

Extra Feature Story

New Grads Increasingly Turning to AmeriCorps, Teach for America

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With the nation's unemployment rising to a 25-year high this month and the financial sector in turmoil, many recent graduates are turning to service-oriented job programs like Teach for America and Peace Corps.

While the economy is down, volunteer and service program applications are up. Way up.

Teach for America, a training program that hires recent college graduates and professionals with no formal teaching experience to work in the nation's neediest school districts, has received more than 35,000 applications for this year's teaching corps -- a 42 percent increase over last year's record numbers.

Amy Rabinowitz, TFA's vice president of communications, says the struggling economy is just one cause for the jump in applications.

"While the economy played a role in reducing competition for top applicants, we believe this year's increase can also be attributed a growing interest among young people to engage in public service," she explains.

More public service

Today's university graduates represent part of a wider trend in which colleges and universities expect well-rounded students to have engaged in public service throughout their education.

Volunteerism by older teens has doubled since the 1980s and service participation in college has risen sharply since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 according to the Corporation for National and Community Service Report, "Volunteer Growth in America."

The UCLA Graduate School of Education reports that two-thirds of college freshmen believe it is essential or very important to help others -- the highest figure in 25 years.

Madhav Seshadri, 21, who recently graduated from Johns Hopkins University with a major in neuroscience, rejected a job offer as a lab technician for the chance to go to Togo as a Peace Corps Health Care Extension Worker this June.

Seshadri has already participated in health care service work in India and the United States. "I've always been interested in health, rural health, and I wanted to help," he said.

He will apply to medical school from Togo, and like many students entering similar service programs, Seshadri believes that experience will expand his sense of responsibility.

"This will make me a better doctor," he added.

Wall Street losing its appeal

Steven Greenhouse, a jobs and labor reporter for the New York Times, notes that the spike in service oriented organizations appears to be a "logical response to not enough paying jobs" in the current employment climate.

"[Young people] are looking for alternatives that are good for the resume, good for society. The only thing that meets all that criteria is Peace Corps and volunteerism," Greenhouse said. "Great Wall Street jobs are not going to be here, public service is still here"

Such positions offer an "opportunity to wait out the economy for one or two years," Greenhouse added.

Peace Corps

Another beneficiary of the current situation is the Peace Corps, part of President John F. Kennedy's vision of cross-cultural communication and call to service. Although the Peace Corps is open to all adults, the median age of participation is 25, with many members joining soon after college.

Acting Press Director Laura Lartigue believes that President Kennedy's vision of service resonates with America's current generation of young people and has been revived by President Barack Obama, a leader that they helped elect in large numbers.

Lartigue said the new president "definitely made the call to service a cause of his campaign. We also saw our online applications spike 175 percent around the time of President Obama's inauguration. This is testimony to the way many Americans have felt inspired by the new administration."

President Obama has promised to double the Peace Corps by 2011 as a part of his service agenda.

AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, a clearinghouse funder for more than 4,000 different community and faith-based groups, has seen a record-breaking 400 percent increase in applications in the past four months.

President Obama proposed an increase of \$241 million in the 2010 federal budget for AmeriCorps and \$201 million in the stimulus bill for the Corporation for National and Community Service.

And a current bill in the Senate, the Serve America Act, would expand AmeriCorps from 75,000 to 250,000 positions.

Sponsored by Sens. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, the law would provide \$5 billion over five years for minimal living expenses and an educational stipend for people of all ages to volunteer in the fields of health care, energy, education and the environment.

In a statement, Sen. Kennedy said, "Many years ago, on the fifth anniversary of the Peace Corps, I asked one of those young Americans why they had volunteered, and I will never forget the answer: 'It was the first time someone asked me to do something for my country.' Now it's time to ask again."

-- Written by Kate Stanton and Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra

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