

Missoulian

Peace Corps hopefuls can get leg up through University of Montana program

By CHELSI MOY of the Missoulian | Posted: Tuesday, June 7, 2011 10:23 pm

Within days, Josh Kieser will learn which Asian country he will live in for the next two years, serving as a Peace Corps volunteer.

The 22-year-old Michigan native is one of 10 recent University of Montana graduates who were among the first to receive a Peace Corps preparatory certificate from their alma mater.

UM is the third college in the country, and the first public university, to offer a Peace Corps prep certification program. The private schools are Knox College in Illinois and Wittenberg University in Ohio.

UM already ranks among the top schools in the country for producing Peace Corps volunteers, but this program, which was finalized in April, should give UM students a leg up above other applicants at time when applying to the Peace Corps. Application to the Peace Corps has become increasingly competitive as more students turn to volunteer programs or graduate school to wait for the economy to recover and the job market to rebound, said Peter Koehn, director of the International Development Studies program.

For six years, UM has offered a globally minded, interdisciplinary minor in international development studies. More than 200 students representing 20 different majors have graduated from the program within the College of Arts and Sciences, some with the goal of applying to the Peace Corps program, Koehn said, but not all. The minor prepares students for work in developing countries, regardless of field.

Students completing the international development studies minor now qualify for the certification program. Nothing, however, about the curriculum has changed.

"The certificate adds another element to the international studies minor, which gives students a pretty good grounding in actual work that's being done across the globe," Kieser said. "From a Peace Corps perspective, they like to see you have some idea about what the United States is doing as far as programming in developing countries."

There are also ways for UM students to earn specific Peace Corps certifications - rather than the general preparatory certificate - in areas such as health, education, agriculture and forestry and business.

During spring 2011, 85 students were enrolled in the international development studies minor.

UM has a long history of producing Peace Corps volunteers.

Since 1989, UM has offered master's degree programs that allow students to earn credit for serving a Peace Corps assignment in their area of study. Thirteen students are enrolled in one of UM's two Peace Corps master's programs, making UM one of the top-ranked colleges in the nation with such a high enrollment in the special program.

Also, UM ranks 14th among medium-size universities nationwide for its undergraduate alumni serving in the Peace Corps program.

Not only is the certification program helpful for students thinking of applying to the Peace Corps, but it's also helpful in terms of gilding a resume and applying for grad school, Koehn said.

Kieser had already applied to the Peace Corps when he received his preparatory program certificate, but he sees the program as an

added benefit for both UM and for future Peace Corps volunteers.

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