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Volunteer program fills gaps

'Peace Corps of America' works on community level

By Lisa Millegan
 Emerald Reporter

When Zetta McDaniel finished her course work last summer at George Fox College at age 50, she realized that the recession could make finding a job more difficult than she would like.

But faced with the choice of taking a minimum-wage job cooking hamburgers or waiting until the economy picked up, she discovered a better alternative.

She applied to the Volunteers in Service to America program.

"I decided that I could spend my time doing (VISTA) or doing a survival maintenance job that wouldn't be a career move," McDaniel said. "This is a career move."

VISTA was founded in 1964 during President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty and is a branch of ACTION, the federal government's volunteer agency.

Nicknamed "the Peace Corps of America," the federally subsidized program sends volunteers around the country to help alleviate problems of poverty, such as lack of adequate child care and transportation.

After McDaniel was hired by the Lane County VISTA coordinator, she was placed in the University's Women's Center this summer at the center's request. Now she's helping develop programs for older, low-income women students.

In one project, she has worked with students to produce a draft of a handbook for older students. The pamphlet includes information on how to be admitted to the University, how to fund education and which support services are available. Now the group is looking for someone to print and distribute the pamphlet.

McDaniel has also helped older students identify their problems, like feeling isolated from older students and balancing school with a part-time job. She is trying to recruit more women to serve on a steering committee that will help generate ideas for meeting those needs.

McDaniel said one of the most rewarding parts of working on the projects is helping older women students realize that they are not alone.

"Any time women are acknowledged for what they're going through, it's real important," McDaniel said.

However, she said that getting started as a volunteer wasn't easy.

"A VISTA project isn't necessarily real linear and directed," she said, explaining that VISTA participants do not have step-by-step goals set out for them to accomplish.

"There are guidelines (to follow) but (the project) can take on creativeness and change focus depending on the individuals involved," she said.

McDaniel said she was originally attracted to

VISTA because the job was related to what she had studied in college — human resources management.

By being a VISTA participant, McDaniel said she expected to get a transition between the academic world and a career. Working at the Women's Center "is not a whole lot different than what I was doing in my academic process," she said.

She said she wasn't worried about surviving on the low stipend VISTAs receive because she has other funds to draw from.

At a pre-tax salary of \$539 a month for full-time work, the stipend VISTAs receive is barely above poverty-level wages.

Hasani Kudura, Women's Center program coordinator, said the center requested a VISTA because the problems of older students became too much for it to adequately handle.

The students' needs include child care, affordable housing and medical care, said Holly Stegner of the Women's Center, who helped write the center's proposal to obtain a VISTA participant.

Kudura said the problems came to a head about two years ago when some students decided to work on defining the needs of older students for practicum credit. Kudura said the project failed miserably.

"It was not anything they could get a hold of in three to six hours a week," Kudura said. "The answer seemed to be to have a VISTA working on it."

VISTA differs from the Peace Corps in that its volunteers do not necessarily have a specific skill that they teach to poor communities. Instead VISTAs act as facilitators to help people help themselves.

"The real emphasis in the community is creating independence rather than dependence," said Kathy Ask, VISTA program coordinator for Lane County.

She said VISTAs play a secondary role in organizing programs to combat problems because they want the programs to exist after they leave.

"VISTAs are looking at working themselves out of a job in a year," Ask said.

Past VISTA projects in Lane County have included a transportation program for seniors and a co-op for farmers who sell organically grown produce.

The program is managed locally by the United Way and was started in Lane County in 1973. Although in the past the local program has sponsored as many as 40 VISTAs at a time, only four volunteers are involved now.

Ask attributes the decrease to the drop in federal funding to the program in the 1980s, including President Reagan's massive cuts to social programs.

She said the program is trying to recruit more recent college graduates to be VISTAs. "It's an excellent way to develop contacts in the human services field, and it looks great on a resume," she said.

Students interested in becoming VISTAs should contact Ask at 484-6666.



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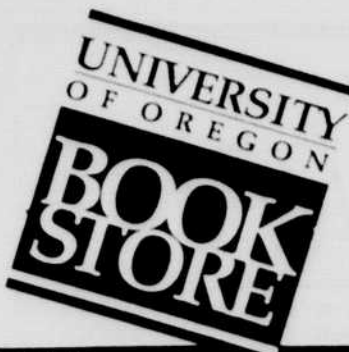
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