



July '25 Partner Spotlight



Rebeca Souza
AmeriCorps VISTA Fellow
Rediscover Center

This month, we're thrilled to present the seventh and final installment of our AmeriCorps VISTA Fellow Spotlight series for the 2024-2025 school year, a project that has been incredibly special for Citizen Schools. It's been an honor to celebrate and share the inspiring stories of our fellows, and we couldn't think of a better way to conclude than by featuring our newest fellow, Rebeca Souza.

A first-generation Xicana college graduate from California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, Rebeca brings a powerful dedication to combating poverty through supportive community programs. Her passion for accessible education and creative learning environments, particularly her belief in fostering emotional and educational support for individuals truly embodies the spirit of service. We know you will enjoy getting to know more about her work and we hope you will continue to follow the work of our fellows!

What drew you to the AmeriCorps and Citizen Schools mission and approach? I am a Communication, Studio Art graduate from California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt in Arcata California and I am a first generation Xicana student within my family to go to college. This is my second AmeriCorps Fellowship and I chose to be with AmeriCorps because I am very interested in working with programs that fight poverty. One of the most inspiring parts about having the opportunity to learn more about expanding programs designed to bring individuals and communities out of poverty is that they are there for individuals emotionally as well. Having someone there for you when no one seems to be can be overwhelming. Having someone who could understand your intentions and confusion, eliminates many frustrations and contradictions. I like to be a part of the AmeriCorps VISTA Program not only to return the appreciation I have for education success, but because I am certain that maintaining and providing a supportive environment is the right approach for advocating for individuals. I admire the way this program values the community as a whole.

For this service year specifically, what drove me to Citizen Schools is that I love working with kids and I believe in higher quality education in all shapes and forms. What drew me to the VISTA role at Rediscover Center was that it is a very creative and open space. When I was learning about Rediscover it seemed very lively and I feel like creativity is very rare, and I love the way that they incorporate arts and STEM together.

What does Experiential Learning (EL) mean to you, and why is it important? What would it look like to truly learn experientially? Experimental Learning to me means the emphasis of learning by doing and connecting real-world situations with classroom knowledge. I believe it is important because we communicate 90% of the time non-verbally. Being in real-world situations allows one to convey messages, build relationships, and create a positive learning environment without relying solely on spoken words.

To truly learn experientially you need to recognize that learning is most effective when individuals' needs are

met and they are engaged in meaningful and enjoyable experiences. This would emphasize the development of the whole person, encompassing intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual aspects, rather than focusing solely on academic achievements. I work a lot with our volunteers at Rediscover and I try to think about what they get out of volunteering and I try to make sure there is more of that available to them. If a student is interested in getting service hours to complete for their graduation, I try to ensure we offer them opportunities that could give them a full day of volunteering hours. Then some individuals reach out and they are looking for volunteering that is more hands-on and more creative so I work to share opportunities with them about our tinkering program. Others are interested in teaching or child development so I find ways to plug them into our programming in those areas. The goal of this is to give them the real-world learning opportunities that best fit their goals and interests and will therefore give them a sense of engagement.

What do you believe is the best first step towards advancing the future of learning? What is necessary to make it successful? I believe the best first step towards advancing the future of learning would be personalized learning. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, personalized learning recognizes that students learn at different paces and in different ways. By tailoring the learning experience, we can better engage students and help them achieve their full potential.

I believe scaffolding learning is necessary to make it successful. By that I mean breaking down complex topics into smaller, manageable steps to help students build a strong foundation before tackling more advanced material. Because not everyone learns the same way and everyone's different I feel like differentiated learning should really be targeted in 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? The most influential mentor I have had throughout my life is my former manager, Kenny Hills. I have two passions and two resumes. I have always had a passion for animals, and Communication. I have a Bachelor's in Communications and I am finishing off my Veterinary Tech courses. I met Kenny when I was working at a dog boarding facility where he was a manager.

Kenny taught me about interconnectedness and had a holistic approach in his leadership. He understood how different parts of a whole relate to and influence each other, rather than focusing solely on individual components. He always spoke to me as a genuine, kind person and focused on well-being whether that was mental, emotional or social.

He was a very patient man and I learned a lot from him. One of the most important qualities that he imparted in my daily life is to know when you are "overfilling your bucket." To make sure you are being honest with yourself about what is too much. He also told me to have faith. When I say faith, I don't mean in the religious sense necessarily. But if you're having a bad day, it's just today. And tomorrow is not promised, but it might just be your day.

Can you share a story about the impact of your service year thus far? I have had the opportunity to meet many great volunteers. One who comes to mind is Angel Wang who is a UCLA student and connected with us through one of her courses. After completing her term, Angel has become one of our regular volunteers! Angel is a psychology major and is highly organized, has strong time management and planning skills and is great to work with. We have developed the kind of relationship I hope to build with more of our volunteers to make sure they are comfortable and we have open lines of communication.

I try to make sure that any volunteer feels welcome and connected to the space. Our space is used by many different people for various purposes and projects. I try to effectively communicate what we have going on on a daily basis so our volunteers have a clear understanding of what the environment is like that they are walking into. I try to provide project examples and tasks ahead of time to set them up for success and make sure they know I am available for questions if something needs clarification.
