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Encouraging More Fortright Conversations: Guides to Engaging with Young Professionals

Green City Force is an AmeriCorps program that supports young adults living in low-income housing in New York City as they start a career in the green sector. The program includes ongoing support after participants' service period has ended, but many participants underuse the opportunity for career counseling because of behavioral barriers that make them hesitant to share information about their work. We worked with Green City Force to develop check-in guides and additional recommendations that can maximize the support counselors offer.

Background

Green City Force (GCF) seeks to provide young adults living in low-income housing in NYC with education, service, and career opportunities in the [green sector](#). The program is composed of two parts: 1) an AmeriCorps service term (Service) and 2) Alumnihood. During their time in the service program, participants serve at GCF's [Eco-Hub sites](#) and are equipped with knowledge and resources to obtain jobs in urban farming, sustainable construction, horticulture, and landscaping, among others. They attend trainings to further their environmental literacy, on topics such as agriculture, energy efficiency, community health, and more. They can also receive technical training and certifications (i.e., Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA-40) certification).

After graduating from Service, participants transition into Alumnihood, where they receive guidance from alumni coordinators on professional development and obtain direct access to unique employment opportunities through GCF's employer partners. Both career and educational opportunities are explored at one-on-one check-ins. Coordinators and alumni discuss how the alum's job, job search, or higher education journey is going, and other opportunities or challenges they would like to investigate or troubleshoot.

Highlights

- Programs that aim to support young adults in new careers are sometimes limited by how comfortable people feel sharing information with program staff.
- Behaviorally informed engagement guides on how to run effective check-ins can help staff set expectations for the program and proactively address concerns, encouraging alumni to speak frankly and freely about their challenges and achievements.

While these check-ins are designed to be an open, supportive space for alumni, GCF has found that alumni are not always frank about their experiences in the workforce, making it challenging for staff to provide adequate support. GCF partnered with ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to better understand what keeps alumni from sharing information about their work experiences, and to identify strategies to overcome these barriers.

Identifying behavioral barriers to sharing information

What keeps alumni from sharing critical information? Our team began by reviewing materials and data from GCF, including the organization's website, introductory presentations, alumni-facing communication materials, check-in resources, and alumni retention data. We also ran an alumni survey and conducted 11 in-depth interviews with GCF staff and alumni to learn more about their expectations of, and experiences with, sharing negative and positive workplace experiences.

Through this work, we uncovered five key insights about why alumni are not always forthright about their experiences:

- 1. Participants' experiences during their service term can affect the extent to which they share workplace information as alumni.** If the Service experience is frustrating or unpleasant, alumni may be more inclined to skip their check-ins with coordinators and avoid providing requested information in response to GCF outreach.
- 2. Alumni may trust only certain GCF staff because they have shared experiences or met them in person during Service.** Alumni often shared that the coordinator they confided in most had not only experienced Service as a participant but also shared similar demographic identities, giving the impression that this coordinator would truly understand the alum's experiences and challenges.
- 3. Alumni are aware of external pressures faced by GCF and its staff, and are wary of overburdening them and jeopardizing their relationships with employer partners.** Because they recognize that GCF staff have limited bandwidth, need to maintain good relationships with employers, and must meet metrics such as graduation and retention rates, alumni feel hesitant to report negative experiences or challenges in their workplace.
- 4. Alumni see certain behaviors (e.g., being late to work) as "bad," and reflective of individuals' worth.** This can keep them from sharing experiences where they've engaged in one of these behaviors because they feel ashamed of it, and expect to be judged by others as a "bad" person.
- 5. Participants feel that sharing about their experience is pointless.** Particularly if the situation is over and seems unlikely to recur, alumni feel that confiding in their coordinator is not helpful.

Encouraging Alumni to Share

To address these barriers, we created two engagement guides for alumni coordinators: one to use during their first meeting with an alum and another to use throughout subsequent meetings. GCF is expanding the Alumnihood team over the next few years, so it was important for us to develop designs and recommendations that would be easy for new coordinators to learn and use. The engagement guides provide staff with clear guidelines on how to:

- ▶ **Introduce Alumnihood and its purpose** to set expectations about what can and should be discussed during the check-ins. Specifically, coordinators should emphasize the importance of sharing information about challenging work experiences even if they've already passed, and address fears alumni hold about overburdening coordinators or jeopardizing their relationship with employer partners. Furthermore, being transparent about the alumni coordinator's role can foster greater trust and visibility between GCF staff and alumni even if they do not share similar identities and lived experiences.
- ▶ **Counteract negative experiences during the service term by highlighting the benefits of Alumnihood.** Because Service and Alumnihood are both programs provided by GCF, it makes sense for alumni to assume these experiences would mirror each other. Sharing the distinct benefits of Alumnihood (such as résumé reviews, career exploration guidance, and direct connections to employer partners) can make it clear that this component is different from Service, and encourage alumni to engage more deeply and intentionally with the coordinators.
- ▶ **Address the belief that sharing workplace experiences could result in negative consequences.** The survey suggests that some alumni fear being judged, reprimanded, or suffering other negative repercussions if they share their negative workplace experiences with the coordinators. Acknowledging these concerns and clearly stating that sharing will not lead to negative consequences, and that staffs' main priority is to provide alumni with guidance and access to professional development opportunities, can help alumni open up.
- ▶ **Offer resources when more challenging or noncareer needs arise.** In cases where alumni share information about challenges and triumphs beyond the workplace, some coordinators may not feel equipped to support them. Thus, the guides include "rules of thumb" underlining when to refer alumni to other GCF staff, and links to external resources to address challenges such as food or housing insecurity and mental health crises.

First meeting with an alum

1. Review notes and alum's file

Before attending the check-in: review the alum's file by visiting LINK

- Take note of how long they've been in the program, career goals, etc.

2. Introduce yourself and alumnihood

- Introduce yourself. Share your name and position at GCF.
- If the alum has worked with a coordinator before, inform them you will now be stepping in for that coordinator.
 - Be transparent about having read their file (if you have) but wanting to get to know them on a more personal level.
- Inform or remind the alum what the check-ins are for:

These calls are a space for you to vent, learn about career development opportunities, and receive guidance on how to navigate positive and negative situations at work. What you share with me is confidential and will never be shared with your employer.

3. Learn about and affirm the alum's work experiences

Ask the alum:

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
- Do you have a job? If so, what is it like?

If the alum is hesitant to share: ask concrete questions and then probe with exploratory questions.

If the alum is still hesitant to share, see "Other resources and guidance" page for tips. If they do share, be sure to affirm their feelings about and perspective on their work situation.

Sample concrete questions to ask:

- Tell me about your position and role.
- Can you describe what your day to day is like?
- How are you liking the tasks you're being assigned at work?
- What do you find most challenging? What are you most successful at?
- Is there anything going on at work right now?

4. Decide on and summarize next steps

Next steps to discuss and summarize might include:

- Any follow up you or someone else will do
- When the next check in will take place
- Additional topics you can discuss next time

5. Record the check in after the call ends and follow up with the alum

Record your check-in:

- Log interaction into [LINK] as a case contact. Make a note if you plan to follow-up or refer the alum.

Visit LINK for additional instructions on recording your check in

Send an email or text message to the alum with the following information:

- 1-2 sentence summary of what was discussed
- Next steps (e.g., Complete a job application)

Date and time of the next scheduled check-in

Subsequent meetings with an alum

1. Before the check in, review notes and alum's file

- Review the alum's file by visiting LINK
- Determine if there is anything to follow-up on in this upcoming session

2. Greet alum and follow up on previously assigned tasks

- Greet alum and follow up on any social or work experience the alum previously shared
- As needed, follow up on any task you previously agreed upon:
 - How did the [fill in] go? Did you get a chance to do it?
 - If not: What kept you from doing it?

3. Learn about and affirm the alum's work experiences

Ask the alum:

- Is there anything going on at work right now?

If the alum shares challenges, concerns or issues:

- Affirm the alum's perspective and feelings
- Suggest a focus for discussion (e.g. the challenge they bring up) and ask the alum if they are comfortable discussing that

Continue the conversation based on their answer, repeating the above steps. Ask questions to understand the alum's experience and lead them to concrete next steps.

See "Common challenges and sample language" for guidance on how to approach common topics that may arise.

If the alum doesn't share anything either:

Ask informational questions and then jump into exploratory questions.

Sample informational questions:

- Can you describe your day-to-day work?
- How are you liking the tasks you're being assigned at work?
- What do you find most challenging? What are you most successful at?
- Is there anything going on at work right now?

Probe for common challenges

- Ask a specific question about a challenge you suspect the alum might be facing (see next page for examples). Ask how they feel about it, if they don't share on their own.
- Follow guidance to the left under "If the alum shares challenges, concerns or issues" once you identify a challenge.

See "Common challenges and sample language" for more guidance on how to prompt and discuss common challenges.

4. Decide on and summarize next steps

Next steps to discuss and summarize share might include: any follow up you or someone else will do, scheduling the next check-in and additional topics you can discuss next time

5. Record the check-in and follow up with the alum after the call ends

Record your check-in immediately:

- Log interaction into the participant's salesforce record as a case contact and make a note if you plan to follow-up or refer the alum.

Visit LINK for additional instructions

Send an email or text message to the alum with:

- 1-2 sentence summary of what was discussed
- Next steps (e.g., Complete a job application)
- Date and time of the next scheduled check-in

GUIDE FOR FIRST MEETING WITH ALUMNI

GUIDE FOR SUBSEQUENT MEETINGS WITH ALUMNI

In addition to the printed and online alumni engagement guides, we provided a Recommendations document outlining strategies for implementing the guide, refining and expanding it over time, supporting staff and participants, and highlighting the benefits of Alumnihood in all phases of the program. For example:

- ▶ Regularly collect feedback from alumni coordinators to ensure the engagement guides are efficient and effective as the program continues to evolve.
- ▶ Refine existing administrative systems and procedures to lessen staffs' load so they have time and mental space to dedicate to check-ins.
- ▶ Improve participants' experiences during the service term by providing greater flexibility and conducting feedback sessions for service members.

What's next and key takeaways

GCF staff have already shared insights from this project with their leadership team and board. As a result, GCF has been able to hire an additional staff member who will provide program participants with career development guidance prior to their Service graduation, and interns to conduct check-ins and other career-related work with alumni. Project insights were also utilized in program coordination meetings to emphasize the need for intentional sectoral exposure, or opportunities that enable program participants to develop a deeper understanding of the work GCF is doing and its connection to the green sector. In addition, GCF has implemented changes such as:

1. simplifying the transition from Service to Alumnihood by facilitating simpler handoffs amongst service term and alumni-facing staff;
2. making the connection between the service term and future career opportunities more salient through increased employer field trips and career fairs; and
3. introducing Alumnihood to service members earlier through organized introductory meetings. They also plan to implement other strategies we suggested, such as creating an Alumni Advisory Board to facilitate more alumni driven programming.

GCF aims to empower youth to transform their own lives by leading and creating regenerative and inclusive communities for all. Our work together was designed to further these goals by helping coordinators understand and address barriers limiting alumni from sharing important professional information, thereby preventing them from receiving adequate support. Ultimately, we hope the engagement guides and recommendations support alumni in securing professional experiences where they feel valued and have opportunities to promote social, economical, and environmental justice.

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