

Teach For America and Teacher Ed:
Heads They Win, Tails We Lose

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July 13, 2009

Forthcoming in *Journal of Teacher Education*

Teach For America is one of the most successful efforts at social entrepreneurship in recent history. In 1988 Princeton senior Wendy Kopp came up with the idea for a teacher corps that would place elite college graduates in teaching positions in the neediest urban and rural districts in the U.S. Only a year and a half later she had raised \$2.5 million dollars to support the new organization and had placed the first corps members in schools (Kopp, 2003, p. 42). By 2008, TFA was raising \$100 million a year and had 6,000 corps members teaching more than 400,000 students across the United States, and it received 35,000 applications for the 4,000 positions in the 2009 cohort. It had become one of the largest and most exclusive employers of the recent college graduates, drawing applications from 10 percent of Ivy League seniors and typically accepting only one in five into the program; after a 40 percent surge in applications for 2009, the overall acceptance rate was only 11 percent (TFA Press Kit, 2009; Friedman, 2009; Noguchi, 2009).

This is a remarkable success story, which has earned the organization kudos from a large array of leaders in the politics, business, philanthropy, and the media. Op-ed columnists like Thomas Friedman (2009) and David Brooks (2008) at the New York Times love it as a force for school reform, foundation heads and corporate executives admire its mix of social mission and efficient administration, and President Barack Obama is only the latest of a string of presidents to sing its praises. *Time* magazine (2008) selected Kopp as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. In fact, the only area of drought in this downpour of praise for the program is found in American education schools. Teach For America is a program that we teacher educators love to hate. Among other things, we have argued that the program is insulting to teachers, harmful to students, and a serious threat to the viability and credibility of our own teacher preparation programs.

This paper is not another attack or another defense of Kopp's program, nor is it an effort to assess the effectiveness of TFA teachers in promoting student learning. Instead it's a brief analysis of the roots of TFA's extraordinary rise as a major player in the world of educational reform and educational policy. In particular I focus on the enormous marketing advantage that TFA enjoys over teacher education programs in recruiting students into the role of teacher.

TFA is a marvel at marketing, offering elite college students a win-win option: By becoming corps members, they can do good and do well at the same time. They can do good by teaching disadvantaged students for two years, as a kind of domestic peace core stint, and then they can move on to their real life of work with high pay and high prestige. They can do well by joining a very exclusive club, TFA, where only the best apply and only the best of the best gain admission; membership will burnish their resumes by demonstrating they are highly skilled and greatly in demand while at the same time showing that they have great social concern and a willingness to serve.

TE programs are in a hopeless position in trying to compete with TFA for prospective students. They can't provide students with the opportunity to do well, since they can offer none of the exclusiveness and cachet that comes from being accepted as a TFA corps member. Instead TE programs are cursed with a deeply rooted reputation for being the safety option (I can always teach) for college students who are less talented and less ambitious. And to make things worse, these programs require a substantial

investment of student time and money just to become certified, whereas TFA corps members only need to attend an all-expenses-paid summer boot camp before vaulting into the classroom. Sure, teaching has always offered students the chance to do good, to devote themselves to public service and social improvement, but this prospect is less entrancing to prospects when presented as a lifelong career instead of two-year tour in the teacher corps. TFA's escape clause allows graduates to do good without major personal sacrifice. More than that, it promises to be a great career booster that will pay off handsomely in future salary and status. In short, the competition between TFA and TE is a case of "heads they win, tails we lose."

Below I examine how Teach For America has been able to market itself to students as a way to do good and do well. Then I explore some of the things about the program that teacher educators might grudgingly find to like as well as dislike. Next I examine the competitive position of teacher education in responding to TFA's marketing appeal. And I close with some thoughts about how TFA has positioned itself in the American system of education.

TFA as Doing Good

"One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education." This statement appears on the wall at the Teach for America headquarters in New York and also on the organization's letterhead; and the opening words – *One Day, All Children...* – are the title of Wendy Kopp's book about the founding of this enterprise. It's a motto that works on two levels to make the case for TFA as an exercise in altruism.

At one level this is simply a statement about the importance of extending educational opportunity to everyone in American society. As such, it's an expression of the deep American faith in the importance of education and of the desire to employ education as a tool to fix pressing social problems. The title of the TFA promotional brochure is "Teach For Solving Our Nation's Greatest Injustice." In the politics of American education in the late 20th century, TFA was ahead of its time in making such an explicitly egalitarian appeal to use education to raise the academic achievement and social opportunities of the disadvantaged in the U.S.

The two central efforts to reform American schools at the time of TFA's founding (and continuing to the present) were the curriculum standards movement and the school choice movement, both of which initially focused their attention on goals other than social justice. Standards reformers, following from the report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence, 1983), argued that by imposing high curriculum standards in public schools and enforcing them with high stakes tests we could improve the productivity of American workers, expand the country's economic growth, and enhance its competitive position in the world. This was a movement grounded in the mission of social efficiency. School choice reformers, drawing on the theory of Milton Friedman (1962) and the research of John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990), argued that by granting educational consumers free choice in selecting schools for their children we could bypass the stifling bureaucracy of public schooling and make schools accountable in a competitive educational market. The result would be schools that are both more effective

in promoting learning and more consonant with American ideals of individual liberty. This movement was grounded in a mission that was both utilitarian and libertarian.

But neither movement developed a broad national constituency until they expanded their goals to incorporate the TFA-style appeal to social justice and equal opportunity. In both cases this happened about 10 years after the start of TFA, when the standards movement transformed itself with the *No Child Left Behind* law (2002), which made a direct appeal to equity in support of curriculum standards, and when the choice movement transformed itself by adopting the argument that poor parents should be allowed the same school choices that wealthy parents have always had.¹ In an important sense, Teach For America established the power of this kind of appeal to personal altruism and social equality, and the national school reform movements followed in its wake.

TFA managed to tap into the social altruism of a generation that had been frequently dismissed as materialistic and self centered, more focused on a lucrative career than on social service. Modeling itself on the Peace Corps, which had been a rallying point for the idealism of college students in the 1960s, TFA asked for a similar two year commitment to service for new college graduates before they entered the career track. The organization deliberately referred to itself as a teacher corps, and when in 1993 the Clinton Administration launched a domestic version of Kennedy's international effort, called Americorps, TFA quickly got itself certified as a prime placement opportunity for graduates entering this program.

At a second level, the altruistic mission of TFA (one day, all children...) contains a strong dose of noblesse oblige. In the opening of her book, Kopp describes TFA's social mission this way:

Why didn't this country have a national teacher corps of top recent college graduates who would commit two year to teach in urban and rural public schools?²...

...If top recent college graduates devoted two years to teaching in public schools, they could have a real impact on the lives of disadvantaged kids. Because of their energy and commitment, they would be relentless in their efforts to ensure their students achieved. They would throw themselves into their jobs, working investment-banking hours in classrooms instead of skyscrapers on Wall Street. They would question the way things are and fight to what was right for children. (Kopp, 2003, p. 6)

The best and the brightest, she suggests, should spend two years bringing their special talents to the aid of poorest and least able. In a book that emerged from his evaluation of the TFA program in its early years, Thomas Popkewitz (1998) argues that Teach For America encouraged a vision of corps members as missionaries, whose job was to save the children they encountered from the social and cultural condition of disadvantage. He zeroes in on the repeated emphasis of the program on serving "urban and rural" students. On the surface these two terms seem to be opposites. But in the contemporary discourse of education, these differences disappear. "Urban" means "inner

¹ See, for example, the rhetoric on the website of the Black Alliance for Educational Opportunity.

² Emphasis in original.

city,” which calls up images of a population that is both poor and minority. “Rural,” especially in the South, calls up similar images. In fact, he argues, rural and urban occupy the same space in our cultural politics, and the unspoken opposite is “suburban,” a term that calls up images of families that are middle class and white. The mission of TFA, then, is to bring middle-class white education, of the type enjoyed in suburban schools, to poor and minority students. And who better to carry out this mission than the well educated and privileged graduates of America’s elite colleges?

TFA as Doing Well

Doing good is nice, but it’s not what has made Teach For America such a raging success in recruiting college seniors. After all, Americorps has been around for nearly as long, and it doesn’t have people from top schools competing vigorously for its positions. Wendy Kopp realized that TFA would need something more than a noble mission to make it take off. As a Princeton student, she had a good sense of what made students at elite colleges tick. And she knew that they would generally not be willing to go through a regular teacher preparation program and then seek a position in the usual manner in order to do two years of public service. She herself considered becoming a teacher late in her senior year and talked to someone in administration at the New York City public schools, who told her that a position for an uncertified teacher might open up at the last minute in September. But she wanted more security than that, and she realized that this approach was no way to recruit the best of the best into teaching.

This whole experience was discouraging, and it only made me more convinced of the need for a teacher corps that would recruit as aggressively as the investment banks and management consulting firms that were still swarming all over campus. The teacher corps would make teaching in low-income communities an attractive choice for top grads by surrounding it with an aura of status and selectivity, streamlining the process of applying for teaching positions, and assuring recent graduates a job and a steady income despite districts’ inability to hire them until Labor Day. (Kopp, 2003, p. 8)

So the idea of giving the program “an aura of status and selectivity” was there from the very beginning, and during the 1990s TFA leaders refined its recruitment approach in light of this initial insight. In her book on the program (and the experience of a few corps members in a single inner city high school), Donna Foote explains that market research showed the organization’s leaders how to rev up recruitment by spelling out more clearly the career benefits for corps alumni.

To meet its expansion goals, the organization needed to better articulate the power of the TFA experience and reposition itself as smart, serious, and purposeful – an important alternative to Goldman Sachs or grad school.... The argument was that a two year stint with Teach For America was a win-win proposition: good for low-performing students, good for high-achieving recruits. (Foote, 2008, p. 194)

Part of what makes TFA a career booster is a selection effect: corps members graduate from highly selective colleges and then are admitted into a highly selective program. Part of it is a training effect: corps members gain frontline experience as leaders, reformers, and game changers under the most difficult of circumstances. And part of it is a network effect: corps alumni belong to a club whose members are going on

to great things and thus serve as a powerful form of social capital for each other. The TFA website exploits all of these dimensions in making its pitch.

The selection effect: The average 2008 corps member had a GPA of 3.6 and SATs of 1320, and 95 percent held leadership positions in college (TFA Corps Profile, 2009). The website lists the colleges that contribute the most graduates to the TFA corps, and it reads like a Who's Who of American higher education. The top large schools feeding the program are among the leading flagship state universities in the U.S.: Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Georgia, Texas, and Berkeley. The top medium sized feeder schools represent American's top private universities: Georgetown, Duke, Washington University, Harvard, Yale, and Notre Dame (TFA Top Colleges, 2009).

The training effect: TFA promotional materials make it clear to all prospects that the experiences that corps member gain during their two years in the trenches will reap them long-term benefits across their careers. The program brochure tells potential recruits that "As a member of Teach For America, you will commit two years to teach in one of our country's high-need public schools and will gain the skills, perspective, and experience that will help you make an impact over the long term and pursue your personal and professional goals, regardless of your career path" (TFA Brochure, 2009, p. 2). The website reinforces this vision by relaying what corps members say about their experience in schools: "They describe the responsibility associated with taking ownership of their students' academic progress as far greater than that of any entry-level job they considered. Through this intense personal challenge, they developed an advanced set of leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills." (TFA Our Alumni, 2009)

The network effect: The TFA website shows how membership in the alumni network pays off for corps teachers after their two-year tour is up: "Through their shared corps experience, alumni form lifelong personal and professional relationships and rely on each other as a source of jobs, mentoring, support, and inspiration" (TFA Alumni Summits, 2009). The site spells out the partnerships that TFA has negotiated with a wide range of prestigious employers "who value the leadership skills and experience that distinguish Teach For America corps members" (TFA Employer Partnerships, 2009). The list of partnerships includes Credit Suisse, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, Accenture, McKinsey, GE, and Google. The site also touts partnerships with graduate schools. Graduate schools, it says, are eager to recruit Teach For America alumni.

They know that alumni have gone through a highly selective process and have engaged in a challenging professional experience. Moreover, they value the rich perspective alumni bring from their direct experience with the challenges and opportunities in low-income communities.

Top-ranked business, law, medicine, public policy, and education schools offer alumni benefits including two-year deferrals, fellowships, course credits, and waived application fees. (TFA Graduate School Partnerships, 2009)

The list includes business schools at MIT, Stanford, Chicago, Penn, and Yale and education programs at Harvard, Columbia, Boston College, Brown, and Arizona State.

The end result is a program that is enormously attractive to college seniors who are professionally ambitious as well as socially committed. The TFA website proudly proclaims the advantages the program provides its corps members. *Business Week* selected TFA in 2008 as one of the "Best Places to Launch a Career," placing the

program in 11th place on the list, higher than any other nonprofit. In 2008 CollegeGrad.com's survey of the country's top 500 employers identified TFA as the 6th largest employer of recent college graduates. In the same year *The Princeton Review* named TFA as one of the Best Entry-Level Jobs for U.S. college graduates (TFA Awards and Recognition, 2009).

Things for TE to Like and Not Like about TFA

Let's pause for a moment and consider what there is for teacher educators to like and not like about Teach For America. First, what's to like? It's a stretch for most of us in teacher education to think positively about a program that has so many advantages over us and poses so many threats to our *raison d'être*. But there are some aspects of the program that it's hard to hate. For example, it's hard to hate a program that draws people into teaching – even if only for a short time – who would otherwise never have considered playing such a role. Don't we need all the help we can get? It's especially nice to have a high-powered program, with a lot of marketing muscle and with the ear of those in economic and political positions of power, which works aggressively and successfully to convince the public that teaching is an incredibly important profession and that we need our best people carrying it out. TFA has managed to accomplish the impossible, which is to make teaching enormously attractive to a large number of people who have promising career options. This is not a bad thing.

Even if these new recruits abandon the classroom after a few years, which most TFA corps members do, they will be carrying their deeply etched experience with education into future roles in investment banking, consulting, law, and business, where they can become informed advocates for the educational enterprise. This too is not a bad thing. And many alumni don't leave education entirely after their term is up but continue to hold a role in education. According to the TFA website, about two-thirds of alumni remain in education in some form – as teachers, administrators, consultants, members of charter school management firms, and graduate students. And nearly half of the alumni who remain in education are still classroom teachers (TFA Press Kit, 2009). The proportion in education, and particularly in teaching, is likely to diminish as the number of alumni grows, an increasing share of whom will be years away from their term of service in the corps, but the current rate of persistence in education is nonetheless substantial.³ A particularly important form of participation is as graduate students in education. In my 25 years at Michigan State and Stanford, I have seen that master's and doctoral programs at leading education schools are loaded with TFA alumni. Some, I

³ Data are scarce on TFA attrition rates. But one study examined a sample drawn from the full TFA census for three years (2000-2002), estimating that 61 percent of the entering cohort remain in teaching (though not necessarily the same school) after the second year and that 24 percent remain in teaching after six years (Donaldson, 2008, p. 18). In comparison, Ingersoll (2003, figure 4) used data from the national Schools and Staffing Survey to estimate that 76 percent of all new teachers remain in teaching after their second year and 54 percent after their fifth year. So TFA attrition is higher than for other new teachers at the earliest career stage, and it grows larger with the passing of time.

have found, are driven there because of a bad experience in their induction into teaching, which fired them up to learn how to prepare teachers more fully than they themselves were in their five-week summer boot camp. But for many, their interest in the field has been sharpened by their experience in the classroom, and they now want to understand more fully how the system works and how to change it.

So what's not to like about Teach For America? One complaint is that the program exacerbates an already major problem, which is that the least experienced and most poorly trained teachers end up in schools for the disadvantaged, which are precisely the schools that need our best. Corps members may be smart, well educated, and highly motivated, but they clearly have not received an extensive professional preparation for taking on the role of teacher. In addition, the program sets up a striking contrast between TFA teachers and regular teachers, which undermines the public standing of the latter. After all, if coming from an elite college and passing through a highly selective admission process is what it takes to be a good teacher – which is the message presented loud and clear by TFA – then this leaves the other teachers, who constitute the large majority of professionals in American classrooms, looking second rate. Unlike the TFA hotshots, they didn't go to a top school and they didn't emerge from a rigorous selection process; and instead of relying on native smarts and elite education, which allows corps members to become teachers after five weeks of summer training, they had to learn the trade of teacher through an extensive program of teacher preparation. The message is: TE is for losers; winners take the fast track in TFA.

Teach For America's short cut to teaching discounts the enormous complexity of teaching as a professional role, suggesting that talented amateurs can pick it up quickly and do it better than plodding professionals. This reinforces an already problematic tendency for both prospective teachers and public to think of teaching as a matter of natural ability rather than professional training.⁴ In the process, TFA interferes with the efforts by a lot of teacher educators and educational reformers, who are trying to improve the quality of teaching across the board by making TE programs more professionally rigorous, relevant, and effective.⁵ Finally, TFA's approach to teaching reinforces an old and dangerous vision of teaching as a form of slumming, a missionary effort by the white middle class to elevate minorities and the lower classes through the medium of education.⁶ Teacher educators argue that we don't need more missionaries in the classroom; we need more professionals.

⁴ See Britzman (1986) on this and other related cultural myths about teaching.

⁵ Teaching has the bad luck of being an extremely difficult profession that looks easy, a particularly bad combination if you're trying to gain professional respect and ramp up the quality of professional preparation (Labaree, 2004, chapter 3).

⁶ Despite the TFA's best efforts to seek corps members outside the boundaries of the white middle class, its focus on recruiting only from elite colleges severely limits what can be done along these lines. The program reports that 29 percent of 2008 cohort were people of color, including 10 percent African-American and 6 percent Hispanic (TFA 2008 Corps Profile, 2009). This compares favorably with the population of public school teachers as a whole, where whites typically constitute about 90 percent (NCES, 2002, table 70), but corps members are strikingly whiter than the teachers who teach in the high-needs inner-city and rural schools where TFA makes its placements. Mathematica

TE Can't Compete with TFA about Doing Well

Doing well is not something that teacher education programs can offer to college students. When you're producing something like 200,000 new teacher candidates every year, as teacher education does, then you can't offer students the kind of exclusivity that TFA can in filling its 4,000 slots. And when you're offering access to a career like teaching that pays at the low end of the professional income scale, you can't match TFA's promise to provide a launching pad for a student's lucrative career in business and the high professions. There's simply no way for TE to compete with TFA in this critically important facet of the recruitment process.

If TFA successfully wraps itself with the "aura of status and selectivity" (as Kopp put it), TE's history in the United States has cloaked it with the gloom of low status and easy access. Of the institutions that train the largest number of teachers in the United States, most started out as high-school level normal schools in the 19th century. Positioned as the feeder institutions to a rapidly expanding school system, these normal schools ended up largely abandoning their initial aim of being models of professional preparation and instead became more like teacher factories. Processing large numbers of students for teaching positions, which at that point turned over every five years or so, these programs featured low standards for admission to an abbreviated program with low academic demands. This was not the way to create the basis for a professional school with a claim to a clubby kind of prestige and exclusivity. Over time these normal schools evolved into teachers colleges, then expanded in scope to become general purpose state colleges, and eventually by the middle of the 20th century became regional state universities. Education programs in the latter institutions, which still produce the most teachers, continue to carry the legacy of this undistinguished history and in addition find themselves increasingly pushed to the margins of the university by other professional programs with higher status.

In addition to this historical legacy, teacher education in the U.S. carries the burden of a collection of low status associations. One is gender. Since the middle of the 19th century, teaching in the U.S. has been seen as women's work, a label that has never enhanced the prestige of an occupation (think social workers, nurses, secretaries). Another is class. Professional standing is in part related to the standing of the profession's clients, and teaching's clientele, as a cross section of the population, is largely non elite. In addition, as the largest profession, teaching has also been the most accessible, with a long history of providing access to working class students seeking a middle class job. A third lowly association is age. Serving clients who are adults is more prestigious than serving those who are children. Think of the relative prestige within the educational profession according to age of student, ranging from teaching in graduate

did a tightly controlled comparison of TFA and regular teachers in the same schools, where 67 percent of the TFA teachers were white compared with 13 percent of the other teachers (Mathematica, 2004, table IV.1). TFA also seems to work hard to recruit students from the lower classes. It reports that 26 percent of the 2008 TFA corps had Pell Grants in college, an indicator of low income (TFA 2008 Corps Profile, 2009); about 30 percent of full-time undergraduates receive such grants (NCES, 2002, table 324).

school to teaching in undergraduate college, high school, elementary school, and preschool. For all of these reasons, teacher education has been unable to make a claim to anything like the status of professional training programs such as law, medicine, business, or engineering.⁷

One might think that this status problem would not affect teacher education programs at elite universities, where these programs might be able to compete successfully against TFA, but this turns out not to be the case. Let me tell a story that shows the depth of the problem. In 2005 I took part in a conference sponsored by the School of Education at the University of Michigan “Celebrating 125 Years of the Art and Science of Teaching” at the school. The papers were good, the level of the conversation high, and the sense of the school’s accomplishments over the years was strong. At a banquet for the participants that evening, the featured speaker was the university provost. He congratulated the School of Education for its high standing across the country and its great contributions to educational research and the teaching profession, and he noted that the university continues to have a strong commitment to serving American public education. His prime piece of evidence? The University of Michigan sends more graduates to Teach For America than any other college in the country. (It still does; in 2008 the count was 79, which was 22 larger than its nearest competitor (TFA Top Colleges, 2009).) Here is one of the country’s most distinguished schools of education (ranked 10th that year by *U.S. News and World Report*), and large numbers of U of M students turn their back on the School’s TE program in order to pursue TFA. And the provost brags about this to his own education faculty. If teacher education at the University of Michigan can’t compete with TFA, then who can?

TE Also Can’t Compete with TFA about Doing Good

Teacher education programs have long attracted students who want to do good. Since teaching does not offer the prospects for pay, promotion, and prestige that are associated with many other career paths that college students could choose, it tends to draw those who are less driven by the pursuit of such goals and more prone to seek a life of social service and social improvement. One of the pleasures of teaching TE students is that they are more committed to providing social opportunity to others than in seeking it for themselves. So it would appear that on the issue of doing good the contest between TE and TFA would come down to a draw. That, however, is not true. Teacher education can indeed offer students the chance to do good, but it can’t offer Teach For America’s convenient escape clause.

Many TE graduates end up teaching for a lifetime, but a substantial number move on to other careers after a few years in the classroom. They stay on average longer than TFA corps members, but substantial turnover is a fact of life in the profession in general.⁸ A key difference between teachers emerging from the two kinds of programs, however, is not only the amount of time they stay in the role but also the meaning they attach to leaving this role. Teacher educators, school administrators, teacher unions, and

⁷ For more detail on this analysis of the teacher education status problem, see chapter 2 of my book, *The Trouble with Ed Schools* (Labaree, 2004).

⁸ See note 3 above for data on attrition rates.

educational policymakers all consider the relatively high turnover of new teachers a significant failure in the system, and they try to deal with it by doing things like providing richer professional preparation, higher pay, better working conditions, and closer mentoring. Likewise teachers themselves tend to experience the decision to leave teaching after only a few years as a personal and professional failure. Perhaps poor pay or working conditions drove them out or an attractive job opportunity drew them out, but often the perception of these teachers and those around them is that they failed to make it in the classroom. After all, this is what they trained for in college, this is the profession they entered with high hopes of making it a career, and they couldn't make it work.

This sense of failure afflicts teacher education graduates when they leave the profession, but it has no effect on Teach For America corps members who complete their two year term. That, after all, is what they signed up for. Only those who drop out before two years undergo this sense of failing to make the grade, as Foote (2008) documents with some of the corps members in the school she studied. But for typical TFA recruits, who serve two years as a teacher and then move on to another career or to graduate school, completing the short term in the classroom is a major accomplishment. They display their time in the corps prominently in their resumes, and they tout the qualities they gained there – leadership, innovation, motivation, entrepreneurship, compassion – as major qualifications for future professional roles. They didn't fail, they didn't quit. Like a graduate who served a term in the Peace Corps, they just moved on to the rest of their lives, exactly as planned.

By defining a short tour in the classroom as a success rather than a failure, TFA enjoys an enormous competitive advantage over TE, even in the domain where the latter should be dominant: doing good. This sharply reduces the risk for corps members in entering teaching – hang in there two years and you're a winner – and thus also reduces the personal and professional cost of doing good. As a corps member, you get to be a good guy who volunteered for public service, which means you treat the classroom experience not as a low paid job but as a paid internship (TFA promotional materials play up the fact that corps members get full pay and benefits). In addition, you get the satisfaction of contributing to the solution of a major social problem without having to put your professional reputation or self esteem in jeopardy. Even if at the end of your tour you're still not a good teacher, you don't have to suffer the consequences since you're already on to something better. TE can't compete with TFA in any of these dimension. For TE grads, teaching is their job, its pay defines their standard of living, inability to do it well is a personal failure, and to leave the profession means not moving on but dropping out.

Conclusion

Teach For America is perfectly attuned to the American system of status attainment and to the highly stratified structure of American education. It allows corps members to have things both ways, to do good and do well. It reduces the risks involved in pursuing the public service of teaching by treating the time in the classroom as combination of a paid internship and a peace corps stint instead of as a professional commitment. And it packages the TFA experience as a credential that opens doors to professional opportunity and labels alumni as valuable commodities in the job market.

The program understands the connection between the structure of educational credentialing and the structure of social opportunity in America. It recognizes that the American educational system is a judicious mix of two qualities – access and advantage – offering everyone a chance to gain some form of education and then making sure that everyone gets a different educational experience and a different social outcome. For students, the educational institution that is most accessible provides the least social advantage. This means that the best place to gain entry to the system is at the other end of the scale, at the point with the lowest access and the highest advantage. (Recall the Groucho Marx line: “I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.”) In this scheme of things, Teach For America has staked out a position for itself as the Harvard of teacher preparation programs, which is both very exclusive and very rewarding. This leaves teacher education with the role of providing broad access to teaching and limited advantage to the teacher – not as the Harvard but as the regional state university of teaching – which, by no coincidence, is the place where most American teachers in fact receive their training. Heads they win, tails we lose.

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