

Peace Corps Training: Trials Tribulations Lessons

THE Peace Corps has used more than 100 American colleges, universities and private institutions to train approximately 19,000 prospective Volunteers during the past three and one-half years. These diverse institutions have organized nearly 450 equally diverse training programs for 51 foreign countries. In all of these programs three factors have been paramount: the nature of the Peace Corps overseas job, the American who is to be trained, and the resources and enthusiasm of the institution which is to train the group.

The Training Program

Training programs have averaged ten to twelve weeks, six hours per day, six days a week. For the most part they have consisted of the following eight components:

1. *Technical Studies*, to include the various types of knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to perform the assigned job overseas and to adapt an "American" skill to prevailing conditions in the host country

2. *Area Studies*, to include historical, political, economic, social and cultural aspects of the host country

3. *Language*, to include knowledge of the structure of the indigenous language, basic vocabulary, conversational practice, and technical terms appropriate to the assignment

4. *American Studies*, to include an analysis of our democratic institutions, history, and current political, social and economic problems

5. *World Affairs*, to include contemporary international relations, communist strategy and tactics, and America's role in the world scene

6. *Physical and Mental Health Training*, to include first aid, mental and physical hygiene, and preventive measures required in the country of assignment

7. *Physical Training and Recreation*, to include physical conditioning as well as the practice of American and host country games

8. *Peace Corps Orientation*, to include the role of the Volunteer in social and economic development and the organization and aims of the Peace Corps.

While all major components are

¹ The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect Peace Corps policy.

Gerald W. Bush is Executive Secretary of the Peace Corps, Washington, D. C.

usually taught, many recent programs have combined World Affairs, Communism, and American Studies into one component. In fact, a few recent programs formally designated only language and technical studies. Other essential understandings were developed from a thorough examination of these. One recent experimental program taught only language and the remainder of the program was developed according to "group dynamics" instruction. Persons who normally would have been "visiting lecturers" were used as resource people in trainee-led discussion groups. Another recent approach which met with considerable success was the integration of the entire program into four components:

1. *Technical Studies*, to include the knowledge and skills required to perform the assigned job overseas, in the cultural context of the host country

2. *Cross-cultural Studies*, to include the study of values, attitudes, roles, customs, and the culture of the host country in comparison with the United States

3. *Language*, to include conversational experience, basic vocabulary, technical terms appropriate to the assignment, and the cultural background reflected in the language

4. *Peace Corps Service*, to include health studies, Peace Corps procedures and policy, and the nature of the Peace Corps experience.

Lessons of the Early Years

First, ways must be found to get a "head start" on training. As the Peace Corps becomes an established feature of the United States overseas commitment, it is time to think of the candidates of the future and what can be done to prepare them before they enter Peace Corps training. This would indicate that further encouragement of educational institutions to begin or intensify their nor-

mal language and area studies programs is needed. The recent requirement of the State of California that all sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students study foreign languages is, in the writer's opinion, most encouraging. However, language and area studies must be continued in high school and college. If America is to produce the type of citizens it will need in the future, it must begin to think in terms of national volunteerism and an international commitment.

Second, it seems essential that training continue to be conducted by established educational institutions, for they constitute the great concentrations of expertise required. For the most part, those institutions which have participated in Peace Corps training bridged successfully the academic-governmental chasm. The response to the new and pioneering challenge of the Peace Corps training was firm and imaginative. It is to these institutions that much credit for the early success of the Peace Corps is due.

The Peace Corps must guard itself, however, to be certain that it does not take the challenge out of Peace Corps training. The most successful training programs have been conducted by those institutions—of whatever size and prominence—with the deepest institutional and staff commitment to the Peace Corps idea. Given ample advance notice, a university can command resources with quality rarely obtainable elsewhere. They also provide an experience in curriculum, pedagogy, and imagination which cannot be found readily elsewhere.

Third, it has been found that the single most significant factor of good training is the people involved. Once a special curriculum has been developed, there simply is no substitute for quality in trainee and teacher. The training institution's staff must understand the job of the Peace

Corps and be capable of transferring this understanding to the trainee. The staff must exhibit in its attitude and behavior those attitudes and behaviors which are most appropriate to overseas work. In this way many subtle but essential re-orientations of conceptions about the Peace Corps and work abroad can be made effectual.

Fourth, even the best and most highly motivated institutions, staff and trainees must have accurate and detailed information about the job to be performed and the environment in which it is to be performed. The training program exists for the purpose of sharpening in a new candidate the many attitudes and skills necessary to perform a task in a foreign culture. When the job is ill-defined, unstructured or fluid in the host country this fact must be known so that an appropriate learning experience can be developed and only those people best able to cope with such a situation are sent. If the job is precisely defined, with sufficient standards and procedures, these must be conveyed early to the designers of the training program and the trainees. The more accurate and detailed the job description and the environmental situation, the more precise and efficient the training can be.

Fifth, a precise statement of the level of language competence required is as important as the level of skill required. It is fully recognized that a knowledge of Twi will not be as important to successful performance in Ghana as a knowledge of Spanish in Chile, but it is important to know the significance of linguistic competence in jobs such as agricultural extension, university education, or public health nursing. Without such a statement it is impossible to allocate accurately the extremely scarce hours of a typical Peace Corps training program.

Sixth, there must be coordination, if not complete integration, of the various phases of the training program. This is made necessary by the brief period of time available for training. A close coordination of all components of the program, and especially language, area studies, and technical studies should bring about the reinforcement most conducive to learning and the integration necessary for action. It is also important that all phases be operationally oriented and not irrelevant to the job ahead. Without doubt, superior training programs have been those which have achieved the highest level of integration of the various components of the program and have related these most closely to the entire role of the volunteer once overseas.

Another major finding is that provision must be made for several "tracks" within a single component. This is essential because of the variation of backgrounds and abilities of the trainees. For example, those trainees who have had some instruction in Spanish must be assigned a different course of instruction from those who have had no previous exposure to Spanish. The same principle has been found to apply to all other elements of the program.

It goes almost without saying that the Peace Corps volunteer must be in good physical and mental condition and know how to stay that way if he is to be effective abroad. This means that the training program must include physical conditioning and physical and mental health training. These three components of personal development have been found to be time consuming and somewhat less tangible, but essential parts of preparation for Peace Corps service. The well-trained volunteer must be made to experience frustration and try his abilities to cope

(Continued on page 583)

(Continued from page 579)

with it. He must be aware of the morale peaks and valleys which he is going to experience in order adequately to prepare himself for the experience. It is also important that the volunteer receive adequate information about the food, clothing, shelter and recreation associated with his assignment. It may not be possible to duplicate these during training, but they should be approximated wherever possible.

The Peace Corps' relatively brief, but extensive experience in training over 19,000 volunteers for overseas service of a unique and particular type has clearly demonstrated that a great deal can be expected from the trainee. The highly motivated trainee can absorb a great deal in an extremely short period of time. Some training programs have, in fact, compressed the equivalent of a year and one-half of college into twelve weeks. Such an intensive course of instruction has been borne with grace and enthusiasm when it is well administered, of high quality, well planned and directly relevant to the job ahead.

Finally, additional means must be found for continuing "training" once overseas. It is obvious that no training program can anticipate all the needs of the many overseas assignments nor can it serve to integrate the training experiences. Further provision must be made for professional support of volunteers in the field, and opportunities for continuing education while on the job. This might be accomplished through professional overseas Peace Corps staff, through correspondence courses, through conferences or workshops during seasonal breaks in the job, or through systematic provision of professional information, periodicals and manuals.

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