

Job Corps, AmeriCorps, and Peace Corps: An overview

These Government-supported programs help thousands of people gain valuable experience and make new connections to others and to the future.

by Kevin M. McCarron

Have you considered serving in the corps? You may have more options than you think. Besides the military corps, you might be eligible for Job Corps, AmeriCorps, or Peace Corps. These federally supported programs help people who are looking either for direction in life or a way to help others.

Job Corps participants improve job skills and find vocational direction while living on Job Corps campuses. AmeriCorps volunteers serve U.S. communities by helping with local needs. Peace Corps volunteers support constructive projects in countries around the world. Recent enrollment figures show about 66,000 Job

Corps, 40,000 AmeriCorps, and 7,000 Peace Corps members each year.

This article provides an overview of each program, including its purpose, individual qualifications for entry, program highlights, and advantages and disadvantages of serving. Current and former corps members offer insights on the programs and on their experiences. Interested readers may continue their corps quest with the sources of additional information at the end of the article.

Job Corps

Founded in 1964, Job Corps is a residential education and job training program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Ad-

ministration. Its mission is to improve job opportunities for economically disadvantaged youth through academic, vocational, and life-skills training. Businesses, trade unions and associations, and State and Federal agencies recruit young people for Job Corps.

Most Job Corps participants live full time, year round at one of more than 100 Job Corps centers throughout the country, where they attend academic and vocational classes. Students spend between 6 months and 2 years there, depending on the training. Job Corps instructors enforce strict discipline and behavioral standards to insure an environment conducive to learning. (Training is discussed further in the next section.) Since its inception, Job Corps

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Photo courtesy of Job Corps



Job Corps participants train with equipment used on jobsites.

has helped 1.9 million youths around the country.

Qualifications and program highlights

Job Corps is open to people aged 16 to 24. Applicants must be U.S. citizens or nationals, legal permanent residents, or legally admitted aliens. They must be economically disadvantaged high school dropouts or high school graduates in need of employment-related education, training, or counseling. Applicants must also commit to being nonviolent and drug free.

Training is available in occupational areas such as computers, business and clerical, nursing, automotive mechanics and repair, and construction trades. Job Corps follows the school-to-work prin-

ciple, which includes three techniques: job shadowing, connecting activities, and integration. Job shadowing exposes students to real-world jobs without requiring a long commitment. Connecting activities, such as training with equipment from job sites, help students connect to occupations. Finally, Job Corps tries to integrate all aspects of academic, residential, and job placement activities.

Based on the kind of training provided, Job Corps uses these techniques differently. In a Washington, DC-based Job Corps program, for example, participants study the home building trades. The participants begin as carpenters' helpers, learning use of tools and basic techniques. With experience, helpers may advance to become carpenters. Eighteen-

year-old Juan Rivera, of St. Croix, Virgin Islands, hopes to join an apprenticeship after graduating and to become a certified carpenter within 4 years. "I would definitely recommend this program to others," he says.

Advantages and disadvantages

The most important indicator of success for a Job Corps graduate is meaningful employment in a satisfying occupation. Other tangible benefits for Job Corps participation include a biweekly stipend (currently \$25 to \$34) during training, a one-time payment (\$250) for getting a job within 6 months of completing a Job Corps program, another payment (\$100) for landing a job in the trade studied at Job Corps, a bonus (\$250) for earning a



high school equivalency during the program, and a completion bonus.

Participants also receive room and board, health care, and transportation to and from job centers, and job placement assistance and counseling. Those who complete basic training have a chance to get advanced training. And Job Corps graduates are more likely to earn more than their counterparts who were eligible for the program but did not participate, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's National Job Corps Study.

Also important, however, are the intangible benefits of Job Corps participation. Alexandria, Virginia-based Milton Kendall, Eastern Regional Coordinator for the Operating Engineers' Union and a Job Corps graduate, characterizes his instructors as "tough but fair...pushy but thorough" and says he developed social skills in Job Corps that continue to help him. Two-time Job Corps graduate LaDonna Tramble, of Denver, Colorado, praises her Job Corps experiences. She

credits Job Corps training with providing her both the occupational and social skills needed to become a clerical supervisor in the Denver Police Department.

But Job Corps training can be difficult, and prospective trainees should be ready to work hard. Some participants may drop out because they are unable to adjust to the rigors of Job Corps training. Others become discouraged as they encounter difficulties learning their new trade. Despite the training and support Job Corps participants enjoy, graduates must remember that they will start their jobs at the entry level. When speaking to graduating Job Corps classes, Kendall makes it clear to the graduates that they should not expect to rise to the top immediately. Nevertheless, he adds, "the road to success is always under construction."

AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps is a national community service program. Since its founding in

1992, more than 100,000 AmeriCorps volunteers have served in hundreds of activities nationwide.

AmeriCorps volunteers participate either full or part time. Full-time volunteers must perform at least 1,700 hours of community service each year; part-time volunteers must work 900 hours over 2 years. After completing their terms of service, AmeriCorps volunteers receive education awards to help finance vocational school or college or to repay student loans.

AmeriCorps is divided into three parts:

- ◆ **State and national programs.** State, national, and local nonprofit organizations sponsor, recruit, and train AmeriCorps volunteers for specific types of service.
- ◆ **National Civilian Conservation Corps (AmeriCorps*NCCC).** AmeriCorps*NCCC volunteers perform hands-on work and live on campuses throughout the United States. In addition to the community service required of all

Photo courtesy of AmeriCorps



Mentoring and tutoring are two of many activities AmeriCorps volunteers engage in.

AmeriCorps volunteers, AmeriCorps*NCCC volunteers complete an additional 80 hours of independent service, such as helping with charity walk-a-thons or working in homeless shelters.

◆ **Volunteers in Service to America (AmeriCorps*VISTA).** AmeriCorps*VISTA participants work full time, year round for local public and private nonprofit organizations in disadvantaged communities.

Qualifications and program highlights

AmeriCorps applicants must be at least 17 years old; AmeriCorps*NCCC applicants cannot be over age 24, but there are no upper age limits for other AmeriCorps projects. All applicants must be U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents. For most AmeriCorps*VISTA projects, preference is given to applicants with a college degree or at least 3 years of work experience.

AmeriCorps volunteers receive train-

ing in first aid and other basic skills needed to carry out their duties. Training varies according to the project. For example, in 3½ intense weeks of AmeriCorps*NCCC basic training, volunteers learn teamwork, communication, responsibility, and other essential skills.

Most AmeriCorps volunteers serve with local and national organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and the Boys and Girls Clubs. These projects target community needs in four areas: education, public safety, human services, and the environment. Activities of AmeriCorps volunteers include tutoring and mentoring at-risk youth, fighting wildfires, providing emergency assistance to victims of natural disasters, and cleaning up rivers and streams.

Advantages and disadvantages

Volunteers receive some monetary benefits, including living allowances. Participants in AmeriCorps*VISTA and State

and national programs must pay for their own housing and meals from their living allowance. AmeriCorps*NCCC volunteers receive money for transportation and are provided with housing and, on three of the campuses, meals in dormitory-style accommodations; on the other two campuses, they get a weekly stipend (currently \$38.50) for groceries and prepare their own meals. Full-time AmeriCorps volunteers also receive health insurance.

Another monetary benefit for AmeriCorps participants is an education voucher. After completing 10 to 12 months of full-time service, volunteers receive a voucher, currently worth \$4,725, to apply toward future costs of college or vocational school or to repay student loans. AmeriCorps volunteers can serve more than 2 years but are limited to two education awards.

AmeriCorps volunteers also cite non-monetary benefits, such as gaining personal satisfaction from serving communities and spending time with fellow volunteers, that



enrich their experiences. Kathryn Whelan, of St. Paul, Minnesota, says she likes the group dynamics and the chance to develop leadership skills in AmeriCorps *NCCC—and she loves the opportunity to travel. For Suzie Cordray of Andrews, South Carolina, serving in AmeriCorps *NCCC gave her time to focus her life before she starts college.

However, some volunteers do not get these benefits because they do not finish the program. Some volunteers drop out for personal reasons; they may not be prepared for the personal sacrifices required, such as adapting their standard of living to the modest level of the stipend. Korri Clayton, of Washington, DC, says AmeriCorps volunteers—especially part-timers—should not use money as their motivation for joining. Clayton, a part-time AmeriCorps volunteer during college, re-

calls being paid only \$65 after 2 weeks of volunteer work.

Despite its financial limitations, some people see completing AmeriCorps service as an investment in the future. Along with education vouchers, discussed earlier, AmeriCorps volunteers with at least 1 year of service may apply for the AmeriCorps Leaders Program, a leadership development program administered by the Corporation for National Service. AmeriCorps alumna Paula Buchanan, of Washington, DC, believes AmeriCorps encourages the type of social responsibility the country needs.

Peace Corps

The Peace Corps, founded in 1961, trains and sends volunteers to work with people of developing countries on grassroots im-

provement projects. Since its inception, over 150,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in more than 130 countries. Volunteers serve for 2 years and return as “cultural ambassadors,” educating the U.S. public about other countries and their customs.

During their assignment, Peace Corps volunteers are immersed in their host country’s culture. Living among the people with whom they work, Peace Corps volunteers make a positive contribution to their host country and promote goodwill between it and the United States.

Qualifications and program highlights

Peace Corps applicants must be over age 18; there is no upper age limit. They also must be U.S. citizens. Almost all volun-

Photo courtesy of Peace Corps



Peace Corps volunteers work abroad in development projects, including education.

teers have at least a bachelor's degree, but some applicants without a college degree qualify with 3 or more years of work experience. Proficiency in a foreign language is not required because the Peace Corps provides intensive language training. Previous volunteer work and community involvement are a plus.

Recruiters interview and nominate applicants for projects, considering each applicant's skills, education, and life experiences. A placement officer then invites an applicant for a specific project, basing the decision on both a host country's needs and an applicant's strengths. Both recruiters and placement officers try to accommodate prospective volunteers' geographic preferences. Volunteers usually are placed 3 to 12 months after submitting an application.

After placement, volunteers who ac-

cept an invitation to serve receive 3 months of preservice training in the country where they will live and work. During this period, volunteers stay with host families, learn the language, and acquire the technical skills needed to accomplish their goals. Their training also includes learning the customs and beliefs of the host country along with health and safety practices, such as avoiding disease and dealing with potentially dangerous conditions.

Volunteers work primarily in broadly defined sectors, including education, health, and business. On a day-to-day basis, they share useful skills for helping people improve their own futures. For example, they may teach young children to read and write, work to bring clean drinking water to communities, or help women start small businesses.

Advantages and disadvantages

The Peace Corps provides volunteers with many quantifiable benefits while they are abroad, such as transportation to and from the country of service, a monthly living allowance, and health care. Some volunteers also receive deferments or partial cancellations of student loans. After serving, volunteers receive a readjustment allowance (currently \$225) for each month of service.

There are also qualitative benefits to Peace Corps service. Along with having the opportunity to travel, live, and work abroad, volunteers often forge lasting friendships with other volunteers and host country nationals. Many find the experience personally fulfilling. Donna Curtis, of Denver, Colorado, worked as an English teacher in a secondary school in Shymkent, Kazakhstan, after graduating



The Job Corps, AmeriCorps, and Peace Corps programs cultivate participants' skills and knowledge.

from Georgetown University. She describes her service in the Peace Corps as a time of great personal growth.

Peace Corps service also is an academic and career booster. Volunteers who complete a full term of service have access to educational and career assistance through the Returned Volunteer Services Office in Washington, DC, and regional recruiting offices. And citing Peace Corps can enhance a graduate school application or a résumé: some university programs provide scholarship funds or offer academic credit for Peace Corps service, and employers often view Peace Corps experience as proof of a potential employee's resourcefulness. In addition, for 1 year after completing their service, Peace Corps alumni are given an edge in applying for Federal Government jobs.

But volunteer service overseas can be tough at times. Volunteers may be unable to achieve results in assignments for numerous reasons, including bureaucratic deficiencies, inadequate resources, and resistance to volunteers' methods for accomplishing goals. Adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings and isolation, especially in rural and remote areas, is often difficult. And volunteers may feel challenged, at times, experiencing hardships—such as illness, meager housing, and poor infrastructure—associated with everyday life in developing countries.

However, many volunteers find solace in the strong Peace Corps support system, including access to resource offices. No matter what obstacles they face along the way, most alumni speak highly of their Peace Corps experiences. Eileen Conoboy, of Arlington, Virginia, joined the Peace

Corps after graduating from West Virginia University and working 1 year with AmeriCorps*VISTA. As a health education volunteer in the Peace Corps, she worked to help prevent malnutrition and increase immunization in the West African country of Mali. Conoboy says she enjoyed having a meaningful, fulfilling job and the freedom of living and working in an unstructured setting. She also appreciated experiencing a different culture and learning about the people, their food, and their language.

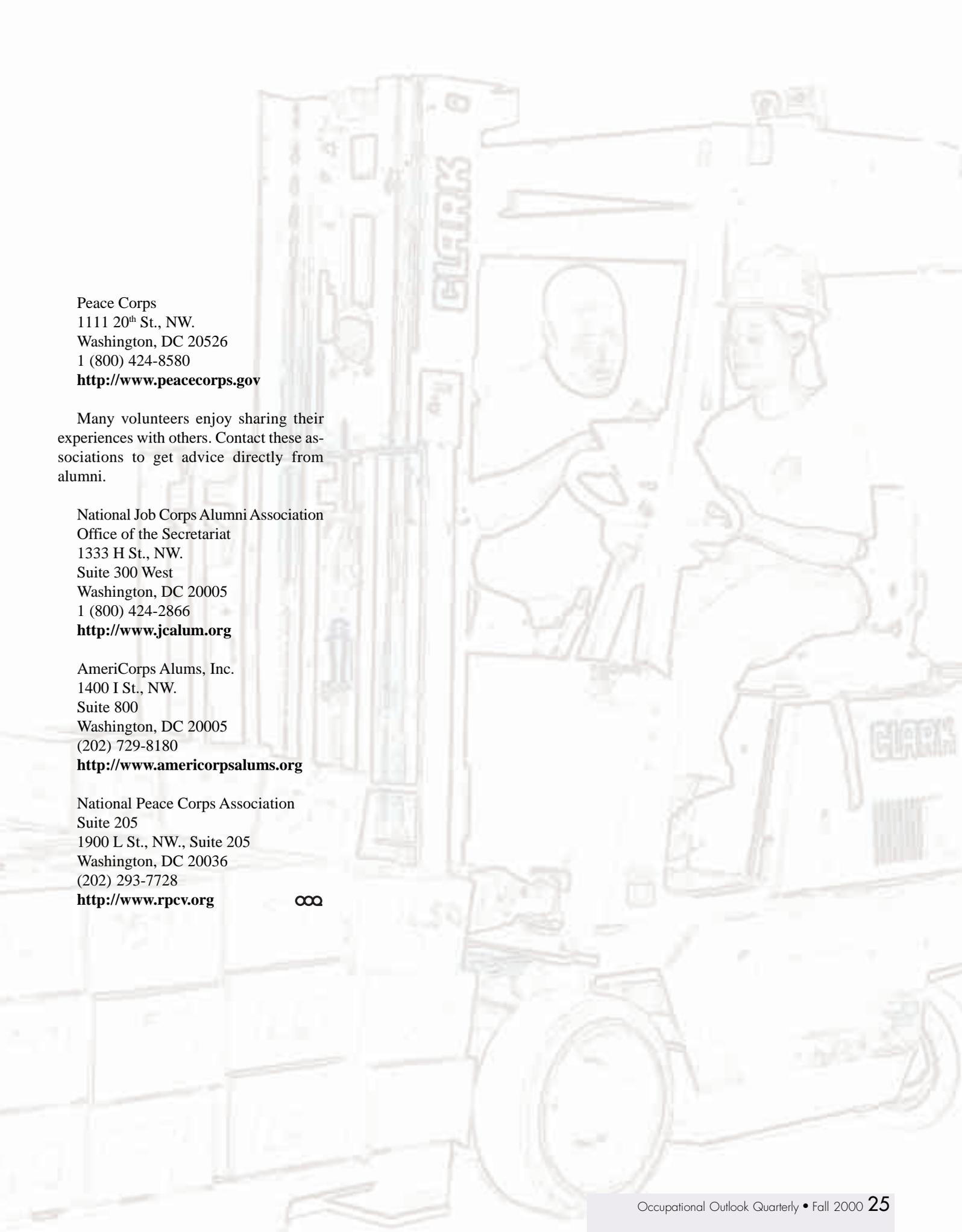
For more information

Check out your school and local libraries for related periodicals or books about these programs. Of special note for those interested in joining the Peace Corps is a recently published book, *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps... What to Know Before You Go*, written by Peace Corps alumnus Dillon Banerjee. It answers questions about the Peace Corps experience from preapplication through postservice and includes several helpful appendixes.

For each program's application and service information, contact the organizations at the offices listed below.

National Office of the Job Corps
U.S. Department of Labor, ETA
200 Constitution Ave., NW.
Room N4507
Washington, DC 20210
1 (800) 733-5627
<http://www.jobcorps.org>

AmeriCorps
1201 New York Ave., NW.
Washington, DC 20525
1 (800) 942-2677
<http://www.americorps.org>



Peace Corps
1111 20th St., NW.
Washington, DC 20526
1 (800) 424-8580
<http://www.peacecorps.gov>

Many volunteers enjoy sharing their experiences with others. Contact these associations to get advice directly from alumni.

National Job Corps Alumni Association
Office of the Secretariat
1333 H St., NW.
Suite 300 West
Washington, DC 20005
1 (800) 424-2866
<http://www.jcalum.org>

AmeriCorps Alums, Inc.
1400 I St., NW.
Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 729-8180
<http://www.americorpsalums.org>

National Peace Corps Association
Suite 205
1900 L St., NW., Suite 205
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 293-7728
<http://www.rpcv.org>

