Food Security Initiative (FSI) Learning Community Evaluation

AmeriCorps VISTA
AmeriCorps Office of Research & Evaluation
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250 E Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20525
202-606-5000/ 800-942-2677

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Authors
Shane Dermanjian, MS, Research Analyst – Office of Research and Evaluation
Orláith Duggan, MA, Program Specialist, Program Impact & Operations – AmeriCorps VISTA

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Contact Information
AmeriCorps VISTA: VISTA@americorps.gov
AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation: Evaluation@americorps.gov

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, AmeriCorps VISTA founded the Food Security Initiative (FSI) to respond to the critical need for food access across the country exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the FSI served as an opportunity to explore the impact of larger, statewide projects as opposed to smaller, more concentrated projects targeting specific communities.

A major component of the FSI introduced "Learning Communities" to VISTA programming, bringing together select VISTA sponsors to connect online via virtual meetings. For over three years, participating FSI sponsors met bimonthly to brainstorm solutions to common issues, share their successes and challenges of running their VISTA projects, and learn from not only each other, but subject matter experts invited to Learning Community sessions. The Learning Community allowed the VISTA program to facilitate sponsor engagement during a time when the COVID-19 pandemic made in-person convening infeasible.

This report details the genesis of the FSI Learning Community as an outgrowth of the VISTA Food Security Initiative, outcomes of sponsors' participation in the community, and ultimately how the VISTA program can best replicate similar learning communities in the future.

Background of the VISTA Food Security Initiative

To enhance AmeriCorps' efforts in addressing food insecurity, the VISTA program selected four existing VISTA sponsors with cohesive, state-wide approaches in the food security sector to receive additional resources via more funds and 25 member slots. These four sponsors included:

- Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty
- Ohio Association of Food Banks
- Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
- Campus Compact for New Hampshire (CCNH)

Over the course of 2021, these four sponsors semi-regularly met online to present on their projects and ongoing work as well as share strategies on how they deploy their members to address food security in their communities. AmeriCorps Region Staff often facilitated these meetings.

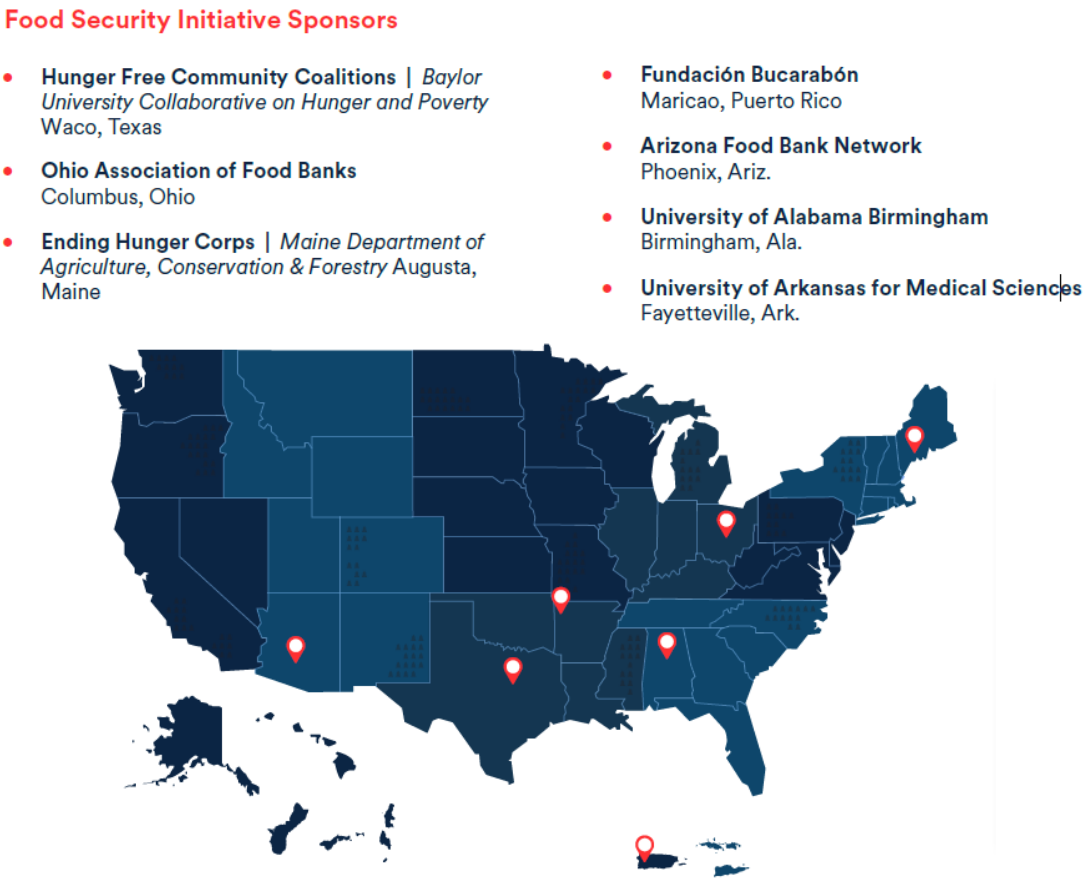
Change in Focus and Introduction of New Sponsors

Following the change in presidential administration following the 2020 election, AmeriCorps received additional resources through the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to provide direct relief to Americans, contain COVID-19, and help repair the economy. With the influx of resources from ARP, the VISTA program formally operationalized the FSI through 2024.

In 2021, incorporating lessons learned from discussions held with the first four participating sponsors and a change in direction implemented by the new VISTA Director, the VISTA program worked to establish a new framework to facilitate greater community learning within the FSI. Staff established preliminary goals of this revamped initiative and planned to add more sponsors to the FSI.

After modifying eligibility and selection criteria, the VISTA program designed a nomination process by which AmeriCorps Region staff would nominate more sponsors and projects to join the FSI. Eligible sponsors no longer required a state-wide reach, certain affiliations, or to be of a certain size. Various types of organizations became eligible for additional resources, especially organizations focused on serving BIPOC communities. The nomination process resulted in the selection of four additional sponsors to be added to the FSI including:

- Arizona Food Bank Network (AzFBN)
- University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS)
- University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB)
- Fundación Bucarabón



To note: Campus Compact for New Hampshire (CCNH) ended its participation in the FSI prior to the end of the initiative.

To differentiate these four new sponsors from the first group of four, AmeriCorps staff began using the moniker "FSI 2.0" and later FSI "Year 2." The first four participating sponsors then aptly became to be known as "FSI 1.0" or "FSI Year 1". This report will use "Year 1 Sponsors" and "Year 2 Sponsors" to differentiate between the two groups.

Sponsors could receive up to 25 member slots, two leader slots, and cash grants. Depending on the project, some sponsors requested less than 25 members slots and only requested the slots necessary for their project and bandwidth. The influx of American Rescue Plan (ARP) resources allowed AmeriCorps VISTA to offer grant funds to Year 2 sponsors to support a full-time staff member. All Year 2 sponsors received ARP resources.

Introduction of the FSI Learning Community

The FSI Learning Community originated as a response to a 2020 focus group conducted with VISTA sponsors. Sponsors felt that despite their increased number of members and resources, they did not have sufficient opportunities to engage in-person or virtually with other VISTA sponsors doing similar work. Sponsors felt they would benefit from regular information sharing and networking beyond the ongoing semi-regular meetings. The focus group's researchers recommended that the VISTA program provide such opportunities for sponsors and members to "connect with one another, such as hosting informal, online meet-and-greets for those in the same state or region or by focal area".[1] Wanting to establish a hub for cross-project collaboration and learning in the virtual, pandemic environment, the VISTA program implemented regular, bi-monthly meetings hosted by AmeriCorps named the **FSI Learning Community**. The Learning Community served as a supplemental benefit to the training curriculum of webinars and on-demand modules that AmeriCorps VISTA offers to all sponsors. In 2020, in-person convenings ceased due to the pandemic, and did not restart until late summer 2023. The FSI Learning Community helped bridge the gap for connection and collaboration during this time.

In addition to FSI project awards, ARP resources allowed the VISTA program to hire a full-time staff member to lead the initiative and formalize the FSI Learning Community. This staff member assumed the role of planning and facilitating the Learning Community meetings, conducting outreach for guest speakers, establishing an online repository of resources, and being the main point of contact for the initiative. All eight participating FSI VISTA sponsors began attending semi-monthly meetings structured by this AmeriCorps VISTA staff member from spring 2021 through the end of fiscal year 2024. In June 2023, the federal government enacted the Fiscal Responsibility Act, rescinding unobligated AmeriCorps ARP funds. To

[1] In January 2020, JBS International conducted focus groups and other data collective activities to help AmeriCorps VISTA better understand program implementation challenges and implement promising practices to improve upon VISTA training and technical assistance. This report is not published publicly.

continue the FSI, the VISTA program provided the necessary resources from its traditional appropriations to the ARP-funded FSI projects, therein conducting FSI through the end of fiscal year 2024 as originally envisioned.

In the FSI Learning Community sponsors discussed scheduled and unscheduled topics such as: member recruitment, member orientation and training, program management, summer feeding programs, disaster resilience, nutrition security, data collection tools, food and mental health, goal setting, cultural competency, and program evaluation. Presenters included external subject matter experts in the food security field as well as representatives from other AmeriCorps offices.

Methodology

Upon FSI's launch in Spring 2020, the VISTA program discussed a variety of ideas on how to assess the initiative's implementation, efficacy, and outcomes on sponsors and ultimately their VISTA members. The VISTA program explored a variety of approaches including the use of the Stakeholder Engagement in Question Development and Prioritization method, better known as the SEED Model.[2] SEED engages community stakeholders in developing research questions about their own communities. Additionally, staff explored the use of case studies to measure the impact of the FSI projects and also learn about sponsors' processes and approaches to address food security.

In 2021, with the change in presidential administration, the VISTA program shifted its research focus from assessing the outcomes of the actual service activities completed by members serving in FSI roles to assessing the efficacy and usefulness of learning communities on participating sponsors. The VISTA program shifted its focus to evaluate whether the experimental nature of a learning community model in the context of VISTA programming could be replicated for other issue areas.

To that extent, VISTA staff partnered with the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) to document the implementation the Learning Community, help frame research questions, and lead evaluation activities. ORE had assisted the VISTA program since the earliest iteration of the FSI by developing logic models and conducting data gathering activities, and then starting in 2021 ORE also shifted its focus towards the evaluation of the learning community itself.

As the FSI progressed and evolved over time, so did the development and fine-tuning of the initiative's evaluation goals.

[2] "The SEED Method for Stakeholder Engagement". Virginia Commonwealth University. Center on Society and Health. https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/work/the-projects/the-seed-method-for-stakeholder-engagement.html#gsc.tab=0

ORE sought to determine:

- If participation in the FSI ultimately led to greater levels of sustainable learning, program improvement, and networking/connection building among FSI sponsors
- If the FSI contributed to more equitable grantmaking at the agency level and better delivery of services to communities experiencing deep poverty
- If and how the collaborative Learning Community model is:
    - a) replicable
    - b) applicable for other VISTA programming initiatives/focus areas
- What the best practices are for structuring and implementing a Learning Community for sponsors (i.e., how many sponsors is best, how often should they meet, what structure is most effective for sharing resources and learning, etc.)
- If the FSI led to more sustainable and effective cross project, cross-agency, and cross-region collaboration and communication

ORE sought to assess the FSI Learning Community's outcomes utilizing research techniques akin to **rapid cycle evaluation**.[3] Utilizing this type of evaluation allowed ORE to conduct research activities throughout the course of the Learning Community, provide feedback to the VISTA program, and then staff implement small operational changes based on the needs and feedback expressed by the Learning Community's participants to make the initiative more productive. This process was iterative and continuous, as staff implemented several tweaks and improvements to the Learning Community as it progressed.

ORE conducted the following research activities to assess the outcomes of the FSI Learning Community:

- **May 2022:** first sponsor focus groups
    - ORE conducted two different focus groups, one with Year 1 FSI sponsor staff and the other with Year 2 FSI sponsor staff
    - Responding to the findings from this focus group, the VISTA program implemented *FSI Buddies*, providing sponsors opportunities to connect one-on-one to learn more about each other's projects and build their networks.
- **October 2022:** AmeriCorps Region Staff focus groups
    - ORE conducted two different focus groups for AmeriCorps Region staff as well, first hosting AmeriCorps Region staff of Year 1 sponsors and then hosting a second focus group with AmeriCorps Region staff of Year 2 sponsors.
    - Responding to the findings from this focus group, the VISTA program continued involving Region Staff in the initiative through regular

[3] For more information on Rapid-cycle Evaluation, please view this document: https://www.mathematica.org/publications/rapid-cycle-evaluation

communication, invitations to the Learning Community, and relying upon staff for technical assistance for project awards.

- **July 2023:** an online survey sent to all participating sponsors
  - This survey asked simple yes/no questions pertaining to potential outcomes from the Learning Community in the previous year leading up to the second sponsor focus group.
  - Through these findings, the VISTA program confirmed participating sponsors' preferences for the size, structure, and communication platform for the Learning Community.
- **September 2023:** second sponsor focus group
  - ORE conducted only one focus group with both Year 1 and Year 2 sponsors participating.
  - This focus group served as a follow-up to the first sponsor focus group and used responses to the online survey conducted in July 2023 to craft questions.
  - Through these findings, the VISTA program finalized its recommendations for future iterations of the learning community model.

Prior to the first focus groups conducted with FSI sponsors in May 2022, ORE completed preliminary interviews with key VISTA and ORO staff as well as Year 1 FSI sponsor staff. ORE asked the interviewees about their work in the food security space, what it meant for a sponsor to participate in the FSI, how each sponsor saw their role in the overall initiative, and how they approached the transition from Year 1 of the FSI to Year 2. ORE crafted the first focus group questions according to the relevant information interviewees discussed and highlighted as major topic areas.

FSI Learning Community Logic Model

In addition to conducting focus groups and other data gathering activities, ORE and VISTA staff sought to create an FSI Learning Community Logic Model to capture all components of learning in the FSI by which ORE could evaluate potential outcomes of sponsor participation in the FSI Learning Community. The following pages depict the FSI Learning Community Logic Model iteratively developed by VISTA and ORE staff using a process in line with the rapid-cycle evaluation of the initiative itself.

Food Security Initiative – Learning Community Logic Model

Problem Statement: In spring 2020, AmeriCorps VISTA founded the Food Security Initiative (FSI) as a response to the critical need for food access across the country due to COVID-19. With the influx of resources from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) in 2021, the VISTA program was able to formally operationalize the initiative through 2024. The idea for a Learning Community originated from other focus groups conducted with sponsors in 2020 that recommended opportunities to connect by region or focal area.

Context: The timeline of this logic model is a balance between documenting what has occurred and extrapolating the future outcomes of sponsors' participation in the FSI Learning Community after it ends. The inputs and outputs capture what is ideal for replication for future Learning Communities as well as accomplishments that moved the initiative forward. The logic model documents the ideal outcomes of what should be accomplished by sponsor participation in the FSI Learning Community as well as how their members and the AmeriCorps agency overall stand to benefit.

Objective: The throughline of this logic model is essentially: sponsors broaden their understanding of how to deploy members in their communities to address food security by engaging in the FSI Learning Community, therein providing their members with greater overall service experiences.

The FSI logic model can be interpreted through the outcomes of three different groups:

1) Participating FSI Learning Community **Sponsors**
    - Greater interconnectivity of sponsors and sustainable relationship building
    - Increased knowledge and awareness of resources available to sponsors
2) **Members** serving with the participating sponsors
    - Increased awareness of what members can accomplish during their service terms
    - More enriching service experiences overall
3) **AmeriCorps staff** including the VISTA program office and regional offices
    - Greater understanding of which features are beneficial to the administration of a VISTA program learning community and how to further engage with regional staff in this space

FSI Learning Community Logic Model

Inputs	Outputs		Outcomes -- Impact		
	Activities	*Participation*	*Short (1-2 Years)*	*Medium (~2-3 Years)*	*Long (Beyond Learning Community)*

Planning of FSI
• Program Specialist, Food Security
• FSI Steering Committee of AmeriCorps staff
• *Committee is not formal, but functions as interactions with each office/team.
• Support Grant Resources
 	
Administration of FSI
• Regional staff
• Bi-monthly FSI Learning Community meetings
• SharePoint for resource sharing
• eGrants
• MyAmeriCorps
• VISTA Campus
• ARP Resources
• MSY Resources
• Guest speakers/potential connections
 	
Sponsor
• Year 1 Sponsors
• Year 2 Sponsors
	Planning
	• VISTA program conducted sponsor needs assessment to help determine design of Learning Community (in 2020)
	• VISTA program designs curriculum of Learning Community
	• VISTA program develops Nomination Process
	
	Application/Award Guidance
	• VISTA program selects sponsors for participation in FSI based on regional staff nominations
	
	Outreach
	• VISTA program develops outreach materials
	  ○ *One pager*
	  ○ *Project summaries*
	  ○ *Press releases*
	
	• VISTA program conducts outreach
		• Sponsors attending Learning Community meetings
		• Sponsors utilizing Learning Community SharePoint
		• Sponsors and AmeriCorps staff uploading documents and posting on Learning Community SharePoint
		• Sponsors, AmeriCorps Staff, and External Speakers presenting during Learning Community Meetings
		• Sponsors connecting inside and outside of the Learning Community (facilitated / structured & organic /unstructured interaction)
			VISTA SPONSOR
			1.a) Sponsors feel they belong to an engaging network of peers where they can share issues as well as solutions
			
			1.b) Sponsors learn of and how to use resources and implement best practices shared by VISTA program and co-participants in the FSI. Programmatically and operationally, sponsors learn how to:
			
			• ***1.b.1)*** *Establish foundation & understanding for using VISTA service to build capacity to address food security*
				VISTA SPONSOR
				1.a) Sponsors feel compelled to connect with FSI Community (co-participants, presenters, AmeriCorps staff) outside of scheduled meetings, and feel more confident in their ability to connect with the AmeriCorps network
				
				1.b) Sponsors demonstrate familiarity of locations and content within AmeriCorps and co-participant resources, troubleshoot issues by using these resources, and begin implementing new knowledge and techniques
				
				1.b.1) *Sponsors:*
				• *Create clearer VISTA Assignment Descriptions (VAD) s & goals,*
				• *Establish clearer project timelines and measures of success*
				• *Implement more successful site recruitment and project management best practices*
					VISTA SPONSOR
					1.a) Connections made in FSI Learning Community continue even after formal conclusion of FSI. Sponsors continue to:
					• ***1.a.1)*** *share concerns and solutions to issues amongst each other*
					• ***1.a.2)*** *act as thought partners*
					• ***1.a.3)*** *Collaborate on adaptive strategies to address the changing landscape of the Food Security sector*
					
					1.b) Sponsors self-sufficiently improve programmatically and operationally; demonstrate fluency in how to use available resources
					
					1.b.1)
					• Sponsors tailor VISTA service to more to effectively address specific needs at their organization and in their community
					
					• Sponsors report increased Capacity Building Outputs:
					  ➢ *More of organizations that received capacity*

*All FSI sponsors are already existing sponsors with currently awarded projects • FSI members & leaders • Full-time sponsor staff to support members & serve as FSI POC • Sponsor participation in FSI as teacher/SME and learner	for presenters & connections for Learning Community ○ *USDA* ○ *SMEs* ○ *Relevant stakeholders* **Learning Community** • VISTA program: ○ *Develops curriculum and meeting activities* ○ *Engages sponsors in learning community hosted by VISTA* Program Specialist *every other month* • Region Offices and VISTA program use MS Teams channel to relay resources and info • Sponsors use SharePoint to passively interact and share resources • ORE provides iterative feedback to VISTA program gained from interviewing Learning Community		• ***1.b.2)*** *Build awareness of national food security interventions and best practices* • ***1.b.3)*** *Recruit, manage, and train Members*	• *Track performance measures more effectively* • *Learn the range of possible activities and how to better use members/ leverage members* ***1.b.2)*** *Sponsors* connect new information about trends in the food security sector to sponsor organization, projects, & service activities ***1.b.3)*** *Sponsors:* • *Implement successful recruitment and member management best practices* • *Implement comprehensive onboarding and training* for members • *Learn how to provide engagement opportunities and develop networks for FSI members*	*building services. (G3-3.4)* ➢ *More of Community volunteers recruited or managed (G3-3.1A)* ➢ *Increased dollar value of cash or in-kind resources leveraged. (G3-3.16A)* ➢ *Number of organizations that increase their efficiency, effectiveness, and/or program reach (G3-3.10A)* **1.b.2)** *Sponsors demonstrate greater:* • Overall food security knowledge • Situational knowledge & awareness of how food security issues connect to the individual & community • Ability to research and deploy external resources and connect with external partners **1.b.3)** *Sponsors promote a more enriching service experience for members leading to higher retention and higher satisfaction levels*

	participants meant to improve FSI in real time		**VISTA MEMBER** **2.a)** Through their sponsor, members increase awareness of and deepen knowledge about how projects engage in food security across a variety of geographies and sponsor types	**VISTA MEMBER** **2.a)** Members develop new networks and professional skills after attending engagement opportunities and trainings hosted by participating FSI Sponsors	**VISTA MEMBER** **2.a)** Members report more enriching service experiences enhanced by sponsor-implemented changes inspired by lessons learned and connections made from the Learning Community
			AMERICORPS STAFF **3.a)** VISTA staff gains awareness of Learning Community's learning needs and preferences. VISTA program gains awareness of the: **3.a.1)** needs of the Learning Community's participants and learn how participants prefer/want to interact in the FSI **3.a.2)** institutional knowledge necessary for successful Learning Community facilitation and structure	**AMERICORPS STAFF** **3.a)** VISTA program uses lessons learned from sponsor participation and AmeriCorps staff to iteratively modify structure and content within the Learning Community ***3.a.1)*** *VISTA program:* • *Shapes meeting curriculum to better address sponsors' requests* • *Learns how to best structure Learning Community meetings and better provide space for sponsors to engage with each other* **3.a.2)** VISTA program improves: • *Internal capacity to engage with sponsors* • *Ability to facilitate and manage groups of sponsors*	**AMERICORPS STAFF** **3.a)** VISTA staff determines efficacy of Learning Community Model in the context of VISTA programming. **3.a.1)** VISTA program develops framework of the best practices and components for replication of future Learning Communities pertaining to: • *Size of Learning Community* • *How it is organized (ex: regionally vs issue area)* • *Type of engagement (virtual, in person)* • *Frequency of engagement (Is bimonthly enough?)* • *Staffing capacity* **3.a.2)** VISTA program has built internal capacity towards deploying institutional knowledge of how to implement Learning Community model for future iterations

			3.b.) VISTA staff identifies gaps between available sponsor resources and trainings and what is needed for successful service within a specific focus area, such as food security.	**3.b.)** VISTA staff further develops resources for project management and training for VISTA projects.	**3b.)** VISTA program has built a broader library of resources to proactively support and respond to sponsor needs and challenges
			3.c) VISTA program learns if resources are accessible based off the preferences and needs of the sponsor.	**3.c)** VISTA program learns how to tailor information dissemination according to sponsor's preferences in the Learning Community.	**3.c)** VISTA program determines if the Learning Community model was effective in disseminating knowledge and developing fluency in available VISTA resources.
			3.d.) Regional staff develops awareness of other regions' activities within the Learning Community model	**3.d)** Regional staff deepen knowledge on VISTA portfolio management through cross-regional collaboration and partnership with VISTA program office	**3.d)** Regional staff bridge communication silos amongst other regional offices and AmeriCorps program offices, and exhibit greater overall fluency in VISTA programming

Assumptions

FSI is in addition to business as usual (VMOs, trainings, etc.) for AmeriCorps VISTA. This includes assumptions that knowledge, resources, best practices etc. are translated to sponsoring organizations and communities that are food insecure. This logic model assumes that capacity building efforts of members result in a trickle down of resources to the communities in which they serve.

External Factors

External factors include the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, local contexts affecting FSI implementation in sponsors' communities, existing resources, sponsors' networks, and available member applicant pools for each sponsor.

Findings

Focus groups, interviews, and surveys conducted by ORE yielded a variety of themes throughout all discussions detailing how sponsors understood the purpose of the FSI Learning Community, their role in said community, and what they perceived to have been the benefits of participating.

To note, these findings largely follow the short- and medium-term outcomes featured in the logic model since longer term outcomes will become observable after the end of the FSI. Five high-level themes and their associated subthemes arose from these findings. These themes are broadly mapped to the labeled portions of the logic model but do not follow the logic model 1 for 1; the logic model is included in this report to depict learning by sponsors over the lifespan of this initiative.

The main themes are as follows:

I. **Sponsors valued their participation in the FSI Learning Community**
   a. Associated logic model outcome: 1a

II. **Sponsors viewed the Learning Community first and foremost as a "Community" and then as a learning resource**
   a. Associated logic model outcomes: 1a, 1.b.1, 1.b.2, 3.b

III. **Sponsors most enjoyed hearing about success stories and the specificities of their peers' programs**
   a. Associated logic model outcomes: 1.a, 1.b.2, 2.a

IV. **Sponsors feel that a successful Learning Community is spearheaded by one VISTA staff member with one location for resources**
   a. Associated logic model outcomes: 3.a.1, 3.a.2, 3.b, 3.c, 3.d

V. **Sponsors would participate in future iterations of Learning Communities, though have preferences for what they could look like**
   a. Associated logic model outcomes: 1.a, 1.b.3, 2.a, 3.a.1, 3.a.2, 3.b, 3.c

I. Sponsors valued their participation in the FSI Learning Community

Sponsors unanimously reported enjoying their time in the Learning Community and saw value in their participation. As one sponsor explained, participating in the Learning Community "just made sense" for them.

I.1) Sponsors viewed the Learning Community as a "sounding board"

Some sponsors described the Learning Community as a "sounding board" where they could share their own program's successes and challenges, as well as discuss the similarities and differences amongst each other's projects.

Sponsors found discussions held in the Learning Community useful for determining when and how to elevate issues with their AmeriCorps Region staff member, building camaraderie around shared issues, and reveling in the successes shared amongst fellow FSI participants.

Given each sponsor operates in different settings within their own specific operational and programmatic contexts, VISTA staff designed the discussions held in the Learning Community to hold space for the participating sponsors to collectively brainstorm on topics rather than have one sponsor prescribe techniques and processes they use in their program to another sponsor.

Sponsors discussed the following topics with their co-participants during Learning Community sessions:

- Professional development, training, and learning opportunities for both VISTA sponsor staff and VISTA members such as *Life After AmeriCorps* trainings
- How to better align program goals with the overall AmeriCorps VISTA mission
    - One sponsor mentioned pushing their program to get more BIPOC-led project sites
- Guidance for sites who had never hosted members before
- How to improve VISTA members' service experience
- How to manage a larger number of project sites and members given the influx of resources associated with additional FSI funding
- Addressing general programmatic challenges beyond any FSI-specific issues

> "We are continuing to participate in the FSI learning group. That group has been a great help with troubleshooting and coming up with new program ideas. One of the members of this group is providing a year-long professional development webinar, one a month, that our VISTAs have been participating in."
>
> -A participating Sponsor via their grant's Progress Report

Most sponsors reported learning new information from their co-participants and wanting to implement this new information into their own organizations and projects. However, the scope of the FSI's evaluation activities did not measure whether sponsors actually implemented new techniques and information acquired by Learning Community sessions.

I.2) Some sponsors changed how they contextualized and thought about their work

The FSI began as a response to growing food insecurity during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As society shifted out of the immediate needs of the pandemic,

the focus of the initiative gradually shifted to that of responding to food insecurity more generally. Along with this shift in focus of the initiative itself, some sponsors noted how their exposure to some topics and trainings in the Learning Community enhanced their food security knowledge overall and changed how they contextualized their work. Discussions held during the Learning Community helped sponsors think about how they can tackle the challenges discussed in the previous section as well as build upon their successes.

Given sponsors' existing organizational capacities, they may not be able to implement new information or methods immediately, but feel they want to introduce some programmatic changes they have learned from other co-participants in their own programs.

The additional funding provided by the FSI both provides sponsors with the capacity to look inward and assess opportunities for improvement as well as identify any issues that could be magnified when scaled up with additional funding. The increase in the scope and reach of the participating sponsors' programs had emphasized the need to critically examine many components of their programs.

More sites and members made possible through FSI funding meant more partners, more connections, and more thinking about a sponsor's overall network. Some sponsors' sites may have hosted only a handful if not just one member, so sponsors wanted to think through ways to connect those sites with those that have many more members and resources. As noted, existing capacity for sponsors to initiate entirely new processes and operations may not be possible, but the FSI increased the capacity of all participating sponsors to at least begin thinking through many of these topics. In some instances, sponsors began implementing

Ripple Effect Mapping

FSI sponsors participated in a *Ripple Effect Mapping* exercise during the VISTA Sponsor Convening in August 2023. Through Ripple Effect Mapping, FSI sponsors reviewed and contextualized how the work of their projects affect various facets of their communities. The FSI sponsors examined how the initiative has built capacity of their organizations and led to enhanced outcomes in their communities.

Sponsors found that the FSI provided opportunities for enhancing community bonds, sponsor staff feeling more engaged with VISTA sites and members, and VISTA service having a greater footprint in often underserved communities.

Some sponsors noted how they would like to incorporate Ripple Effect Mapping in their own work to see how their partners, project sites, and VISTA members contextualize the FSI work they complete in their communities.

For more information on Ripple Effect Mapping, please view this guide. Ripple effect maps made by sponsors present at this convening are located in the appendix of this report.

Learning Communities of their own with their respective members and site supervisors.

I.3) Sponsors discussed shared challenges as VISTA programs as well as their own specific challenges in their own communities

Several programmatic, sectoral, and socioeconomic challenges transcend the capabilities of the FSI and affect all sponsors and all AmeriCorps programs. In addition to their successes, sponsors also discussed these shared challenges and brainstormed potential solutions and techniques.

- Sponsors felt that although their programs are all different, they also like the idea of standardized templates and forms provided by AmeriCorps and the VISTA program for organizational and metric tracking purposes.
    - Some sponsors figured out how to best track their performance measures and upload them into the necessary AmeriCorps systems, but removing the guesswork of sponsors from this element of managing their programs would be welcomed.
    - The uniformity of an initiative such as the FSI may lend itself to the standardization of performance measures and how to track them.

- Recruitment was a common challenge discussed amongst FSI sponsors
    - Issues with recruitment continue to affect the AmeriCorps agency overall and is not just limited to those participating in the FSI. Moreover, formal volunteerism is down across the country.[4] That said, sponsors discussed the specificities of recruiting for their members such as:
        - Recruiting for positions located in remote geographies when the AmeriCorps stipend is not necessarily attractive and not every member applicant may have a vehicle.
        - Defining what makes an applicant "qualified" for FSI service such as an existing interest in food security and an awareness of the time commitment and flexibility necessary to excel as a VISTA member.
        - Establishing how word of mouth has been the most effective recruitment method.
        - Determining which recruitment responsibilities fall to AmeriCorps staff versus which fall to the sponsor or project sites.

[4] "Volunteering and Civic Life in America". AmeriCorps. https://americorps.gov/about/our-impact/volunteering-civic-life

II. Sponsors viewed the Learning Community first and foremost as a "Community" and then as a learning resource

Though they acquired new information and recontextualized their work, sponsors found meeting and communicating with other sponsors actually did more for morale than for navigating specific challenges in administering their FSI projects. The participating sponsors felt united through the work they do in the food security space yet recognized they are all programmatically and operationally different from one another. Resultingly, the Learning Community was not used to create uniform solutions for sponsors, nor was it necessarily meant to construct solutions at all. First and foremost, the Learning Community was a "sounding board" where its participants came to be heard and seen, and from that point could connections and learning be facilitated. The participating sponsors decided what was of utmost importance for themselves to learn and do with their time in the FSI Learning Community. Often times this did *not* consist of communally developing solutions to shared issues.

Sponsors reported increasing their subject matter knowledge and overall awareness of how VISTA projects operate across the country in the food security space. Some sponsors feel as if AmeriCorps' grantmaking and policies have a certain rigidness to them that does not necessarily permit sponsors from implementing programmatic or operational changes as easily as they would hope, though sponsors reported learning and implementing small changes when they had the capacity to do so.

II.1) Resource sharing was still a major benefit of Learning Community participation

Although most of a sponsor's organizational capacity is dedicated to daily management of their VISTA projects, sponsors valued the resource sharing associated with the Learning Community. A major goal of the Learning Community was to get sponsors to know that specific resources exist and how to locate them. Whereas sponsors may not be able to provide each other with specific solutions, they still shared resources and/or best practices they either created or found in their own work. Resource sharing allowed for sponsors to access materials and knowledge when they need to on their own time, therein not requiring sponsors to make changes to their programs based off any best practices during the course of the Learning Community. The goal of the Learning Community was not to encumber sponsors with more work so as to adopt new practices but rather to provide them tools to improve their programs when they a) want to and b) are able to.

III. Sponsors most enjoyed hearing success stories and the specificities of their peers' programs

Though sponsors were in no way against guest speakers or other external subject matter experts presenting material during the Learning Community, sponsors liked hearing about what their co-participants did in their programs the most. They saw value in discussing the specificities of their projects and detailing case studies about what their members do. During the first iteration of the FSI the four participating sponsors shared information about their projects in an early Learning Community session using PowerPoint presentations and Q&A discussion. Once more sponsors were added during the second year of the Learning Community the initial four participants specifically asked for another session where all sponsors could provide background on their programs.

Sponsors felt they developed a greater overall understanding of VISTA and its range of possible projects and member placements by listening to their co-participants describe their own programs' scopes of work, techniques for member management, operational procedures, and so on. Without first gaining familiarity of all of the programs and projects involved in the FSI, sponsors felt it would have been difficult to connect and discuss topics with others.

III.1) Sponsors valued one-on-one discussion and connections and feel comfortable reaching out to one another

Learning Community sessions could provide only so much time for participating sponsors to discuss their programs amongst each other. VISTA staff incorporated breakout rooms into the Learning Community sessions for sponsors to discuss weekly topics in smaller groups but sponsors still wanted to dive deeper into the specifics of each co-participant's program. To this end, VISTA scheduled one-on-one meetings of sponsors, titled the "FSI Buddy" program where each sponsor would have the opportunity to individually meet with each other co-participant. Talking with co-participants one-on-one deployed the "peer learning" aspect of the Learning Community and helped further build connections.

Sponsors noted how they did not regularly engage with their Learning Community colleagues outside of regularly scheduled meetings and scheduled one-on-one conversations, but still felt they could if they needed to. Sponsors engaging in one-on-one conversations developed both a) a greater familiarity with one another personally, and b) a greater functional understanding of what all participating sponsors do with their programs and members. This curated familiarity helped build the potential for sponsors to feel comfortable enough with one another to connect outside of scheduled FSI sessions if they so wished.

Sponsors did not change this behavior from the first focus group to the second. In many instances, the sponsors felt they are more prone to discuss their specific questions with their assigned AmeriCorps Region staff or other AmeriCorps program

staff than they were with their co-participants. However, some sponsors did still engage with one another outside of scheduled meetings and in one instance three sponsors decided to collaborate and coordinate a professional development series for all of their members throughout 2023 and 2024.

IV) Sponsors feel that a successful Learning Community is spearheaded by one VISTA staff member with one location for resources

A major goal of the Learning Community was to develop sponsor familiarity with AmeriCorps resources and where/how to access them. Having just one person responsible for administering the Learning Community presents some capacity issues for that given staff person, though it facilitated routine behavior in the participating sponsors. Knowing who to turn to because there is only one person spearheading the Learning Community allowed sponsors to quickly address concerns and access resources. Whereas sponsors may receive many emails and communications as part of their own work in their own communities, seeing just one specific name emailing them from the AmeriCorps agency allowed sponsors to quickly identify pertinent information about resources and further engage in the Learning Community. Part of what made the facilitation and participation in the Learning Community "smooth" as one participant described was that the participating sponsors only had to know one contact, therein reducing any administrative and participatory burden on the sponsors. Some sponsors noted how their assigned AmeriCorps Region staff had changed multiple times over the course of their participation in the FSI Learning Community so the consistency of one person in the VISTA program facilitating the community aspects of the FSI program was welcomed.

IV.1) AmeriCorps Region staff feel they are a part of the overall process of administering a Learning Community, but think it should be managed by Program Offices

AmeriCorps Region staff with VISTA projects participating in the FSI felt that the Learning Community should be managed by the VISTA program office as it had been. AmeriCorps Region staff did not treat their FSI sponsors any differently than any of their other VISTA sponsors in their portfolios, though acknowledged that the FSI is a natural extension of their roles as regional staff members of connecting their sponsors to resources and other sponsors. AmeriCorps Region staff felt the subject matter expertise needed in both focus area and program management is crucial for the facilitation of a Learning Community, which is why they believe it is best suited for a program office to run instead of the AmeriCorps Region Offices where staff may have more generalized experience across focus areas. One AmeriCorps Region staff member defined their role as just participating, listening, and attending the Learning

Community as needed whereas a different staff member described their role in the Learning Community more simply as supporting their sponsor's capacity and impact.

Similarly, like how the Learning Community is not meant to develop and prescribe universal solutions for all FSI sponsors, AmeriCorps Region staff agreed that any help and connections they could facilitate would likely have to be region-specific given the regional context of their work The FSI Learning Community did not necessarily build inter-regional connectivity and productivity in the ways that it did build connections amongst sponsors themselves irrespective of AmeriCorps regions. The specific resources one region uses may not be applicable to another.

IV.2) One location for resource sharing helped facilitate ease of finding said resources

The VISTA staff member compiled resources shared in the Learning Community in a document library hosted on AmeriCorps' external Microsoft SharePoint sites. Any resources that the VISTA program wanted its sponsors to obtain, and any resources shared within the Learning Community itself were uploaded to a dedicated FSI SharePoint site available to access by all participating FSI sponsors.

SharePoint proved to be difficult to master by FSI sponsors both because of the complexity of using the site and downloading resources as well as their own inabilities to connect to the SharePoint on their own networks, specifically the sponsors based out of universities. Sponsors understood AmeriCorps' own limitations in having to use a SharePoint site and recognized the utility of having just one location for resources despite its shortcomings.

V) Sponsors would participate in future iterations of Learning Communities, though have preferences for what they should look like

As noted, the presence of additional funding presented sponsors with opportunities to hire more staff who then had the time and capacity to engage with the FSI Learning Community. Looking forward, sponsors noted how they would participate in future learning communities if time and resources permitted. Without additional staff members dedicated to the FSI work, sponsors felt it may be too challenging to carve out time for their staff to fully participate in a Learning Community at the frequency with which they currently do. Assuming the availability of sponsors to continue to participate in learning communities, they noted a handful of preferences for what future iterations could look like.

V.1) Sponsors want an easy-to-use website to host all documents and want to normalize greater engagement on that homepage regardless of website.

Though sponsors saw value in there being one catch-all location for all documents and resources, they were not fully satisfied with SharePoint. Sponsors were not

entirely opposed to using SharePoint but noted the steep learning curves and limitations associated with logging in and using the site. Once sponsors were appropriately logged into the site with all permissions and approvals granted, some felt they eventually became acclimated to the site.

Of the sponsors that were able to login to the SharePoint, they wanted to see more engagement on the site overall. Some sponsors noted how they would post questions in the discussion section of the FSI SharePoint site and not receive any responses, discouraging further participation on the site. Additionally, some sponsors felt the SharePoint did not have enough resources to access and download once they were able to access the site. The expectation on the part of some sponsors was that if another co-participant mentioned a resource they used or created that it would then be uploaded for group use on the SharePoint without having to ask for it to be uploaded, though this was not always the case.

To better facilitate the community aspect of the Learning Community the SharePoint would need to become a regularly visited website by the participating sponsors. Whether greater online engagement originates through an easier to use website or further encouragement during Learning Community sessions is yet to be tested, but having an easier to use website or means of resource sharing theoretically should help.

If SharePoint no longer becomes a viable option, sponsors suggested potentially using a Listserv to send each other resources via email. Again, the notion of sponsors being able to quickly identify pertinent information specific to the Learning Community is of importance, which is in line with regular emails sent to all participating sponsors detailing weekly to semi-weekly updates to the SharePoint including new resources available. One sponsor noted how if they were to Google "AmeriCorps food security" their search would yield no relevant results, so having a landing page or resource library that is as accessible as possible is seen as utmost importance by sponsors.

V.2) Sponsors preferred to meet based off topic area, not geography

Sponsors felt the focus area of their shared work is what is most important for creating a Learning Community. Connecting over their shared work in the food security space is what the sponsors felt unified their work rather than being in similar geographies or settings. Discussing similarities in where the sponsors operated such as being based at a university or working in similar parts of the United States was deemed useful by sponsors, but part of what made the Learning Community so interesting to its participants was hearing what organizations totally different from one another did with their VISTA projects in their communities. Hearing from sponsors in totally different settings helped sponsors think more creatively and expand their conceptions of what was possible with their VISTA programs in a way

that hearing from sponsors too similar to themselves perhaps would not have facilitated.

V.3) Sponsors crave opportunities and resources for member development and member interconnectivity in the post-pandemic era

Each sponsor and their project sites coordinated their onboarding processes but felt that staggered member start times and virtual onboarding led to a broad disconnect of members from the VISTA program and AmeriCorps ethos. Due to the lack of in-person gathering and connection-building (at the time ORE conducted the focus groups), some sponsors felt as if their members did not receive the same experience as their members who in past years onboarded and trained together in-person, therein developing a cohesive identity and purpose.

Sponsors thought what member connectivity can look like large-scale. Whereas sponsors want to pursue opportunities within their own projects to bring their own members together, they also like the idea of convening each other's members all together, operating as "One Big Corps". In other words, a Learning Community for all of the FSI sponsors' members across states and projects. While sponsors can gain much information from learning about each other's programs and projects, the same is theorized of one sponsor's members meeting another sponsor's to facilitate a greater holistic understanding of the true breadth of AmeriCorps' capabilities and opportunities.

Whereas a uniform FSI Corps enlisting the members of the FSI sponsors may involve a great deal more coordination in part of AmeriCorps and participating sponsors, the potential to host smaller professional development sessions for each other's members is readily possible. Collaborative webinars for their members, hosting external professional development series for each other's members, and a variety of other networking events can easily occur by sponsors connecting outside of the Learning Community, though sponsors welcomed top-down coordination by the VISTA program for these types of activities as well. Some sponsors already began offering each other's members professional development sessions they normally host as continuing education for their own project's members.

Components of Learning Community Replication

In the event the VISTA program or other AmeriCorps programs plan to establish learning communities in the future, a variety of factors informed by last three years of managing the FSI Learning Community should be considered to enhance sponsor engagement, participation, and outcomes.

Focus on the experience level of the participant in the focus area, rather than the level of the experience has with the managing a VISTA project

Some initial focus in the development of the Learning Community had placed an emphasis on more seasoned sponsors providing their insights and expertise to newer Sponsors. Sponsors with relevant experience on a given Learning Community topic were often the best sharers of useful information regardless of their experience in managing a VISTA project. In other words, no notions of seniority existed within the group even considering how four of the sponsors had been part of the FSI for a year before the other four sponsors joined. Anecdotally, even if an organization was a seasoned sponsor, their staff member engaging in the FSI Learning Community may be new to supervising the project. A learning community may have potential to target newer, more inexperienced sponsors, but perhaps this may be better suited for mentor/mentee relationship building rather than a Learning Community where participants largely have the same successes and challenges independent of past experience.

This does not necessarily exclude notions of equitable grantmaking. Part of the start of the FSI Learning Community was rooted in the VISTA program wanting to explore the FSI as a means of more equitable grantmaking, but instilling greater equity largely happened outside the confines of the Learning Community itself. Within the FSI Learning Community, all participants entered equitably both as teachers and students.

Give ownership over the group to the group participants

The evaluation of the FSI Learning Community incorporates components of Participatory Research. Participating sponsors generally directed the direction in which the community should take and helped dictate which topics are of particular interest, if meetings should be more so dedicated to learning about each other's programs compared to hearing from subject matter experts, and so on. A goal of the learning community was to not manage the group prescriptively but rather responsively. Sponsors and their members are the closest to their communities rather than AmeriCorps staff, therein the sponsors have a greater understanding of the needs of projects operating in the food security space and can better speak to how a learning community can address those needs. Democratizing the FSI Learning Community can help provide ownership of the group to its participants while acknowledging that maintaining an overall structure and hosting the Learning Community is still vital work for the VISTA program office (or whichever program plans to coordinate a learning community).

Be proactive about uploading and categorizing materials/resources for sponsor download on SharePoint

Sponsors want guides, guidelines, templates, and anything else that can better facilitate their grant applications and program management on their ends. Expending time and effort on navigating the complexities of national service and the regular upkeep of their projects essentially results in sponsors having less time to commit to productive and creative thinking. Coordinating a learning community must answer the question of whether the learning community exists for troubleshooting grant challenges or for the purpose of creatively thinking collectively. Streamlining the process of giving sponsors as many resources as possible is paramount in allowing sponsors to utilize the very little time they have to expand their programs' capacities.

To that end, it is recommended to find a communication and resource exchange platform that all sponsors agree upon (within the guidelines of federal regulations).

Facilitate sponsor and member connections as much as possible

Though a major goal of the FSI Learning Community was to develop participating sponsors into sustainable thought partners by the end of the initiative, getting to that point requires a great deal of coordination and facilitation by the program office managing the learning community. VISTA staff had to normalize networking and relationships. Community connections needed to be built before participant sharing could take place. To help build camaraderie, sponsors would ideally have been able to connect in-person before starting in a virtual Learning Community. Similarly to how the coordinating program office needs to normalize resources being uploaded to and downloaded from an external site, the VISTA program has to focus on relationship building within the Learning Community before collaboration and resource sharing can take place. Connections were visibly deepened during the VISTA Sponsor Conference where FSI participants participated in the Ripple Effect Mapping activity, highlighting the significance of in-person engagement.

Summary and Conclusions

Evaluation work conducted on the FSI Learning Community was iterative and responsive to the needs of participating sponsors. Findings from interviews and focus groups detail how to construct a learning community conducive to participating sponsors' organizational and programmatic improvement as well as member development.

By identifying and internalizing the lessons learned from implementing and managing the FSI Learning Community, AmeriCorps staff are better positioned to start and manage the next learning community.

Outcomes of Participating in the FSI Learning Community Tested by the Logic Model

As noted, the FSI logic model captures outcomes for participating sponsors, members serving with the participating sponsors, and the AmeriCorps agency, namely VISTA program and AmeriCorps Region Office staff. Though long-term outcomes on participating sponsors may not be as measurable for some time, its short- and medium-term outcomes are readily assessable.

Participating Sponsors

(Associated logic model outcomes: 1.a, 1.b.1, 1.b.2, 1.b.3)

Ideally, the participating FSI sponsors will continue to engage with one another as time progresses and the FSI Learning Community ceases to formally meet. Thus far:

- Sponsors reported feeling like they belonged to a community and in several instances connected with one another outside scheduled Learning Community and FSI Buddy meetings
- Sponsors plan to incorporate research techniques in their own communities such as Ripple Effect Mapping or establishing their own learning communities
- Sponsors reported an increased awareness of the breadth of AmeriCorps VISTA projects' capabilities by learning about the work their co-participants do in their respective communities

Members Serving in FSI Roles

(Associated logic model outcomes: 2.a)

ORE did not formally test the outcomes of members serving in each of the participating sponsors' programs. However, the FSI Logic Model speaks to actions the sponsors can take to improve their respective members' overall service experiences. Sponsors incorporated member development sessions for their own members and coordinated member development opportunities with one another.

AmeriCorps agency staff (e.g., VISTA program staff and AmeriCorps Region Staff)

(Associated logic model outcomes: 3.a.1, 3.a.2, 3.b, 3.c, 3.d)

AmeriCorps agency staff effectively learned how to manage and replicate learning communities if and when AmeriCorps introduces more learning communities for its grantees and sponsors. These factors to include for next time are detailed in the previous section. After learning which topics were of interest for sponsors, how sponsors preferred to meet, and how sponsors like receiving new resources, VISTA incorporated this feedback into the FSI Learning Community to curate a better overall experience for its participating sponsors.

Whereas cross-regional collaboration and full-fledged, inter-sponsor member engagement did not occur as intensively as initially envisioned or asked for, future learning communities are now aware to recognize opportunities for such activities.

Conclusion

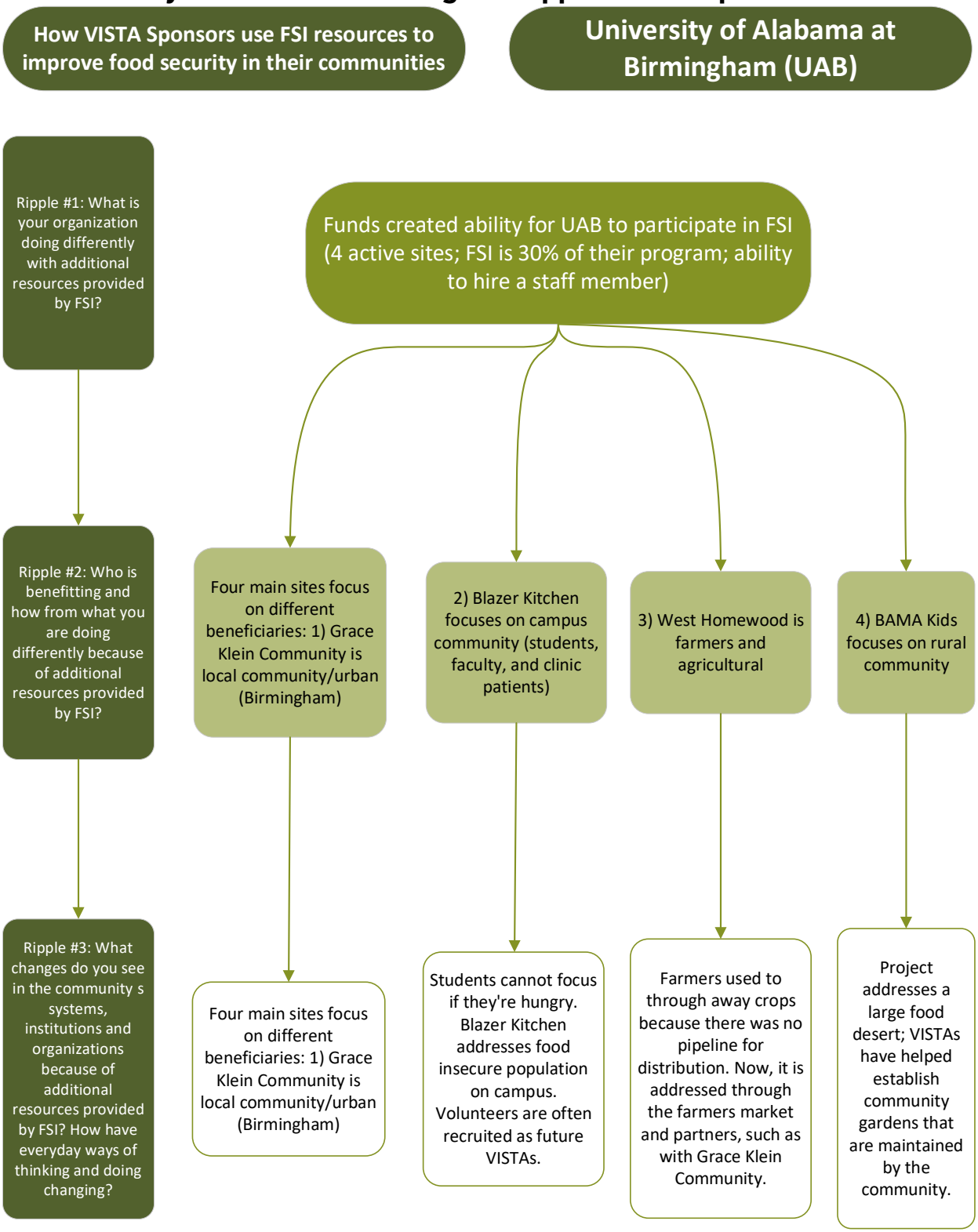
The FSI began in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and helped bridge the need for sponsor engagement during a time where in-person convening was functionally impossible. The learning community model helped sponsors from across the country connect within a similar field and issue area of food security. In many ways, the FSI sought to shift the culture around grantmaking by experimenting with sponsor collaboration. The learning community model at its full potential allows for sponsor-driven learning and engagement to ultimately inform AmeriCorps grantmaking processes and programming.

There are essential components for a successful learning community replication such as a full-time staff member dedicated to the learning community, supplying sponsors with member and grant resources to compensate sponsors for their time and engagement in a learning community through support grants, and providing funds for occasional in-person engagement.

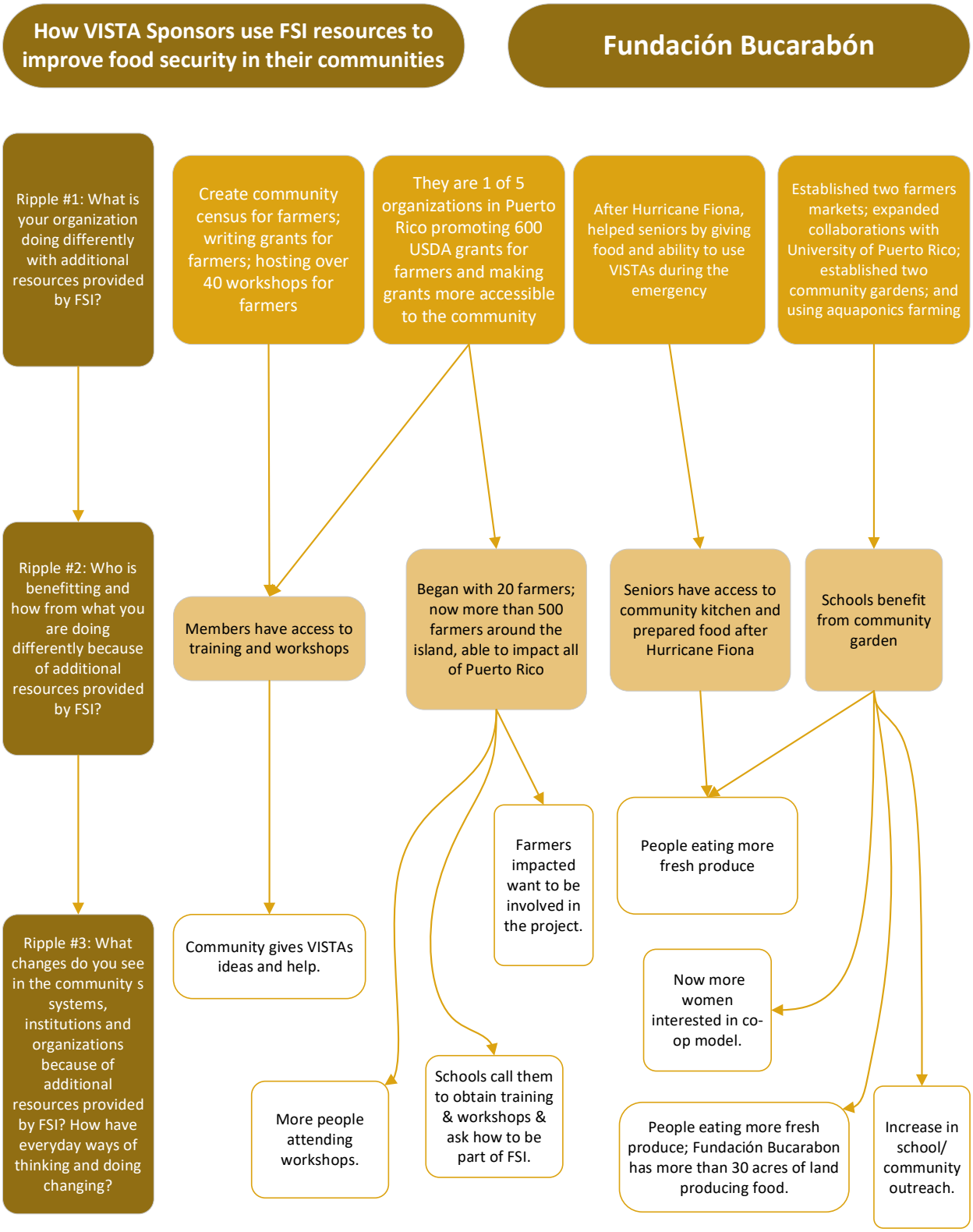
In a space with more agency resources dedicated to learning communities, AmeriCorps may be able to refine, research, and replicate learning communities for even more sponsors and grantees.

Appendix A: Ripple Effect Mapping Maps

A.1: University of Alabama at Birmingham Ripple Effect Map

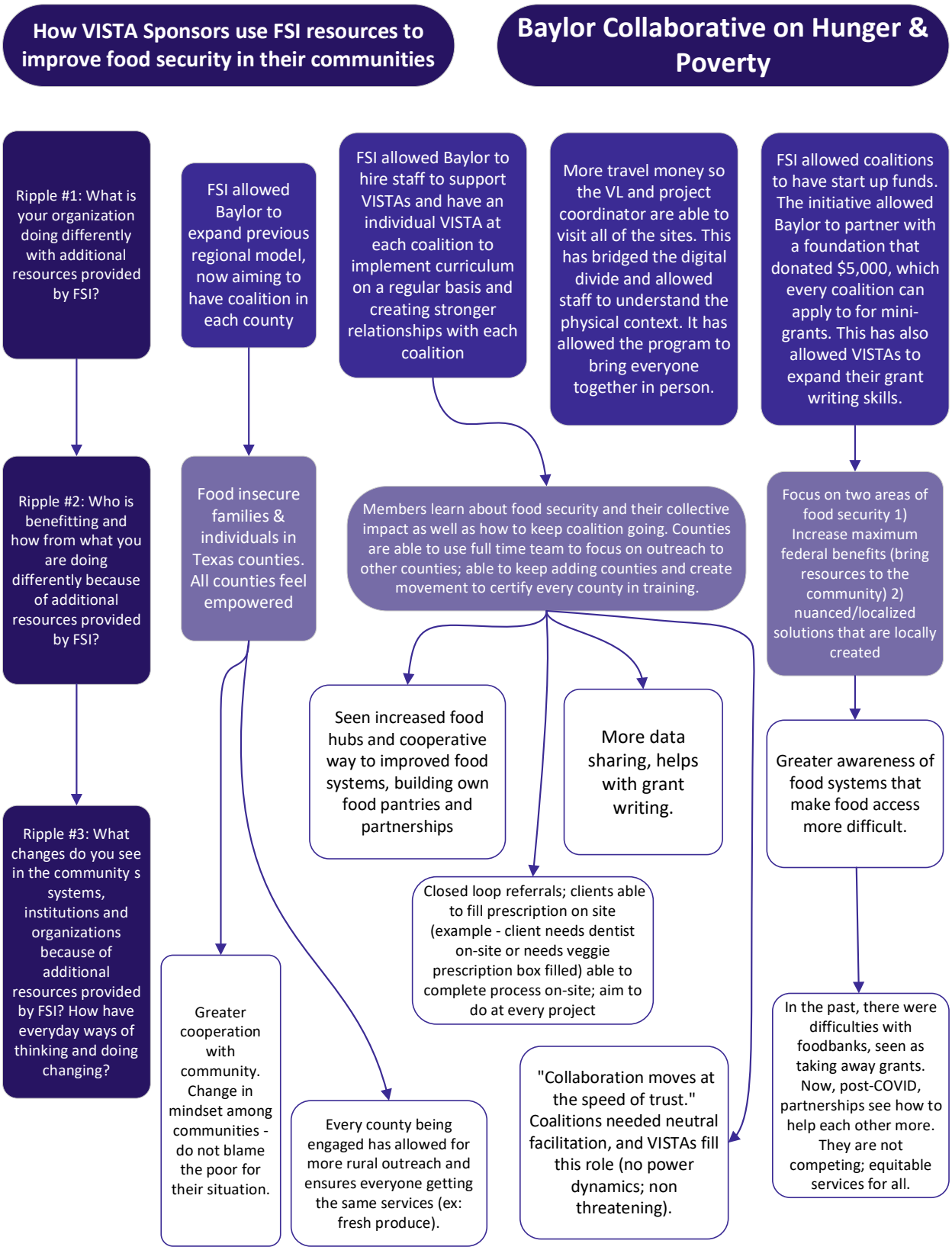


A.2: Fundación Bucarabón Ripple Effect Map



A.3: Ohio Association of Food Banks Ripple Effect Map

A.4: Baylor Collaborative on Hunger & Poverty Ripple Effect Map



A.5.1: Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Ripple Effect Map Part 1

A.5.2: Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Ripple Effect Map Part 2