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## Managing your transition

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Whenever you find yourself working your way from “here” to “there,” you are going through a transition. When you left grade school to enter junior high, for example, you went through a transition—possibly a painful one. Passing from junior to senior high or from high school to college represents another transition, as does moving from one geographical region to another or from one job to another.

Whether these and other transitions ultimately lead to better or happier times, the process itself sometimes feels hard when you’re passing through it. Some AmeriCorps members, for example, may view the end of their service as a loss to themselves—one that will be difficult or perhaps painful to deal with. On the other hand, others may see this period as a chance for continued growth and opportunity—a way to move on.

you can expect things to change for you

Whatever your views concerning the end of your own service, you can expect things to change for you. If you give some thought to your upcoming transition and how well prepared you are to face it, you may find your path an easier one. To help with some of your thinking, the next two sections briefly discuss the views of two transition theorists, William Bridges and Nancy Schlossberg. (If you’d like to pursue the topic of transition in greater depth, see the list of resources in Appendix D.)

### Stages of Transition

According to William Bridges’ theory of transitional stages, adulthood encompasses a lifetime of transitions (*Making Sense of Life’s Changes: Transitions* Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980). These generally take place in three stages:

**Stage One.** The first stage begins with an ending or loss: An identity is lost, and a new one has not yet been developed. Disenchantment may set in. Before the person in transition can move on, the ending must be confronted and resolved. This description could apply to AmeriCorps members who either have left their placements or have begun to lose their AmeriCorps focus. During this stage, these members may be sad or angry about the loss of affiliation with AmeriCorps.

Sometimes people leave situations quickly, without saying goodbye. It is best, however, to plan your transition so you have a chance to say goodbye to both co-workers and community members, no mat-

ter how hard that will be. Ensuring that your project is left in good hands will also help with your transition. Many program leaders will have a closing ceremony to give members an opportunity to formally close their year of service. If you do not close that chapter, it will be hard to move on.

**Stage Two.** Severing connections and letting go lead to stage two. Feelings of emptiness usher in this middle stage, a neutral zone that often includes confusion. Although it is temporary, the neutral stage must be endured before the person can move on. Some AmeriCorps members in the second stage of transition may feel confused and unsure about their new direction. According to Bridges, people in this stage are “in the middle of a road.” He points out that although one cannot cross a road without at some point being in the middle, the middle of the road can be a dangerous place because people tend to get stuck there.

One good way to minimize your time in the

middle stage is to start taking small steps toward the future. For example, if thinking about long-term goals seems too overwhelming, decide what you will do next week. Then do it. Action is the best tonic for the distress of the neutral zone. If, however, you find yourself stuck or immobilized in the neutral zone, ask for help. Very likely someone in your family or circle of friends and colleagues can help you move on.

**Stage Three.** In stage three we find a new beginning, the final stage of transition. New beginnings can be problematic, and the secret is “to do more than simply persevere.” In this stage, you will fare better if you take action and concentrate on goals. According to Bridges, the transition ends not when all decisions have been made and everything is “wrapped up,” but when action and goal setting are under way. Former AmeriCorps members who are actively working on their next steps are at the end of the transition. This workbook will help you identify those next steps and lay out your goals.

What stage are you at right now? Why? Note the date and your response to this question below. Return periodically to determine whether your stage has changed and why.

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## Readiness for Transition

Another model, that of Nancy Schlossberg, also may help you gain perspective as you leave AmeriCorps (“A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition.” *In The Consulting Psychologist*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 2-18). Like Bridges, Schlossberg believes that adult life is characterized by one transition after another—transitions that are inevitable and often unpredictable. Three assumptions underlie this transitional model:

- ❑ A transition can result from a lack of something happening (a nonevent, such as not being accepted into the college of your choice) as well as from something happening (an event, such as getting a new job).
- ❑ Every transition has both positive and negative aspects.
- ❑ Most transitions move from a turbulent and crisis point to a point at which the event or nonevent is integrated into the individual’s life.

Schlossberg’s transition model contains four assessment areas—situations, supports, self, and strategies. The four short sections that follow provide an opportunity for you to assess your exit from AmeriCorps according to Schlossberg’s model.

**SUPPORTS. What support do you have for the transition?** You can expect the upcoming transition to affect several areas of your current life—your roles, your relationships, your routines, and your assumptions. How much support do your family, co-workers, friends, and community give you? Will your transition from AmeriCorps disrupt any of that support? For example, AmeriCorps members who leave the communities in which they’ve been working may lose the support of co-workers and community members, or at least some of that support. Thus, their experience will likely differ from members who remain in the community.

What do you think your own support options are? Can you think of ways to increase these options? Take some time to think about the level of support you have, and then write your thoughts in the following space.

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**SELF. How will your own nature, or personality, affect your transition?** Do you have a positive outlook on the transition from AmeriCorps to your next step? Do you have physical and psychological energy for the transition? What type of coping skills do you have? Do you fully understand the financial requirements of the transition, and can you meet them? How will your health affect your energy? Do you take good care of yourself even when under a lot of stress? During and after the transition, will you be able to take care of whatever is important to you? Reflect upon the state of your personal readiness for the transition, and write your thoughts below.

**STRATEGIES. How will you cope with the transition from AmeriCorps service to your next step?** Do you need to learn new ways of transitioning? Can you modify and/or change the transition? Do you want to? How will you manage the stress of the transition?

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**SITUATIONS. How do you view the transition from AmeriCorps to your next step?** Is the timing good or bad? How much control do you have over the transition? What other stress do you have in your life? Are you looking forward to the transition? Do you have experience with similar transitions? Think about how you have coped with past transitions. What worked then that might also work in this situation? What would need to change? Use the following space to write your general view of the transition you now face.

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**Given your view of the transition, the support you have for the transition, and your personal characteristics, what do you have going for you as you leave AmeriCorps service?**

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**What do you need to work on?**

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**► If you feel you are not yet ready for the upcoming transition, try to work out ways to better prepare yourself. (Perhaps your co-workers or supervisors can help you with this.) Can you increase the support you'll be able to call upon? Can you talk with someone who has successfully completed a similar transition recently? Can you build upon your current strengths? How can you overcome the obstacles you've identified?**

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**Going "Home":  
Cross-Cultural Re-Entry**

When people return to previously familiar surroundings after living in a different environment or culture for a time, they face what is called "cross-cultural re-entry." This experience will lie ahead for AmeriCorps members who moved to a new community to serve but will return to their home community after service. Returning is not always easy. An AmeriCorps member who grew up in rural Texas and served in urban Chicago, for example, may find re-entry harder than expected if she returns home for any length of time.

Many times, people find coming home to be more difficult than the initial move to the other culture. Even people who have spent their AmeriCorps service in their home community may experience some "re-entry" if they have worked in a culture somewhat different from their own or if families or friends have discounted or even dismissed their efforts.

In general, people returning home don't expect a hard time. "No problem," they think. "I understand and appreciate this culture." Then, if the transition turns out to be difficult, they are surprised because the difficulty is so unexpected. Sometimes the surprise of re-entry "shock" can lead people into ineffectiveness and/or depression during their transition. Typically, the stronger the desire to return home, the easier the transition will be.

Planning for re-entry can help to ease the transition. You may want to give some thought to the way you'll describe your AmeriCorps service to your family, friends, and neighbors at home. Sometimes, the people you care about at home won't be interested in your experience. Or perhaps they believe their culture is better than the one in which you served. How will you deal with that attitude or disinterest?

You may experience any of several stages of re-entry. First, as noted earlier, you may begin to disengage from the AmeriCorps community

while still in it. Your focus moves from the present to the future. Then comes the initial “home” period, which is usually full of goodwill and comfort. It feels good to be home. Next comes a middle period during which you may feel some discomfort with the home culture and may find yourself developing a negative attitude. In this stage, former members may compare their home culture with their AmeriCorps culture and find their home culture lacking. Eventually, however, if they work patiently through the stages, they will likely achieve a positive integration of home and AmeriCorps experiences.

Your re-entry experience may be similar to the experience of people who return from service overseas or within cultures that differ from their own—members of the armed forces or Peace Corps volunteers, for example. Often, these same people discover that the coping skills they used to adjust to another culture help them cope, as well, with returning home. Think back over the ways you got through the first few months at your AmeriCorps assignment. Transfer your new experiences and the expertise gained through AmeriCorps to your home, or your “old” situation.

**If you are returning home after AmeriCorps, what will be comforting and welcoming to you? What may be hard to deal with? How might you handle the difficulties?**

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## Leaving Right: Final Administrative Issues

Before you leave your AmeriCorps assignment, be sure to complete all final business. Following is a list of administrative details and procedures you’ll need to work through before leaving. (Check with your program director and/or supervisor to make sure the list covers everything.)

- Final clearance
- Final program evaluation
- Change of address (if needed)
- Health insurance (What happens with yours?)
- Education award (see Appendix A for more information about loan forbearance and education awards)
- Interested Accrual* form (see Appendix A for more information about loan forbearance.)
- End-of-Term-of-Service* form (which triggers the education award; see Appendix A for more information about education awards)
- References from program director, site supervisor, fellow AmeriCorps members, team leaders, AmeriCorps leaders, and/or other community members
- Addresses and other contact information for fellow AmeriCorps members who are leaving the community

- Addresses and other contact information for community members/organizations with whom you want to stay in touch
- Information on the AmeriCorps Alums organization and other ways to stay involved with AmeriCorps and other former members