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Peace Corps at 50: Bringing the World Back Home

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Peace Corps at 50: Bringing the world back home

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The Peace Corps is 50 this year.

For those old enough to remember, the anniversary of its founding evokes memories of idealistic young people answering President John F. Kennedy's famous call to national service: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

A half-century ago this fall, the first 500 volunteers left for two years of service in Africa and Latin America. Tens of thousands of Americans joined them throughout the 1960s.

While the Peace Corps continues to dispatch volunteers around the world (8,675 currently serve in 77 countries), critics question whether this 50-year-old program is still relevant in a post-Cold War and post-9/11 world. They charge that its model of sending generalists abroad, mostly recent college graduates, does not match the current needs of poor nations for experienced, highly technical expertise.

They add that if the program wants to influence critical regions for U.S. foreign policy, it should devote less attention to sub-Saharan Africa, where 37 percent of volunteers serve, and focus more on the Middle East, where only 4 percent of volunteers now are.

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The Peace Corps and its defenders counter that its volunteers provide critical grassroots assistance in developing nations and that the program has evolved with the times. It partners with thousands of NGOs and has moved into fields like HIV/AIDS prevention, small-business development and information technology.

At the same time, the personal connections it fosters between volunteers and people in other nations make its volunteers, in the words of President Obama, important "emissaries of hope and goodwill to the far corners of our world." All of this, they add, comes with a very small price tag: The Peace Corps' annual budget of $400 million costs less than 28 hours of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Both the critics and defenders of the Peace Corps judge the organization on its ability to change other nations' views of the United States, either by offering technical assistance or by making friends for the United States in the world. What is missing from these debates is a frank acknowledgment that the Peace Corps teaches Americans as much as it serves the world. The organization's greatest value may be in "bringing the world back home" through its more than 200,000 former volunteers.

The Peace Corps was founded with three goals: 1) helping to further economic development in poor nations; 2) helping to promote "a better understanding of Americans on the part of the people served"; and 3) "helping promote a better
understanding of other peoples on the part of all Americans."

All three goals were products of the Cold War.

In the wake of the Cuban revolution and the decolonization of Africa, U.S. policymakers rushed to compete with the Soviet Union for the "hearts and minds" of people in developing nations. At the same time, the Peace Corps' call to service appealed to Americans eager to see the United States' rising global power as wholly altruistic and benevolent. The Vietnam War tarnished this view, and for many years, Peace Corps volunteer rates plummeted.

Today, applications to join the Peace Corps are on the rise and the program enjoys its largest number of volunteers in 40 years. In part, this rising popularity reflects the present, dismal job market: recent college graduates no longer choose from a bevy of lucrative offers. Yet, it also demonstrates the personal and professional value that young people see in the program.

While volunteers often make a difference in small communities around the world, they return with important international experience and an education about the world they could never have gotten in the classroom or semester-long study-abroad programs.

The Peace Corps can do valuable work in grass-roots development, but it was long ago eclipsed by thousands of other specialized programs and projects in the development field. Rather than seeing the Peace Corps as an engine of development, we might instead think about it as fostering Americans' education for the 21st century.

President Obama and other political leaders have called for Americans to improve their knowledge of math, science and technology. We should also recognize that a global education requires knowledge of the history, culture and perspectives of peoples around the world.

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Rather than abstract notions of the "Third World," democracy and free markets, Peace Corps volunteers bring home a fine-grained view of the complexities of other cultures. Rather than static views of "them" and "us," Peace Corps volunteers meet a range of people with different ideas abroad.

Returned Peace Corps volunteers include the founders of Netflix and The Nature Company, ambassadors, directors of the U.S. Agency for International Development, university presidents, members of Congress, pastors, heads of non-government aid groups, journalists and novelists.

Through the Coverdell World Wise Schools program, returned volunteers bring their international experience to U.S. elementary and secondary schools. In 2010, more than 5,400 returned volunteers worked with schools in all 50 states.
Finally, returned volunteers maintain ties to other nations through personal connections and through 140 private organizations that send microloans and grants abroad.

Recognizing the Peace Corps as a force for international education does not mean that the organization need not adapt or improve. The agency must address recent criticisms of its volunteer training and safety measures. The program should work harder to diversify its volunteer pool, opening a window onto international experience to more Americans from different walks of life.

Finally, in promoting the Peace Corps abroad, we as Americans might insist less on the good we are providing others and talk more about what we can learn from the world.

Section: Commentary
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