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Peace Corps at 50: Bringing the world back home

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Author: Nicole Sackley

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 grass-roots 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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