Challenges of the Program – Coursework, Research and Peace Corps

Unlike traditional Master of Science degrees where research is a primary focus, the aim of the MI program is to increase student knowledge through coursework. The goal is to provide a broader and more in-depth knowledge base for the students before they enter Peace Corps, thus enhancing their experience and capacity during their time of service. As mentioned, Peace Corps is earnestly seeking recruits with a background in agriculture and agriculturally related fields, but many students desiring Peace Corps come from majors lacking knowledge in agriculture. The MI program is designed to provide a strong background in agriculture and natural resource related fields, focusing on breadth rather than depth. Accomplishing a framework of courses within a 2 semester timeframe will be challenging, so the selection of the major advisor and committee is critical.

Graduate research is not discouraged, but the challenges posed by PC service often preclude traditional master’s level research. Students enroll in a major and begin classwork before they receive knowledge of Peace Corps placement. While students often know the region of placement several months in advance, the actual country is not known until just prior to departure. Site placements (region, city vs. rural) within the country are made after volunteers have arrived in country. The Peace Corps gives special consideration to placing PCMI students in countries where they can use the skills and expertise gained in their master’s programs. Due to these limitations, it is strongly suggested that any research projects (if desired by the student and the major advisor) be developed after the student has been in his/her country and region of placement. This gives the student the chance to settle in, learn the language and local customs, develop relationships, and understand the parameters and constraints of their environment (infrastructure support; internet and cell phone access). The second year of service is likely to be the best time to develop a research project. While Peace Corps service project(s) is expected to take precedence, there is flexibility to conduct research and utilize the skills learned from graduate coursework.

The PCMI program offers a unique synergy between graduate school and Peace Corps. Within a three to three and half year period, students not only receive a graduate degree, but first-hand knowledge of a new language, culture and country. They also have a greater understanding of development practices, experience putting theory into practice, and how knowledge of their discipline can improve the lives of people around the world.