

# Build Your Work Experience with AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, and Teach for America

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**LEANNE RALSTIN:** Hi. My name's Leanne Ralstin, and we're going to talk about building your work experiences with AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, and Teach for America today. Welcome.

Are any of you considering doing something different other than just going directly into a job after graduation? If so, type in the comments section, and we can talk about it. One of the things you need to think about if you're considering-- whatever it is you're considering, is what are your goals?

AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, Teach for America, these are situations, where if you want to make a difference, if you're interested in community service, doing something good, positive, and lasting-- if you want to gain maybe some experiences or some training, you want some more professional or leadership development, maybe you're just not ready for the corporate world. Or maybe you want to just experience something out of the box.

These sort of programs might be exactly for you. A lot of people will look at them as gap-year experiences in the sense of if you're not quite ready to go out there in the corporate world, maybe you just want to do something for a year or two. These are great experiences. These companies, well, they're not really companies. They're more like organizations, more like programs. But they pay, and that's something that you don't always get with nontraditional experience.

One of the things that's great about these programs is you're going to get transferable skills. You're going to build on those skills that you can take with you anywhere. According to a recent [? NASE ?] survey, 82% of employers seek skills like problem solving, teamwork, on their candidates resumes. 80% want excellent written communication skills. And 72% of those employers want leadership skills.

The problem is that these things like critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, collaboration, and just professionalism and work ethic, these employers consider essential, but they have found only 41% to maybe 55%, only about half of recent graduates have the skills. So how do you develop these skills? Well, one way is through these experiences. These experiences can really build those skills.

One of the first programs that people think about when they think about those gap year experiences is Peace Corps. Most people have heard about Peace Corps. It's been around for a really long time, longer than most of us have been alive.

It's a great program, but it requires a two-year commitment. It's going to be somewhere outside the US. It's going to be in another country somewhere. It takes quite a while to go through the application process for Peace Corps. But if you get through it, what a grand experience.

You've got to be over 18 and a US citizen. Those are two big requirements. Other than that, they recruit all kinds of majors. They do all kinds of things related to education, the environment, all kinds of different programs. You can look on the Peace Corps web site and find out more about the specific projects.

They'll give you a housing and a living allowance according to the country that you're in. They want to live on a similar scale as the people that you're going to be helping. You're not going to get rich. But it's a great opportunity.

They'll help you with grad school expenses, medical and dental benefits, travel expenses. They'll help you with student loans. You can get your student loans on deferment.

And they give you a transition benefit. When you're done after the two years, you're like, ooh, now I need to locate somewhere. They'll give you a chunk of money that helps you transition, which is really great.

You're going to receive rigorous technical training, which includes language instruction. If they're going to send you to, for instance, a Spanish-speaking country, they're going to teach you Spanish before you go. The alums do many different things after Peace Corps.

There's a couple of stories that I was given. For instance, Melanie Kirby was a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay in the late '90s. She volunteered in beekeeping for the agriculture sector. After her service, she became a beekeeping trainer in Paraguay and then moved back to the US and started her own beekeeping business. We think it's in Minnesota. We're not real positive about that.

She became very successful. After developing the business, she decided to go back to school here at WSU to get her PhD in entomology, and that is where she is now. She's fluent in Spanish and quite proficient in the indigenous dialect, called Guarani. I'm not sure how to pronounce that.

Another Peace Corps alum is Zoe Campbell. She was a volunteer in Tanzania in the last 10 years. After completing her Peace Corps service, she came to WSU to continue her studies and is working on Global Animal Health, specifically how Newcastle disease virus vaccine impacts people at the small household level. She secured a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant and now spends part of the year here in Pullman and part of the year in Tanzania doing her research and finishing her studies. She's fluent in Swahili, which certainly helps her research in Tanzania.

The Peace Corps representative here at WSU, his name is Brian Nyquist. He's also a Peace Corps alum. If you want to talk about his experiences in Paraguay, get a hold of him. I'll give you the contact information later.

Now another program is AmeriCorps. This is often referred to as the domestic Peace Corps. There's hundreds of different programs across the US, and they require a three-month to a one-year commitment. One of the programs is AmeriCorps VISTA.

This is a program that I participated in several years ago. It's a one-year commitment. But there's a lot of different AmeriCorps programs that are part-time or just for short periods of time. Like I said, hundreds of programs all over the US.

Their core principles they want to work on, they have an anti-poverty focus, their capacity building, they empower communities, and they look for sustainable solutions. They work with anyone from non-profits, public agencies, community organizations, or even some faith-based organizations. AmeriCorps are all over the US.

Some of the benefits that you can get include the student loan deferment, which you can also get with Peace Corps, training, just like-- well, not just like Peace Corps, but you do receive training. You get a potential living allowance. It depends on where you're at, where you're located. It will probably be between \$11,000 and \$15,000 a year, and that depends on where you're at. You're not going to get rich doing this by any means, but you will not starve.

They do have some limited health benefits. And what's great is the education award that's \$5,920 at the end of your year of service, which is pretty cool. Now, if you served less than a year, it's going to be different. But if you do the full year, that's what you'll get.

I think AmeriCorps is great. I served, like I said, as an AmeriCorps VISTA, which VISTAs build programs, they create programs. And then the regular AmeriCorps, they're like the boots-on-the-ground people. They're the people who work on the programs that are out there. They might be tutors in a school, for instance. And I did that for a while as well.

This is how I got into career advising. It was my stepping stone. So these programs can be a stepping stone to your later career. It's fantastic.

Teach for America. If you're interested in education at all, this is a great program. Now Teach for America is one of the many programs that's under the umbrella of the Corporation for National Service, which includes AmeriCorps. Peace Corps is foreign service. AmeriCorps, Teach for America are within the United States.

Teach for America requires a two-year commitment, just like Peace Corps. But what will happen at the end of that two years is you'll be certified to teach as a regular teacher. They'll help you through the certification process. You'll be paid the salary and benefits according to the school district where you're at.

Let's say they send you-- Las Vegas has a Teach for America program down in their school district down there. You would be paid what regular teachers are paid down in that district, for instance. If you're interested in this, their last deadline for starting this summer is coming up March 2nd, if you're interested. All majors are recruited. You don't have to be education major.

Some of the Teach for America alum have gone on to be teachers, principals, even gone into a business sort of things, like finance and wealth management or real estate. Some of them have gone on to law school and maybe into health care. They go all different places.

You've got to understand that Teach for America participants come from all kinds of backgrounds, not just straight-up education, although a lot of them do come from education and stay in education. One thing that I thought was really interesting is these are the characteristics that Teach for America really looks for in their people who they choose to be part of their program. A deep belief in potential of all kinds, strong achievement, long-term commitment to reaching goals, excellent interpersonal skills, and respect for individuals' diverse experiences, which goes along with their recruiting all majors.

And this is true of all these programs. All majors are recruited. You don't have to be a certain major to be in any of these. Teach for America is pretty competitive. You can't just be a slacker and expect to be part of this program. The same is true for Peace Corps. Peace Corps' application system is very-- I wouldn't say it's complicated, so much, as there's a lot to it, because they're going to send you overseas. So they want to make sure that you're ready to go overseas.

They want someone who's healthy, for instance. You can't have major health issues and be a part of Peace Corps. But with these others, you know, disabilities would depend upon the project that you're working on.

Now you think you have all these characteristics, and these are more transferable skills that you can build upon. But how do you leverage those things? So you go and you do these things. A lot of them will translate very, very well.

They'll make your resume more robust, so whatever you choose to go into, you're going to-- one of the things that I talk about as a Career Consultant is building your resume. And what I mean by that is building a master resume, where it has all the list of everything that you've done. And certainly, these experiences, you'll need pages and pages to list everything that you've done. So you can choose from that to build resumes that will apply to whatever career you choose to do.

You'll have stories to tell. One of the things-- a major company that recruits here on campus, when they do interviews with potential employees, they ask them to tell them stories. Behavior-based interviewing is what they do. And they expect the candidates to tell their stories, to use what we call the STAR method, which is Situation, Task, Action, and Result.

You'll have a lot of stories to tell, where you can tell the situation. OK, so I was in the Peace Corps. I was in Paraguay. This was the situation, this is the task I had to do. This is the action that I took, and this was the result. I made a difference.

Those are powerful stories that you could tell in an interview that's going to help you get to the next step, maybe, whatever your career is. Cover letter details, same thing-- all of these stories can be part of your cover letters, which makes you stand out above the group. But the best benefit of all, I think, in these sort of things, is the experiences that you get, the growth that you get personally. You become something better, you've made a difference. You can point at something, and say, hey, I was part of that, which is very cool.

Here's some contact information. With Teach for America, if you want to know more about Teach for America, I recommend, go to their website. It's a beautiful web site. There's lots of details, [www.teachforamerica.org](http://www.teachforamerica.org). The main contact here for WSU is Jordan Hoefer. And her email is just [Jordan.Hoefer@teachforamerica.org](mailto:Jordan.Hoefer@teachforamerica.org).

If you want more about AmeriCorps, and now, there's hundreds of different projects, like I said, all over the US. You could be just about anywhere. Go to their main website and see what you're interested in, because there's so many different programs.

There's regular AmeriCorps. There's the AmeriCorps VISTA. There's the Senior Corps. There's a lot of different programs that you could be a part of.

See what seems to fit you the best and then find out the contact information there. Every state has their own AmeriCorps office. So if you prefer, let's say Washington State, go to the Washington State page and see what's offered there.

Peace Corps, right here at WSU, we have Brian Nyquist, who's our Peace Corps representative. He's the one that I said would be happy to talk to you about his experiences in the Peace Corps. You can email him at [peacecorps@wsu.edu](mailto:peacecorps@wsu.edu) or you can go-- I recommend going to the web page, [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).

So that's what I have right now. Are there any questions?

**KAITLIN HENNESSY:** Thank you, Leanne. One question asks, can you expand upon what you did while in AmeriCorps? And did you get to choose your project?

**LEANNE RALSTIN:** Yes, in my case-- like I said, I worked for two different programs. One was AmeriCorps VISTA, and it was a school-to-work project. And this is where I worked with schools and with local businesses and tried to get them talking to each other to expand the opportunities for students, primarily junior high and high school students, like setting up job shadows, for instance, and coming and talking to the students, employees talking to students about how to get into the fields and what they wish they would have known. We even put on a

career fair, where hundreds of students, 1,500 students came and talked to these different businesses.

Now, the next project I did was regular AmeriCorps volunteer, and I worked for Lewis-Clark State College as a Career Advisor. And that's where I got into the field where I'm at now. I learned all about resume development, interviewing skills, job search. All of the things that I do now as a Career Advisor, I got my base there. And I did that one for two years.

**KAITLIN HENNESSY:** Thanks, Leanne.

**LEANNE RALSTIN:** You're welcome.

**KAITLIN HENNESSY:** Do you know if there's an age cap on any of these service programs?

**LEANNE RALSTIN:** Actually, I don't think so. Well, you've got to be over 18 for all of them. I know with Peace Corps, they take retired people.

Some programs-- there is a program in AmeriCorps that requires you to be between 18, and I think it's about 24. But that's one where they move around and do a lot of very physical things. They move as groups. But I think that's the only one with a real strict age group other than being over 18.

**KAITLIN HENNESSY:** And another question asks, do you an assessment of which program has the best student loan benefits, whether it's deferment and/or paying back your student loans or anything like that?

**LEANNE RALSTIN:** They're all really close to the same. You can get your loans deferred with all of them, because they all are government-related, so they have very similar benefits. You get your loans deferred with all of them. You get what they call an education award, I know, with Teach for America and AmeriCorps.

And I don't know for sure about Peace Corps, but I kind of think so. But I'm not positive about Peace Corps about the education award. But you do get the transition award with Peace Corps, which is about \$8,000 at the end of the two years. That could be used for loans or whatever you wish.

**KAITLIN HENNESSY:** Those are all the questions we have right now.

**LEANNE RALSTIN:** Thank you. And thank you for attending.