

Local News

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3 universities in Washington pack Peace Corps pipeline

Three top Peace Corps schools this year are in Washington state: the University of Washington, Western Washington University and Gonzaga.

By Katherine Long

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For the second time in three years, three Washington universities have sent more undergraduates to work overseas in the Peace Corps than any other schools of their respective sizes in the nation.

Seventy-two undergraduate volunteers from the University of Washington are working for the Peace Corps now, making it the top school among large colleges and universities. Western Washington University has 47 volunteers, tops among midsized schools. Gonzaga University, with 20 volunteers, leads among small colleges and universities.

“It’s really exciting to see Washington state sweep the field like that,” said Ben Conway, a Peace Corps regional recruiter and Seattle native who served in Togo, West Africa, from 2010 to 2012.

The Peace Corps has been ranking schools by the number of volunteers for more than a decade, as a way to spur friendly competition among colleges and universities.

The UW was the top school for Peace Corps volunteers in 2007, 2010 and 2012. Western and Gonzaga led their respective categories in 2012.

The Seattle area’s long history of Peace Corps volunteerism seems to build on itself, Conway said. Corps alumni talk up the program when they return, prompting others here to consider the Peace Corps, too.

Add to that Washington’s Pacific Rim location, an economy tied to trade and a certain appetite for adventure among Washingtonians: The combination seems to make the Peace Corps an enticing option for students when they finish their bachelor’s degrees — and for older people, too, Conway said.

There is no upper age limit on who can join the Peace Corps.

Peace Corps volunteers do a wide range of jobs, from teaching math, science and reading in local schools to working with farmers to improve food production. They work in communities around the globe, from South America to Africa to Asia.

New on the list of top five schools this year is the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, which moved up from 14th place to third place among small colleges and universities, tying with Middlebury College in Vermont for the biggest jump in ranking over the last year. Both colleges sent 16 students to the Peace Corps.

Both international and national politics have led to an overall drop in the number of Peace Corps positions available to would-be volunteers.

The Corps suspended operations in Ukraine and Kenya due to safety concerns last year and pulled volunteers out of three African nations during the height of the Ebola crisis.

Currently, there are 6,818 volunteers working in the Peace Corps, down from 8,073 in 2012.

Two years ago, Washington's three top schools had a grand total of 204 undergraduate volunteers working in the Peace Corps. This year, the number is 134.

That's not for lack of applicants.

More people than ever want to work for the agency started by President Kennedy in 1961 to help promote world peace and friendship. The Corps had 17,336 apply for posts in 2014, the highest number of applicants in 22 years.

Over the Corps' 54-year history, the UW is in third place overall for the largest number of volunteers sent. To date, 2,888 Huskies have joined the Peace Corps.

It has a long way to go, however, to catch up to No. 1: the University of California, Berkeley. That school has sent 3,598.

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