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THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERISM IN THE PEACE CORPS ON CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND SKILL TRANSFERABILITY

Mary DeCarlo, Ph. D., Director, Volunteer Development Institute

During the first few years after the formation of the Peace Corps a plethora of studies was conducted to determine why people joined the Peace Corps. Almost all these studies agree that the idealism of youth in the 1960's, spurred by President Kennedy's exhortation to "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," was the prime motivating force.

In a study published in 1964, an analysis was made of the ratings given by 1568 volunteers on the reasons for joining the Peace Corps as reported in the Close of Service Questionnaire. The most important reasons were to gain intercultural experience, to work with people, and a belief in the Peace Corps (Marvel, 1964). A 1963 study found that, of 2612 Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) asked, "What do you hope to accomplish by joining the Peace Corps?," almost all wanted to do something for the Peace Corps such as helping others by applying their skills overseas. The responses to this question were divided into three classifications: those who desired to give something to the Peace Corps, those who were primarily concerned with what the Peace Corps could give them, and substantiating statements (see Table 1).

These results show that 93% desired to give something to the cause of world peace while 65% were concerned with personal benefits from their Peace Corps experience. (There is obviously an overlap in responses, but even if one takes that into account, the majority still desired to "give".) Within the "Getting" category, the practical advantage mentioned most frequently was learning or gaining general experience which 17% hoped to derive from their service. 12% expressed the more specific desire to further a career vocation.

ENHANCEMENT OF CAREER POTENTIAL

In the early 1960's while the majority of those who volunteered in the Peace Corps did so for idealistic purposes, they later found that their overseas service had also strengthened their marketable skills and profoundly affected their career choices. A 1966 study found that 34% of over 2000 volunteers had no career goal when they began their 2 years of service. After service, only 12% were still uncertain (Calvert, 1966). Longworth agreed: "Few Volunteers had made career commitments before joining the Peace Corps. For those who had, service overseas was an enlightening experience, an expansion of horizons that was likely to stimulate new professional interests" (Longworth, 1971). The Calvert study compared the goals of Peace Corps Volunteers before and after service (see Table 2). These data seem to illustrate that those goals which were most enhanced during the terms of service were social service and the Government. The rest stayed roughly constant.

In 1971 a study on the returned volunteer reported that 2 out of 3 Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) who decided to pursue further education indicated "their educational interests and career plans were directly influenced by Peace Corps service. The direction of influence tended to favor the fields of education, economics, linguistics, international relations, agriculture, and the social sciences. Nearly a third of the students expressed the intention of using their skills overseas, usually in the area or country of their Peace Corps service" (Longworth, 1971, p. 15).

Finally, in October, 1969, the TransCentury Corporation conducted a study of RPCVs and found the results reported in Table 3 concerning the applicability of Peace Corps service to the present job of the RPCV. 67.2% felt that their Peace Corps experience enhanced their career potential or in some way related to their present job, compared to 28.7% who thought their service had little or no relevance.

THE SITUATION IN THE 1970s

In some respects the situation today is quite different than it was in the 1960s, especially with respect to reasons for joining the Peace Corps and the generalist focus of Peace Corps recruitment being replaced with a more specialist focus. "Today, individual goals have become more modest and few volunteers set off any more believing their efforts will change the world" (Springfield Daily News, December, 1976).

Results of a June, 1976, questionnaire show the change from "Giving" to "Getting" motivations. The data in Table 4 were obtained in answer to the question: "What was your primary reason for joining the Peace Corps? What was your secondary reason?" These data illustrate a change in motives for joining the Peace Corps. No longer are volunteers as idealistic about their ability to change the world. While the majority still state this as their primary reason for joining the Peace Corps, a significant proportion of others place more importance on personal growth, desire to see other cultures, and travel.

Many reasons have been advanced for this change, the most popular being the condition of the US economy and subsequent employment prospects. Don Stewart, a Los Angeles-based ACTION spokesman, told the Rocky Mountain News that the large number of recent applications "is due to two factors: the economic recession and the bleak unemployment picture. Many young people with little or no chance of obtaining a job under the present economic conditions are turning to the Peace Corps instead."¹ A seemingly typical case is that of Wilson Hill, Jr., who, upon graduation from North Carolina State in 1974, could not decide what to do with his eco-

¹Richard Trubo, "Peace Corps Enjoys Postwar Revival, Rocky Mountain News, Denver, Colorado, December 8, 1976.

nomics degree. He decided "to spend the next two years in the Peace Corps traveling and helping other people while he decided what kind of work he would like to do. Hill says he decided to join the Peace Corps because 'It was intriguing to think about living in another country. I didn't quite know what to do with my economics degree'".²

A more cynical view of the reasons some people join the Peace Corps was stated by Special Services officer Craig Storti: due to a deteriorating employment situation in the States,

Many volunteers now see the Peace Corps as a means of getting work experience that will make them competitive on the job market when they return. (This was not the case 5 years ago; then, volunteers did not expect difficulty getting jobs when they completed their service and certainly did not see Peace Corps as a means to that end.) These new volunteers are not necessarily interested in the goals of the organization; they have committed themselves to a particular job which, coincidentally, happens to be in the Peace Corps.³

Storti grants this is a rather severe appraisal and applies only to a minority of Peace Corps volunteers.

The hypothesis that the Peace Corps experience provides the Volunteer with valuable career enhancement is as true today as it was in the '60s. Says Jeff Pesola, PCV in Brazil, "I'm growing personally, doing something different and I don't feel the pressure at work. But I'm also growing professionally. I have more responsibilities here than I would at home."⁴

For others, the Peace Corps has helped develop future career plans. Richard Figoni, PCV in El Salvador, got so involved in developing a seedless watermelon and thereby teaching plant genetics to local farmers that he concluded, "I don't want to teach biology any more. I want to work with plant improvement programs of developing countries."⁵

Philip Lopes calls the two years he spent as a PCV in Colombia "the turning point of my life. From that experience I made decisions about what I want to do with the rest of my life." The decisions included a career in human services and Lopes' subsequent appointment as the director of the Peace Corps in Ecuador.⁶

²Kathy Kopley, "He's Back After 2 Years in Africa: Chair Citian Serves with Peace Corps," Times, Thomasville, NC, December 10, 1976.

³Craig Storti, "Is Altruism Losing Ground in the Peace Corps?," Interaction, Volume 5, No. 4, January, 1977, p. 3.

⁴"Melrose Park Accountant Aids Peace Corps Effort in Brazil," Star-Sentinel, Melrose Park, Illinois, December 15, 1976, p. 6.

⁵Mildred Hamilton, "Seedless Watermelons Are the Fruits of Figoni's Labors," San Francisco Examiner, January 12, 1977.

⁶"Lopes New Director of Peace Corps in Ecuador," California Star, Dos Palos, December 9, 1976.

THE PCV PARTICIPATES IN BUILDING A NATIONAL CULTURE

Nation-building has been defined as the attempt to overcome cultural, language, skill and economic differences between various population groups (Pinkay, 1965). Peace Corps objectives were designed to be accomplished by just such a program of "assisting the developing countries in an institution-building program within a total program of development" (Colorado State University Research Foundation, 1961, p. 2-3).

There are two avenues by which the PCV contributes to building an LDC culture/nation: 1) by promoting change in attitudes and institutions which hinder growth of a national identity or culture; 2) by attempting to stop or alter the pace of change which threatens to destroy already existing seeds of national growth or culture.

Changing attitudes is an important part of building a culture. Often it is necessary to subordinate goals of more schools or greater food production to goals of changing attitudes of people in such a way that they will be able to perceive on their own what they want and what they need, and then, by collective action, proceed to develop their nation on their own. The PCV can play a vital role in promoting this kind of community development, which the UN defines as,

a process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress (Jones, 1966).

As a result of their training, PCVs are concerned with affecting the minds of the people of a community with less tangible but more lasting values and attitudes (Jones, 1966).

Thus, the first way in which a PCV contributes to LDC nation-building is by changing attitudes and institutions which are limited and narrow in outlook, much as PCV Jim Towers (Antigua) encourages Antiguanians to look at a broad, overall picture of today, tomorrow and the future in terms of work and benefits.

Very often, however, a developing country has had very few problems in adopting new, "modern" outlooks and goals. The problem occurs when these changed attitudes "get away" from the LDC and begin to destroy the culture which is at the very base of the nation-building process. When this occurs, a secondary avenue of

¹Alis Foster, "Volunteer Finds 'No Man Is an Island' on Antigua," Miami Herald, Florida, December 12, 1976.

approach by the PCV is called for.

Inka Benton, PCV in Iran, is an example of this second approach to nation-building. As an urban planner, Benton's greatest challenge in Iran was convincing the Iranians to preserve their way of life:

The government is pouring the oil money into street and road planning. It is all very short-sighted, paving enormous areas of streets, bulldozing through old sections, tearing down old buildings for wide, paved roads, and they don't even have many cars,' said the 58-year-old planner, architect and environmentalist.

What they want is against the whole way of life in Iran. They feel they are becoming modern, but the area is hot and windy with a lot of sand storms. Wide streets encourage the sand storms and eliminate shade. The most pleasant thing is the old, winding streets.⁸

Jack Helfgott, PCV in Micronesia, has also been confronted with a misplaced Western culture and has found himself teaching Micronesians to go back to a traditional way of life:

The school system that's been created there doesn't suit their civilization. The people are being overeducated for their life-style. This is leading to social problems, so we developed a sort of outward-bound program to teach them to go back to their roots.

The program concentrates on troublesome youths from the larger towns who have strayed from the ancient ways. We're helping them go back to basics, back to the land and the sea of their ancestors...⁹

Thus, a strong cultural identity is the basis which fosters nation-building. Where certain attitudes and institutions impede the development of this identity and/or the process of nation-building, the goal of the PCV is to focus on changing these attitudes. Where the process of "modernization" has "progressed" so far or so fast as to erode the underlying cultural identity, the goal of the PCV has been to bring the LDC population back to its culture.

⁸Joan Lisetor, "Helping Plan a Nation: Peace Corps Aide Gives View of Iran," Independent-Journal, San Rafael, California, December 18, 1976.

⁹Josie Z. Task, "Finds Service in Distant Micronesia Has Brought Him Closer to Judaism," Jewish News, Newark, NJ, December 16, 1976.

There are many examples of PCVs working to develop a cultural identity among local populations. Favorite examples usually cited concern PCVs promoting local arts and crafts. The experience of Julia and Isaiah Zager in Peru illustrates PCV involvement in local crafts and promoting local culture, national identity, and thus nation-building:

We worked at developing cottage industries that would produce high-quality crafts and would preserve native skills. As we worked, we learned a lot and we developed a basic method for community development. We tried out our ideas in different situations and found that they worked. We even stayed an extra year to work in craft and community development in another area.¹⁰

Ali Fujino, a PCV in Honduras, was charged with compiling an arts and crafts survey to study marketing possibilities that could boost the country's economy. She helped promote Honduras's Mayan heritage by designing products consonant with that heritage and promoting embroidery cooperatives. Fujino has also helped to organize museums to house Mayan artifacts important to Honduran history. Thus, she has been involved in developing a strong cultural identity among Hondurans which will foster nation-building.

WHAT HAPPENS TO RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS?

Current information on where former PCVs go is scanty, at best. However, much more has been written on the early years of the Peace Corps. Table 5 presents data on the career status of the first 5400 RPCVs.

In 1965 Secretary of State Dean Rusk commented on the Foreign Service and the RPCV:

I can assure you, if you apply for the Foreign Service, that your experience in the Peace Corps will be a plus with respect to others who are applying for that Service... I hope very much that we can enlist a considerable number of you in our own work in the future.¹¹

The PCV experience has also tended to further interest Volunteers in international careers. The Career Information Service worked with the Bureau of Recruitment for International Organizations of the Department of State attempting to identify former Volunteers for positions with the United Nations and other international organizations. At the end of 1965, 9 former PCVs were employed by international

¹⁰Longworth, op. cit., p. 13.

¹¹Calvert, op. cit., p. 12.

organizations and 35 by foreign governments (Calvert, 1966). Today, Bertran D. Smucker, director of overseas operations for CARE, where 60 to 150 staffers are former PCVs, says that "one of the biggest things about the Peace Corps is the great number of Volunteers who go into international work who would otherwise not have done so."¹²

Early data show low figures for the number hired by private enterprise (498 out of 5400). Calvert suggests two points that might explain these figures: 1) a high percent of volunteers are drawn from liberal arts classes; 2) the trend is upward (in 1966), and, as many graduates not in school complete their professional training, the percent employed in business should climb (Calvert, 1966).

The 1972 data provide some interesting contrasts. The percent in school stayed roughly the same: 36% in 1963-65, 35.22% in 1972. Business increased from 11% in 1963-65 to 27.54 % in 1972 (see Tables 6 - 8).

It is interesting to note the relatively equal distribution of those wishing domestic employment and those desiring to work abroad (53.19 to 51.86, respectively). Also, the percent of those desiring further education is rather large -- 78.25%. Only 1.3% entered the Foreign Service; however, other sources put the percentage higher: The State Department "estimates that about 10% of its entering Foreign Service officers over the past 5 years have seen Peace Corps service. For AID the ratio is even higher. About 50 of AID's 100 yearly interns are former volunteers" (Interaction, 1976).

AWARDING COLLEGE CREDIT FOR THE PEACE CORPS EXPERIENCE

According to Woodman, the "climate has never been better" for Federal Government/college-university discussion of and cooperation in awarding academic credit for Peace Corps service. These institutions are already in the fullswing of experimenting with service-learning programs in local communities, Indian reservations, cities and rural areas. Many various programs are in operation, from internships to University Year for ACTION to "universities without walls" (Woodman, 1975).

Criticisms of and Responses to Credit for Peace Corps Service

(1) Claim: Rewarding academic credit for Peace Corps service violates the philosophy of voluntarism and the spirit of Peace Corps service, and will result in a conflict of interest.

Counter: Academic activity can be integrated as a natural component of the PCV's regular work assignment; contingent college credit is an appropriate incentive quite compatible to the ethos of

¹²Ibid., p. 117.

the Peace Corps and different from extra pay, etc. There will be no conflict of interest (Woodman, 1975).

(2) Claim: The PCV cannot spend much time on academics and still pay full-time attention to his job.

Counter: This is more a problem of prevention rather than a need for cure. Sufficient supervision and control must be established from the start to ensure that academics do not impinge on the PCV's work in the field.

(3) Claim: The political sensitivities of host governments to PCVs "snooping around" collecting data will result in problems. The most innocent normal academic pursuits can be misinterpreted.

Counter: It will be necessary to get the cooperation and help of the host country in promoting the educational aspect of development and Peace Corps service, as well as their active participation in the researching process itself.

(4) Claim: Awarding credit will result in elitism within the Peace Corps and a schism between PCVs (separate identities between those receiving credit and those not).

Counter: The nature of work/study arrangements must be publicized, emphasizing the limits as well as possibilities of individual credit arrangements, so there will be no misconceptions of the arrangements under which different PCVs serve.

Rationale for Credit

(1) What is in it for the Peace Corps?

a. Credit will attract more and possibly better candidates to apply. Those college students most interested in the Peace Corps also tend to be interested in graduate school. Postponing or delaying school is a major factor against joining the Peace Corps;

b. Recruitment will improve. The opportunity to continue education without interruption will result in more people being willing to apply;

c. The attrition rate will decrease. A relationship between the PCV and a school, established before, during and after the Peace Corps experience abroad, should provide the PCV with more sense of purpose to his program and encourage his sticking with it while overseas.

(2) What is in it for the PCV?

a. Relevant, on-going education with "invaluable intercultural international experience" (Woodman, 1975);

b. The establishment of contacts for future employment and refining and developing career skills.

(3) What is in it for the university?

- a. Better student quality. Work/study strengthens attitudes toward studying and sharpens the understanding of the relationship of theory to practice;
- b. Increased faculty experience in international affairs and increased opportunities for research;
- c. Increased reputation of the institution which will in turn attract better students to apply.

Many of the case studies cited earlier expressed or demonstrated a need of the RPCV to continue using the skills at home that he or she developed overseas. Another important observation is the large number of RPCVs that desire to continue their formal education. Thus, a "marriage" of the two, service to the community and university education, would be a valuable program to develop.

TABLE 1

Motives for Joining the Peace Corps

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
<u>Giving:</u>	<u>2418</u>	<u>93</u>
1. Ideal-oriented contributions	919	35
2. Internationally-oriented contributions	945	36
3. "People"-oriented contributions	1477	57
4. Task-oriented contributions	1250	48
<u>Getting:</u>	<u>1708</u>	<u>65</u>
1. Personal gains	827	32
2. Social gains	904	35
3. Practical gains	827	32
<u>Substantiating Statements:</u>	<u>1457</u>	<u>56</u>
1. Personal statements	806	31
2. Idealistic statements	1075	41

SOURCE: Gordon and Sizer, 1963, p. 42.

TABLE 2
Change in PCV Goals

<u>Goals</u>	<u>Pre-Peace Corps</u>		<u>Post-Peace Corps</u>	
	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Career goals not defined	732	34.4	261	12.2
Teaching (all levels)	527	24.8	633	29.7
Business and industry	208	9.8	230	10.8
Social service	83	3.9	231	10.8
Health professions	119	5.6	127	5.9
Government	231	10.9	424	20.2
Agriculture and crafts	82	3.8	80	3.8
Other	<u>144</u>	<u>6.8</u>	<u>140</u>	<u>6.6</u>
TOTAL	2126	100.0	2126	100.0

SOURCE: Calvert, 1966.

TABLE 3
Applicability of Peace Corps Experience to Present Job

	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Very applicable	2160	32.4
Applicable	2323	34.8
Little relevance	1081	16.2
No relevance	835	12.5
No answer	<u>269</u>	<u>4.0</u>
TOTAL	6668	

TABLE 4

Reasons for Joining Peace Corps

	Primary		Secondary	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Desire to help	741	25.2	420	14.4
International understanding	199	6.8	184	6.3
Share skills	236	8.0	255	8.7
Adventure, travel	323	11.0	505	17.3
Interest in cultures	413	14.0	471	16.1
Career advancement	199	6.8	209	7.2
Get away to plan	221	7.5	235	8.1
Personal growth	537	18.2	602	20.6
Other	76	2.6	36	1.2
TOTAL	2945		2917	

SOURCE: Office of Evaluation, ACTION Agency, December 3, 1976.

TABLE 5

Career Status of the First 5400 RPCVs, 1963-65

<u>Career Status</u>	<u>Total %</u>
<u>Continuing education</u>	36
Graduate school	26
Undergraduate school	10
<u>Employed</u>	53
Federal government	13
State and local government	4
Job Corps and War on Poverty	2
Teaching	16
Business and profit-making organizations	11
Nonprofit organizations	7
<u>Other</u>	11

SOURCE: Calvert, 1966.

TABLE 6

Employment Status of RPCVs (1972)

	<u>#</u>	<u>%</u>
Unemployed	406	11.16
Employed	2293	62.92
Student Only	503	13.80
Student & Employed	491	14.48
TOTAL	<u>3693</u>	

TABLE 7

Employers (1972)

	<u>#</u>	<u>%</u>
State Agency	290	10.60
Federal Agency	299	10.93
Local Government	148	5.41
Private Firm	753	27.54
School	963	35.22
Social Services	170	6.21
Health Services	135	4.93
Politics	2	.07
TOTAL	<u>2760</u>	

TABLE 8

RPCV Goals Being Met Through Present Job

	<u>#</u>	<u>%</u>
YES	937	43.99
NO	408	19.15
PARTIALLY	<u>785</u>	36.85
Total	2130	

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