

The Peace Corps and Higher Education: Finally the Envisioned Partnership?

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Abstract

A number of structural and contextual changes underway suggests that now that the Peace Corps has begun its second half-century, it may be the opportune time for a broader and deeper strategic partnership with higher education along the lines that the Peace Corps founders' envisioned. That partnership would involve higher education playing an expanded role in recruiting, training, and evaluating Peace Corps volunteers to supplement the more than 100 existing partnerships between the Peace Corps and higher education in graduate study.

Introduction

With the Peace Corps' 50th anniversary year in 2011 and its global celebration concluded, now is the time to develop a strategic initiative that will help advance the agency's timeless mission of a more prosperous world at peace, and help achieve that mission by finally embracing the strategic partnership between higher education and the Peace Corps that its founders envisioned. In 2013, with the Peace Corps now (at) near its highest level in 40 years—8,000 volunteers serving in 74 countries—the time may be ideal for this enhanced partnership (*Peace Corps*, 2012).

In its earliest formulation, the Peace Corps was not designed to be a government-administered program. Rather, higher education institutions were envisioned as the essential delivery mechanism for Peace Corps training and programs. The February 1961 memo to newly elected President John F. Kennedy proposing the initial blueprint for the Peace Corps stated that “whenever feasible, the overseas projects themselves should be administered through contracts with colleges, universities and other educational institutions” (*Shriver*, 1961, p. 14).

In designing the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver and the other architects wanted to rely heavily on universities because of their expertise and potential. Shriver saw higher education as one of the few sectors that could educate Peace Corps volunteers in languages and understanding other cultures and could offer the technical training needed to advance the Peace Corps' overall mission by addressing its three goals: (1) providing technical assistance, (2)

enhancing understanding of the United States, and (3) promoting greater understanding of other countries and cultures (<http://www.peacecorps.gov>).

Shriver also believed that higher education would benefit from this engagement with the Peace Corps. By providing this training before their service, as well as offering graduate study and potential faculty positions for volunteers after the completion of their service, the Peace Corps could help “globalize” American education. Shriver saw not only that the universities could contribute great intellectual and training resources, but that engagement with the Peace Corps could assist in transforming American colleges and universities into “world universities” (Shriver, 1964, pp. 14–15).

Despite higher education’s abundant intellectual resources and the perceived potential, as Shriver sought to turn the bold but untested concept of the Peace Corps into practice, he chose not to rely exclusively on universities, or on nongovernmental organizations or faith-based organizations. Shriver said, “[A]s with a parachute jumper, the chute had to open the first time.” Thus he opted for a government-administered program to better control factors ensuring that the chute would open (Shriver, 1964, p. 13). By relying on a government-administered program, the Peace Corps did not have to engage significantly and consistently with external partners, whether universities or nongovernmental organizations.

Although higher education did not administer the Peace Corps program in its early days, it played a significant training role. For much of its first decade, during the 1960s, volunteer training took place on college campuses. These included Ivy League schools, land-grant universities, and public universities as well as specialized training institutions like the School for International Training, now part of World Learning. This model of relying on higher education to provide volunteer training shifted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, mainly for economic reasons. The Peace Corps found it advantageous to provide the training in situ, in the country where volunteers were going to serve. Not only was it less expensive, training in-country accelerated acquisition of language and cross-cultural acumen, skills critical to volunteer success.

Besides the training function, in the Peace Corps’ first decade there also was some experimentation with “outsourcing” a country program to higher education. Under the leadership of then Notre Dame president Father Ted Hesburg, and under the auspices of the Indiana Consortium of Higher Education, the Peace Corps outsourced the training, placement, and support of volunteers

in Chile. In addition to being extremely successful for both the volunteers (*Scanlon, 1997*) and the Peace Corps itself, this instance of delegating a country program to higher education also greatly strengthened Notre Dame's expertise on Latin America.

Conditions are increasingly favorable for an expanded partnership between higher education and the Peace Corps, although with some modifications to the initially envisioned partnership. Dramatic changes in technology and travel link the world in ways unimaginable when the Peace Corps was created a half century ago in 1961. Our world today is far more urban, global, and connected—but it is still plagued by persistent problems of poverty, insecurity, and injustice that the Peace Corps was designed to help combat. As a consequence, countries are increasingly asking the Peace Corps for more highly skilled volunteers. The demand for specialized training in numerous areas, such as public health, food security, and teaching English as a foreign language, offers many opportunities for universities.

In addition, today's circumstances create many more opportunities for higher education to expand its international service programs, whether self-administered or in conjunction with other leading programs, such as the Peace Corps. An added impetus is the growing appreciation for international and domestic service programs as a cost-efficient and programmatically effective way to address pressing global challenges, especially in these difficult economic times (*United Nations Volunteers, 2011*).

History of the Peace Corps

At its origins, there were ineluctable links between the Peace Corps and higher education. The architects of the Peace Corps, including President John F. Kennedy's brother-in-law Sargent Shriver and former senator and later president of Bryn Mawr College Harris Wofford, envisioned a mutually beneficial and ongoing partnership between higher education and the Peace Corps. Shriver and Wofford both suggested that the Peace Corps would not have been possible without universities (*Shriver, 1964; Wofford, 1980, pp. 259–260*).

In fact, the very origin of the Peace Corps can be directly attributed to higher education. At 2 a.m. on October 14, 1960, after the final television presidential debate with Vice President Richard Nixon, then-Senator John Kennedy offered impromptu remarks to a crowd of 5,000–10,000 gathered in front of the University of Michigan's Student Union. Kennedy basically posed a set of questions, challenging the students to apply what they were learning

to improve the lives of those in need in poorer parts of the world. That call to service presaged President Kennedy's clarion call in his inaugural address.

So, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country, and my fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but together what we can do for the freedom of man. (*Kennedy, 1961*)

This second, less well-known, part of Kennedy's most remembered line from his inaugural speech received its clearest expression in the founding of the Peace Corps.

Given this history, Sargent Shriver said that the Peace Corps "might still be just an idea but for the affirmative response of those Michigan students and faculty" (*Shriver, 1964, p. 13*). The students, led by Alan and Judith Guskin, responded promptly and emphatically to candidate John Kennedy's call to service through a petition, containing nearly 1,000 signatures, indicating a willingness to serve. That petition helped ignite a movement and inspired a generation to serve internationally.

Contrary to common understanding, this idea for international service was not new when Kennedy spoke in 1960. Approximately 57 colleges and universities were administering international programs in 37 countries. Well-known examples of international service programs were also offered by faith-based organizations, including Jesuit Volunteer Service, Brethren World Service, Jewish World Service, and the American Friends Service Committee. Many of these programs, most notably the Experiment in International Living, which is linked with the School for International Training in Vermont, have close ties with higher education. In addition, the U.S. Congress in 1958–1959 saw a variety of legislative proposals to create an international youth volunteer service corps, authored by Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Congressman Harry Reuss of Wisconsin, among others. Kennedy's words on the University of Michigan campus elevated the prominence of service in the national imagination, inspiring students to serve internationally (*Wofford, 1980, p. 245*).

In addition to being the ideal venue for recruiting volunteers, in the Peace Corps' early days universities were essential partners for volunteer training. For example, in the spring of 1961, the first group of Peace Corps volunteers was sent to Rutgers University to be trained in the Spanish language and Colombian culture before

leaving for their assignment in Colombia. As mentioned previously, the Peace Corps “outsourced” a country program, Chile, to a consortium of Indiana universities led by Notre Dame. This consortium was responsible for training and supporting the volunteers recruited by the Peace Corps. In effect, Notre Dame administered the Peace Corps’ program in Chile, and this unique collaboration between the Peace Corps and a university was successful in a variety of ways. The volunteers were well trained, received good job placements, and were effectively supported by university staff and faculty. This arrangement also had a positive impact on the members of the consortium. In particular, it enabled Notre Dame to significantly broaden and deepen its engagement in Latin America and was part of the impetus behind the growth of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, one of the preeminent centers on Latin America in the United States. Unfortunately, this model has never been replicated (Scanlon, 1997).

Peace Corps founders Shriver and Wofford envisioned a positive impact on higher education resulting from engagement with the Peace Corps. For example, in the report to President Kennedy proposing the Peace Corps, Shriver wrote, “It is time for American universities to become truly world universities . . . [and] by involving universities on a large scale, thus expanding their teaching and research to the world, the Peace Corps would help with this transformation” (Shriver, 1964, p. 14). Greater engagement with higher education could have yielded more Peace Corps contributions to American higher education like that at Notre Dame.

Besides recruiting and training volunteers, the link between the Peace Corps and higher education continued after the volunteers’ service. From the beginning, a significant percentage of returned Peace Corps volunteers came home to enter graduate school. Tens of thousands of volunteers returned to the United States to pursue professional degrees in public policy, international health, nursing, social work, and international affairs, among other disciplines (Bridgeland, Wofford, Quigley, & Milano, 2011). These returned Peace Corps volunteers also helped establish African studies departments and strengthened linguistics and anthropology departments and schools of public health and international affairs, among other programs. In this way, they helped realize Shriver’s aspirations for the Peace Corps to play an important role in assisting the globalization of American higher education.

Today, universities across the country support nearly 100 Peace Corps Masters and Peace Corps Fellows programs. These programs combine volunteer service with accelerated graduate study and

sometimes tuition benefits. They range across fields as diverse as public health, international affairs, urban planning, social work, and public policy, to name just a few, and include tuition benefits ranging from free tuition to modest tuition credit. Approximately 40% of returned Peace Corps volunteers undertake graduate work. These volunteers are highly prized in graduate classrooms because of their field experience, their foreign language skills, and their ability to work in teams and in different contexts to overcome significant obstacles (Bridgeland et al., 2011; Peace Corps, 2012).

Structural Changes Affecting an Enhanced Partnership

A number of ongoing structural changes related to international volunteering make an enhanced partnership between the Peace Corps and higher education much more attractive. These trends include (1) the internationalization of volunteering, (2) the proliferation of programs providing international service experiences, and (3) the rich variation in these programs.

Internationalization of Volunteering

Since the Peace Corps was established a half century ago, volunteering has been internationalized. Volunteering has become much more prevalent, and in many cases there is a blurring of domestic and international volunteer service, with participants often opting to do both. Government-sponsored international volunteer programs exist in some 20 countries, including Japan, Korea, Germany, and Canada. Because volunteering has also become increasingly bilateral and multilateral, it is not just a one-way program sending volunteers to the “developing world.” Examples of these two-way and multilateral programs include Atlas Corps (or “the reverse Peace Corps”), which brings fellows from other countries to volunteer in the United States, and regional international volunteer programs created by the EU (European Union) and ASEAN (*Association of Southeast Asian Nations*; Rieffel, 2005).

In 2011, which the United Nations proclaimed the International Year of Volunteers + 10, there was a growing global perception that volunteering could be a powerful tool in the endless fight to address complex issues of human development, especially those related to education and health (*United Nations Volunteers*, 2011). The United Nations publication *State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2011* recognizes international volunteering as a strategy to help develop skills and attitudes that foster citizenship, a critical aspect of the

mission of many higher education institutions in this dynamic and globalizing world.

International service programs designed to build global citizenship skills include the recently established Global Citizen Year program. This program provides highly structured and closely supervised international volunteer experiences that promote global citizenship during a “gap year” between high school and college. During this experience, young people develop language skills, acquire field experience, and broaden their worldview, all of which are essential building blocks for global citizenship.

Proliferation of Providers

Perhaps the most startling change since the Peace Corps was established is the number of institutions that are now providing high quality international volunteer experiences. In the early 1960s, Americans had relatively few opportunities to travel or serve internationally. These opportunities were generally confined to military service, a limited number of study abroad programs, and a very few international service opportunities, most of which were administered by faith-based organizations. Today, however, a multitude of providers offer a myriad of international service programs.

Reflecting the dramatic increase in the number of institutions providing international volunteer programs, the Building Bridges Coalition (<http://www.buildingbridgescoalition.org>)—dedicated to expanding the quality, quantity, and impact of international volunteering—has more than 300 members. The Building Bridges Coalition includes more than 100 universities with international service programs, suggesting that there is considerable potential for a significant enhancement of the partnership between the Peace Corps and higher education. These higher education programs sponsor international service experiences during spring break, winter break, and summers; some combine international service with study abroad experiences. These experiences, which are often the participants’ initial international experiences, inevitably whet students’ appetites for more international experiences, as well as helping them settle on courses of study and make career choices.

Another remarkable development has been the increase in international service programs provided by corporations. IBM, for example, has an exemplary international service corps program that is designed to align with the corporation’s strategic market opportunities. Demand for this program is making it a valuable supplement to IBM’s traditional leadership programs. IBM leaders have said that they especially value how these programs help their

employees develop and master the intercultural, interdisciplinary team-building skills that are essential to the future success of global companies (Litow, 2011).

Faith-based organizations have also significantly expanded their international service programs in the past 50 years. In addition to programs of the historical peace churches like the Quakers, Catholics and Jews have long-standing service programs. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of faith-based international service programs, many administered by evangelical churches. (See the membership list of the Building Bridges Coalition, <http://www.buildingbridgescoalition.org>).

Rich Variation in Programs

Since the Peace Corps was created a half-century ago, there has been a dramatic increase in the variety of international service programs. These programs might involve studying turtles in Costa Rica, building houses in the Philippines, working in an HIV/AIDS clinic in Kenya, or teaching English in Vietnam. In addition to the wide variety of focus and locale, international service programs also offer their participants a choice of duration, a direct response to the demand from individuals who want to serve, but may have limited time available to do so. Participation can range in length from a week, to a month, or to a semester; there are even year-long programs, like World Teach and Princeton in Asia. The Peace Corps' 27-month program, which includes 3 months of training and 2 years of service, is considered the gold standard.

There is growing evidence for strong on- and off-ramps between the shorter term programs and longer programs like World Teach and the Peace Corps. Based on the experience of 210,000 Peace Corps volunteers these past 50 years, it is generally thought that the best volunteers tend to be individuals with prior volunteer service and international experience, ideally an international service experience (see Bridgeland et al., 2011). In this regard, higher education's international service programs are superb preparation for Peace Corps volunteer service.

While higher education's international service programs are shorter than the Peace Corps', they are effective in exposing students to cultures and environments different from their own. This exposure can shift students' worldviews. These service programs also help inculcate empathy and flexibility, which are essential to volunteer success and serve as critical building blocks for global citizenship. In many instances, these international service experiences help students refine their thinking about their majors and

ultimately their careers. For example, in a survey conducted for the National Peace Corps and Civic Enterprises by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 96% of the 11,138 respondents indicated that their international volunteer experience influenced their choice of careers (*Bridgeland et al., 2011*).

Contextual Factors That May Influence Collaboration Between the Peace Corps and Higher Education

In addition to changes in programming, contextual factors may influence the partnership between higher education and the Peace Corps. Some factors are conducive to this enhanced partnership; others may inhibit it. These factors include the technology revolution, growing concerns with security, questions about financing, and changing demographics.

The Technology Revolution

The rapid pace and broad scope of the information and communication technology revolution is sweeping the world. When the first Peace Corps volunteers arrived at their posts in the early 1960s, infrequent and unreliable mail was the only means of communication. Today, volunteers have regular access to the internet, they maintain blogs, and in some cases they have daily cell phone conversations with their parents. This revolution in communication technology is weaving the world together in remarkable ways. It is also influencing the nature of international volunteering. The changes in information and communication technology make the problems of other parts of the world more apparent, and often motivate individuals to do something to make a positive difference. The ready and easy access to these technologies provides invaluable resources that can strengthen an international volunteer experience. Access to such technologies, however, also may inhibit integration into the host community, limit language learning, and interfere with other elements of the experience since volunteers may stay too closely engaged with their family and friends at home, thus missing out on essential educative aspects of their volunteer experience.

Growing Concerns with Security

After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, U.S. citizens everywhere, especially those who travel or live internationally, have become increasingly attentive to security-related issues. This is caused by concerns related not only to terrorism, but also to

violence that may be drug-related or may occur due to a government's inability to provide safety and security in some contexts. Security has always been a consideration for those who travel. However, evidence indicates that security concerns are growing more salient. For example, in the 1960s, just 2% of the serving volunteers identified security as a concern. In the 2000s, that number has risen to 7% (*Bridgeland et al., 2011*). These growing security concerns add to the challenges higher education faces in supporting international programs.

Questions about Financing

A major influence on the Peace Corps is the growing financial crisis in the federal budget. As a taxpayer-financed discretionary international program, the Peace Corps is likely to come under mounting pressure to reduce its budget and/or find alternative financing. This pressure will increase as the aging U.S. population places an added burden on government entitlement programs, reducing available funds for discretionary programs like the Peace Corps.

On the positive side, this trend has the potential to motivate Peace Corps leaders to seriously explore how they might strengthen partnerships with higher education (and other sectors) in mutually beneficial ways. These partnerships could involve some joint financing of programs, or outsourcing of some Peace Corps recruiting and training activities to colleges and universities. This is just one possible approach that would better align the Peace Corps' relationship with higher education.

Changing Demographics

A fourth contextual factor that will influence the demand for international service programs is the aging U.S. population. Many baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) are retiring, but will seek to stay active through service and other activities. This will likely increase the demand for high quality, best practices international (and domestic) service activities and programs. It is inconceivable that the Peace Corps could meet this demand. In fact, today the Peace Corps cannot meet the existing demand for volunteer opportunities, with roughly three qualified applicants for every available volunteer position. This suggests that the higher education sector could broaden its international service offerings for alumni and others, customizing them to meet the demand and interests of a graying population. Colleges and universities could

do this through expanding their own programs, expanding consortia approaches, or partnering with nonprofit organizations or for-profit providers as well as with the Peace Corps.

Potential Benefits of an Enhanced Partnership Between the Peace Corps and Higher Education

An enhanced partnership between the Peace Corps and higher education has many potential benefits. Promising areas include recruiting, training, research, and a more global curriculum.

For universities, a more robust partnership between the Peace Corps and higher education would provide a clear “glide path” for alumni through the Peace Corps to graduate school and/or a career. If the Peace Corps shifted some of its training activities, perhaps around specialized topics, that could provide some additional income for professors and resources for the university. By linking students and faculty more directly, the Peace Corps could provide new and expanded opportunities for faculty research. This effort could also assist universities in keeping their curricula current and more globally relevant.

Despite the potential difficulties, many opportunities exist for an enhanced partnership with higher education that would provide programmatic and strategic advantages for the Peace Corps. For example, higher education’s expertise on a variety of topics could strengthen the Peace Corps’ training, programming, and monitoring and evaluation. A broader partnership would also help the Peace Corps “bring the world home,” one of its three congressionally mandated goals. Widening the Peace Corps’ range of higher education partnerships could engender strong institutional ties in virtually every congressional district, laying the groundwork for long-term congressional support.

In a commencement speech at New York University in 1964, Shriver called for American higher education to be much more directly engaged in addressing the problems of the city, the country, and the world. He said,

I call upon NYU and all the great universities to practice the politics of service here at home in your own neighborhoods—not by courses in responsibility or in American social problems, not by lecture, not by commencement talks, but by political action in the true sense of politics (the Greek sense), in the service of your city. (*Shriver, 1964, p. 118*)

Elements of an Enhanced Partnership

A number of elements essential to implementing the enhanced partnership are already in place. They involve three key areas: recruiting, training, and evaluating.

Recruiting

Most Peace Corps recruitment currently takes place on campus since approximately 90% of the current volunteers enter service right out of college (*Peace Corps, 2012, <http://www.peacecorps.gov>*). The Peace Corps does this through recruiters who target college campuses, as well as graduate students who are part-time representatives on college campuses. The Peace Corps publicizes the colleges and universities that send the most graduates into the Peace Corps. The agency could encourage colleges and universities to play a more active role in recruiting by providing modest financial resources to the higher education institutions that do the most to attract the next cohort of Peace Corps volunteers.

Training

Although sound reasoning supported the shift from campus to in-country training, this change deprived colleges and universities of an important role that provided ongoing connections to the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps could further engage with colleges and universities by contracting for them to provide some components of the language and cross-cultural training here in the United States. In addition, as the world is increasingly asking for more highly trained Peace Corps volunteers, the Peace Corps could similarly contract portions of professional training, especially around teaching of English as a foreign language, food security, and public health. This would offer the added benefit of making the Peace Corps more rooted in the United States, with higher education as an ally and part of its domestic constituency. The increasing online and internet capability within higher education also offers enormous opportunities for an expanded role in training and supporting volunteers, and perhaps even providing some of the content for the nearly 30% of the 9,000 current volunteers who are engaged in education.

Evaluating

This area may hold the greatest potential for an expanded engagement of higher education with the Peace Corps. For most of its history, the growing demand from countries wanting

volunteers and citizens wanting to serve kept the Peace Corps focused on recruiting, training, and placing its volunteers, so there has been little systematic evaluation of the organization's impact. Most reactions to Peace Corps work have been anecdotal and qualitative. The evaluations that have occurred generally have focused on the impact on volunteers, rather than on perceptions about the Peace Corps, or on the communities that volunteers have assisted. Higher education has considerable expertise that is readily applicable to enhancing the Peace Corps' evaluation capabilities.

Conclusion

The Peace Corps has been remarkably successful in its first 50 years. As a government-administered program, it had the safe parachute landing that its founders wanted. The initial skepticism that generated the term "Kiddie Corps" has evaporated, and the Peace Corps has overcome considerable challenges and, against the odds, has endured.

Along with the Fulbright Program, the Peace Corps is perhaps the most respected international program sponsored by the U.S. government. Given current global trends and the likely growing financial challenges, the Peace Corps' success will be hard to duplicate in its next half century, especially if it remains a solely government-administered program. To continue to succeed, it must innovate. Fortunately, the blueprint for potentially fruitful innovation was developed by Shriver, Wofford, and others long ago. This would involve operating the Peace Corps through multiple channels: government administered, university led, and nongovernmental organization managed. Among these, a broadened and deepened partnership with higher education holds great promise for increasing the prospects for the Peace Corps' future success.

Strengthening this partnership will benefit both parties. Higher education will partner with the leading international service program provider and increase its capacity to further expand international service programs. These programs are vital for developing the global citizens, future leaders, and service-oriented individuals that our communities, countries, and world need so desperately. Benefits accruing to the Peace Corps would include enhancement of its training, programming, and evaluation capabilities as well as added financial support.

Higher education can help make the Peace Corps' next 50 years even brighter than its first 50 years. As Sargent Shriver continually exhorted us, and Harris Wofford often reminds us, let us make our plans executable so that our dreams and actions can be large and we can significantly expand international service as a step toward worldwide peace. This is the goal that the Peace Corps was established to seek. An enhanced partnership with higher education could offer significant progress toward realizing the aspirations on which the Peace Corps was founded.

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