

April '25 Partner Spotlight




Gretchen Upton
AmeriCorps VISTA Fellow
Citizen Schools

In this installment of our Partner Spotlight series, we turn our attention to Gretchen Upton, a Citizen Schools AmeriCorps VISTA Fellow making a profound impact at South Bronx Community Charter. Gretchen brings a unique perspective to her service, fueled by a journey of self-discovery and a deep commitment to community impact. Her work centers on connecting students with transformative volunteer opportunities, emphasizing Experiential Learning and the importance of diverse, inclusive educational spaces. By fostering collaborative learning and mentorship, Gretchen is not only building capacity for her host site but also instilling a lifelong commitment to service and civic engagement in her students, demonstrating the profound impact of hands-on community involvement. We are honored to share her story with you!

What drew you to the AmeriCorps and Citizen Schools mission and approach? Share a little about your journey that led you to CS. When I first applied for this role, I had just dropped out of college. I was living abroad and working, trying to find my niche. I had done a term of service with AmeriCorps State and National during my gap year, and I loved the direct service and the ability to work directly with my community. However, I also knew that, long term, I wanted to do more infrastructure-focused work. I've always been super interested in service, justice, and policy, but I didn't really know how to shape those passions into a career. Sometimes that reckoning feels impossible. I knew I wanted to do community work, something that put my values into action, but how do I also pay my bills and make this a career? So, I was lost.

I had spent a few years organizing for the American Climate Corps legislation, so when it was passed in 2023 I decided I would look into AmeriCorps again, specifically a VISTA role for the higher level, capacity-building work. That led me to Citizen Schools. I had never worked in education before, nor with kids on this level, but I loved the idea of project-based learning. I loved the dual role in the school, getting to work with both students and community partners, being a liaison. It can feel like direct service, but I know it's in service of a longer-term goal, which feels satisfying and fulfilling. I just wanted to try something new, something rewarding, that would leave a long-term impact.

What does Experiential Learning (EL) mean to you, and why is it important? What would it look like to truly learn experientially? Experiential Learning, to me, is about bodies and brains working in tandem. I think of how studies show handwritten notes improve learning, because people experience knowledge on multiple levels. I grew up in a traditional classroom: sit still, don't talk, listen quietly while a teacher presents the information, and then take a test. These environments teach obedience and discipline, because the physical experience is about being quiet, still, and following the rules. There's a place for that in secondary education, but ideally, the physical experience in a classroom aligns with the content of the lesson. That's where project-based,

Experiential Learning really excels. What we carry into our lives, our careers, and further education are the experiences we have, not just the things we hear or read about. Experiential Learning expands classrooms by engaging both our brains and bodies, and allows us to put theory into practice, try new things, learn to fail and to get back up. Typically, we learn better by going through the motions and reflecting on real-world applications.

My role at South Bronx Community Charter is connecting students with volunteer roles in the community. This is valuable because a lot of our students struggle in the classroom, whether academically or behaviorally. They have a hard time caring about what's going on in class because there's so much going on in their lives outside, it doesn't always feel relevant to them. A classroom education is so important, we know that with hindsight, but you don't always feel that in high school. When students are able to get outside of the classroom and relate their learning to their lives, see themselves make a tangible impact in their own community, they really open up. These kids are itching for a job and independence, and these roles give them that feeling. Through volunteer service, they learn hands-on skills and have the opportunity to speak with community members who aren't their parents or teachers, but mentors, and learn to harmonize their skills and interests. It's a kind of mentorship.

Volunteerism, especially, is rooted in the reality of their lives and struggles. It's cool to see kids connect their experiences with service. They'll say, "I've had this experience growing up, something I dealt with, and so I want to make an impact on others who have experienced that as well." For example, a lot of our students, it's sweet, want to be social workers for young kids because they dealt with anxiety or depression or were struggling with difficult things as young people. And they want to grow up and be able to help other young people in their position, like, process that and handle that, which I think is so beautiful. To see them draw connections with service and careers is really cool. They're young, and still learning who they are and what they care about. This is an essential time to instill in them the idea of a lifetime of caring for others, whether that is through a career of service, or just the way they live their lives.

What do you believe is the best first step towards advancing the future of learning? What is necessary to make it successful? The first thing that comes to mind is diversity in the classroom, accommodating different learners and life experiences, to allow for functional, student-led spaces. We should be curating classrooms where students learn from each other, lift each other up, and hold each other accountable. The value of this diversity and collaboration is something I feel is often lost in traditional classrooms. Because it's not easy: we need real support and resources, including support for special education and English language learners. We need co-teachers to expand these supports. And of course, project-based learning is vital to these efforts. But we also need trust.

Students can teach each other a lot if we let them. When they feel empowered to take ownership of their learning and lead classroom spaces, embracing their own backgrounds and learning styles, they tend to surprise themselves and one another. They feel more invested in their learning. But to do this effectively, we need diversity and real equity. Learning isn't one size fits all, and if we leave gaps in our supports, students with real knowledge and potential fall through. There's a delicate balance between providing the necessary scaffolding for our students, and trusting them to hold one another accountable.

When I was in high school, it was all about competition. If a peer got a higher grade then it reflected poorly on me and it was something to feel threatened by. At South Bronx Community Charter the goal of the community-based culture is for students to feel inspired, not threatened. Students should work together, sharing knowledge and appreciating that everyone's skills are different. A student who excels in English can work with someone talented in computer science, and both students can thrive. This contrasts with the idea that "I have to be the best at everything and do it on my own." That individualism is toxic for a learning environment and it causes social problems. So, I'd like to see a comprehensive shift towards collaborative learning implemented in more high schools.

Who is the most influential mentor you have had throughout your life? What qualities did they impart that you continue to embody in your work? One person I think of is a teacher I had in high school, Mr. Medlin. He only taught me for one semester, and it was a selective course, so he wasn't really my teacher. But sometimes, as a young person, you find an adult in an educational space who feels like they understand where you're coming from. For me, that was Mr. Medlin. The biggest thing he did was nurture my curiosity and passions. I had a lot of opinions in high school, was driven, and had a strong sense of justice. Mr. Medlin always gave me space to explore that. He never made me feel dramatic or stupid, would listen to me, and challenge me as an equal. It was one of the first times I felt like what I had to say was important, interesting, and worth hearing.

Now, working with students here, I'm getting to feel the other side of that. Kids talk all day. They love it. They have so much to say. Sometimes you wonder, "Why are you telling me this?" But what they're looking for is to feel heard, to feel like they're allowed to take up space, and that what they believe and think matters. And it does. I love that I get to be someone they can talk to, someone who will hear them out. Mr. Medlin was also the sponsor of a club I founded with my best friend, that dealt with women's issues on a legislative level. His mentorship allowed me to explore outside passions that weren't necessarily academic but that enriched my learning in a myriad of ways, and gave me a safe adult with whom to explore those interests. That feels really important to being a kid, and it's cool that I get to do that in my job, too.

Can you share an example of a successful project or activity that demonstrated the value your service year?

My relationships with the students are what I'm most proud of so far. I feel lucky to have so much student-facing time, working with them to explore new things and to just learn about each of them as individuals. Currently, I'm working mostly with the seniors, and have had the opportunity to get to know them all intimately. It's been really special.

My fellowship has focused on launching a new volunteer program, as in the past they've primarily focused on internships and career programs at SBC. I built capacity for community partnerships and asset mapping, compiling resources and matching them with students. The goal was to implement a 40-hour volunteer graduation requirement. For seniors, this meant completing 40 hours in one year, which was a heavier burden than the underclassmen faced. So my primary goal was to get them volunteering quickly, so they could still have these opportunities before going on to their post-secondary careers.

Midway through the second semester, most of the seniors are on track to finish their volunteer requirement, which I didn't honestly expect. This is significant, especially since many of our students had never done community service prior. At the beginning of the year, I had to spend a lot of time explaining what volunteering was. They pushed back against the idea of doing work without getting paid for it, especially considering their already-busy schedules. But now we have students tutoring, working in community gardens, volunteering in hospitals, with their churches – the volunteer opportunities span a wide array of interests.

It's beautiful to see students, who were hesitant at first, now enjoying their volunteer work. As I mentioned, there was some initial pushback. But now, they're having fun in after-school programs, helping with art projects, and their mindset has changed. They've even started their own community garden here on the SBC campus. It feels rewarding to see them trying new things, engaging with new communities and people. It's cool to watch them grow.