

Year of Service Opens New Vistas

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When Stephanie O'Brien moved to New Orleans from New England last November, she had signed on for a one-year stint as an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) member. She had never been to New Orleans. Now O'Brien says she can't imagine leaving the Crescent City when her service ends.



Stephanie O'Brien, center, offers assistance during a summer camp staffed by high school volunteers. O'Brien is the Tulane AmeriCorps VISTA liaison with Catholic Charities, the largest health and social services provider in the Gulf South. (Photo by Mallory Montgomery)

O'Brien, 22, is one of the 25 AmeriCorps [VISTA members](#) at Tulane University who work with partner agencies, acting as liaisons between the university and the community. At Catholic Charities, O'Brien is developing partnerships and conducting volunteer outreach. This summer, she launched an internship program with seven interns from different universities.

"I've made lots of different relationships with people in the community that allow my work to be something different every day," says O'Brien, who is a graduate from

Wesleyan University.

The VISTA members receive training and support from Tulane that allows them to better serve their partner agencies and to further their professional development. They also organize the activities of Tulane service-learning students and public-service interns placed at partner sites. The Louisiana office of the Corporation for National Community Service's AmeriCorps VISTA program is funding the initiatives.

Given the widespread destruction from Hurricane Katrina and the following floods, many of Tulane's community partners required assistance in accepting volunteers or repositioning their services to meet the needs of the New Orleans community, says Vincent Ilustre, executive director of the Tulane Center for Public Service.

"The infrastructure and capacity created by Tulane's VISTA program will allow organizations and communities to utilize the services provided by public-service students and the university more effectively and creatively," Ilustre says.

The Center for Public Service's AmeriCorps [VISTA program](#) has become a model for four other universities and communities across the country — Virginia Tech University, Otterbein College, Augsburg College and the University of Minnesota.