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ON PAGE 6A

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The CIA attracts the curious in a big way at Stanford

By Kathy Holub
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PALO ALTO, Calif. — The man in the gray suit saw a likely target and leaped.

"Hi, there. Are you interested in something special?" he asked, with the air of someone selling expensive jewelry.

"Uh, no," the student mumbled. "I'm a political science major, and I'll be interviewing with you tomorrow."

"Ah!" said the recruiter, gratified. "Then you'd be interested in overseas assignments."

As he led the young man away, his co-recruiters from the CIA were welcoming dozens more Stanford University students this week to the agency's biggest, most expensive campus recruiting effort in recent memory.

It worked better than anyone at the CIA had dreamed.

At least 150 students dropped by the Tressider Student Union on campus Wednesday for hot coffee, fresh donuts, free CIA pens and so-called major briefings from CIA division chiefs.

Even better, from the CIA's point of view, were the 80 students — including the sought-after majors in engineering and computer science — who signed up for interviews.

"They're not throwing rocks at us anymore," said an exultant Bob Magee, CIA director of personnel.

Far from it. The CIA is having a banner year on college campuses, and Stanford, 30 miles south of San Francisco in Palo Alto, is no exception.

Bill Cooley, the CIA's recruitment officer in San Francisco, said he now received 100 to 200 applications a year from Stanford students — about 50 percent more than in the mid-1970s. Student interest also is increasing at the University of California at Berkeley and other bay area colleges, he said.

Cooley does not pretend to know why things have changed so dramatically since the late 1960s, when Stanford student demonstrators physically blocked their classmates from meeting with CIA recruiters.

"There's a certain amount of curiosity now," he said. "Most people don't understand the agency that well. Beyond that, a lot of people are interested in jobs."

About 15 demonstrators did show up on Wednesday to protest the CIA's involvement in Nicaragua, but they could not have been more polite. When Magee made it clear that he would not answer their questions from the podium — "I'm not going to get into a debate on policy because it's really not my bag," he told them — they made a short statement and left.

Those who stayed heard that the CIA is looking for a few good people. They heard that "spies are not glamorous — they're people just like you and me." They heard that working for the CIA will not make them famous or rich — starting salaries range from \$19,000 to \$25,000.

They heard that a CIA career is "exciting and filled with diversity."

They also heard the term "best and brightest" mentioned at least a dozen times.

The CIA, officials said, is facing a

period of growth as its first generation of recruits reaches retirement age, and needs more people than ever.

Stanford is a prime hunting ground because of the caliber of its graduates, they said.

The visit to Stanford was preceded by three full-page advertisements in the campus newspaper, a mass mailing to about 1,000 Stanford students, a plastering of posters all over campus, and two days of radio spots on the campus station. The advertising was estimated to cost about \$5,000.

For the briefings and interviews themselves, 10 CIA officials flew out from Washington — an expensive and unusual recruitment effort. Such a strategy has been used only once before in the recent past, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in October. That session drew a smaller audience of 100 students, about 35 of whom signed up for interviews.

CIA officials said they would wait to see how many people they actually hire from the two sessions before they spend more money in that way.

Stanford senior Paul Toback, a political science major, said he had attended the briefing out of curiosity and found it "boring" and "simplistic."

Not Myron Smith, a sophomore majoring in applied math. "I'm interested in covert operations because I like to be in places I'm not supposed to," he said.

"I've always been a person who likes to defeat systems, like burglar alarms. Being in the CIA would almost be like being a criminal — legally."