

EXPLORING
EXPLORING
THE
IMPACT
OF THE
TFA EXPERIENCE
ON THE
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
OF
ALUMNI
ENGAGEMENT

A REPORT BY
COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

"I'm not teaching anymore. And I may not even be, in the end, involved in education; but I'm going to be involved in the society because I can't not be, not having seen what I've seen. I can't not do something. And I think that a lot of people have had that experience."

- TFA alumnus

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Collaborative Communications Group is a strategic communications consulting firm built around the belief that public engagement is essential to the improvement of communities and, particularly, schools. Collaborative Communications Group works in three portfolios areas: defining and analyzing the nature and impact of civic engagement in the context of organization, education and community change; developing tools to increase and improve the practice of engagement; and improving the management and communications capacity of organizations that serve as primary initiators or supporters of engagement activities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its inception 10 years ago, Teach For America has been widely recognized for its significant contributions in providing high-quality teachers in low-income situations. Indeed, this is part of the TFA mission.

Just as important, but less visible to outsiders, has been the second part of the TFA mission — the desire to create a cadre of future leaders who have an enlightened perspective on education and the related social conditions of under-resourced communities.

The experts in civic leadership we talked to in this study, as well as the TFA alumni themselves, demonstrate a belief that civic engagement — defined here as the process of working to solve public problems through citizen action — is truly important to the health of schools and communities. To improve both, we will need talented teachers who actively commit themselves to meeting the needs of low-income students, and leaders dedicated to bringing about the broader societal changes needed to end inequality.

The findings in this report provide opportunities for Teach For America to examine programmatic and strategic improvements so that it can be more responsive to the civic side of its mission and to think anew about where it spends time and in what direction it focuses its energies.

Key Findings

First, we found that Teach For America indeed is a critical catalyst to the civic engagement of alumni. TFA has influenced how alumni think about education and other social issues and the careers paths they pursue. Alumni find it difficult to separate who they are from what they have become as a result of their experience in TFA. Still, they recognize that TFA has led them to be lifelong advocates for public education. In addition, alumni say that TFA has helped them to see and relate to education issues differently. Because of TFA, they are keener observers of education systems and more likely to see the need for policy change. Furthermore, alumni say that because of TFA they see the connections between education and other social issues more clearly. They look at politics, systems, leadership and opinion makers through an enlightened lens.

For some alumni, the sense of frustration they experienced with the slow pace of change in schools and districts led them to develop new approaches to longstanding problems.

Second, we found that the TFA program makes it possible for young people to apply civic ambitions that otherwise might have been unfulfilled. Many of the alumni we spoke with indicated that they came into TFA because they were actively seeking ways to put their community service ambitions to work. TFA provided them with an accessible vehicle for carrying out these civic ambitions. Others said that the TFA experience nurtured a sense of civic responsibility and action. The current structure of the TFA program encourages civic engagement because it:

- allows direct, one-on-one individual service;
- allows corps members to assume fulfilling and responsible roles as teachers;
- adequately compensates individuals for their work, thereby making it possible to serve in a longer-term capacity;
- provides corps members with a sense of being part of something larger than themselves;
- allows corps members to work with a group of like-minded peers, which supports efforts and diminishes isolation;
- provides corps members a chance to see that they are having an impact and that their work really matters; and
- immerses corps members in schools and communities, which helps them to understand the systemic nature of social problems.

Third, we found that while the nature of the experience itself will have the greatest impact on corps members, TFA has opportunities to strengthen its impact on civic engagement. One of the ways this can be done is to be more explicit about shaping the civic lives of corps members. Alumni were clear about TFA's intention to cultivate skills that directly improve the quality of education for students in low-performing districts — what TFA regards as the first part of its mission. They also were clear that TFA hopes to cultivate lifelong advocates for public education, what TFA refers to as the second part of its mission.

Alumni were less clear, however, on what is implied in the second part of the mission — that TFA will cultivate individuals who are committed in general to community service because they have come to understand the *systemic* nature of the problems they confront in their classrooms. Corps members generally agreed that TFA needs to be more explicit about its expectations about civic engagement and advocacy for the range of problems that beset urban and rural America — everything from homelessness and poverty to nutrition, health care and family violence.

In addition, we found that if the two-year TFA experience provides a vehicle through which those with civic ambitions can play them out, then the shaping and delivery of the alumni program provides a similar vehicle to sustain those efforts once corps members leave the program. While TFA is recognized for conducting outreach already, alumni see current efforts as too thin to make a real impact in their job opportunities, networking with other TFA alumni and identifying volunteer and career matches.

ABOUT TEACH FOR AMERICA

Teach For America is the national corps of outstanding recent college graduates, of all academic majors, who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools. TFA's mission is to provide excellent teachers who help low-income students fulfill their true potential, and to create an ever-expanding force of leaders who are committed to increasing educational opportunity and improving the quality of life in under-resourced areas. More than 1,000 corps members are in the midst of their two-year teaching commitments at any given time, and more than 4,000 alumni have completed the program and either remain in education or carry their perspective into other fields such as business, law or medicine.

To study the impact of the TFA experience on civic perspectives, we listened carefully to voices from the field and TFA alumni. It was important to tease apart what people brought with them to the conversations and what impact the TFA experience itself actually had.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

From the onset of our study, we understood that many TFA corps members get involved in education because of their desire to have a direct impact on students, schools and under-resourced communities. We thought it would be exciting and valuable — for TFA itself, as well as for other organizations supporting the emerging leadership development of young people — to look deeply into the TFA program to explore the potential it has beyond the direct impact on schools. Thus, we looked at the potential of Teach For America as a program that is growing citizens who are motivated to engage in education and other social issues at a systemic level.

The project, supported by a grant from the Surdna Foundation, was not intended to be an evaluation of the TFA program, but rather an exploration of the impact of the two-year experience on the ongoing civic engagement of the young people involved. Specifically, we set out to analyze three essential questions:

1. Does the Teach For America experience — an opportunity to work in public schools in under-resourced communities — influence the career and civic participation decisions of those who graduate from the program?
2. If so, how does this impact occur?
3. How could the extent of the impact be increased?

To examine these questions, we conducted three sets of interviews:

- **Interviews of Leaders in Civic Engagement.** We interviewed 13 leading thinkers in the areas of civic and community engagement. We sought to explore how they define civic engagement; identify where they have seen impact in civic participation programs and where that might occur in Teach For America; and get advice/consultation about the kinds of program elements that lead to systemic change.

- **Focus Groups with Alumni.** Shaped by the findings and analysis of the interviews with leaders in civic engagement, Belden Russonello & Stewart conducted four focus groups with alumni of Teach For America. Focus group conversations probed whether and how specific elements of the Teach For America training and program influenced corps members' experience and had an impact on their decisions about how best to participate in issues related to education, community and social change.
- **Individual Interviews of Alumni.** The stories and experiences of individual alumni added context to the definitions of civic engagement that come from experts in the field and from the focus groups. By looking at particular experiences in which Teach For America has had a real impact on alumni decisions about civic engagement, we learned a good deal about the strengths and opportunities in the current program.

How the Report Is Organized

Section I outlines the specific impact on civic sensibilities that the two-year Teach For America experience has on the people who participate in it. We talked with national leaders in the field of civic engagement to get their ideas about the impact and potential impact of the Teach For America experience. We then tested these ideas in focus groups and individual conversations with Teach For America alumni.

Section II describes how Teach For America has encouraged and influenced the civic-mindedness of corps members. We looked at specific elements of the initiative's structure and design and compared these to what national leaders in the field identify as program elements that encourage the development of civic leaders.

Section III identifies a number of interventions in which Teach For America could have even more influence. The recommendations are arranged by time period: pre-intervention/recruiting, training and service, and alumni intervention.

“The value of TFA in and of itself is that it gives a much deeper understanding of what otherwise would be possible. It demonstrates the potential of the individual, a sense of fulfillment and importance of doing [public work]. Also, when people participate in a collectivity, not just an individuality, there’s a more powerful sense. One can see, directly, in a hands-on way, that there’s no escaping social problems, and that working with the most vulnerable sector of our society — poor kids — however frustrating, provides a very true sense of just how much more is needed.”

— *Tom Ehrlich, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and board member of the Corporation for National Service*

SECTION I:

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE TFA EXPERIENCE ON THE CIVIC PARTICIPATION OF ALUMNI?

We talked with national leaders in civic engagement to get their ideas about the impact and potential impact of the Teach For America experience — both during the two-year program and afterward — on developing civic leaders. We then tested these ideas in focus groups and individual conversations with Teach For America alumni.

The civic engagement leaders we talked with expressed excitement about the potential of a two-year intensive experience such as Teach For America to shape and sustain the civic ambitions of the people who participate.

They could foresee the impact occurring within individuals in terms of how they think about themselves and their personal decisions and how they relate to their communities. They could foresee Teach For America creating alumni who better understand what is required in education reform and who are advocates for education. In addition, experts believed TFA provided an opportunity to get alumni to view education as a complex set of issues and problems that must be addressed systemically. By working and living in high-poverty, high-need communities, TFA corps members have an opportunity to learn firsthand that improving the quality of community life depends on addressing a complex weave of systems.

Many of the civic engagement leaders we talked to considered Teach For America to be an opportunity for participants to explore personal aspirations and understand their personal role in civic efforts. They saw TFA as an initiative that actively grows better citizens — by helping to shape the character and sense of responsibility of alumni, and by encouraging alumni to focus for the rest of their lives on engaging social capital to promote the kinds of communities we want to live in.

Wendy Puriefoy, president of the Public Education Network, characterized the opinions of a number of civic engagement leaders when she said, “Teach For America is not in itself civic engagement. Teach For America is a process of personal transformation.” Personal transformation was seen as a central tenet of the concept of civic engagement. Personal transformation includes deepening — and in some cases, changing — personal perceptions or developing sensibilities about public issues. In addition, it includes developing a belief in one’s own ability to contribute to civic efforts and to make a difference. Furthermore, civic engagement leaders believe that social change depends on a critical mass of such individual transformations. When enough people are engaged in meaningful discussions and actions regarding social change, they can then begin to transform communities.

As Richard Harwood, president of the Harwood Institute, said, “What seems important to look at is whether the experience helps these young people to think publicly. When they come out, do they see themselves as public actors or private individuals? Does the experience spark a different career path, encourage them to seek new vistas, or act differently in the public arena? What they do over time is important. The experience has the potential to infuse [these corps members] with certain public sensibilities. If that occurs, it’s as good as it gets.”

Finding 1.1: Alumni see career choices as demonstrations of civic engagement.

Alumni told us that they see civic engagement in terms of the choices they make about their lives and what they do for a living, and not as taking on additional

volunteer activities. Thus, because many of its alumni are committed to social service, TFA has in a very important sense already delivered on its goal of increasing civic engagement. Most of the individuals who took part in our research groups are working in education or other service and civic careers. They have chosen community and civic affairs as the focus of their work and continuing education.

Alumni believe that these career and education decisions demonstrate a commitment to civic matters. Furthermore, they say that graduate school education and the types of jobs they have chosen, including teaching, are very consuming undertakings. Many alumni believe they have neither the time nor the resources to volunteer or engage in civic activities outside their jobs, and they do not feel it is realistic to expect them and their fellow alumni to do so.

Finding 1.2: TFA helps to develop lifelong advocates for public education.

TFA knows that many of the volunteers who work in high-poverty schools will decide after two years of service to pursue careers other than teaching. Even if they decide not to become lifelong educators, this does not mean that TFA has failed in its mission. TFA hopes that the young volunteers who are exposed to the complex problems of poor schools will become enlightened lobbyists for public education for the rest of their lives. The conversations with TFA alumni suggest this is indeed the case.

One TFA alumnus, Taggart Hansen, noted that his years of service suggested to him that public education is filled with inequities. Although he is no longer an educator, he said he regards himself as a lifelong advocate for public education. From his law office, he continues to stay in touch with former students, offers seminars in the local school district and works on a national essay contest for students. “Teach For America challenges those things from the inside,” he said. “And Teach For America alumni challenge them from the outside.”

Another TFA alumnus noted, “It is equally wonderful to take kids going to law or med school and give them a two-year intervention” whether they stay in public education or not. “You will divert some along the way; others you won’t divert. But TFA realized this can be

sold as an advantage, because it is better to have a boardroom of corporate lawyers who understand the problems of public education than not to have them.”

Corps members have their consciousness raised about the value of public education. They have informed opinions about what will and will not work in school reform, and they understand that those who want to improve education systems from the inside face an uphill battle.

I think TFA is building a corps of people who have education at the forefront of their minds. In that sense, wherever they’re going, some systemic change is going to happen because education is just there. I’m going into social work, but I think about education every day. – *New York alumna*

I know a lot of people have gone into another field. I know tons have gone into education, but they still are involved and are part of the larger conversation of civil justice and education. – *New York alumnus*

Finding 1.3: TFA helps corps members see the need for policy changes in education.

Charles Supple, executive director of California’s State Commission for AmeriCorps, framed the issue this way: “It would be interesting to see whether the TFA experience provides an answer to this question of self-versus collective interest. Does having an experience of seeing public education firsthand lead to involvement in policy that would lead to a systemic or global look at the problem versus a narrow self-interest?”

We tested this idea in our conversations with TFA alumni. Did the experience have an impact on how these young people think about and relate to education issues? How did their thinking and understanding of education develop during their two years of teaching? And how did it lead to thinking about policy?

There was no doubt, listening to the discussion in the focus groups, that TFA alumni believe they now see public education differently. They said the TFA experience influenced them to want to address education not just in terms of direct, one-on-one service to individual students but more systemically. Working in high-poverty schools, alumni said, made them see that policy changes, resource allocation and school system leadership had a lot to do with whether students

were ultimately served effectively. TFA alumni said they came to appreciate the complexity of the problems of public education.

Every day, TFA corps members bump into barriers beyond the relationship between teacher and student that require solutions at the systemic level. Several TFA alumni who worked in New York commented on the challenge of teaching in a system that appears dysfunctional at the top. Some talked about the need to address education at a systemic level, rather than working incrementally, in order to make education reform succeed.

make sure the computers are hooked up. It's just little things like that. I used to think that if they would allocate more money to the schools then the problems would be solved. I realize that this is not necessarily the case. – *New York alumna*

I guess for me it was the social/emotional things that I was seeing kids go through on a daily basis coming into my classroom, which prevented them from being ready to learn. For me, just – I'll never look at kids the same. I don't look at people the same. ... I think for me it was seeing the impact that a lot of their home lives have and just the whole social

“For me, I look at everything differently. I hear the news differently. I see subtleties in what a politician says, and I see it for what they want people to see. Then I see what the consequences are for the underserved in this subject. I see the subtext a lot more.”

- TFA alumnus

I couldn't just work in the classroom. It is very important work, and teachers are fabulous, but I couldn't. I kept looking down the hall and looking at the district. So I'm going to graduate school in public policy so I will hopefully change things from another perspective. I know that I want change to happen and I know the ways that I can't do it, so I'm trying to figure out the ways that I can. – *New York alumna*

I think the impact for me is just seeing how everything is so interrelated. I'm going back to what [she] was saying that you can't just look at one aspect of education. You have to look at the health and the emotional side and all that, ... and if I didn't go through the TFA experience and I hadn't been in the classroom and interacted with all the different sides of it, I probably would not have seen that. – *New York alumna*

Teaching in the public school where I'm teaching has made me realize also how much money is actually wasted. A new superintendent comes in, they chuck the old basals and bring in new basals. It happens constantly, consistently. It's ridiculous just how much money is actually wasted. They've spent all this money to wire the building for Internet service but then no one has come in to

fabric; but that impact is how I view education and the idea of having to be a holistic process where everyone is involved — the parent, the social worker, the community. – *New York alumnus*

I know what not to do. You learn from your mistakes. You see how programs are received at your school. You see the library that we were able to open up. The library that opened up at our school closed down after a week because there was no librarian. Yes, you have to take those things into account. I think I'm more able to see the problem as a whole and how to effect change as opposed to saying, “Okay, let's just get a lot of books and we'll have a library.” There's more to it than that. – *D.C. alumnus*

My career choice has wavered within boundaries, but during my second year of teaching I decided that I wanted to go to law school, and what I wanted to do was education policy. – *New York alumnus*

Tom Ehrlich told us: “No person is better able to talk about schooling, about school reform, than someone who's been through Teach For America. They've been deeply involved in the elements of one of this country's most vulnerable populations — poor children — and what

it takes to school them and the social and political contexts that affect them. They've lived in these communities.”

Finding 1.4: TFA helps develop an appreciation of the connection between education and other social issues.

Education itself is a complex system of issues. In addition, education is a vehicle through which we discover a connection to larger social and community issues that have an impact on the quality of life for all of us — whether we are rich or poor, or whether we live in the city or in rural or suburban areas. Experts in civic engagement said that the ability to view problem solving as a set of integrated systems suggests a higher level of social thinking. According to Joseph Kahne, associate professor and director of the doctoral program in education leadership at Mills College, “Problems do not occur in isolation, and those who work in social systems long enough begin to get a sense of the importance of recognizing and working with different points of leverage.”

Alumni said they also recognize that the TFA experience gave them a better understanding of social needs and helped them think about the integration of a set of social systems. TFA made participants view the world differently. They look at politics, leaders and opinion makers through a new lens. As one corps member said, “I hear the news differently. ...I see the subtext a lot more.”

Other alumni said:

I definitely think that being in a community that had issues, as people mentioned, where there were people that didn't have jobs, helped me to see that there's more to the piece than just the educational. Kids are going home where their parents don't have jobs and they're not going to learn an ethic. Obviously, we need to create jobs and training and things so that outside of home can carry into the classroom. – *D.C. alumnus*

I look at the way things are in a very different manner. I would say that I look at organizations, social service agencies, and think that we are wasting a lot of time by not collaborating. I think that education and social work have to go hand in hand. I think that teachers alone are never going to solve it. Social workers alone are not going to solve it. ... I no longer look at the extra social services in the same way. – *D.C. alumnus*

I think for me, teaching in Los Angeles, that the conditions are very similar to New York in certain ways. Being so close to Mexico and being so close to Central and South America, I became very interested in issues affecting immigrants, illegal immigrants, migrant workers and bilingual education. I think that just as far as that goes, the population that we're dealing with is 60 percent [English as a second language]

Sixty percent of the community was Latino or Latina and I think that the issues that affected them as a community were very prevalent at our school. Also poverty issues. There's more to people who are receiving welfare than just those who are too lazy to get a job. You know, people say, “Why don't they just go and get a job. It's so easy to get a job.” There's more to it than that. I think that if you teach in any high-poverty area you'll come away with that. – *New York alumna*

When I was in TFA I was very close to one of my students who was pregnant. She was a ninth-grader. Towards the end of her term I started to take her to the doctor. And that was eye-opening for me. Another spin-off of the TFA experience was seeing different policies and how they affected the kids that we taught. The first time I was with her with the doctor he left and wasn't going to come back. She hadn't asked him a question, and I said, “Kendra, this man has reached up inside of you; doesn't it bother you that you don't know what he is doing?” She said, “This is the first time that he has ever used my name, and he has never stayed with me for more than five minutes.” Right? Just these little things that you learn as you are interacting with your kids is — the kids lives don't stop within the school walls. They are affected by all of the other policies. – *D.C. alumna*

Some volunteers indicated that coming to awareness about the relationship between education issues and other social concerns was like an epiphany. “I knew I had the right target,” one alumnus said. “To me that wasn't demoralizing, it was energizing. If you become a student of social policy, you begin to realize that these dynamics are not Newtonian physics; they are manmade realities that we can change. If you look at Social Security, for example, the poorest Americans were once elders. Now about 11 percent of them are poor. It wasn't the economy that changed; it was Claude Pepper

putting a cost of living adjustment on Social Security benefits that slashed poverty in half.”

One alumnus decided he could have a more profound effect on the poverty he encountered in his classrooms by becoming a student of social policy. “I thought I would teach English in a small liberal arts college; then I went to Teach For America,” said Andy Sokatch, a doctoral candidate in social policy. “As I spent time in TFA, I realized these were the problems I wanted to dedicate my professional career to — the problems of urban poverty and how it interacts with education and youth development.” Others found they could become lawyers, stockbrokers, or, in the case of Janet Boudreau Ceddia, management consultants and still not turn their backs on the people who need them. Ceddia gives away much of her professional time working with nonprofit agencies.

For me, I look at everything differently. I hear the news differently. I see subtleties in what a politician says, and I see it for what they want people to see. ... Then I see what the consequences are for the underserved in this subject. I see the subtext a lot more. – *New York alumnus*

Finding 1.5: The TFA structure helps corps members merge entrepreneurial and civic inclinations.

TFA targets high achievers who want to put their energies to use in civic causes. In addition, a number of TFA alumni say they are modeling themselves after the big thinkers in social change and are interested in designing new ways or creating new programs to tackle social problems. The TFA experience demonstrates that it’s possible to do both. Individuals with this combination of interests are often called “social entrepreneurs.”

Michael Brown, executive director of City Year, believes the development of social entrepreneurs is a signature of successful community engagement programs. When programs grow social entrepreneurs, he says, they provide evidence of commitment and they help perpetuate activities that lead to long-lasting changes.

He describes the social change process as a pyramid. “At the top of the pyramid are the Wendy Kopps who are building gigantic structures,” he said. “At the bottom are everyone who has done Teach For America. Then those

who grow it are at the middle level.” Included in the ranks of the entrepreneurial middle are “those who have created their own institutions — charter schools — or have gone to an institution to create an institution within.”

One example of a social entrepreneur is Mark Levine. On his way to his TFA assignment each day, Levine walked past a nonprofit agency that helped small businesspeople get federal assistance. He was so interested in the concept that he began to carve out time in his busy schedule to volunteer at the agency a couple of times each week. The experience convinced him that he could have a real impact on the lives of poor people if he could establish a credit union in neighborhoods where banks feared to tread. With financing from a foundation and a TFA supporter, Levine was able to found two nonprofit, federally insured credit unions in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan and in the South Bronx.

Today the Washington Heights credit union has 2,800 members and deposits valued at \$4.5 million, including funds from some commercial banks. Over the last three years, it has made 700 small loans valued at \$1.8 million, mostly to people who had no credit history. The repayment rate on the loans is nearly 98 percent. “We had one member who buried his money in a park outside his window because keeping money at home wasn’t safe either,” he said. “We allowed people who had no experience with finance to get their first savings account and loans.”

Other TFA alumni have had similar successes. Julie Kennedy, who taught fourth grade as a corps teacher in Washington, D.C., now operates a national program called America Scores. America Scores builds students’ athletic and literacy skills by providing opportunities to play competitive soccer and write and publish their own creative works. Danny Brassell, who taught second grade in Compton, California, founded a local nonprofit called Assignment: Books, which collects cast-off books and recycles them into school libraries in high-poverty school districts in metropolitan Los Angeles. And Martin Winchester, who taught in the Rio Grande Valley, has started a charter school in Texas Hidalgo County, located near the border of Texas and Mexico. The school is modeled after KIPP Academy, a highly successful pair of charter schools established by two other TFA alumni.

WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Our conversations with national leaders in the field provided us with an emerging definition of civic engagement. Most of the experts described civic engagement as a process of working to solve public problems through citizen action. The process includes collaborative deliberation about public issues and problems and taking action to address them. Central to this process is the core democratic belief that addressing public issues requires the participation of all citizens. In turn, this means that engaged citizens have an interest and involvement that go beyond personal and family issues to community, national cross-national issues.

Those we interviewed believe that, in addition to identifying and working to achieve common aspirations, engaged people understand that complexity of and connections among social issues. For these national leaders, civic engagement requires that people care about and actively try to improve the effective operation of a social system. Civic engagement goes beyond voting or the promotion of a single political belief; the interviewees characterized political involvement as a subset.

Civic engagement includes a spectrum of actions, from making individual, private choices to publicly collaborating with others for the common good. Private choices might include voting, deciding to throw newspapers into the garbage rather than recycling them, or choosing to do business with a corporation that is known to discriminate. Public collaboration or deliberation might include participating in volunteer activities, going to public forums, or speaking out publicly against bills or other issues. The common element that qualifies these actions as civic participation is this: In each case, people make a choice about an action that affects the public good.

For the purposes of this analysis, we also were interested in identifying indicators that would demonstrate to these experts that Teach For America alumni were developing a capacity for civic engagement. The interviews illuminated several possible indicators. As civic engagement occurs, the experts said, certain sensibilities develop. At the point of engagement, for example, the identity and thinking of the participants, as individuals, shifts from singular to collective. People move from thinking about what's in their own individual best interest to what is best for the common good.

This concept of collective versus individual aspirations would be evident in the choices an individual makes. A sense of shared responsibility influences how engaged people think, where they live, how they vote, how they understand the news around them, how they interpret their environment, and how they think about and relate to their community. And it affects their view of political, social and organizational leadership. More and more, these experts said, people regard leadership as the ability to get things done with others, rather than having charisma or occupying a particular position.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:

- Goes beyond family to community, national, cross-national issues. Political involvement is a subset.
- Does not promote a single political belief or vote. Civic engagement is caring about the effective operation of a social system, the achievement of common goals and a belief that addressing these issues requires the participation of all citizens.
- Represents an appreciation of the difficulty of collective action and the need for thoughtful public discussion.
- Involves people coming together to solve common problems.
- Requires the development of leaders for social change.
- Is the politics of common ground. At point of engagement, powerful elements of civic identity form.
- Moves people from “here’s how I see” to “here’s how we see.”

PEOPLE WHO ACCEPT CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY:

- Participate in local citizenry.
- Have a sense of the larger social fabric.
- Accept social problems as their own and take action when appropriate.
- Have a sense of shared responsibility, which influences how they think, where they live, how they vote, how they understand the news around them, how they interpret their environment.

“TFA provided me not only with an opportunity to teach but also an opportunity to see in what realm I want to be a social advocate. Without it I would have said, ‘Yes, I’m interested in helping causes,’ but I don’t know how active I would have become without actually diving in and putting myself in that position.” — TFA Alumnus

SECTION II:

HOW DOES TEACH FOR AMERICA ENCOURAGE AND INFLUENCE CIVIC COMMITMENT?

In this section, we describe *how* Teach For America has encouraged and influenced the civic-mindedness of corps members. On a fundamental level, the program’s mere existence encourages civic participation. We heard from many alumni that if a structured program like TFA did not exist, they might never have been exposed to community service.

Furthermore, the program’s *design* helps explain its impact. For example, the design gives corps members face-to-face contact with those they are trying to help, which is what researchers say today’s youth prefer when engaging in community projects. The one-on-one interaction allows them to see results, which helps to sustain further activism. The program also allows them to assume a fulfilling and responsible role as teachers and compensates them for the work, reinforcing their sense that they are performing a valuable function in depressed areas. And it helps connect them to other peers, which gives them the energy and support to sustain their work.

These and other elements of the TFA design described below make it easier for corps members to develop a new way of thinking about public education and other social issues, as well as about the efficacy and importance of community service. Further, it increases the likelihood that these young people will remain involved in civic issues beyond the two-year Teach For America experience.

Finding 2.1: The existence of the TFA program makes it possible for young people to apply civic ambitions that otherwise might have been unfulfilled.

Research supports the notion that young Americans are interested in community service. In 1998, Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted a poll of 18- to 30-year-olds for Public Allies to determine young Americans’

attitudes toward community service and leadership. Among other things, Hart found that the portrayal of today’s youth as a self-absorbed, socially inert generation was without merit. His research suggested instead that this generation is “not searching to distance itself from the community, but instead [is] actively looking for new and distinctive ways to connect to the people and issues surrounding them.”

We found evidence of Hart’s conclusions in our work with TFA alumni. Many of those we spoke with indicated that they were actively seeking ways to put their community service ambitions to work. Further, TFA provided them with an accessible vehicle for carrying out their civic ambitions.

A participant in the New York focus group said, “TFA provided me not only with an opportunity to teach but also an opportunity to see in what realm I want to be a social advocate. Without it I would have said, ‘Yes, I’m interested in helping causes,’ but I don’t know how active I would have become without actually diving in and putting myself in that position.”

Another said that he and many of his TFA peers “would never have stepped into a classroom” if TFA had not been an option. “We would have never been aware of why Wendy Kopp came up with this, or whoever came up with it.”

One corps member described how TFA allowed him to exercise his community service ambitions that he discovered while studying abroad. He said that while in Spain, he had conversations with students from other countries that caused him to reflect on the problems of poverty and inner-city violence in his country. “In August 1990 I had just gotten off the plane from Spain when I read about Teach For America in *Parade* magazine.” So he called the toll-free number and began the necessary steps to enroll.

Another former corps member from New York said, “I was looking for something to ‘give back’ after I graduated. I’d done some projects in my senior year in college that sort of directed me to say, ‘I’ve been really blessed. Let’s give back.’” Teach For America presented these youth with an opportunity to do just that.

Indeed, for some, TFA was the lifeboat that rescued them from a life of performing meaningless jobs with no social merit. A Washington alumna told us, “Before [TFA], I

He said putting a face on the problems of poverty and education made all the difference to him. “Because otherwise it is a daunting abstraction that seems to be an insurmountable barrier. But if you see this one kid and you know her and you identify with her and love her, to me, saying it’s too hard or unchangeable is not sufficient.” This corps member’s experience was indeed life-changing. “As I spent time in TFA, I realized these were the problems I wanted to dedicate my professional career to: the problems of urban poverty and how it

“What Teach For America did was it allowed me to get into public education.”

- TFA alumna

got into one of those awful administrative assistant jobs, and I couldn’t get out. It was awful. And I couldn’t see how I was going to make a difference. I feel that this is the point in being here; you must make a difference in the world. I guess to give thanks back for being here.”

Finding 2.2: The structure of the TFA program allows young people to exercise civic ambitions in ways that are most fulfilling to them.

Many young Americans are looking for opportunities to do public work. But they also have stipulations for where they will apply their energies. For many, Teach For America, because of the way it is designed, fulfills their need.

First, TFA’s design reflects a key finding of Peter Hart’s research, which shows that today’s young people are interested in community service work that **allows direct, one-on-one individual service**. Their attitudes are distinctly different from the attitudes of their 1960s predecessors who focused on changing broad social institutions. Working as teachers permits that one-on-one interaction. Even in the context of the overwhelming challenges TFA corps members face as new teachers, seeing the impact they have on children is empowering and renewing.

As one corps member noted, being able to work one-on-one with students helped him understand poverty.

interacts with education and youth development.” Today this corps member is enrolled in a doctorate program in social policy at Brandeis University.

Second, TFA offers youth the opportunity to **assume fulfilling and responsible roles as teachers**, reinforcing their sense that they are performing a valuable service in depressed areas. Teaching appeals to their sense of purpose. It is not make-do work or work that is deadening to the spirit and intellect. On the contrary, teaching in impoverished schools is intellectually rigorous. Some alumni recalled that the steep learning curve required to move from summer trainee to practitioner was the most challenging experience of their young adult lives.

At the same time, the teaching opportunity offered an additional benefit of enabling corps members to test themselves while learning an important occupational skill. For those who entered the corps thinking they wanted to be teachers anyway, the practical experience in a challenging and socially important context was more appealing than learning the profession through the traditional route of matriculating to an undergraduate or graduate program in education. As one alumna said, “I would have been a teacher [even though] my undergraduate training wasn’t in teaching, and I never, never would have gone through...an education program. So what Teach For America did was it allowed me to get into public education.”

Finding 2.3: TFA compensates individuals for their work, thereby making it possible to serve in a longer-term capacity.

Because TFA compensates individuals for their work, it does not demand overwhelming sacrifices. Although the work is difficult, corps members still are paid professional wages — the wages of a schoolteacher — for the opportunity to perform community service. Corps members can perform a valuable public service in a career environment, which means they can think of service as more than a short-term commitment. For young adults, public service need not be rare, and it can be sustained.

Adequate compensation satisfies one of the requirements of promising civic engagement programs suggested by John Dedrick, program officer at the Kettering Foundation. Dedrick says it is necessary to break down the notion that heroic personal sacrifice — such as the acts of selflessness performed by Mother Teresa — is necessary to serve well. He says behaving heroically is not how we would act in our ordinary lives, and making heroism a requirement of civic action makes the experience unreal and extraordinary.

Finding 2.4: TFA gives corps members a sense of being part of something larger than themselves.

Social movements are made up of people who focus on context rather than solutions to small problems. As John Dedrick notes, when Harry Boyd of the Humphrey Institute interviewed Works Progress Administration workers, he learned that they did not approach their tasks with the single-mindedness of building dams, statues or trails. Most understood that they were part of a bigger plan, and that plan was to build a strong and stable republic. They were engaged in the task of saving their country from the devastating effects of the Great Depression. The realization gave them the will and the energy to complete their tasks.

Like the WPA workers Boyd interviewed, TFA corps members see the context. Even though the work of a classroom teacher is often isolating, TFA corps members have a sense that they are part of something that goes

beyond their classroom and their school. They know they are engaged in a social experiment that aims to improve poor students' access to quality education. It is a mission they have internalized, and they express it as a *national movement*, not as an isolated or isolating experience. "Teach For America is the national teacher corps that puts recent college graduates into under-resourced urban and rural school districts," a former corps member said when asked to describe TFA. Another said, "When you talk to individuals about Teach For America, sometimes we'll discover each other accidentally. They'll say, 'Oh, you're Teach For America,' and that is a good feeling. And it is also a good feeling to know that there are other people out there on that whole idea of feeling a connection to those big national causes."

"I wouldn't have been able to stay in my placement if I didn't know that there were people all over the nation," another alumna said. "The bigger picture really did affect my feelings about Teach For America."

Many also derived satisfaction and pride from knowing that TFA is a movement that is growing. "The corps gets bigger and bigger every year," a New York alumnus said.

Finding 2.5: Working with a group of like-minded peers supports alumni efforts and diminishes possible feelings of alienation.

Tracy Gray, former deputy director of the Corporation for National Service, noted the importance of giving community service workers the opportunity to be part of peer networks. Because the work is difficult and lonely, the workers need a support network that gives them continual reinforcement from people who are going through similar experiences. The support improves the likelihood that corps volunteers will succeed in their work.

Gray explains that the work is particularly lonely these days because the social culture does not necessarily support community service. "In the '60s, part of it was that other people were doing it. It put fire in your loins. It was exciting. You were part of a movement. You weren't alone."

The Teach For America alumni who believe they had a positive experience say having a chance to meet with like-minded people was critical to their success and commitment. “One of my best experiences [in life] has been the two years in the Mississippi Delta being surrounded by people my age who are idealistic and believe in what they do,” one former corps member said.

Some say they could not have made it through their placement without the support network. A New York alumna compared TFA with a similar program called the Resident Teacher Program, which she perceived as offering its workers very little opportunity to mingle with each other. “They had meetings once a month. I couldn’t have imagined having been in my school without having someone else from Teach For America in my school with me, or having gone to Baltimore not knowing who my roommate was going to be. It would have been such an isolated experience, and I don’t think I would have made it through two years there.”

Having the opportunity to meet with peers also improved the quality of their work, which, as the next finding indicates, increases the likelihood of continuing to do community service. “One of the things that helped me through my two years was the support that I had from other teachers within the corps — just to exchange a whole array of topics, not just inside a

Finding 2.6: The TFA experience gives corps members the chance to see that they are having an impact and that their work really matters.

Joseph Kahne, an associate professor at Mills College and director of the doctorate program in education, says one of the best ways to ensure continued social activism is to give rookie activists a positive sense that they are having an impact. He says this is particularly true with the Teach For America corps members, who clearly could be doing more lucrative things with their lives.

“A lot of kids will pick TFA because it’s a clear thing to do right out of college,” Kahne said. “But they’re not going to stay teachers for 40 years. So the question is, how can you help them see other paths out besides Silicon Valley and law school? And they’re going to feel huge pressure to do those things. This is where agency is so important. If they don’t feel what they are doing is making a difference, you are going to lose them because they are people who think of themselves as being incredibly capable, and they want to feel capable.”

Gray added, “The beauty of the program is that it has empowered young people who don’t think they can make a difference [to believe] that they can make a difference.”

“As I spent time in TFA, I realized these were the problems I wanted to dedicate my professional career to: the problems of urban poverty and how it interacts with education and youth development.”
- TFA alumnus

classroom, but outside the classroom,” a former corps member said. “One of the things I found when I came last year is that those support networks don’t exist in a traditional public school setting — that teaching is a pretty isolating career. Basically at 2:30 p.m. teachers will either run home with their plans and things of that sort, or they will close their classroom doors so they can work on their plans there. So there is not much sharing going on in a traditional public school situation.”

TFA alumni feel they are filling a void. One described how difficult it was for her school to find a science teacher to replace her when she finished her corps service. Another said she was able to expand the horizons of the students in her French class. “We took a trip to Memphis; some of them hadn’t been to Memphis. We saw *Les Misérables*. We organized a trip to Paris, and then when we came back we went and talked to the Lions Club, and we went and talked to different organizations. There definitely was an impact.”

Others felt empowered enough by their experiences to charter their own schools. In Houston and the South Bronx, two TFA alumni, David Levin and Michael Feinberg, raised funds from their districts and outside sources to open in-district charter schools called the KIPP Academy. “The district said — I think more to get rid of us — that if you can get 50 kids interested, we’re going to give you a chance to do this,” Levin recalled. “We went door to door to every single student’s home. We sat in their living rooms, we met with their parents, we explained what we were trying to

problems, and the systemic nature of these problems, is critical to their development as long-term civic activists.

Corps members learn through their work in the classroom that the problems they encounter are complex and interrelated. Because many corps members are coming from elite schools, good homes or prosperous communities, many have never been exposed to the spectrum of issues they encounter in their classrooms. And for most, it is an awakening. “If you are teaching for two years in an inner-city

"If you are teaching for two years in an inner-city school and if you are immersed in that type of situation for two years, it is going to change your perspective on many social issues, from capital punishment to corporal punishment in classrooms to juvenile justice and the way we deal with juveniles in the criminal system." - TFA alumna

do, why we were trying to do it and what we were trying to get out of it. And they believed.”

Their efforts, because of their success rates with high-poverty students, have received national media attention: Students in the Houston school ranked first in the district in 1999 on state test scores; the South Bronx school ranked first in the borough and fourth in the city.

Finding 2.7: Experience in the classroom and immersion in their communities help corps members understand the systemic nature of social problems.

For many corps members, Teach For America is their first significant exposure to community service. What they learn during their experience about social

school ... and if you are immersed in that type of situation for two years, it is going to change your perspective on many social issues, from capital punishment to corporal punishment in classrooms to juvenile justice and the way we deal with juveniles in the criminal system,” a former corps member said.

Another noted that the problems she encountered in her classroom required her to know more than just how to teach. She said her students “don’t need just English education, they need a whole plethora of services that I can only begin to offer them. I think the broader my experiences, the more likely I am to be effective in the various aspects of my students’ lives.” She cited specific examples of experiences she said she needed to improve her ability to service her students, including working “in homeless shelters, or social service shelters or cafeterias for people who need food.”

"It's especially important... they understand that the problems they are seeing with students are tied into structures and not individuals; that working as individuals to help the kids is not a structural response, and that there are limits to what they can do as individuals."
— Joseph Kahne, associate professor, Mills College

SECTION III:

WHAT ELSE COULD TEACH FOR AMERICA DO TO EXPAND AND SUSTAIN CIVIC ACTION?

The observations of national experts, as well as the comments and actions of alumni, clearly show that Teach For America is having an influence on the civic commitment of its corps members. Based on what TFA alumni said about their own experience, and on the expert opinions, this section identifies a number of interventions in which Teach For America could have even more influence. The recommendations are arranged by time period: pre-intervention/recruiting, training and service, and alumni intervention.

Teach For America can exploit opportunities during its recruiting efforts to improve the likelihood that corps members will succeed in their first mission — teaching — and remain engaged in community activities during and after their service.

PRE-INTERVENTION/RECRUITING

Recommendation 1: Be more explicit about and play up the civic engagement element of the TFA mission.

Alumni were clear about TFA's intention to cultivate skills that directly improve the quality of education for students in low-performing districts — what TFA regards as the first part of its mission. They also were clear that TFA hopes to cultivate lifelong advocates for public education, what TFA often calls the second part of its mission.

They were less clear, however, on what is implied in the second part of the mission — that TFA will cultivate individuals who are committed in general to community service because they have come to understand the *systemic* nature of the problems they confront in their classrooms. Just as the Freedom Summer volunteers in Mississippi became activists for many social causes beyond civil rights after their work in the 1964 voter registration project, so can TFA

alumni become lifelong advocates for social causes beyond public education. Corps members generally agreed that TFA needs to be more explicit about its expectations about civic engagement and advocacy for the range of problems that beset urban and rural America — everything from homelessness and poverty to nutrition, health care and family violence.

TRAINING AND SERVICE

Recommendation 2: Focus on teaching first.

When asked what could happen in the training program to help TFA have a greater civic impact, alumni repeatedly stressed the need to focus on teaching first. Their comments speak to the importance that Kahne and Gray attach to efficacy. Both suggest that community service workers are more likely to continue civic activities throughout their lives if their first significant foray — in this case Teach For America — is satisfying and successful.

Alumni recognized that acquiring the skills to become high-quality teachers is something that occurs over a number of years, not in a six-week training session. Nevertheless, they argued for highly focused professional development during their pre-service initiation. "I think if they are going to invest time in anything, they should invest time in teaching us how to teach kids how to read," a former Washington corps member said.

Recommendation 3: Expose recruits to role models.

Teach For America should expose recruits during their training and fieldwork to role models who have been tested by the fire of classrooms and social movements. These might include teachers who have had success working in low-performing schools and social activists

who can help corps members to understand how TFA's work fits into the context of social reform movements. They should be people who have been effective and influential.

What purpose is served by exposing youth to civic crusaders?

1. Knowing that ordinary people can do grand and important things is valuable. It gives those new to the experience of civic engagement a chance to appreciate that within all of us there is the opportunity to serve.
2. It can promote community acceptance.
3. It gives new recruits a dose of reality.
4. It helps corps members understand the importance of thinking systemically.

As noted earlier, the civil rights, women's rights, Vietnam War and anti-nuclear movements are only words in history books for young Americans. They cannot feel the context, the anguish or the exhilaration. That doesn't mean, however, that the experiences are lost to them. They can connect to these experiences vicariously through exposure to role models and heroes of generations past.

Kahne underscores the importance of connecting recruits to role models. He explains that young recruits are trying on the identities of civic activists; introducing them to real activists can help them assume the identities more accurately.

In his own research, Kahne interviewed students who had been exposed to social activists who told the students stories about their work. "Once they [the students] heard these things, especially from people who weren't famous, they started to believe this is who they could become and needed to become."

Kahne says the role models need not be glitzy, just influential and charismatic. "For Teach For America, they can be people without prominence, and they also need to include some people who are less well-educated than they [the recruits] are."

Exposing role models to recruits can serve another important purpose: acceptance in the communities they serve. "If TFA is to succeed in its civic mission, it has to undermine its own elitism," Kahne said. "I think a speaker series can help do that; it will trouble the comfortable. They are going to come in thinking they

are the answer; I know I did. They have to see people who don't have all the polish or all the options that they have, but who know things that they will never know, and who have committed in ways they will not be able to commit."

Some TFA alumni, looking back at their own experience, acknowledged the danger of coming off as paternalistic. One alumna recalled that she and her fellow corps members had to work very hard in their school to overcome distrust. "There was resentment in the school that I went into, by the people that had been there doing this work for a long time," she said. "They were given this notion that we were all coming from Ivy League schools and that we were these rich Northerners with lots of money and powerful people who were going to come in and show them how to do their jobs right, because they weren't doing them right."

Although alumni agreed that Teach For America already makes impressive efforts to expose corps members to the reality of the conditions they will confront when they go into classrooms, efforts must be continually sharpened. As most alumni noted, the shock of what they endured in their first few weeks was always more than they expected. Role models can facilitate reality checks through role-playing and readings.

Finally, a more deliberate effort midway through the fieldwork — when the intersections of politics, poverty and family dynamics with education are becoming more apparent — to connect corps members to role models can improve systemic thinking. During his work in the Rio Grande Valley, Martin Winchester made such attempts to connect corps members to people who had become local folk heroes because of their work. "I took a lot of effort to connect with the freedom fighters here — entrepreneurs, civil rights [activists] and others. Then as the executive director, I tried to find a niche there — bringing these people in as speakers."

Recommendation 4: Immerse corps members in the social and political contexts of the community.

Teach For America needs to stress the importance of getting to know the political contexts of the community where corps members work. Just as students in overseas programs are encouraged to immerse themselves in the culture of their host country, so should corps members immerse themselves in the cultures of their

communities. The analogy is deliberate: for many corps members, the political context and culture of their host communities will be foreign. Full immersion will accelerate learning and catalyze a spirit of activism.

Such was the case during Freedom Summer. Doug McAdam, a researcher at Stanford University, writes that the Freedom Summer volunteers experienced a welter of emotions when they finally landed in Mississippi, where they confronted “the other America” of rural life. “The publicity accorded Michael Harrington’s 1962 book of the same name may have made the volunteers intellectually aware of poverty, but their class advantages had insulated them from any real experiential understanding of the problem. No such comfortable distance was possible in Mississippi. The volunteers’ generally optimistic, idealistic upbringing had not prepared them for the underside of the American dream.”

McAdam posits that their total immersion in the lives of the community — many lived with black families — changed them forever. Most would never be able to turn their backs completely on poverty. Their experiences turned many into social activists in spirit and deed.

Some TFA alumni described alienation from the communities where they worked. Several indicated that more deliberate efforts to stress the importance of socializing with community people would have had value. Martin Winchester, who became an executive director of TFA in the Rio Grande Valley region, said an important component of his job was “to inspire corps members, to send a message that this is a privilege to come here and live, and to expand your social circle. I really tried to push them to hang out at barbecues, go out with the janitor and maximize the opportunity to grow.”

Recommendation 5: Provide opportunities for reflection.

To accelerate learning and to put issues in proper context, Teach For America needs to build into its program regular — possibly weekly — periods of reflection.

In the heat of battle, it’s not often easy to see an impact. It is necessary to step back and take stock of gains and assess opportunities for advancement. Reflection brings meaning to the struggle and gives the activist a reason to continue.

Paul Schmidt, president of Public Allies, says that the organization sets aside time each Friday for participants to reflect on the experiences of the past week. During the reflection, corps members talk about how they have an impact, and what they want to change. “If you don’t show them what they’re learning, they won’t know how to do it,” he said.

In the case of TFA corps members, building opportunities for reflection can deepen understandings of the mission and the struggle. “It’s especially important in the Teach For America context so that they understand that the problems they are seeing with students are tied into structures and not individuals; that working as individuals to help the kids is not a structural response and that there are limits to what they can do as individuals,” Kahne said. “The more they can be helped to develop social analysis about the importance of civic involvement to try to create a structural response, the better.”

John Dedrick, a program officer at the Kettering Foundation, says reflection also can be therapeutic. “The lasting civic impact of that reflection is greatly enhanced when reflection focuses not on the therapeutic difficulties of the time, but also on framing experience in the context of much bigger challenges of society,” he said.

ALUMNI INTERVENTIONS

If the two-year TFA experience provides a vehicle that otherwise wouldn’t exist for young people to play out their civic ambitions, then the alumni program provides a parallel possibility once they leave Teach For America. Alumni, in fact, were very excited about using post-service interventions to build and sustain their commitment to community work. They offered a variety of good recommendations for building on peer networks, some of which the organization already is pursuing.

Recommendation 6: Help alumni secure jobs and volunteer opportunities that enable them to effect social change.

After corps members complete their service, Teach For America should offer some assistance to help them transition to other socially meaningful jobs or volunteer opportunities. Possibilities range from mentoring recruits or new corps members to job referral services.

One alumnus from New York described packing up his car after he finished his service and driving away from his placement to some unknown next stop in life. He said it would have been nice if TFA could have offered him some help during this transition period. From TFA's perspective, this is a ripe moment to steer alumni into other community service functions.

One of the most obvious services would be job referral. Through job referral services, organizations have the chance not only to provide valuable assistance to those reentering the workforce, but also to shape their future direction. Many of the alumni are interested in education jobs, and about half end up staying in education jobs after their service is completed. TFA also can point alumni to community service work, whether or not they stay in education.

TFA does provide some referral services on its Web site, but alumni said the services are not yet well developed. A former corps member from Washington said, "I went on that Web site, too, after I heard about it. I wasn't that impressed with it, but maybe [they should] expand their job bank, expanding their listing of grant-based resources, opportunities for fellowships and things of that sort. That would be helpful." Another said, "I tried to submit ... a job opening, and there were no directions on how to do it. So I ended up just e-mailing it in, and they put it on. But it was just lucky that I knew someone to e-mail it to."

Recommendation 7: Provide professional networking opportunities for alumni who remain in education.

For those who remain in education, TFA can continue to be an invaluable resource. Alumni indicated that they are always looking for information and resources to improve their professional practice. They suggested that TFA set up list serves, publication referrals, chat rooms or other Web site services that can refer alumni to continuing professional development opportunities.

"Teachers do lots of pen pal things with different classes," a D.C. alumna said. "You could find out that there is somebody teaching in something — maybe you are doing a unit of study on a certain area and you find out there is a TFA alum teaching there — and set up contact with that person's class and your class."

Teachers also call on professionals for career day appearances, and a well-constructed database could serve that purpose. In addition, some educators find they periodically need the services of professionals outside their field to help them effectively work out medical or child advocacy problems — issues that come up frequently in classrooms serving poor students. A D.C. alumna said, "I would like to talk to a lawyer who really knows, and who would be really civic-minded in the way that I think Teach For America people are, and if I could e-mail somebody or have the number of somebody I could call who does child advocacy, I think that would be a way I could access, as a teacher, the corps members who are [professionals]. And maybe I could do something with my students if I know what other people are doing, and that would be a way to get, you know, a doctor in my classroom."

Many of the networking opportunities that alumni seek simply require facilitation rather than direct intervention.

- **Alumni referrals.** Alumni are generally very interested in lists of the whereabouts of their former colleagues. Maintaining these lists provides a valuable resource for anyone who wants to use them for networking opportunities.
- **Electronic mailing lists.** List serves that define areas of specialty or topics of interest would help alumni stay connected by telling them what is going on in the community service and education worlds, or who they might call on for help in their own fields.
- **Grant announcements.** A New York alumna, who is no longer an educator, nevertheless found the TFA network invaluable in her work. "I would say Teach For America has allowed me to network in terms of if I'm doing a grant through an organization in Chicago that is run by the TFA members." She said she used the network to apply for a grant and do research in childhood development.
- **Searchable databases.** Some said a searchable database that lists alumni by fields of expertise would be helpful in calling for additional resources for job or community service issues. Just as an educator might call on a lawyer to help with a child advocacy issue, others outside education might have similar needs.

Recommendation 8: Offer educational programs.

TFA could become a resource for offering educational seminars, speaker panels or meetings that focus on education or community service topics. The panels and seminars could call on outside expertise or highlight the interesting work of TFA alumni. The point: to keep alumni who are education practitioners aware of current issues in education.

“One of the things we could do as alumni is have an instructional conference, and at that instructional conference Arlene could present her paper on instructional technology and community service, and — that is just an idea,” a D.C. alumnus said, referring to the work of another focus group participant. “Teachers could get — or not just teachers, but anyone in Teach For America — could present, could share their ideas in an informal and a formal setting, in a way.”

Without getting directly involved in political work, TFA could still keep alumni informed through alerts about important issues that affect the work of educators or that might suggest community service opportunities.

“I think that is a great idea,” a D.C. alumna said. “I know I would appreciate that, because sometimes I feel a little bit too disengaged, now especially because I am not teaching. I am getting that craving. It would be nice. I generally try to stay on top of things, but it would be nice to feel like I am part of this community and being the activist that I know I am.”

Another said, “If they want us to be civic-minded and develop into adequate or super democratic citizens, keep telling us all of the things that are going on,” another said. “Just be another conduit of information, because we already have that in our hearts, and we are looking for that information.”

APPENDIX: METHODS

Interviews with Leaders in Field of Civic Engagement. We conducted telephone interviews with leading thinkers in the field of civic engagement to increase understanding of current definitions of engagement and to gain insight into programmatic elements that influence and sustain civic participation. Those interviewed were:

- Michael Brown, executive director, City Year
- John Dedrick, program officer, Kettering Foundation
- Tom Ehrlich, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
- Tracy Gray, former deputy executive director, Corporation for National Service Corporation and vice president, Morino Institute
- Richard Harwood, president, The Harwood Institute
- Matt Heyd, director, Do Something! League
- Joseph Kahne, associate professor and director of the doctoral program in education leadership, Mills College
- Wendy Puriefoy, president, Public Education Network
- Paul Schmidt, executive director, Public Allies
- Marcia Sharp, president, Millennium Communications Group
- Charles Supple, executive director, California State Commission for AmeriCorps,
- Thomas Tighe, chief of staff and chief operating officer, Peace Corps
- Anthony Welch, vice president, Do Something!

Focus Groups. Four focus groups were held, two in New York City on November 15 and two in Washington, D.C., on November 19, 1999. Participants in two of the four groups had been through TFA training since 1994, and one group contained participants trained before that year. The recruits in these three groups had answered an annual TFA questionnaire. The fourth group was made up of individuals from both time periods who had not returned TFA alumni questionnaires. Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS) recruited participants from lists provided by TFA headquarters. Thirty-four alumni took part, 21 women and 13 men. The majority (27) have remained in teaching or allied education fields, 6 are in graduate school, and the remainder are spread among publishing, nonprofit and governmental organizations, and private business.

We used a moderator's guide developed in conjunction with the Collaborative Communications Group and TFA. Nancy Belden, the senior partner at BRS, led the groups, and transcripts of the conversations were prepared from audiotapes. The participants were assured of confidentiality, and no names of participants are associated with the transcripts or report.

Interviews with Individual TFA Alumni. We conducted telephone interviews with 10 TFA alumni to explore how their TFA experiences have affected their professional choices, civic engagement and thinking about education. Those interviewed were the following:

- Danny Brassell, professor, Los Angeles, CA
- Janet Boudreau Ceddia, McKinsey & Company, Boston, MA
- Michael Feinberg, KIPP Academy, Houston, TX
- Taggart Hansen, lawyer, Denver, CO
- Julie Kennedy, America Scores, Washington, DC
- Mark Levine, Credit Where Credit Is Due, New York, NY
- Bill Norbert, Maine state representative, Augusta, ME
- Andy Sokatch, Ph.D. candidate, Waltham, MA
- Janna Wagner, All Our Kin, New Haven, CT
- Martin Winchester, HEROES Academy, Hidalgo County, TX

TFA Sites. TFA corps members currently teach in 13 areas across the country:

- Mississippi Delta
- Baltimore, MD
- Bay Area, CA
- Greater New Orleans, LA
- Houston, TX
- Los Angeles, CA
- New Jersey
- New York City, NY
- North Carolina
- Phoenix, AZ
- Rio Grande Valley, TX
- Baton Rouge and rural Louisiana
- Washington, DC



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