

**Carolina Economic Recovery Corps  
Executive Summary  
August 28, 2009**

**Overview:**

After the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or the stimulus legislation, was passed by Congress and signed by President Obama in February 2009, localities across the country and here in North Carolina faced numerous deadlines to apply for funding. In many cases, officials were unsure what funds were available, had to apply with tight deadlines, and had to work through multiple federal agencies. Following through on its commitment to public service and the economic development of the state, UNC-Chapel Hill—with funding from the Vice Chancellor of Research and Economic Development—dispatched nine graduate students or recent graduates across the state to assist area Councils of Governments, or COGs, in helping localities learn about and apply for stimulus funding. This program was based on local demand for “boots on the ground”—individuals to help understaffed local governments access the resources of the stimulus act. The Carolina Economic Recovery Corps included paid interns from the Department of City and Regional Planning, the School of Law, and the School of Social Work. After a summer of hands-on service, the Corps members provided reports detailing their work and reflecting on their experiences. This executive summary highlights common themes and lessons from these public engagement internships.

**Corps Work Experiences:**

- Eight interns worked in COGs, while one intern went to the NC League of Municipalities and coordinated a statewide inventory of stimulus funding being sought by local governments. In addition to grant-writing and technical assistance, all the interns assisted in gathering survey data.
- Corps members had different reporting structures and placements within their individual COGs, but most did not work directly under executive directors.
- While specific work outputs varied, typical Corps member activities included: researching, writing, and distributing information about grants; answering phone and email inquiries and making office visits; making presentations to local administrators and elected officials; and other outreach activities.
- Although some members worked on some non-ARRA grant opportunities, the majority of work activities centered on finding and sharing information about stimulus funding.
- While some activities were conducted out in regional communities, most Corps members spent the majority of their time in their COG office.
- Members researched and reported on a wide variety of grants, including but not limited to: Broadband, Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grants, and Assistance to Firefighters.

**Region Reflections:**

- Although some Corps members worked in metro COGs like Centralina (Charlotte) and Triangle J (Raleigh-Durham), most interns worked in rural regions facing particularly high unemployment and other economic disadvantages.

- Many of the COGs were operating at low capacity and, in the eyes of interns, did not have the required resources to be able to research stimulus funding and write grants.
- Local governments had varied relationships with their COGs. Some localities were fairly independent and had little interaction with these regional organizations, while others were more engaged with their COGs.
- As interns began their summer work, they observed varying levels of knowledge or engagement on stimulus funding from COGs and local governments. Some local officials felt inundated and overwhelmed by the large amount and high frequency of stimulus funding information. Some COGs and localities knew of funding opportunities, while others were much less aware. In several cases, COG officials were very skilled in certain policy areas, but had gaps in other areas or simply did not have adequate time to help localities seek grants.
- Many communities were reluctant to apply for federal grants because of upfront expenses such as engineering plans, hesitations about taking out loans for matching amounts, worries about not having the capacity to apply for and implement the grants, and other concerns. These worries were especially apparent in small municipalities but also extended to some mid-sized towns which were low on manpower and financial resources.
- Some Corps members worried that the COGs and regional communities would not have the resources—mainly staff time—to follow through on federal grant opportunities and other projects started by summer interns. One member wrote, “while my efforts will surely bring in additional funding to the region, it will also create additional hours of work for the COG staff.”

#### **Structure of the CERC Program:**

- Corps members enjoyed frequent contact with fellow interns. Members were able to compare notes online and also on the phone during weekly conference calls facilitated by the UNC Office of Economic and Business Development. Interns were glad to have forums to share information about the stimulus act, vent their frustrations, and seek advice from their peers, many of whom were experiencing similar situations in their regions.
- For the most part, Corps members enjoyed the flexibility of the program. Most interns felt they had adequate structure through the COGs, but also were given enough freedom to work independently and in ways that were responsive to the needs of their specific regions.
- In some cases, certain ARRA grant application deadlines already had passed by the time interns began working at their COGs in May.
- Given the rapid planning and deployment phase under the time constraints of a couple weeks, Corps members were generally happy with the program’s structure. However, some interns said the program could have run smoother with more initial planning. For example, at least one member would have liked to have clearer expectations from the outset.
- One Corps member suggested placing more than one intern in COGs that have fewer staffers able to handle the work demand.
- Corps members were passionate about their work. They continue to believe in the mission of this engaged partnership and would like to see it continued.

## **Project Outcomes:**

- Corps members directly wrote, revised or otherwise assisted in the writing of 22 grants over the 10-week period, resulting in 3 awards so far. In addition, Corps members provided technical assistance and outreach for 75-100 potential applications, often through phone or email consultation and by giving presentations to local officials. Over the 10-week period, Corps members had substantial interactions with more than 90 localities. In total, Corps members provided 3,500 hours of assistance to COGs and small, medium, and large communities through North Carolina.
- A comprehensive inventory of municipal and county ARRA applications has been created and will be maintained by the NC Office of Economic Recovery and Investment
- Three of the CERC interns have been offered and have accepted six-month positions with the state Office of Economic Recovery & Investment. Another Corps member has been offered and accepted an ongoing position with her COG. Two returning students are currently developing project proposals with the NC Rural Center to continue their work throughout the year.
- State and local officials and nonprofit representatives have expressed interest in continuing the initiative in some form.
- The Corps Program gave graduate students and recent graduates opportunities to apply their academic knowledge and directly engage with local communities. In some cases, members' experiences with the grant have helped reaffirm or redirect their career objectives. Two Social Work interns felt the work experience reinforced the personal outreach and mission elements of their schooling. Another student entered the internship wanting to write economic development plans for communities as a consultant. After her Corps experience, this student is less interested in working on the community level and instead wants to focus on regional partnerships.
- This initiative continued UNC's engagement efforts throughout the state in ways that were rapidly responsive to imminent challenges and timetables. Interns were able to connect local officials to outside resources and funding opportunities.
- The Corps program gave interns multiple opportunities to collaborate with outside organizations, including nonprofits, to seek funding. These activities expanded capacity by creating or strengthening partnerships that localities and COGs may be able to expand.

## **Acknowledgements:**

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UNC Vice Chancellor of Research and Economic Development; NC League of Municipalities; the NC Rural Center; the eight participating Councils of Government (Triangle J COG, Isothermal Planning Commission, Piedmont Triad COG, Land of Sky Regional Commission, Cape Fear COG, Mid-East Commission, Centralina COG, and the Upper Coast Plain COG); UNC School of Government; and the state Office of Economic Recovery & Investment.

For more information on this program and other activities, please visit the Office of Economic and Business Development Web site: <http://research.unc.edu/oebd>.