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Teach for America attracts a new brand of compassionate grads

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Last year, the largest single employer of Wellesley graduates was not a hot-shot business firm but a non-profit organization that recruits educators all over the nation. Teach for America (TFA) is a program that employs recent college graduates as teachers in urban and rural public schools for children from predominately low-income families.

Teach for America corps members commit two years to the program. According to the program's Web site (www.teachforamerica.org) there are over 3,500 corps members teaching in 1,000 schools in 22 regions across the country.

The statistics are undeniable—there is a large achievement gap between children in low-income areas and their high-income counterparts. Compared to children from high-income families, they are seven times less likely to graduate from college. On average, nine year-olds from low-income families are three grade levels behind in English, and by fourth grade they are three grade levels behind in math (data from the TFA web site).

Applicants must be college graduates but may be any academic major. If they are offered an interview, applicants list their preferred grade level, subject and region to teach in. This year, about 99 percent of applicants were placed in their preferred regions.

Corps members receive salaries and health benefits from the school districts where they work. Teach for America is a member of AmeriCorps. If TFA corps members have never received an AmeriCorps award, they receive \$4,725 at the end of their first and second years for further education or to pay off undergraduate loans. The summer before they begin teaching, corps members attend a summer institute for training. Corps members participate in alternative teacher certification programs, varying by state. There are also many graduate schools that have relationships with TFA. Benefits include two-year deferrals, fellowships, course credits and waived application fees.

Wellesley has a strong connection with TFA. Forty-eight seniors applied to the program. Thirteen were offered positions, and 11 accepted and became corps members. (Wellesley's acceptance rate for the year was 27 percent; the national rate was 17 percent.) For the class of 2006, five out of nine applicants have already been accepted.

Jamie Powell '03 taught at P.S. 115 at Washington Heights in a "rough neighborhood" in Manhattan for two years. She found TFA to be a rewarding experience because of the way she was able to influence her students' academic progress—particularly the kids struggling with reading. She found the first year much more difficult than the second, partly because it was a challenge to start as a teacher with so little experience. Also, she said, "You really never know what kind of placement you're going to get. I requested kindergarten and got a special-needs fifth grade class. It was a rough year."

Powell emphasized the importance of talking to other TFA corps members before committing to the program. "It sounds really inspiring—you're going to go in and help these kids and it's going to be great, but you really have to go in knowing you're just a teacher on a day to day basis," she said. Also, "You have to put up with a lot and be really adaptable. You have to be really prepared to roll with the punches."

Now, Powell is living on Manhattan's Upper West Side and is in her first year of law school. After seeing the impact of the law on children, especially those in disadvantaged neighborhoods, she has become interested in child advocacy.

Julia Meade '05 teaches at Fonville Middle School in Houston, TX. She teaches sixth grade science and is in her first year of the program. After TFA, she plans on going to medical school. Meade said that a lot of her job is simply teaching her students to be good people. Many of her students do not think about what happens beyond their life right now—they think very short term, and she has tried to be a role model for the future.

She advised interested applicants to "examine their hearts and really think about what they can bring to those children... The organization is so focused on the kids. If you aren't, you probably won't be a very happy corps member."

Migdalia Arciniegas '04 said, "Be prepared for a very challenging experience. Wellesley women tend to be very hard on themselves. In order to stay sane your first year, my advice would be to be able to forgive yourself—you can't cure all the ills and all the wrongs in the first year. That's okay. You're learning." Arciniegas is in her second year of TFA. She teaches sixth grade bilingual science, social studies and math at M.S. 135 in the Bronx.

The TFA Campus Campaign Managers at Wellesley are Michelle Ogunti '06 and Shara Collins '06. They are responsible for TFA marketing on campus, including alumnae visits and TFA events. Collins was accepted from the earlier application round and will teach elementary school in New York City.

Students interested in Teach for America can contact Ogunti or Collins or access the TFA website. TFA representatives visit the Center for Work and Service through the on-campus recruiting program. The application deadline for joining in 2006 is Feb. 17.