

The Driven—Yet Undirected—Generation . . . and the Difference We Can Make

Wendy Kopp, Founder and President, Teach For America

Editor's Note: The author has been invited to present an address on Teach For America at the 1992 NACADA National Conference in Atlanta.

As advisors to today's college students, many of you must at times disparage the directionlessness of today's undergraduates. I am writing in the hope of convincing some of you that directionlessness is not always a bad thing. It can be the impetus for creativity. And today's driven—yet undirected—college seniors can, if pushed to think about *all* of the options available to them, make choices that will enable them to find fulfillment and make a positive difference.

I was a senior at Princeton University in the fall of 1988, and I was wandering around campus, lacking inspiration for both my senior thesis (I couldn't think of a topic) and my job hunt. I was certainly not alone with regard to the latter. For four years I had watched my peers head off in droves to investment banks and management consulting firms. Some of them were really motivated by the thought of a career in high finance. Most of them, however, were *driven*—yet undirected—individuals who simply couldn't figure out what to do. They had been extremely involved on campus, not only in campus events but also in community service projects and tutoring at local schools. They were looking for something that would enable them to assume a great responsibility and to make a difference. But they didn't see a great variety of opportunities. Most of what they saw were corporate recruiters who were vigorously recruiting them to make two-year commitments to investment banks or management consulting firms. Seniors would sign on, theorizing that they would learn a lot and then move on to something else. Most of them seem to have moved on to business school and then right back into those same firms.

In November of my senior year I attended a conference that brought student leaders from across the country together with businesspeople to develop "action plans" for improving the education system. I listened to speakers talk about the drastic need for more and better teachers,

and I heard students around me saying "I would love to teach" and "I didn't know people who didn't major in education would be allowed to teach." Then it hit me: why not create a national teacher corps? Why not surround teaching with an aura of selectivity, service, and status? Why not recruit all these driven, undirected college seniors to make two-year commitments to *teaching* on the theory that the experience would shape their interests and career directions? Why not capitalize on the drive and the idealism of college students to help build a better America?

I became not only inspired but virtually obsessed with that concept. Not only was it the answer to my senior thesis dilemma, I thought, but it could also be at least part of the answer to the problems in our nation's schools. I spent the spring of my senior year researching teacher supply and demand, the political context in which the corps would operate, and the experiences of the Peace Corps, Vista, the federal Teacher Corps, and alternative certification programs that exist today. On April 10, 1989, in a 170-page senior thesis, I announced that I was going to create a national teacher corps as a nonprofit organization.

I was in the computer room the next day, condensing the thesis into a 30-page proposal that I sent to the chief executive officers of 30 large corporations. I hoped that a couple of those proposals would land in the right hands, and my wish came true. Union Carbide told me that I could use their offices in Manhattan through the summer, and Mobil Corporation approved a \$26,000 seed grant the day after I graduated. I spent the summer simply walking around with the proposal, meeting with as many people as I could—corporate and foundation officers, school district officials, and education reform leaders. I went to as many conferences on education as I could, for they afforded me the greatest access to people. "Hi, I'm Wendy Kopp," I would introduce myself. "I just graduated from Princeton, and I'm going to create a national teacher corps that will recruit 500 outstanding college seniors to commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools that

have teacher shortages." Many were skeptical. Few believed that talented graduating seniors would want to teach. I told them that I *knew* they would.

In September of 1990 I began pulling together a group of recent college graduates who would take Teach For America from idea to reality. We had a concrete plan, and we simply moved forward, convinced that everything would come together. We began by identifying a student leader to act as our representative on each of 100 campuses. That November we brought these students together to motivate them and to organize them to spread the word about Teach For America. By April 2,500 applicants had completed an application process consisting of an interview, a sample teaching session, and an essay application. We selected 500 charter corps members and brought them together in June in Los Angeles for an eight-week training institute that we organized. Then we sent them to one of six placement sites where we had established local offices and arranged for schools to hire our corps members. This past year we recruited an additional 700 corps members, chosen from 3,100 applicants, and placed them at the six original sites as well as four additional ones.

The skeptics were wrong; graduating seniors from all academic majors and ethnic backgrounds, who see before them a whole world of opportunities, are excited by the thought of teaching in America's most underresourced schools. We have not selected a corps of people who couldn't find other jobs. We have selected a group who met stringent criteria: a high level of commitment, demonstrated through excellence in academics, extracurricular activities, and work experience; leadership; maturity; effective communication skills; flexibility; and respect for all students. Corps demographics defy national averages: while 8% of graduates of teacher education schools are people of color, 24% of our corps members are; while 18% of education graduates are male, 38% of our corps members are; and while the average education major's SAT falls below the national average of less than 900, the average corps member's SAT (self-reported) is 1255.

We learned a tremendous amount during our first year. We approached that year with a commitment to listening to our corps members, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and being incredibly responsive to what we heard and saw. The resulting changes

have included (a) adding a second interview to the selection process, (b) restructuring the Institute so that six weeks take place in Los Angeles and two weeks at the corps member's local placement site, (c) selecting the teachers and teacher educators who comprise our Institute faculty from the local placement sites, (d) strengthening the curriculum and assessment process of the Institute, and (e) expanding our local offices significantly by hiring experienced teachers to support corps members. The most tangible result of these improvements is that our attrition rate for corps members during their first year is 4.7%—60% lower than it was during the program's first year.

Members tell us that the corps is the most challenging experience they have ever had. Yet their principals rave about the energy and creativity with which they approach their classes. Capturing their spirit and commitment with specific examples is difficult, for any example seems almost superficial next to the extraordinary effort our corps members make day in and day out to overcome what at times seem overwhelming odds. Yet it is inspiring to know that some of our corps members are chairing their academic departments, that two of them teaching in an alternative school in Arkansas convinced their principal and faculty to take half of a one-hour lunch period to institute a school-wide reading period, that one of our corps members in Los Angeles—a former Yale University freshman counselor—inspired some of Yale's current counselors to have their freshmen write to each of his freshmen at Compton High School, that a corps member in Oakland has paired each of his students with a big sister or big brother from Stanford University, that a corps member here in New York took 65 seventh graders from their middle school in Brooklyn to spend a week at Tuskegee University in Alabama.

Teach For America is taking people who otherwise probably would not have taught, and we are placing them in our nation's most difficult-to-staff schools. Without exception, this experience unalterably changes the way corps members view the world and their own career directions. One corps member who has been headed to law school is still going, but with the intention to concentrate on educational law. One who had deferred an acceptance from Harvard Law recently wrote to the admissions office to explain his decision to remain in the classroom. One who turned down an investment

banking offer, still with the intention of heading to business school after Teach For America, is now applying to graduate schools of education. Each has his or her own story. We believe that a good percentage will remain in teaching, that a good percentage will go on to graduate school in education with the intention of either returning to the classroom or some other aspect of education, and that others will work outside the educational system to effect systemic change.

We have seen only the beginning of the Teach For America movement. Our plan is to become an institution that each year places between 500 and 1,000 corps members in communities all over the country. Our power will come not only from the corps members who are completing their two-year commitments, but from the thousands of Teach For America alumni who will be a force for positive educational change, who will communicate their experiences to the public and to our nation's leaders, and who we believe will be some of our future educational leaders.

Teach For America is operating at an exciting time of educational innovation and perhaps even revolution. At no time has there been a

greater need for creative and driven educational leaders who are committed to ensuring that all children in this nation have an opportunity for a superb education. Efforts to reform, restructure, and even revolutionize education will fail if the public continues to believe that education is a downwardly mobile field and if college seniors fail to consider teaching and education as possible career fields.

Many of today's young people may be undirected. But we are idealistic, and we desire great challenges and responsibilities. We want to play, **and can play**, a major role in addressing the problems that plague our educational system and our society as a whole. We must only see the opportunities to do so. We must hear our teachers and advisors encouraging us to follow less-travelled paths. And we must see the public and the nation's leaders recognize and respect our efforts to make the world a better place.

Address correspondence concerning this article to Wendy Kopp, Teach For America, P.O. Box 5114, New York, NY 10185. The author may also be reached by telephone at (212) 974-2456 or fax at (212) 221-0266.