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Wanted: Life Experience

The Peace Corps is turning to community colleges to recruit a broader variety of applicants

By JAMILAH EVELYN

After 16 years Jo Catherine Mannix was growing tired of her job in the supply room at an Air Force base when, one morning in 1986, she heard a radio advertisement for the Peace Corps.

Ms. Mannix, then 57, had just earned an associate degree in general studies from Cerro Coso Community College, in Ridgecrest, Calif. "I just happened to hear about it at a time in my life when I had just finished school and was ready to do something meaningful," she says.

She spent two years volunteering for the Peace Corps in Jamaica, raising chickens and vegetables at an orphanage. The experience taught her not only about another culture, but also about herself. "I realized how much I have taken for granted in my life," says Ms. Mannix, a soft-spoken 74-year-old.

Nearly 20 years after Ms. Mannix's work in Jamaica, Peace Corps officials say they realize how much they have taken volunteers like her for granted, too. With her associate degree and her gardening experience -- she had canned and sold vegetables she raised in her half-acre garden for most of her adult life -- Ms. Mannix is a model of the skilled community-college graduates that the Peace Corps has, only now, started to systematically recruit.

President Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address called for doubling by 2007 the number of Peace Corps volunteers. And as the number of recruits fails to keep pace with rising demand, Peace Corps officials say they have been looking for applicants from new institutions. This year the organization announced a campaign to recruit applicants from some 200 community colleges.

Gaddi H. Vasquez, the Peace Corps' director, says it is also trying to diversify the volunteers it sends abroad "to put a face on the Peace Corps that is representative of America." More than 30 percent of the nearly six million community-college students in the country are members of minority groups.

Additionally, Peace Corps officials are looking to increase the number of recruits who are trained in agriculture, construction, information technology, and nursing -- fields that have expanded at community colleges.

"This is really exciting for our students," says Mary Crabbe Gershwin, executive director of the

Colorado Community College system, one of four sites where the Peace Corps started its recruiting campaign this spring. "It's also a great recognition of how community colleges prepare people for really practical work."

Correcting Misperceptions

Peace Corps officials note that the organization has always welcomed graduates of two-year colleges.

But this year's effort marks the first time that the 43-year-old program, founded by President John F. Kennedy and announced at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, has had a coordinated effort to recruit at the nation's 1,200 community and technical colleges.

Mr. Vasquez, the director, attended Santa Ana College, a community college in California, and says he is not sure why the Peace Corps never looked to the institutions before.

"We do know that there's a common misperception that you have to have a bachelor's degree to volunteer, and that's never been true," Mr. Vasquez says. "Part of what we want to do with this campaign is help clear up some of the misperceptions."

Currently, graduates who have only an associate degree account for less than 2 percent of the more than 7,000 Peace Corps volunteers serving in 71 countries. But with a waiting list of some 20 countries seeking new projects and a high demand for volunteers with expertise in technical fields, Peace Corps officials are looking to raise that percentage.

A report last year by the Peace Corps' inspector general found that the organization had trouble finding volunteers for assignments in health and agriculture, fields for which the Corps received few eligible applicants from four-year colleges.

The international AIDS crisis has fueled the organization's need for health-care workers. And many developing nations are in desperate need of volunteers with experience in crop development, construction, and information-technology.

"This is a time when community colleges are producing graduates that are exactly what we are seeking," Mr. Vasquez says.

Additionally, Mr. Vasquez says, officials realize that community-college graduates tend to have a lot of life experience: Many of them have already had careers, and some even have bachelor's degrees.

"Many community-college graduates, because they tend to be older, possess a certain maturity, humility, and professionalism that you don't find in your average 22- or 23-year-old," Mr. Vasquez says.

'A Novel Idea'

The Peace Corps' push comes as the demographics of community-college students are shifting. More starry-eyed high-school graduates, many of whom have the time and means to spend two years abroad

after they graduate, are landing on the colleges' doorsteps. Meanwhile, many of the institutions are also trying to internationalize their campuses and their curricular offerings.

This spring the Peace Corps chose Tidewater Community College, in Hampton, Va., as one site for the campaign's rollout because the institution already had a strong international presence. The 22,000-student college has service learning and study-abroad programs in Costa Rica and Vietnam, for instance.

Tidewater officials have had a unique relationship with the Peace Corps since 2000. Speakers from the organization have attended study-abroad fairs at Tidewater and professors there often invite former Peace Corps volunteers to speak in their classes.

Nonetheless, "this is really a novel idea to community-college students," says Jeanne B. Natali, coordinator of international programs at the college. "I don't think they really realized they were eligible, so more than anything it's been an education process just for them to understand that Peace Corps is looking for people with the kinds of skills and life experiences that they possess."

Ms. Natali says she is not sure how many Tidewater students have applied to the Peace Corps since the recruitment drive there began, but says "a good handful" of students have expressed serious interest.

In Colorado, Ms. Gershwin says, the system's 13 colleges have just begun getting the word out. The system office has identified faculty and staff members -- 11 of whom are former Peace Corps volunteers -- to help recruit students for the organization.

Peace Corps officials have done much of the organizing of the recruitment events, something that campus officials may not have had the time or the resources to do, she says.

Ms. Gershwin suspects there is a lot of interest among students in Colorado's two-year college system.

System officials have begun to push the Peace Corps as an option for community-college students to consider before they transfer to four-year colleges. Ms. Gershwin also notes that the system has a number of students who have already raised children and may be ready to tackle an international adventure.

At the same time, such an option is not realistic for many other students. Ms. Gershwin points out that a large percentage of those enrolled in community colleges have young children and, after graduating, may need to work to earn more money than the Peace Corps can provide. The organization pays its volunteers only a cost-of-living stipend.

New Recruits

The effectiveness of the fledgling recruitment drive may not be clear for some time. Ann Conway, a Peace Corps regional director in Denver, says the Peace Corps is "building an awareness that students may not act upon for another year or so."

So far, she says, the Colorado college campaign has yielded a lot of interest and at least two potential

recruits, both of whom graduated this year. One has a nursing degree and could work in an HIV-outreach program. The other has an associate degree in liberal arts and could work in small-business advising.

Amber L. Gilbert, who graduated this spring from Johnson County Community College, in Kansas, will be going to Bangladesh next month to teach English.

Ms. Gilbert, 27, who attended the University of Kansas right after high school but dropped out because financial problems put her "in a bind," says she never thought she would qualify for the Peace Corps without a bachelor's degree.

But when she learned through a friend a few years ago that she might be eligible if she earned her associate degree, Ms. Gilbert quit her job as a project coordinator at IBM and enrolled at the two-year college.

What also helped her application, she learned this month, were her seven years of volunteer work with the Boys Scouts and Girls Scouts of America.

"I feel like I bring a lot to the table," she says.

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Section: Students

Volume 50, Issue 47, Page A25

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