Peace Corps offers graduates meaningful opportunities in agriculture and natural resources

The first thing David Howlett was told to do when he arrived in the Dominican Republic was to draw a map and mark the best place to land a helicopter. He was on Peace Corps duty, and the landing spot was for the U.S. Marines to airlift him to Miami, in case things got rough.

Despite the risk involved with serving in the Peace Corps, Howlett felt safer living in the mountain town of Jarabocoa for two years, than he did growing up in his hometown in Nevada, he said.

“You know everyone, and everyone helps each other out,” Howlett said.

Howlett, a University of Florida forest resource and conservation graduate student, served in the Peace Corps from 1997 to 1999.

“The Peace Corps training alone was worth two Ph.D.s,” Howlett said. “You learn a lot of human skills that are valuable anywhere.”

The cultural training helped him adjust to the change of lifestyle and relate to the people he was going to work with, Howlett said.

He worked as an agriforestry volunteer, where his primary job was to help poor farmers make their crop productions more successful and sustainable. He educated farmers on the benefits of trees for nutrient cycling and erosion prevention. He also taught techniques such as contour farming, which builds up terraces on sloping land, making it more usable for crops.

Agricultural and environmental jobs make up approximately 25 percent of the Peace Corps. However, some volunteer projects overlap, and volunteers often end up working and learning new skills in several fields.
Howlett also organized beekeeping demonstrations, built storage for farm equipment and helped repair roads during his time in the Dominican Republic.

UF resource economics and international policy graduate student Greg Parent also had a wide variety of experience during his time in the Peace Corps.

Parent went to the African country of Togo as a natural resource management advisor in 2002. His main project was to improve an ecotourism plan for a local waterfall, but one of his biggest accomplishments was getting the funding to build and oversee the construction of a health clinic.

Knowing that the health clinic is continuing to serve and benefit people in this remote area of Togo is a gratifying feeling, Parent said.

The Peace Corps offers students the opportunity to share their knowledge to help others and learn new skills, UF Peace Corps recruiter Amy Panikowski said.

The Peace Corps give recruits jobs according to their experience or skills, then the training builds on this knowledge appropriately for their country, Panikowski said.

Panikowski visits UF classes to tell students about the benefits and rewards of joining the Peace Corps. She also volunteered two years in Malawi working with natural resource and wildlife parks.

“After serving in the Peace Corps, you have a whole new perspective on things,” Panikowski said. “It offers a wealth of knowledge and personal growth.”

UF food resource and economics professor Evan Drummond teaches two honors classes that Panikowski visits each semester.

Drummond wants to make sure his students know the opportunities the Peace Corps offers and to think of it as an alternative after graduation.
“It’s not for everyone, but for some students it is a wonderful opportunity,” he said.

More than 1,000 graduates from UF have served in the Peace Corps. As of September 2006, 49 UF alumni were volunteering their two years in various countries around the world, Panikowski said.

The need for agriculture and environmental work is still high, especially in Latin America and Africa, Panikowski said. For many in these countries, agriculture is their livelihood.

“People don’t realize the amazing opportunities they have to share their knowledge of agriculture with those that need it,” Panikowski said.

The Peace Corps doesn’t have the same meaning to this generation as it did when it first started in the 1960s, she said.

The Peace Corps was founded March 1, 1961, through an executive order by President John F. Kennedy. The Peace Corps is often remembered for Kennedy’s inaugural speech encouraging citizens to, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.”

Jane Luzar, UF provost fellow and former associate dean for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, was among those first, few generations to answer the call of the Peace Corps. Luzar went to Liberia from 1974 to 1977 to work in rural youth development in agriculture extension.

Her experiences in Africa with the Peace Corps gave her opportunities in leadership she never would have gotten in the U.S. It also influenced her professional goals, she said.
After her first two years in Africa, the president of Liberia at the time asked Luzar to continue the program she was running from the country’s capital. Luzar stayed in Liberia for a third year and headed up the national agricultural education efforts.

“This experience got me interested in international development during graduate school,” Luzar said. “The Peace Corps made a big difference in my life, and it still offers these opportunities today.”

Volunteers return home with a lot more than practical skills and cultural knowledge. Volunteers have a connection to the people they work with, Parent said.

“The sense of community is what I miss most,” Parent said. “There was no homelessness in my village. The U.S. can’t say that. Everyone was taken care of.”