know where their funding is coming from. Ask questions about where their funding is from, how stable it is, if they expect any changes in the future, etc. This tells you longevity with the organization, it's safe not to assume that they are sitting pretty.

SS: I try to look at job turnover. If you see an organization with 15 positions posted, ask yourself why. Do they look like they're they having a large period of growth and looking to expand, or are they having a lot of turnover?

KE: Ask the person interviewing how long they have been there, what they like and dislike about it.

Audience question: Would that be offensive to a company to ask about finances?

KE: If asking about finance is offensive, you don't want to work there. Anybody should be able to talk about their organization's financial position honestly. If somebody asks about that in their interview it shows me that the person is a creative thinker and sees the broad picture.

Rachel Diskin: Working for a nonprofit, I know that my funding is never completely secure. I am not guaranteed a job in the future. If someone who is not familiar with nonprofit funding wasn't told things like that going in, that would be a huge deal for them.

BD: If you have an opportunity to practice with someone, practice interviewing. I've had people who come to interviews shaking. I'm a pretty easy person to talk to, but when someone is super nervous coming into the interview it takes time to calm down and get to the conversation. If you're a person who gets worked up, you should practice. A mentor is a great person to do a mock interview with you. In your AmeriCorps program alone you will cross these people who can help you. Another piece of that is that I often make decisions on if someone holds themselves confidently. Sometimes it is redeemable, but first impressions are very important. Be confident making your initial approach, since that shows a lot of character.

JM: Learn how to properly shake somebody's hand, since a strong handshake is a representation of your confidence and pride in yourself. Regarding financials, I was hired for a position and five months after moving my family the funding was eliminated and therefore so was the program. Financial stability of a program is something to be very aware of.

KE: I have dyslexia. I know that that causes problems with spelling and proofreading, much more so when I got my job. I was upfront about that during the interview when people asked about obstacles or weaknesses, and shared that sometimes I need help with those things. I knew my solutions and I knew the help that I needed to have success. It took me a long time to get to that point where I could be as open, but if you are able please be

honest and open. You don't want to get in to the position and pretend that a major challenge is not there. It is no big deal, it is a part of hiring a new person.

When interviewers ask about challenges, I usually say my age since I am young and fresh out of college. What are good acceptable challenges to say?

SS: Coming out of college, I was thinking about team projects that I've had to do. You can look inside of your work history, school, AmeriCorps, volunteer and other experiences for challenging situations and ways that you have come through them.

KE: I think you have to know yourself and know what the things that cause you more effort than others. Think of it that way: are you super shy and it's hard for you to open network? Maybe you're really awesome with people and networking, but leaving me alone in a room will cause me trouble with productivity. Understand how you work best and what makes you work not-best. Those are your challenges.

JM: Relatable challenges! Sometimes I will not process completely in my brain and things will just fly out of my mouth. That's a relatable experience that causes humor in an interview. I talk about how over 12 years of experience, mentors have helped me learn how to deal with and control those behaviors. Relatable challenges are a good way to have good conversations.

(Audience Member): I'll offer challenges and then solutions. So if I'm having a hard time with organizing, I'll explain that I use a planner. Always try to have a solution to challenges you have.

What is your advice for negotiating salary in an interview, knowing that nonprofit fundraising is fluid?

KE: For sure negotiate your salary. Understand the limitations of nonprofits and think of not just your financial compensation but also your paid time off, your healthcare, your 401k, disability benefits and the whole package. A nonprofit may not be able to pay the same as a for-profit, but I get a ton of vacation time compared to my for-profit companions. I would not negotiate salary at your first interview, since you won't even know if they like you or not. I would bring it up in a second interview, when you're invited back because they are interested in you. I'm always put off when people bring it up in the first interview.

JM: Acknowledge the time that you have to put into the position. At the boy scouts, it was expected to work above 50-hour weeks during recruiting season, and when we broke it down by salary it was \$0.17 an hour. Ask that question of: "Is this a straight 40 hour a week or are we expected to work overtime and weekends?"

SS: Do your research with knowing what the position is worth. Understand the complexity of the job, especially since people in nonprofits wear a lot of hats. Be considerate of if this is actually three jobs that you are applying for.

KE: The Michigan Nonprofit Association has a salary review of all different types of jobs in the sector. You will be able to know the highs and lows to expect with these positions.

How long do you work someplace before asking for a raise? Is a year appropriate?

SS: I have a yearly review with a cost of living adjustment, but if a position or responsibilities change then you should renegotiate a bit.

JM: Know how reviews work, since that is naturally when pay changes.

KE: In that second interview, it is a good practice to ask: “How do you handle reviews and compensation increases? What is the room for growth in the organization?”

BD: I just recently had an experience while in the banking world. Compensation increases aren't just given. I'd had conversations with people who say that they've been in their position for a year, and I want to know how they are doing in the position. If you're showing up to work and that's all that you're doing, there's not really a deserved increase. Increases are earned, not necessarily given. Some places have a cost-of-living increase, but not all do. Know that you're doing well and that it is appropriate to ask for a raise. I caution you against putting yourself in situations where you look silly by asking for a raise and having your supervisor wonder what you did to deserve a raise.

JM: It comes to your transferable skills and keeping track of experiences as you go and not when you are finished. Log your successes, and maybe log how you overcome failures.

SS: That's not just for this year, that's a lifelong career thing to keep track of milestones and your value to the company.

Rachel Diskin: Don't devalue yourself because you're an AmeriCorps member. People will ask about your salary history and you're going to have to explain the stipend, but make sure that they know that it is not a salary and that you are being compensated for serving and giving back to your community. Making 12k a year does not make you unwilling to be paid for what you're worth. You are all wearing so many hats and carrying responsibilities that you have more than most people's entry level jobs. Don't let host sites strong-arm you into not making the money that you deserve.

JM: I frame it as a “stipend for a period of service to a nonprofit organization”. A stipend is viewed totally different than a salary.

Can you be too confident in an interview?

BD: There's a difference between confidence and overconfidence. I've had people come in who have had the perfect answer for every question, and I just don't believe them. There's a level of confidence in body language and verbal communication, but overconfidence is unattractive in an interview.

KE: Does anybody watch Survivor? There are the people who think they're going to win and are all talk, and you can tell when people walk into an interview with that attitude. Just be authentic and humble, It's alright if you don't know an answer, but you can talk about something similar.

(Audience Member): Adding to that, a lot of employers look for people who are trainable. You don't want to come off as overconfident because they don't want someone who knows it all, they want to know that you are still willing to learn and that will make you a better fit. You should show that you don't know something but are willing to learn.

JM: Companies will take a risk on someone with strong soft skills. If you look them in the eye, present well, etc. If you don't have the skills necessary to just jump in, they are usually willing to train on the duties as long as they can trust the soft skills of the person.

KE: That's a nice transfer into transferable skills. The last hire I did was a 22 year old who was just graduating with an English Degree, somebody who we wouldn't expect to go into community development. During the interview, she demonstrated the ability and willingness to learn and think critically and creatively. I hired her as a development assistant even though she doesn't know grant-writing, GIS, real estate development, but she has all

of the pieces that make her good to train. She's running our homeownership program and has been with us for almost a year and she is awesome.

What skills have stood out in exceptional interviews that should be showcased by AmeriCorps members? Follow-up: how do you sell your transferable skills without being overconfident?

KE: The only reason I got my job was because I could articulate what my transferable skills were. When I got my job, I was literally running the ceramic department at Wayne State University and I was a vegan chef before that. I have an 8-year-old with a disability, and we had been traveling back and forth to Europe for therapy treatment. I wrote down all of those things, identified my transferable skills, and said that I'd done fundraising, had won travel grants and had pulled together a quasi-portfolio from different life experiences. They were looking for someone who was not from within the system so that they could be a trainable employee. You all are very worried about being overconfident. That's interesting.

BD: Being able to take skills and give specific examples is a good way to avoid coming off as cocky. When I interview, I'll ask questions and I want specific stories of when this worked for you. You won't always have an exact story, but in an interview we want to know if you understand what we are asking and explain what that means to you. Taking all of the experiences and your portfolio of prepared items is the best way to showcase what you've learned through your answers.

Audience question: If you misunderstand an interview question, is there recovery from that?

KE: Oh yeah! What I do in an interview is that after I respond I will ask if that answered the question. If they say no, I can apologize and respond. It's about the thinking, where interviewers are assessing your thinking process. The way you interpret a question may give good information. Interviewers don't always ask the best questions, just like how occasionally you get grant questions that are easy to misinterpret. Just ask if it answers the question!

SG: At LCC, we encourage our search committees to prompt the interviewees if the questions are not directly answered. A lot of times we will have to repeat a prompt or question in a different way to guide you to the answer that they want. Always check in if there is something that you miss! I encourage people when you're in an interview to jot notes down. That's not rude and it is showing me that you really want to answer a question.

JM: If you get nailed with a two-part question, you could answer the first question but then forget what the second question was so that is excellent advice to keep in the notes.

KE: If you feel like the people who are interviewing you are trying to pull a "gotcha", then you don't want to work there. As a person, you may think it may be the best place ever to work, but if you get a bad vibe or the receptionist is bad, that is something to think about.

What would be the best ways to identify potentially toxic workplaces during an interview?

KE: Everybody will have a different meaning of what toxic is to them. Jennifer doesn't want to work in a place with a lot of gossip. I don't want to work at a place where I'll be micromanaged and they will be watching my time clock. High turnover is super telling. A place for me that would be toxic would be the hierarchical nature of a bank. Even though my org is small, I like the freedom to create things because that is important to me. Other people may thrive in that environment.

SS: If your potential manager is interviewing, I would ask what their management style is for themselves and the organization. Do we have to track our minutes very precisely? Think about what would irk you in a workplace.

RD: The nonprofit world is small, especially in some of your communities. If you can, talk to someone who has been there or knows about it. I am always asking our executive director if she knows anybody who works at so-and-so.

KE: Start watching the boards, you will see patterns of who is posting. If you see someone posting very often, that is a flag to see that something is going on. So you'll know who is doing what and get an idea of that landscape. I look at job postings all the time to keep an eye on competitors and problems they may have.

BD: Another piece to that, there is no 100% perfect workplace. You have to know what is important to you, and if you can leave feeling successful, you might have a small piece that is annoying. We all have small pieces. If it's livable and not questioning your ethics there is a give and take. You will get a gut feeling from an initial interview. I've turned down jobs after an interview because I don't think it is a good fit for me.

[What is the most respectful way to decline an offer?](#)

KE: "Thank you for your time in the interview, I have found other positions that I am seeking. Best of luck to you finding a qualified candidate that works well!" You don't have to over-explain. Be kind, don't burn the bridge by insulting them.

JM: They won't hesitate to send you a two-sentence letter saying that the position has been filled.

[What about when you're looking for employment somewhere but the company says to "put your foot in the door" by accepting a job and seeing how it goes?](#)

SS: You might get pigeonholed into a specific position where you may not be able to move.

JM: The foot in the door theory works very well in a government position. I'm in a temporary position but they need the position year-round, but because it is a temporary position I am eligible to apply for any position that opens in the county government. My boss is straight up about that: "You need to do what is best for your family, if there is a position that would work for you that you apply for then you are free to do that and I understand". Foot in the door is good for specific things, and now my position is going to blossom into something that is full-time, permanent, and union because I took a chance on a lesser-paying position.

SS: Universities are like that too. MSU hires a lot of temp workers that opens you up to the intranet for more opportunities.

JM: If you're going for a fast food job and you end up as manager, you may wind up the cook at the grill because they want you to grow at the company and see how it is after a year. If you're going to a university or government, you can hang out as long as you're comfortable. I love the work that I do, I'm more than happy to be in that position for a year, so I think that while you're gaining experience and networking within an organization, those bigger organizations are good.

KE: You have to assess for yourself the opportunity to movement.

JM: I'm assisting processing and returning thousands of paperwork in a given year and doing paperwork. If I hated the environment I was in, I would so be applying for different positions. But because I love the environment and the people, I don't mind making thousands of copies or finding people or whatever the job requires.