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Front Page **NEW**

Learning and service

By DAN SCHNEIDER, DMG Writer

HOUGHTON — Training graduate students for Peace Corps work was a relatively new idea when Blair Orr came to Michigan Technological University in 1992.

Orr, international programs coordinator for the university's School of Forest Resources and Environmental Science in addition to being a professor of forest economics, served in the Peace Corps from 1978 to 1981 in the tiny country of Lesotho in southern Africa.

He had set up an undergraduate program tied to Peace Corps work at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn. When he arrived at Tech, he started the process of developing a program there like the Peace Corps Master's International that had begun five years earlier in the U.S.

"It was kind of a gamble to do something like this, because you never know how something is going to turn out," Orr said.

In its first year, the program had five students and it grew from there.

"It's really taken off, we've had really good luck with it," Orr said.

Now Tech has four different Master's International Programs. A program in engineering started a year after forestry's, a geology program is now four years old and a Master's International Program in Science Education, one year old, is currently recruiting its first class of students.

Representatives from the Peace Corps, marking the 20th anniversary of the Master's International Program nationwide, honored Orr for his work with the program, now called the Loret Miller Ruppe Master's International Program at Michigan Technological University, in an Oct. 2 ceremony at Tech. The program's full title is in honor of Ruppe, who was a resident of Houghton and was the director of the Peace Corps from 1981 to 1989.

There are 70 students enrolled in the Master's International Programs at Tech, making it the largest campus for the programs nationwide. Currently, 42 Tech students are serving overseas. They are among 239 volunteers from Master's International Programs nationwide currently working overseas.

Orr said what Master's International Programs do is generate individuals with skills that are important to the Peace Corp's mission. Peace Corps assignments are originated by national governments, local villages and non-government organizations in the countries the Peace Corps serves.

"The reason Peace Corps has these programs in general is they get a lot of applicants that are history majors or anthropology majors and that's not necessarily what developing countries want," Orr said.

Foresters and engineers, however, are always in high demand.



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“The Peace Corps term for it is ‘scarce skills,’ people they can’t usually get,” Orr said.

Getting those “scarce skills” starts with a semester at Tech’s Ford Forestry Center in Alberta for students who come into the program. It is designed for students who don’t necessarily have backgrounds in forestry, so it’s highly concentrated learning.

“Our program is designed to take people from any profession and turn them into foresters,” Orr said. “Our first semester is very, very intensive forestry instruction.”

Casey Rosengarden, who was “doing genetics work” at a company in California before she enrolled in the Master’s International Program in Forestry, can identify with that statement.

“It was overwhelming at first,” Rosengarden said. “I kind of feel like I was luckier because I had a background in science.”

When they actually get in country, actually get to the village where they will be working, the students often realize they’ll learn more than forestry.

In Hato Horcon, Panama, Rosengarden did her master’s research on fuel wood collection and worked on a reforestation project, but much of her work was concerned with improving the village’s rice and fish tank.

The practice involves raising fish in land flooded for concentrated rice production and it was new to Rosengarden when she arrived in Hato Horcon. She had learned about it during her three-month Peace Corps training, but her arrival at the village was the first time she had seen it in practice.

“They were already doing it and they were having people from neighboring villages coming in wanting to learn about it and they wanted to expand it within their own village as well,” Rosengarden said. “I learned it while being there, basically spending my first couple months out in the field with them.”

She helped the villagers improve their own practices and learn ways to teach them to farmers from other villages.

Another Tech Master’s International Program student built a bridge for the village he volunteered in. Fortunately, the course of study at Tech includes a class in field engineering.

“Yes, they go out and do forestry, but they are told to go out and identify the needs of the community and do what needs to be done in the community,” Orr said.

Orr said the Master’s International Programs at Tech are successful in part because the university culture encourages international sustainable development. He pointed to other programs such as International Senior Design and Engineers Without Borders as examples.

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