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Teach for America, Hope for the Future

SAMANTHA J. KATZ

Joslyn Woodard is doing something she never thought she would—teaching environmental science and biology to high school students in Chicago’s south side. As an undergraduate student in molecular biology and neuroscience at Yale, Woodard was sure she wanted to go to medical school. She never considered teaching at all. However, after graduating last year, Woodard deferred attending medical school and made a two-year commitment to teaching. She explains, “I joined Teach For America because I wanted to help people now, not wait until after medical school.”

Wendy Kopp founded Teach For America (TFA) in 1990. Originally proposed in her undergraduate thesis at Princeton as an educational version of the Peace Corps, the program places some of the nation’s top recent college graduates (those with a grade point average of at least 3.5) in 26 of the nation’s poorest urban and rural public school systems for two years. In its first year, TFA started with 500 young men and women teaching in six low-income communities across the country. Today, 4400 teachers reach approximately 375,000 students.

The TFA corps members are a diverse and talented group. They come from all disciplines of study, and no teaching experience, training, or formal education degree is necessary—but demonstrated leadership qualities are. TFA teachers have the ability to influence and motivate others, to be authoritative yet approachable, and to persevere through unanticipated classroom challenges. Before stepping into the classroom, corps members attend a rigorous five-week training program at one of five TFA summer preparation institutes across the country. TFA also has a regional support network that helps with professional development throughout the two-year commitment.

Although teachers are needed in all disciplines, TFA recently launched an initiative to boost the number of math

and science teachers in the nation’s lowest-income communities. At present, 880 corps members are teaching math and science to more than 130,000 secondary school students. The initiative aims to increase these numbers to 2000 corps members serving 300,000 students by the year 2010. A key component of this initiative is the Amgen Fellowship, which provides 50 math, science, and engineering majors with a \$2000 signing bonus and an all-expense-paid trip to the annual TFA symposium, held each spring in Washington, DC.

Woodard, an Amgen fellow, believes this experience will have a positive effect on her future career. “I think this will help me become a better doctor and...relate better to my patients.” She said that her tenure with TFA has helped her to break down scientific topics in a way that her students can understand, and relate science to her students’ everyday life.

To date, 17,000 graduates have participated in TFA. Approximately two-thirds of those are still full-time teachers or are involved in education. For some, TFA is the entry point into a teaching career; for others, it helps them decide what other career paths to follow.

Joseph Spagna is one TFA alumnus whose experience helped him find his career focus. Spagna completed his two-year teaching commitment in 1997 and then attended graduate school. He received a PhD from the University of California–Berkeley in environmental science, policy, and management, and is now a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Illinois’s Beckman Institute. Spagna feels that TFA made him a better candidate for doctoral study. One advantage of the program, he says, is that “it gets you focused on why you are going to graduate school.”

Spagna remembers that after his senior year of college, his choices were to either attend graduate school or participate in TFA. “There were other opportunities,” he

said, “but these two seemed the most viable.” Spagna ended up teaching ninth-grade biology in northeast Baltimore. “The training I received in college was very analytical. As a teacher, I had to become very creative. I spent a lot of time planning and thinking about how to present these ideas and concepts [and about] what materials I needed to present [them].”

Spagna, who plans to teach at the university level, says he will advise his future students to consider the rewards of taking part in TFA. Each year more graduate schools and businesses partner with TFA to offer TFA alumni special benefits such as two-year deferrals, fellowships, course credits, and waived application fees.

Moreover, TFA benefits students. According to TFA’s Web site (www.teachforamerica.org), nine-year-olds growing up in low-income communities are, on average, three grade levels behind their higher-income peers. Half do not graduate from high school, and those who do have reading and math skills at only the eighth-grade level. The TFA program gives these students an edge. A 2004 study by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., found that “Teach For America corps members make more progress in [teaching] both reading and math than would typically be expected in a year and attain significantly greater gains in math than the other teachers in the study.”

As Woodward and Spagna demonstrate, TFA is enriching the lives not only of the students but also of the teachers who participate, empowering them to make a difference in the communities where they teach.

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